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Situated Dialogic Action Research

Disclosing “Beginnings” for Innovative Change in Organizations

John Shotter

University of New Hampshire

I want to discuss a **version of collaborative action research** oriented toward exploring, and verbally articulating, the real possibilities for making an innovative next step in a specific situation in a particular organization. There are many situations in organizational life in which people express, either very general concerns—for example, a need for people to be more innovative, to trust each other more, and so on—or simply feelings of disquiet, of “something being not quite right” needing to be changed . . . although they do not know what that “something” is! The research we are often asked to do is precisely to make these vague concerns sufficiently determinate to inform new (or at least modified) practices. But this task, as I see it, following Wittgenstein (1980), entails resolving a difficulty of orientation or of relating rather than solving a problem. Below, the author discusses a dialogically structured action research practice precisely tailored to these orientational needs, along with the theoretical-concepts needed to guide participants in it toward the activities relevant both to its conduct and toward the realization of the possibilities it discloses.

Keywords: *dialogic; action research; poetics; change; embodiment*

“Theorists have been so preoccupied with the task of investigating the nature, the source, and the credentials of the theories that we adopt that they have for the most part ignored the question what it is for someone to know how to perform tasks” (Ryle, 1949, p. 28).

“For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (T. S. Eliot, East Coker, 1944).

The exchange below occurs early on in a research interview with an innovative manager:
Senior Manager: The way the whole thing started with me . . . it came out of a business . . . and I ran a business unit, business unit leader. I was brought in to do something I did not really want to do at the time . . . in this case it was actually to build something called capability in the area of sales and marketing, which is not something which ____’s DNA is particularly focused on . . . but the then GTE (or whatever they call them nowadays) said: “Okay, we want an Academy that is what we want.”

Research Interviewer: ah ha

Senior Manager: Because that is the answer, good marketing companies have them. You know, go forth and do it.

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Research Interviewer: yup, yup.

Senior Manager: . . . and I mean, they of course had no idea of what they meant by that. So there was a lovely example of them saying something: “Here is the direction. Go forth and deliver” . . . and I was on my own at a time and I said: “Thank you very much . . .” The good news being actually, nobody had defined what it meant

Research Interviewer: yup, yup.

Senior Manager: . . . they have asked me to do something, but they do not know what it means.

Here, a manager within a large international company is assigned a new set of tasks, a new role: she has to bring into existence, within the already existing organization, a new institutional structure with a wholly different character to it than any already in existence. Although a degree of planning is of course required in outlining what its final “architecture” might look like, how might we approach the step-by-step “journey” required in bringing such a project to its final fruition? What might we, as professional researchers, offer this manager that might be of some help to her in such a task as this, in which she, as a leader, must work outward from within the midst of a continuously changing, already existing complex set of circumstances, with initially no clear end in view? What kind of writing or talk might be of help?

If we as professional researchers were to offer some help to the senior manager above in terms of general theories or nonspecific models, they would not, I feel, be of much use to her in working outward from within the specificity of her present surroundings to reveal within them, the specific openings, real possibilities, and the actual resources available to her in taking her first step. Nor would they, after taking that first step, help her in assessing specifically all the new openings, and so on, she has now made available to herself on taking that step, and so on—while needing all the time to act with the end in view of clarifying something that can be shared and agreed upon by those who first commissioned her with her task. Like a boat captain needing to navigate a hazardous river passage, unless she learns how to “read the water”—to notice how slight changes in the water’s surface movements can indicate all kinds of hazards below such as rocks, sand banks, sunken vessels, strong currents, and so on—she risks being carried off course or running aground. Simply to be told that the river contains such hazards and that they should be avoided by taking certain kinds of actions is simply to be told facts, to be told of the achievements that can be brought off by completing an organized sequence of separate task activities successfully (Ryle, 1949). But information of this kind is of no help in coming to develop within oneself the embodied skills and criteria of judgment required to “bring off” such achievements successfully, to slow the engines, drop an anchor, or to swing the rudder, in an immediate and appropriate response to an experienced hazard.

The kind of trying needed to achieve an outcome accounted as appropriate by others (to say the least) cannot be learned by simply being told what it is that one has to “get,” for coming to “get it” involves, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, achieving that kind of “understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (p. 122). We need a kind of understanding to do with trying to do something, with making successful subsidiary moves toward an overall final goal before our actual achieving of it. To do this we not only need to know what the overall task before us looks like prospectively, we also need an embodied sense of the relevant criteria for use in judging our success at achieving these subsidiary tasks along the way.

However, rather than thinking prospectively, all too often we tend to think and talk about social activities in a habitual past tense, as if they take place in a world of already fixed and namable atomic objects—the company, its DNA, its customers, the executive, the workers, the new “leadership model,” and so on—and as if the doing of our activities within it consisted simply in the sequencing of a similar such set of namable atomic tasks: We must begin to value innovation; respect coworkers; identify currently unused human resources; and so on—as if all already know what “innovation” and so on are, and what now beginning to “value” them (as if they had been ignored in the past) looks and feels like.

