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**THE EMBODIED PRACTITIONER:**

**TOWARD DIALOGIC-DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL PRACTICES**

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ABSTRACT: As Raymond Williams (1977) notes“In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes” (p.128). If we are to express how we might best *orient* ourselves, in practice, in relation to the continuously changing sense we have of the “forming and formative processes” in which we are still actively involved, then we must develop completely new (dialogically-structured, non-Cartesian) forms of thought and reflection, as well as new ways of talking and styles of writing. Central to their development will be a change of focusa shift away from thoughts and ideas inside the heads of individuals, toward events occurring in people’s *meetings* out in the world – events occurring as a result of the *spontaneous, embodied, expressive-responsive* activities taking place between them as growing and living beings. In the past, these events have been left unnoticed in the ‘background’ to social life. In exploring this ‘corporeal-dialogical turn’ in social inquiry, I will draw on the work of Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, and Raymond Williams, and discuss a new style of talk and thought I call *withness-thinking* to constrast with the *aboutness-thinking* (representational thinking) most currently familiar to us.

I feel quite unqualified to speak from the current centre of the Social Sciences – if there is such a centre – on what actually *is* the dominant role of the social sciences today. But what I do feel qualified to speak about... from the margins... is what *might become* their role – or at least, about what *could be* a crucial role for the introduction into certain of our everyday practices, dialogically-structured moments of critical (*and appreciative*) reflection, aimed at refining and elaborating them further. Indeed, for the past six or seven years or so, drawing on the work of Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, Garfinkel, G.H. Mead, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Merleau-Ponty, and Raymond Williams, I have been *working with*, and *writing for*, practitioners and action researchers in a number of different fields – in psychotherapy (family therapy and in the treatment of psychotic crises), management, regional and urban development, and in health care and medical education settings. And I have now taken ‘retirement’ from my american university specifically to work more with just practitioners. As a consequence, my work has begun to take on a certain style not easily recognizable as a form of disciplined inquiry at all in academic circles... and I hope to persuade you, nonetheless, of its well connected academic credentials and its of intellectual worth.

              As a preliminary, let me just list some of the kinds of concerns that one must answer to from my current situation: First, instead of generalities, as a co-practitioner, one must work with unique particularities, with events that are always occurring, as Garfinkel (1967) nicely puts it, for yet “another first time” (p.9). Next, co-practitioners must also work in already ongoing, *complex* situations, mostly drawing on the *resources* already available within them. While there is an enormous amount of repetition and regularity in such situations, there is as well, “the crack where the light gets in” (as Leonard Cohen puts it) – so we are looking for small, once-off, fleeting, novel events which can constitute the beginnings of a new “form of life” along with its relevant “language game” (to use Wittgenstein’s, 1953, terms). Indeed, as Wittgenstein puts it: “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]” (1980, p.31). And when he asks: “But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here?” He replies: “Presumably that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought” (1981, no.541). In other words, as he sees it, our new ways of talking and thinking arise out our new, embodied, spontaneously expressed, ways of acting – in the beginning was not the word, but as Goethe puts it: “In the beginning was the deed.” Our embodied practices, which begin in our meetings with the others and othernesses around us, are primary.

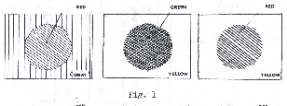
              Thus for Wittgenstein, Philosophy takes on a new and quite distinctive role: Instead of seeing it as the handmaiden or under-laborer (John Locke) to science, he sees it as an autonomous enterprise, as concerned with a task that cannot be accomplished by any other discipline. He wants it to be an inquiry into all the different possible ways of making sense available to us in the many different practical activities we share in our everyday lives together. And he wants to do this by making use of many of the self-same methods available to us in daily life for ‘making visible’ our ways of doing things to ourselves, and for training others in these ways. With the aim of improving them in two ways: 1) by helping us to avoid confusions and bewilderments of our own making; and 2) by showing how they can be elaborated, refined, or extended into novel spheres of activity – for, as we shall see, he suggests that the beginning of a new language games is to be found in our spontaneous bodily reactions to events occurring in our meetings with the others and othernesses around us. And what is of especial interest to me in all of this, is the power of a person’s embodied utterances in such meetings, the power of the spoken voice to influence, not only the behaviour others, at certain relevant moments in its performance, but also, crucially, the speaker’s own behaviour.