The trouble is, as John Dewey (1896) noted long ago and Wittgenstein (1965) noted more recently, because we can focus our attention on an aspect of our lives and in our talk in relation to it lift it out of the larger context within which it has its being, we can very easily mistake the terms of description and analysis we use for terms of existence, that is, we talk of “it” as an actually existing, identifiable objective thing. Indeed, we can easily go so far as to assume that when we talk of such “things,” everyone who is a party to such talk knows what we are talking about. This mistake, this fallacy of reification, although already recognized long ago—Heraclitus, for instance, in reminding us that “it is impossible to step in the same river twice,” tried to prevent us from imputing a misplaced constancy to intrinsically changeable circumstances—is still pervasive in our everyday, intellectual lives. Indeed, nowhere is it more pervasive than in our talk about our social activities. But what such retrospective, finalized, monological talk (as I will call it) does is to make it extremely difficult to talk of the experienced complexities, uncertainties, changing tensions, the vague but unique nature of one’s living circumstances, the felt shifts in one’s understandings as one moves around in one’s surroundings, and of the reorientations one experiences as one hears of one’s surroundings described by other’s from a different point of view. If talk of this kind is offered at all, it is treated as “merely subjective,” as something occurring solely in the head of an individual. But this, I think, is a serious mistake.

To jump straight away in the realm of language use, such a move is to ignore the “countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols,’ ‘words,’ ‘sentence’ . . . [where our] speaking of language is part of an activity, or form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 23). We use our linguistic expressions, for instance, not only in directing our attention to something, in selecting distinctive features in our surroundings and in analyzing and/or synthesizing them, but also in organizing and directing both our own inner mental processes and overt activities in “inner dialogues” with ourselves in ways intrinsically sharable with others. For, as has become increasingly evident, if we are to communicate at all by the use of words and language without continually puzzling and bewildering each other, then we must share a whole background of embodied ways of spontaneously responding to the expressions of those around us—a background that we must “grow into” as children (Bakhtin, 1984, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1965).

It is within and against this background that our utterances can work to provide us with not only specific transitory understandings as to where and how we are currently placed within our surrounding circumstances but also with specific action guiding anticipations as to where next we might go (Shotter, 2005)—but only, as we shall see, utterances of a certain kind, uttered at crucial moments, as Wittgenstein (1953) suggests above, as part of a larger activity. And this is the crucial point: such specific directive and organizing understandings occur only as feelings, as “a felt change of consciousness” (Barfield,

1999, p. 78) within the unfolding dynamics of our living exchanges with the others and othernesses in our surroundings, as we all move around in relation to each other (Todes, 2001). Such feelings, as I will discuss in more detail later, provide us with orientation, they relate us to our surroundings in such a way that we can go out to meet them with certain expectations “at the ready,” so to speak. Indeed, in such uses of language, our utterances point beyond themselves to features in their surroundings. Once we begin to talk from a fixed standpoint, in relation merely to a mental picture (representation), they disappear. Thus decontextualized utterances not expressed as part of a larger activity, will not engender such specific transitory understandings and action guiding anticipations. Although they might provide a descriptive account of a distinctive situation, and listeners might readily “get the picture,” if they are then to act in relation to it, they will still need to interpret the “meaning of the picture”—the lack of specificity still leaves them with much work to do, with little to guide them in the doing of it. It is a kind of action research relevant to this task of seeing connections between aspects of one’s circumstances that one has not seen before—connections that might provide one with action guiding anticipations as to what might in one’s current circumstances happen next—that I want to try to describe below.

The Importance of Dialogically Structured Events in Practice

We must begin by exploring the very special nature of dialogically structured events, what they look like from within the unbroken flow of our everyday practices: moments in human exchanges when a second person spontaneously responds to the utterances (or other expressions) of a first, moments in which a living connection, can be created. Following Bakhtin (1986), we might call these dialogical moments—moments of “joint action” or “interactive moments” (Shotter, 1980, 1993). Central to their occurrence is the spontaneous, living responsiveness of our bodies to the others and to the “othernesses” around us. There are a number of major consequences of this living responsiveness: One is that, in coordinating our activities with those around us and responding to them, what we desire and what actually results in our interchanges are often two very different things. In short, dialogically structured activities produce unintended and unpredictable outcomes. This is so, because the formative influences shaping our conduct are not wholly there in our individual heads to be brought out; our activities occur when interlaced with the actions of others, and their actions are just as much a formative influence determining what we do as anything within ourselves.

Another major consequence is that such moments have the character of singularities. They are moments in which what occurs “. . . is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside it that is given and final. [An utterance] always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable . . .” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 119). An aspect of this creativity is the creation of a situation, an organized practical-moral setting, that participants experience themselves as being in and as exerting calls upon them to act only in certain ways; it is a situation with a particular “grammar” to it.

As a consequence, although aspects of our utterances are clearly shaped by influences we have come to embody from our past experiences, they can also (perhaps even more

powerfully) be shaped by influences in our immediate situation. Indeed, as Voloshinov (1986) notes, in such dialogical moments “the organizing centre of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside—in the social milieu surrounding the individual being” (p. 93). In other words, the influences at work in shaping and organizing people’s actions are neither wholly in a person’s individual psyche, nor in the linguistic system; what is unique in our utterances at the moment of their expression (their pacing, pausing, intonational contour, words choice, and so on) is open to influence by events in the surroundings of their occurrence. Thus, to that extent, they can be accounted as “determining surroundings,” for we can feel answerable to calls to act in ways that are, in some sense, “fitting” within them. Yet crucially, because its organization cannot be traced back to the intentions of any particular individuals, it appears to participants as if it has a given or an externally caused nature. So, although people within such situations treat them as their own, and indeed they are as they have made them, they cannot easily think of how they themselves might be able to alter them.

This is where a dialogical approach to action research becomes of importance. For, in adopting it, we are not only moving away from inquiries focused on what goes on inside people, we are moving toward those focused on what people go on inside of. We are also moving away from a concern with what is regular and repeatable, to a concern with what people can notice and become sensitive to in their surroundings, moments when it is possible for them to “regard a given case differently” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 144)—or view it from a different perspective and change their approach to it. In short, the point here is to outline the nature of a practice concerned with overcoming orientational difficulties, difficulties to do with noticing and giving significance to easily neglected, but nonetheless actually occurring moments of a unique and subtle kind in the circumstances and course of one’s practice. It is not about providing theories about practice. My concern is not with an epistemological but an ontological question: To what extent can dialogical action research bring about a change in a persons’ ways of relating themselves both to the others around them as well as to the rest of their surroundings?

Let me present an example in the following vignette (adapted from an actual transcript), in which a new information technology (IT) leader, in the course of a conversation with a consultant, is being influenced—changed—in the way he sees (or relates himself to) the context in which he must conduct his own consultancy work. Thus, this example offers an illustration of how a change in a person’s relationship to her or his surroundings might occur, and how a uniquely new, shared understanding can be jointly created in a responsive, dialogical moment between research participants:

Tony (reflecting on his first 15 days in COMP, a very large, global company): We’re not professional here in the way we do stuff, so there is a real opportunity to make a difference.

Consultant: What has been striking you that epitomizes where the issues and the opportunities are?

Tony: What’s really struck me is that I’m bringing an external perspective. I say to people in COMP how other companies use good ways of doing things, and they will listen and debate and discuss and they’ll argue the pros and cons, but they have no capacity for execution.

Consultant: What do they come up against that you have touched yourself?

Tony: We've got barriers up between us—you know—"You worry about your performance contract and I'll worry about mine," and "We won, and that business unit lost," but together we were actually losing. Pockets of this going on everywhere. We've no way of operating across our activities.

Consultant: Can you give me a specific instance?

Tony: This very day, on day 15, I encountered it. We are trying to deliver cost savings to the CEO and VP-IT. We said we are going to reduce the amount of money we spend on IT. And they said: "Over our dead body! You can't do that to us. We need this technology to meet our business plans so we're going to spend what we said we are going to spend and you guys can't tell us anything different." And that's interesting, because it wouldn't happen in most other companies. Of course, the segments have the power but usually they would consult the function, and we would say of course we can't tell you what you should do, but we can show you a better way of how to do it, cheaper, faster, better.

Consultant: So how do you move things on? Can you say: "What we are looking for is an honest, frank account of what this is actually going to take. This is how we are going to find this difficult. This is what it looks like when it starts to move. As it begins to move this is what we are beginning to reap?" Not generalizations but real stories, real vignettes, when people in the room go

Tony: . . . I GET IT!

The consultant here, of course, is working methodically (although not according to an agenda or recipe). Her concern is to find a moment in Tony's experience when a felt change in consciousness connected with the issues he currently faces occurs, for this is a moment—if a reorientation to it can be achieved—in which an opening for a new way of acting might be revealed. Thus, in a way reminiscent of Bateson's (1973) important remark about "a difference that makes a difference" (p. 286), she asks Tony to bring to attention something of importance that had "struck" or "touched" him, something of relevance to his task that he had not expected or anticipated, that had surprised him, made a difference within him.

Indeed, as an aside here, let me note that as my account unfolds, I will be emphasizing more and more the importance in our inquiries of bodily experienced events that are in some sense unanticipated, unexpected, or surprising to those whose practices are of concern to us. For it is within such passing moments, within such events, that we can find the uniquely new beginnings for genuinely innovative changes in organizations.

Turning now to the consultant's second question: What do they come up against that you have touched yourself? It is both in response to how Tony's utterance has "touched" her, but it also offers Tony an invitation to go further into his own lived experience. He does, but instead of talking with "it" guiding his expressions in a concrete and particular manner, that is, narrating its character is such a way to "move" his listener as he was originally moved by it, he talks about it in abstract, general, and metaphorical terms—terms that to do not help to orient a listener (or Tony as a speaker) toward any particular action (and that would require interpretation if its meaning for action was in question).