**Personal history, Luria and Vygotsky**

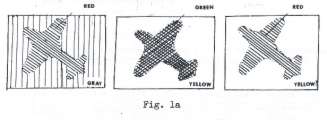
I won’t go into the history of how all this came about, except to mention two early influences. One was, that I first left school at 15 yrs to work in an aircraft factory, and I have retained an ‘engineer’s embodiment’, so to speak, ever since – in wanting to get the ‘feel’ of the stresses and strains involved in how each unfolding movement in an interconnected system of organized parts are realized in contributing to a certain overall outcome. “Are the parts strong enough, inflexible enough, prone to resonance, prone to rapid wear, etc, etc?” (See Preface to Shotter, 1993a). In other words, rather than starting with abstract theories, my concern has always been with the detailed, concrete description of the participant or constitutive of events occurring in the sequential unfolding of a particular practical activity – with what in the realm of human involvements one might call a ‘blow-by-blow account’.

              The other influence was an early meeting with Basil Bernstein – when I was an electronics lab technician in the University College London phonetics department between 1959 and 1963, researching on speech synthesis and recognition machines, and Basil was doing his Ph.D. under Frieda Goldman Eisler. He introduced me to Alexander Luria’s (1961) little book: “Speech and the Regulation of Behavior” immediately on its publication in 1961 (along with a dose of Ernst Cassirer, G.H. Mead, and later, Mary Douglas). Basil, of course, was interested in how it was that Middle class kinds learned to be “self-controlled,” while Working class kinds seemed to remain more “impulsive,” controlled by events in their immediate surroundings – and this of course, under Vygotsky’s influence, was Luria’s focal concern too. But while Basil went on to draw upon the essential classics in Sociology – Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Symbolic Interactionism – I stayed with Luria and Vygotsky. And although my early work wandered this way and that, and had a strong negative, critical thrust to it, that negative thrust was formulated against the background of a positive thesis that they provided. Let me set out the character of this background in more detail, first by describing a couple of Russian experiments described by Luria, interspersed with some quotations from Vygotsky.

              The first of Luria’s experiments is this: 3 to 5 year old children were asked to attend to two compound displays (stimuli) – a Red circle on a Gray background, and a Green circle on a Yellow background (as in Fig.1, from Luria, 1961, p.5)), and to squeeze a rubber bulb in their right hand for Red and one in their left hand for Yellow.



Tests showed, however, that for these young children, they were not distinguishing between the *compound* displays, but were just focussing on the Red or the Green circles – the background was not being noticed. When Red was shown on a Yellow background, they pressed with their right hand without confusion. With older children aged 5 to 7, this dominance of the foreground element could, however, be changed through the use of speech. If the coloured circles were replaced by coloured aeroplanes, and the children were first told a little narrative: “Squeeze with right hand for the Red aeroplane on Yellow background, because the plane can fly when the sun is shining. But squeeze with the left hand for the Green aeroplane on the Gray background because when its rainy the plane can’t fly and has to be stopped.”



Here, at this age – it wasn’t possible with the younger children – we have the power of another person’s, an adult’s, spoken words to influence the direction of the child’s attention.

               Before turning to Luria’s second experiment, let me insert some quotes from Vygotsky. The first is:

•            “Our experimental study proved that it was the functional use of the word, or any other sign, as means of focusing one’s attention, selecting distinctive features and analyzing and synthesizing them, that plays a central role in concept formation... Words and other signs are those means that *direct our mental operations, control their course, and channel them toward the solution of the problem confronting us*” (Vygotsky, 1986, pp.106-107, my emphasis) [](javascript:WPShow('WPEndnote1',%20WPEndnote1%20)) .