The consultant thus asks a further question to orient Tony toward recounting a specific instance in its living, moving detail. He does. And now, instead of thinking in his head of the problem he faces, he begins to an extent to relive a typical circumstance in which he encounters the barriers that he had spoken of abstractly. He thus moves from the realm of abstract things that one tries to think about changing by making interventions—into the

realm of people responding to each other's utterances and where people's expressions can make an impression on those around them. Tony shifts from describing relevant experiences in terms of their finished outcomes, to describing an actual experience from inside, in terms of what trying to do something feels like in its step-by-step unfolding, the tensions and resistances he encounters, the criteria of judgment he uses in finding a successful line of action in relation to them. This orients him both toward responding to the researcher's third question and toward seeing the point of her suggestions regarding the kind of utterances he might make. So, when she says: "Not generalizations but real stories, real vignettes, when people in the room go . . . ," and leaving the ending of her utterance dangling so that he can finish it, he "gets it." He now sees (senses) a possibility in the situation that he had not seen (sensed) before; he sees the connection between the use of a kind of simple nontechnical talk, to tell of stories or short vignettes, and the "moving" effect of such talk—that perhaps it can make the kind of difference that matters to him in the situations he faces, the breaking down of barriers between business units.

It is the orientation toward detailing the actual, living expressions used by those involved in the unfolding of a difficult situation, that helps Tony to create within himself a felt sense of its unfolding movement. And it is this cocreation by researchers of occurrences of a felt kind within a collaborative inquiry conducted with clients, that I want to suggest is crucial if any deep organizational change is to occur: not just a change in what members of the organization think but a change in their spontaneous, bodily responses both to each other's utterances and to events occurring in their surroundings. In short, a change in how they go about relating or orienting themselves toward the task of making sense of the situations they find themselves to be in, a change in their way of being a member of the organization.

To consolidate the earlier shift in Tony's perceptions of his work situation, to help him begin to embody it, the consultant provokes Tony into further embodied explorations of the situations he must work in:

Consultant: What is the move you are going to make to bring down the barriers? What's in it for them?

Tony: We have to have a compelling value proposition.

Consultant: But that's just a proposition. With the culture of COMP as it is now, how are you going to do that "showing"?

Tony: We have to show them what good looks like. We are going to change the way we work to get into the top quartile of IT performers—we can become a great service provider and help the businesses also achieve prosperity, but we can only do that in partnership, so the answer to the conflict is to sit down and compromise and agree a partnership.

Consultant: How will you know that they've "got it," that they do in fact now have "the capacity for execution"?

Tony: They'll be able to tell me what's involved, the details of what they must do. They'll be able to "spell it out."

In other words, they will not just repeat back to Tony the recommendations he has just made to them, they will be able to "go on" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 151) from them. For, knowing one's "way about" (pp. 123, 203, 664) in relation to a previously bewildering situation by now being able to tell the details of what next they must do is certainly a criterion in Tony judging whether those whom he must influence have got the point of his work with them. Thus, in this further exploration, he arrives at two more important understandings:

One is, that, following on from his realization that the use of stories and so on can work to help others “regard a case differently,” they can also help them get a vision of his “end in view” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 132), that is, what his point actually is! The second is that he can confirm that they have got it by the fact of them being able to spell out the details of what is involved for them in their own situation. And this, of course, is what the consultant is doing with him: she is practicing with Tony what he must practice with his clients!

Thus, as I see it, what is being changed here is not Tony’s concepts, not the content of his thoughts or his frameworks of thought. He is not being supplied with some new theory, data, or information, or a new model to guide his thinking about organizational affairs, he has been changed in his very being. In the course of the conversation with the consultant, he is changing in his felt ways of seeing or how he relates himself to his surroundings in terms of his expectations and anticipations. In other words, he is changing in his felt orientation to the social milieu, surrounding his actions to which he must be responsive. In so doing, he is beginning to change his ways of working with those around him, the ways and methods he has come to embody as a result both of his early training in becoming a member of his society and of his later training into his profession.

The consultant here, as I see it, is using a special form of talk, what I will call a prospective, unfinalized, dialogical forms of talk, in that she is talking with Tony from within his (and, to the extent he can by his detailed talk engage her in it too, her) situation. Thus, everything she says is both in response to his immediately previous utterance but is also looking forward, prospectively, toward possibilities open to him for his next step. Thus, although as mentioned above, she is clearly working methodically, she is not providing Tony with a “map” of where she thinks he should go. In her questions, she is provoking Tony into making his own further explorations within the landscape of possibilities in fact open to him, explorations that without her questions he might not otherwise have undertaken.

People’s ways or methods in acting accountably for yet another first time:

From difficulties of the intellect to difficulties of orientation or relation

Above, I introduced the importance of what I called the felt background or the surrounding social milieu of certain kinds of human conduct—conduct in which we can achieve jointly what we cannot achieve apart—as if it occurred only in rather special moments. And, of course, in one sense it does. But in another sense, and this is what I want to emphasize in this article, the unique and creative features of our living interactivities are not at all special. The relevant shared background of felt tendencies to act in certain ways in response to previous actions of others is intrinsically present in all our everyday encounters. It is present in our capacities as unique personalities with unique characteristics to uniquely tailor our actions to our circumstances in ways which make sense to those around us.