•            “All the higher psychic functions are mediated processes, and signs are the basic means used to master and direct them. The mediating sign is incorporated in their structure as an indispensable, indeed, the central part of the total process. In concept formation, that sign is the *word* which at first plays the role of means in forming a concept and later becomes its symbol (1962, p.90).

•            And, as the child grows older, “the child begins to perceive the world not only through his [or her] eyes but also through his [or her] speech” (1978, p.32).

              To illustrate these points, let me turn to the second experiment Luria describes: In it, children were asked to do various tasks connected with the manipulation of levers (to push an object into a certain position, say). Children of 3 to 4, and more especially of 4 to 5, could operate the system fairly successfully to achieve the required goal. But when the whole system was presented in picture form *and practical action was excluded*, and the children were required to give the solution in purely verbal, concrete visual terms, they were totally unable to do the task – let me repeat that, it was when practical action was excluded that the 4 to 5 year olds were unable to do the task. 5½ to 7 year olds could begin to attempt it, but were only 22% successful. But, if a child was asked to do the ‘pictorial’ task together with the experimenter or with an older child, the results were utterly different. As Luria remarks:

“In these experiments, not only could the child shift his [or her] attention from the final goal to the interrelation between goal and lever and fulcrum, but he could also considerably increase his orienting activities and incorporate his own speech into the process of performing the task required; he achieved this by means of his relationship with the adult. All this made a substantial change in his way of doing the task; his successively developing orienting actions, inhibiting his direct-impulse attempts, now played a decisive part; the operation involved his own speech, which consisted at first of interjections (‘That's it!’ ‘This way’, etc) but later acquired the form of an extended verbal analysis of the situation; his complex chain of outward movements was gradually replaced by visual examination of the levers; his speech, having arisen *from his relationship to the adult*, took on an independent character and was subsequently curtailed; and some time later new modes of performance evolved which allowed him to generalize the methods acquired previously and to cope with the task not only in imaginative visual terms but also in purely discursive form. The long chain of direct-impulse actions had thus been replaced by a new functional system of ‘mental orientation’ or ‘direct comprehension of relationship’” (Luria, 1961, pp.16-18, my emphasis).

In other words, the role of an Other, another addressee, to whom the child *must be* spontaneously responsive, is crucial to the occurrence of this kind of self-directed, directive, controlling, and channelling talk by the child – the speech that Piaget calls “egocentric speech,” but which Vygotsky (1986) was able to show, with a whole series of experiments [](javascript:WPShow('WPEndnote2',%20WPEndnote2%20)) , was not *egocentric* at all, but the gradual turning of speech for others into “inner speech” for oneself. As he comments:

“We observed how egocentric speech [in our experiments] at first marked the end result or a turning point in an activity, then was gradually shifted toward the middle and finally to the beginning of an activity, taking on a directing, planning function and raising the child’s acts to the level of purposeful behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.31).

              I’ve included this long account of the experiment recounted by Luria, and Vygotsky’s work on egocentric speech, as they contain the elements of almost everything I think is important in the forms of practical inquiry into practices that in a moment I want to discuss. But before I say what these elements are, let me again add a couple more quotations from Vygotsky to this account of Luria’s. They are:

•            “The general law of development says that awareness and deliberate control appear only during a very advanced stage in the development of a mental function, after it has been used and practiced unconsciously and spontaneously. In order to subject a function to intellectual and volitional control one must first possess it” (1986, p.168 - see 1962, p.90).

•            “The history of development of signs brings us to a much more general law governing the development of behaviour. The essence of this law is that in the process of development the child begins to practice with respect to himself the same forms of behaviour that others formerly practised with respect to him” (1966, pp.39-40).

In other words, what Luria and Vygotsky are in effect outlining here, are three very important principles:

•            One is that higher mental functions are developed out of an ‘inner, deliberate orchestration’, so to speak, of already existing lower ones.

•            These lower functions are developed from even lower, biologically available capacities, that are spontaneously or impulsively expressed, or ‘called out’ from us, as a result of events occurring in the course of our embodied, practical involvements with all the others and othernesses in our surroundings.

•            Individuals develop the capacity to conduct the deliberate ‘inner orchestration’ of their own, spontaneously expressed lower functions, by verbally ‘calling for’ for their expression at appropriate moments in an ongoing practice, just as another person or a teacher might.

Thus, from a whole background of bodily available, impulsive ‘ways of going on’, a few can be ‘called on’ to take part in a deliberate and accountable performance.

**Describing “the Background”**

What I want to discuss here, then, is what some writers like Searle (1981), Dreyfus (1991), Taylor (1980), and Wittgenstein call “the background,” what Foucault (1970) calls “the positive unconscious,” and what Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Wittgenstein (1980) also call “the primordial, or the primeval chaos,” from within which our more deliberate activities cam emerge. Gadamer (1975, 1989) puts the same issue in terms of his concern with, “not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (p.xvi; p.xxviii). But my own term for what I think is at issue is much closer to Raymond Williams’s (1977) “structures of feeling.” I want to talk of the “shaped and vectored sense” that we have at any one moment in an ongoing practice of how things stand and are going for us, our background sense of our moment-by-moment changing *relations* to our circumstances.

*An aside*: It is the failure to into account this background stuff – not an already existing objective or material reality – that determines not only what counts for us as ‘a thing’ or a ‘person’, but for everything else that ‘makes sense’ to us, and thus ‘orients’ us in the actions we direct toward the others and othernesses around us – that is, I think, a major mistake in many current versions of Social Constructionism. In fact, let me pronounce now, that I no longer want to be known as a Social Constructionist, and that besides returning to my original concern with what I called a Social Ecology, I now espouse what I call an “Expressive or Relational Realism.” In other words, instead of wanting, like a *scientific realist* (á la Bhaskar), to know the nature of physical things in our surroundings *independent of* us, I want to study the lives of living things as having a life of their own *in terms of their expressive-responsive relations to* us. It is Anthony Rudd (2003) who calls this “expressive realism,” and I want to follow him in this.

              As I now see it, then, at least the following six features of our expressive-responsive relations to our surroundings are worth mentioning:

•            1) One is, that as living embodied beings, we cannot not be spontaneously responsive, bodily, to events occurring around us.

•            2) The second is that, in such a spontaneously responsive sphere of activity as this, instead of one person first acting individually and independently of an other, and then the second replying, by acting individually and independently of the first, people act jointly; they form a new and strange collective unity, a ‘we’ – not a unity that is not a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1989, p.306), but is a “*plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*,... combine but are not merged in the unity of the [dialogic] event" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.6).

•            3) The next is, that such dialogic events can only occur – but do not always do so – in *meetings* between ourselves and the others and otherness around us.

•            4) Fourth, the others around us can find our embodied responsiveness *expressive* of our *unique relations* not only to them, but also of other aspects of our circumstances – in short, dialogic events are always ‘situated’ in a ‘background’ and always expressive of certain aspects of that ‘background’.

•            5) Fifth, because all living bodies, organic forms, change *internally* by growth and differentiation into more internally complex forms, while still retaining their identity as the unique individuals they are, there is always a kind of *developmental continuity* involved in the unfolding of all living movement. Thus, the earlier phases of a living activity can often be indicative of at least the *style* of what is next to come.

•            6) While the final feature is that, because the outcome of any exchange cannot be traced back to the intentions of any of the individuals involved, the ‘dialogical reality or space’ constructed between them is experienced as an ‘external reality’, a ‘third agency’ (an ‘it’) with its own (ethical) demands and requirements: “The word is a drama in which three characters participate (it is not a duet, but a trio)” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.122) – a third agency is at work in all dialogical realities.