But if we are to notice how we do this, how we shape our own actions in the course of their performance as being rationally accountable to those around us, we have begin to treat our own actions as “anthropologically strange” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9), as actions we need to look at in a new and different way. As a consequence, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, “. . . we shall constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms

of language easily make us overlook” (p. 132). In other words, we as investigators face the task of reorienting ourselves toward a whole set of events we ordinarily take for granted as familiar, commonplace events. For what we have to recognize is that being able to generalize, to categorize, and to find regularities in our affairs in ways that make sense to the others around us, is in fact an accomplishment, something which, although we do it in different ways according to our different needs, we do it as a member of a society and as a member of a particular social group and/or profession. And to be accounted a member of a social group (whether of society at large or of a more specialized group), we must manifest in our actions to others in the group, the group’s “accounting practices” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 9). That is, we must manifest the unnoticed and unsung normative ways of making sense of things implicitly at work in all our everyday, practical relations with all the other members of the group. Thus, what we come to embody in becoming a member of a social group is enormously complex.

In giving a tremendously full description of the reflexive nature of our accounting practices, that is, their capacity to act back in the unfolding of events to influence our perception of them, Garfinkel draws our attention to what we can in fact achieve by their use as follows:

“That by his accounting practices the member makes familiar, commonplace activities of everyday life recognizable as familiar, commonplace activities; that on each occasion that an account of common activities is used, that they be recognized for ‘another first time’; that the member treat the processes and attainments of ‘imagination’ as continuous with the other observable features of the settings in which they occur; and of proceeding in such a way that at the same time that the member ‘in the midst’ of witnessed actual settings recognizes that witnessed settings have an accomplished sense, an accomplished facticity, an accomplished objectivity, an accomplished familiarity, an accomplished accountability, for the member the organizational hows of these accomplishments are unproblematic, are known vaguely, and are known only in the doing which is done skillfully, reliably, uniformly, with enormous standardization and as an unaccountable matter.” (1967, p. 9-10, my emphasis)

Besides the fact that these are all joint or dialogical accomplishments, among the very many features mentioned in this exceptionally dense account are these: (a) that in accounting for each social event, we both treat it as known in common yet also recognize it as also unique, as occurring for “another first time”; (b) that we continually talk of such things as “ideas,” “theories,” “social groups,” and “society” as though they exist, and thus treat what is in fact imagined as an aspect of what is real for us; and that (c) although these practices are basic to our everyday lives together, due to their particularity, to their only passing existence within the unfolding dynamics of our interactions, they are unaccountable within our everyday accounting practices. As a consequence, their special nature in this respect that is easily ignored, eradicated, even. We simply do not know how to account for things and events which do not have any independent existence in themselves.

Indeed, to go a step further, another difficulty in accounting for them is their intrinsic lack of specificity. For, in approaching to any new circumstance, we do not know at first how to relate or orient ourselves toward it—for we are, as Garfinkel puts it, confronted with “another first time.” Our initial activities are thus a complex mixture of many different kinds of influences. As dialogically structured activities, they are just as much mental as

material, just as much felt as thought (or thought as felt). Their intertwined, complex nature makes it very difficult for us to characterize their nature: they have neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, neither a completely stable nor an easily changed organization, neither a fully subjective nor a fully objective character. While they may exhibit progressive changes, they can exhibit retrogressive ones too. They are also nonlocatable, in that they are spread out among all those participating in them. They are neither wholly outside people nor are they inside them; they are located in that space, where inside and outside are one. Nor do they manifest a separate before or after but subsist within an “enduring” (Bergson, 1911) whole which cannot divide itself into separable parts—a whole that, in enduring, dynamically, eventually comes to constitute itself as an intelligible whole.

Indeed, we could say that it is precisely their indeterminacy, their lack of any predetermined order, and thus their openness to being specified or determined by those involved in them, in practice—while usually remaining quite unaware of having done so—that is the central defining feature of our activities in our initial involvement in any new situation. Yet clearly, as I noted above, we are capable of trying to do something, of first coming to know our way about within a landscape of possibilities, thus to know how to make successful subsidiary moves toward the achievement of a final goal before our actual achieving of it.

How, then, might we study these often ignored background activities, these unique, partial kinds of orientational activities that set-the-scene, so to speak, for everything else that we do? Indeed, as Donald Schön (1983) remarked some time ago, it is problem-setting not problem-solving that is a major hurdle to be overcome by those dealing with the practical difficulties of organizational change. So what kind of inquiry could be helpful in our overcoming our initial bewilderments in the face of many new situations in which we must act, that might help us in our problem-setting? Our habitual inclination as social science researchers is to turn toward the task of analysis with the aim of devising a theoretical framework, rational solution, or planned approach to change. But all such cognitively pitched programs fail to take account of people’s embodied readinesses to respond to events in their own unique and particular surroundings. As a result, the recommendations resulting from such programs can still occasion extensive committee room discussions as to how they might be implemented. What is fundamentally new in the approach I am exploring here is the suggestion that change cannot be produced by following intellectually devised theories, plans, or protocols. It cannot be done, intentionally, by people’s deliberate actions. For, the coordinated execution of planned actions depends on all concerned sharing the set of already existing concepts relevant to the formulation of the plan; thus, its execution can only result in the further elaboration, refinement, or correction of these already existing concepts. No uniquely new, embodied understandings are created.