In other words, in our interactions, we do not experience ourselves as living and acting in a neutral space of simply inert physical objects. As living, embodied beings, we *can*, at each moment in our interactions with the others and othernesses around us, not only ‘go out to meet them’, so to speak, with the appropriate anticipations and expectations at the ready, but we *can* also have an *evaluative and anticipatory sense* of ‘where’ we are with them, and of ‘where next’ we might go with them – that is, we can have a shaped and vectored sense of how we are placed and how things are going for us in what we might call “the landscape of now.”

              By this term, I mean (I hope), more or less what Raymond Williams (1977) meant by his term, “structures of feeling.” He put it thus: “... we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations... We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity” (p.132) – let me repeat, thought as feeling, and feeling as thought; not just an inert representation, a picture that needs *interpretation* if we are to give it a meaning, but a shaped and vectored sense of how we stand, how things are going for us, and where and how we might move next.

              As I see it then, “the background” is not a thing or entity, but is a *relational dynamic*, a ceaseless flow of expressive-responsive, living, embodied activity, spontaneously continuously, which occurs between us and the others and othernesses around us in our meetings with them, as we all carry out our daily lives. At first, I called this relational dynamic, “joint action” (Shotter, 1980, 1984, 1993a&b); but later, following Bakhtin (1981, 1986), I called “the dialogical;” but now, following Merleau-Ponty (1968), to do justice to the weird kind of complexity created, I want to call the realm of activity created in our meetings, the realm of “the Chiasmic – the realm of the Entangled or Intertwined.” [](javascript:WPShow('WPEndnote3',%20WPEndnote3%20))

              But let me first say something about the task *of talking about or of writing about* this background, this *relational dynamic* – the task of describing the nature of the practices that make possible everything else that we do deliberately, consciously, and voluntarily, all the actions for which we can be held responsible by the others around us. About it, John Searle (1981) remarks:

“There is a real difficulty in finding ordinary language terms to describe the Background: one speaks vaguely of “practices,” “capacities,” and “stances,” or one speaks suggestively but misleadingly of “assumptions” and “presuppositions.” These latter terms must be literally wrong, because they imply the appearance of representation... The fact that we have no natural vocabulary for discussing the phenomena in question and the fact that we lapse back into an Intentionalistic vocabulary ought to arouse our interest... There is simply no first-order vocabulary for the Background, because the Background is as invisible to Intentionality as the eye which sees is invisible to itself” (pp.156-157).

Foucault (1970) puts the task that faces us thus:

“The human sciences, when dealing with what is representation (in either conscious or unconscious form), find themselves treating as their object what is in fact their condition of possibility... They proceed from that which is given to representation to that which renders representation possible, but which is still representation... On the horizon of any human science, there is the project of bringing man's consciousness back to its real conditions, of restoring it to the contents and forms that brought it into being, and elude us within in it...” (p.364).

Wittgenstein (1953) put the positive task we face more briefly:

“What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words” (p.227).

Elsewhere, he states it thus:

“Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here *is* the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it)” (1980, I, no.257).

But, as Raymond Williams (1977) notes – as I mentioned in my abstract for this talk – we often fail to measure up to the task at all, and instead, easily fall into the temptation to seek well ordered patterns, repetitions, rules, laws, categories, codes, principles, or conventions, etc. “In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense,” he says. “The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes” (p.128). Indeed, here is the opening sentence of an about to be published journal paper sent to me last week by a quite famous colleague: “*Categorization is fundamental to human existence. It penetrates every context of collective social action and individual reasoning. We simply cannot describe, reflect on, or deal with reality without invoking categories*...”