Yet change can and does happen. Uniquely new understandings and ways of acting can emerge. How can this be? Here, a remark of Wittgenstein’s (1980) can, perhaps, serve to reorient us, for he suggests that in many cases the difficulties we face—although it is very difficult for us to recognize this—are of a wholly different kind to those we can formulate as problems amenable to rational solution. They are difficulties “having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (p. 17), difficulties of orientation not to do with our ways of thinking, but with our embodied ways of relating ourselves to our surroundings—of spontaneously experiencing what our contexts require of us, what we should anticipate as we move around within them as having to do next.

These fine details of such embodied ways of relating are not at all easy to describe. However, their existence makes itself known to us when we are confronted with an unanticipated response. As Garfinkel (1967, p. 42) illustrates in his breaching experiments, where experimenters had been briefed to act as if nothing could be taken for granted:

CASE 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject's car pool, about having had a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(Subject) I had a flat tire.

(Experimenter) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: "What do you mean, What do you mean?" A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!

We see here the subject's angry reaction to the experimenter's unusual response to the subject's everyday expression—angry because she is being treated as ignorant of the everyday use of language.

Thus, instead of taking it for granted that we understand another person's speech simply by grasping the inner ideas they have supposedly put into their words, we should recognize that it is from within the dynamically sustained context of these actively constructed relations that what is uniquely being talked about gets its meaning. In practice, shared understandings are developed or negotiated between participants over a period of time, in the course of their ongoing conversations with each other. Indeed, in practice, shared understandings occur only occasionally, and when they do, it is by people testing and checking each other's talk, by questioning, challenging, reformulating, elaborating, and so on. So how might this play out in our forms of inquiry? How might we recognize the unique and responsive nature of our interactivities, of the situation, or the person before us? This is what I see as the task of the situated dialogic action research I want to describe below.

Situated Dialogical Action Research: The Methods of Social Poetics

How do we orient and relate ourselves to our surroundings? As we have seen, we must be able to orient our activities and responses to previous actions and words and to the surrounding circumstances. Indeed, as we have already noted with respect to Garfinkel's breaching experiments, we can say, I think, that our ways or methods of looking, listening, and so on work generally in terms of anticipations of what next to expect to see or hear, given what we have seen or heard so far. Todes (2001, pp. 64, 65) puts it thus:

"I have to 'catch onto', or 'get', whatever I know by anticipating it, and then somehow confirming this anticipation by an actual (present) response to the thing anticipated For effective movement, and only for effective movement, to be is to be known. I know what I am doing

just insofar as I am really doing it But the existence of the human body as capable of activity is not merely necessary for there to be a world of human experience, it is also necessarily known, in order for there to be a world of human experience. This is so because the activity of the human body is necessarily known in the responsive act by which we first know anything in the world; the act by which we first make the world habit-able; the act, in other words, by which we first make the world a world, i.e., a place in which we can live.”

Here, I think, is the clue we need to specify the kind of inquiry we need if we are better to orient ourselves to new circumstances as we meet them. We must find guidance in the unfolding dynamics of our ongoing involvements from within our participation in them. For, if the separate elements of “the social reality” that we all encounter “out there” unfold for us in a special way according to the ways of seeing, hearing, valuing, and so on, as members of a certain social group—then these elements can give rise in all who encounter them spontaneously, a shared (or at least shareable) sense of circumstance or context. And this shared sense of context allows all attuned to it to act in different ways but in ways that are all sensibly related to each other. This kind of inquiry takes in a certain kind of space, one not only of actualities but also of still invisible and as yet unrealized possibilities. In other words, we do not need to refer to a mental schematism (a theory or a model) in order to act in a skillful manner; we simply need to act continuously in response to our sense of our current situation.

But how can we get in touch with, so to speak, this space, if we cannot do it by the pursuit of deliberate schemes of investigation? We must, in a sense, wait for “it” to come to us. We can occasion it precisely, by not adopting a deliberate gaze—in Foucault’s (1973) sense of the term—but by being prepared to catch a glimpse of such new possibilities in those moments when events “strike” us. To do this, we must desist from seeking explanations, conducting analyses, offering interpretations, or formulating hypotheses. We must be sensitive to Barfield’s felt changes of consciousness, and allow ourselves to be struck, moved, arrested, and so on. All of which can be summed up by saying: we must adopt a poetic attitude to events occurring around us.

Elsewhere, with my colleague Arlene Katz (1996, 1998, 2004a, 2004b), following Wittgenstein (1953), we have specified it as the space of a social poetics. And here, I want to introduce it as central to the conduct of situated dialogic action research. We have laid out some of the methods of a social poetics as follows; we begin with those moments in which, in some way, we were “struck” by an event:

- Arresting moments: We first emphasize how certain events or kinds of remark can work to arrest or interrupt the spontaneous, unself-conscious flow of our ongoing activity, that work to give “prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 132). A focus on striking moments gives a focus of differences that can make a difference that matters (Bateson, 1979). We can see this move in the consultant’s conversation above when she asks: What has been striking you that epitomizes where the issues and the opportunities are?
- Bringing words back to their everyday use: As Wittgenstein (1953) remarks about a central move in his investigations: “When philosophers use a word—“knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition”, “name”—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: Is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which

is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (p. 116). Thus, when the consultant above asks Tony: What do they come up against that you have touched yourself? She is bringing him back into the everyday situation from which his talk gets its life.

- Questions: Next, there is the use of specific questions to help people call to mind the details in the interrelationships between their use of words, and concrete features in their surroundings at the moment of their use, that were important in coming to an understanding of each other in particular everyday life settings. Such questions can reveal the criteria, the evidence in terms of which one made one’s judgments in the situation. We can see this move at work in the consultant’s question: How will you know that they have “got it,” that they do now have “the capacity for execution”? Such questions not only direct our attention toward unnoticed details in our surroundings but also redirect our expectations regarding the kind of answers we anticipate receiving from our inquiries.
- The continued use of particular examples: Living concrete examples—as a counter to the unexamined images implicit in currently established routines—can work to call out new, first time responses from us. “The origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language—I want to say—is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’ [Goethe],” remarks Wittgenstein (1980, p. 31). We can see this move at work in the consultant’s conversation when she suggests: Can you say: “What we are looking for is an honest, frank account of what this is actually going to take. This is how we are going to find this difficult. This is what it looks like when it starts to move. As it begins to move this is what we are beginning to reap?” Not generalizations but real stories, real vignettes
- Images, pictures, metaphors: This suggests to us a fourth method that is often of importance: By the careful use of selected images, similes, analogies, metaphors, or “pictures,” we can also suggest new ways of talking that not only orient us toward sensing otherwise unnoticed distinctions and relations for the first time but which also suggest new connections and relations with the rest of our proceedings (see also Cunliffe 2002). We can see the use of images at work in Tony’s talk: “We’ve got barriers up between us—you know—you worry about your performance contract and I’ll worry about mine, and we won, and that business unit lost, but together we were actually losing. Pockets of this going on everywhere. We’ve no way of operating across our activities.” The consultant thus must make the same use of Tony’s metaphorical talk: What is the move you are going to make to bring down the barriers?
- Comparisons: This brings us to a fifth and perhaps the most important of Wittgenstein’s methods, using various kinds of objects of comparison, for example, other possible ways of talking, other language games both actual and invented, and so on, he tries “to throw light on the facts of our language by way of not only similarities, but also dissimilarities” (1953, p. 130). For, by noticing how what occurs differs in a distinctive way from what we otherwise would expect, such comparisons can work, he notes, to establish “an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one of many possible orders; not the order” (1953, p. 132, The emphasis IS in the MS). Again, the consultant brings Tony to see that without sharing in his end in view, the CEO and VP-IT will not get the point of his vignettes and the other striking events he offers: “We have to show them what good looks like.”
- Die übersichtliche Darstellung: Where the overall point of these methods, and the slow and painstaking exploration of the many different uses of language available to us, and the landscape they engender, is that these explorations can give rise to a “perspicuous

representation or simply a clear overview (Ger: *übersichliche Darstellung*)” of the circumstance bewildering us. For, as he sees it: “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of our use of words—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (1953, p. 122).

If we are to find our way about inside our own linguistically shaped forms of life, then we need to grasp the landscape of their internal relations, the background landscape of possibilities, so to speak, within which each of our actions is formed and has its life—what above I have called the “determining surroundings” to which we must be answerable to in our actions, if they are to be fitting actions. But if we are to achieve such a synoptic sense of its immense complexities, as well as curing ourselves of the many temptations to see it as much more simple than it in fact is, we have to explore its grammatical geography close-up, in detail, without end. And to do this, the prospective, unfinalized, dialogical forms of talk of questioning others, can be of tremendous help to us.

Conclusions

If all our activities are at least partially shaped by our body’s ineradicable responsiveness to the unique character of our surroundings, then any inquiry into their nature that fails to take this into account—inquiries that draw on ready-made theories and models—may miss important aspects of our spontaneously expressed bodily activities. Indeed, they will miss just those aspects that make them unique both to the persons and to the situations within which they occur. Thus, my main concern has been to establish the possibility of what I want to call situated dialogic action research, a form of research or inquiry situated within a place where there is a focus on an actual, ongoing practice, shared both by the practitioners of the practice and a group of researchers or inquirers versed in traditions of thought that might help provide some useful ways of making a new kind of sense of the practice in question.

In pursuit of this end, I have explored the idea of a local, singular, practice-based, social science, in which: (a) the research questions; (b) the relevant methods of inquiry; (c) the criteria for what counts as evidence; and thus (d) what counts as the relevant data; (e) as well as the basic terms designating the focal events around which inquiry rotates and in terms of which its essential findings are formulated are all to be found within the intertwined nexus where all those involved in a situated difficulty interact with each other.

To sum up, the strictly situated character of such a form of inquiry is necessary for at least the following four reasons: (a) Our interactions are partially shaped in their being responsive to their surroundings in their performance, and if their unique nature is to be respected, this influence must be allowed to manifest itself. (b) We are often deeply unaware of what it is we are doing in our everyday interactions, thus it is only in the moment of acting that we can draw participants’ attention to aspects of their own activity that they would not otherwise notice. (c) Although we continually make use of already given forms of expression in our activities, there is a unique, situated creativity at work in all our everyday interactions: “What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (Bakhtin,

1986, p. 120). (d) In their arousal in us of anticipations, other people's (and our own) expressions arouse in us precise, bodily felt, situated anticipations of what next should occur, but the precise character of these unique expectations is only available at the moment participants are poised on the brink of seeking their satisfaction. Thus, for at least all of the above reasons, we cannot approach this kind of work with any theories or textbook methods already in mind; the kind of prospective, unfinalized, dialogical forms of talk required must be tailored to the requirements of the situation at hand. So, to paraphrase Wittgenstein (1953, p. 133) somewhat: while there is not a single method of inquiry here, there are indeed methods, like the everyday methods we use continually in making sense of what happens around us.

I cannot draw this article to a close without a few comments on how the process of inquiry I have described above relates to a number of major issues of concern in the conduct of the social sciences at large that have been nagging away at me in the background to my work. Although I have no space to treat them in any detail here, it is worth listing them in order:

- (1) The first is to note the increasing concern with the lack of relation between academic, investigator-initiated, discipline-driven inquiry, and inquiry relevant to local concerns in a region, business, or institutional practice of some kind (be it in health care, psychotherapy, education, or whatever). This worry has been voiced by quite a number of scholars in recent times, for instance, Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000), Flyvbjerg (2001), Fuller (2000), Law (2004), Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001), and Ziman (2000), not to mention Gadamer's (1975, 1989) monumental earlier efforts. All these writers have noted the baleful influence exerted by what we might call the university scientist's version of social science as contrasted with a local, practice-based social science.
- (2) The continual beginner's logic imposed on expert practitioners.
- (3) The loss of uniqueness and the growth of a "one size fits all" mentality.
- (4) The idea that everything efficient must be mechanized.
- (5) The feeling that unless one is following a textbook method, one's work cannot be properly scientific. We can find all these ills expressed in Dillow's (2007) and Taptiklis's (2005, 2008) work on the managerialism prevalent in much current managerial thinking.

However, if my account above is correct, there is a rigorous and disciplined approach to inquiry into the conduct of human affairs to be had, an approach with its own situated standards and criteria of goodness and worth, which does not model itself on the methods of the physical and natural sciences. Indeed, situated dialogic action research can be conducted in a disciplined, public manner, so as to provide what Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001) call "socially robust knowledge." But instead of generalities and regularities, it is oriented toward recognizing the language participants actually use, toward becoming clear about how they are using such standards and criteria, and toward understanding the world they are constructing for themselves by their use of them—not a world constructed for them by academics and other theorists. In respecting both the uniqueness of people and their situations and the uniqueness of the needed changes within them, it is necessarily a practical social science of singularities, concerned not to "lose the phenomena" (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 264-267)—the felt anticipations, and so on—crucial to their achievement. It is a form

of organizational inquiry aimed at helping people to better their own organizations in their own terms, not in our's. This, however, is not the aim of science-oriented research. For it seeks to foist on its subjects a set of alien terms or to redefine the words people already have and use perfectly well, while pretending in the name of objectivity that it is simply and neutrally explaining how things really are in the organization. How much longer can we live with this hubris?

Notes

1. "A person's performance is described as careful or skilful, if in his operations he is ready to detect and correct lapses, to repeat and improve upon successes, to profit from the examples of others, and so forth. He applies criteria in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right" (Ryle, 1949, p. 29).

2. In other words, while such terms serve a use in our talk (in Wittgenstein's, 1953, sense), they are not the names of any objective entities. Indeed, as Wittgenstein (1965) notes: "The questions 'What is length', 'What is meaning?', 'What is the number one?' and so on, produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something (We are up against one of the greatest sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it)" (p. 1).

3. I hesitate to call what is occurring here "coaching," as the consultant is in no way an expert or knowledgeable in the skills of the particular practitioner in focus here. The consultant's task is not to tell practitioners of better ways of conducting their professional activities but to help them to come to a more well-articulated understanding of their own ways of working; of making use of the "relating" skills they already possess and understanding how they can develop them further by drawing on the resources available to them from their everyday dealings with other people.

4. Interventions which, in fact, if they are to be intelligible to those to whom they are applied, must be formulated in terms of concepts already familiar to them. They thus, inevitably result in people doing simply a variation of what is already well known to them—uniquely new changes are impossible.

5. Chia (1998) has also contrasted these two different ways of relating ourselves to a phenomenon.

6. What does "socially robust knowledge" mean in practice? Notwotny et al. (2001) answer this question as follows: "First, social robustness is a relational, not a relativistic or (still less) an absolute idea It follows that the social robustness of knowledge can only be judged in specific contexts. Next, social robustness describes a process that, in due course, may reach a certain stability. Third, there is a fine but important distinction to be drawn between the robustness (of the knowledge) and its acceptability (by individuals, groups or societies). Of course, the two are connected—but social robustness in an important sense, is prospective; it is capable of dealing with unknown and unforeseeable contexts. Fourth, robustness is produced when research has been infiltrated and improved by social knowledge. Fifth, and last, socially robust knowledge has a strongly empirical dimension; it is subject to frequent testing, feedback and improvement because it is open-ended" (p. 167).

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