              Well, I beg to differ... we can, and I will show in particular how we can ‘deal with reality’ without resorting to the use of categories in our speech. We can overcome what I will call, “Williams’ dilemma,” the seeming unavoidable resort to retrospective description. The trick is, as Raymond Williams (1977) puts it in talking about works of art, is to make our everyday social realities *present* in the same way. About works of art he says:

“... we have to make them present, in specifically active ‘readings’. It is also that the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present. At different moments in history, and in significantly different ways, the reality and even the primacy of such presences and such processes, such diverse and yet specific actualities, have been powerfully asserted and reclaimed, as in practice of course they are all the time lived” (p.129).

But how can we do this? What kind of talk is required? What might be its aim?

**The power of our spontaneous, living, embodied, responsive expressions**

**in our meetings with the others and othernesses around us: 1st-person tellings and 3rd-person reports**

We more often than not think, as experts in Social Research, our task is to conduct empirical research to discover unknown facts, to communicate new information to those too harassed by their other jobs to have to time to collect it. But this is what Wittgenstein (1953) has to say about the goal of his investigations:

“... we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (1953, no.109).

And how are we to achieve this special way of looking into how our language ‘in fact’ works... despite of an urge to misunderstand them?

              Well, we can achieve it through some of the ordinary everyday uses of language in terms of which we first learnt it from the others around us. If how it worked depended on our possession of the special methods of priestly, scientific class of experts to ‘dig out’ what is ordinarily hidden, then few of us would ever learn our mother tongue. Thus, as Wittgenstein (1953) sees it, his kind of investigatory philosophy “simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us” (no.126). Thus his task “consists in assembling *reminders* for a particular purpose” (no.127, my emphasis). Like a mother with her dirty-boots son: “Stop! Look! (pointing to the kitchen floor) Haven’t I told you before – take your boots off before coming into the kitchen after playing football!!” The issue here is not that of providing a new piece of data, a new unknown fact, but of stopping someone in the tracks of their current activity (‘deconstruction’ in practice), and of *re-orienting* them, or of *re-relating* them, to their surroundings with a whole lot of new background expectations and anticipations in mind.

              This, I think, is how we can approach the problem of working with individual practitioners to help them in working on themselves, to increase their own capacities to react in a spontaneous fashion, more fully to the events occurring around them – we must approach the issue, not in terms of them needing to learn more facts, gain more information, but as a matter of them learning to *re-relate themselves* to their surroundings in many different ways – an “ontogenetic” task, as Vygotsky (1986) puts it.

              But we cannot do this while sitting in a seminar room or conference hall talking amongst ourselves about theoretical frameworks, about general ways of *thinking* to impose in a Procrustean, one-size-fits-all fashion on the unique circumstances within which they are situated. If we are to overcome *Williams’ dilemma*, one aspect of the major changes we must make as researchers, is to work as a co-practitioners in with the practitioners we are researching *with* (not *upon*), and try to help them become co-researchers along with us. And if we do this, our task is – in the landscape of now, as I put it a moment ago – to help them, even in the middle of the fog in which that landscape is enveloped, to erect some landmarks and signposts, to help them gain a sense – a “structure of feeling” – that *tells* them how they stand and how things are going for them within it. Indeed, this is exactly how Wittgenstein (1953) puts it in characterizing the kinds of philosophical problems he is concerned with. For him: “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don't know my way about’” (no.123). And the mark of the solution coming to us, of our overcoming our bewilderment and confusion, is not when we can describe the mysterious processes going on in our heads, but when we feel able to say to those around us: “Now I know how to go on.” Indeed, he advises: “Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all – For that is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on’...?” (no.154).

              But if we are to help practitioner-others gain these ontogenetic skills of being able to re-orient themselves when necessary, how can talk with them? What kind of use of language will work? Let me again turn to Raymond Williams (1977) to gain a sense of what is at issue here: “if the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed,” he says, “we have indeed to find new terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of the present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products” (p.128).

              Well, it is at this point that, of course, I want to go back to Luria and Vygotsky (and to Wittgenstein), and to the power of spoken words, of words in their speaking not to patterns of already spoken words, not to their representational, picturing power, but to their expressive-responsive power in the present moment of their uttering. As Vygotsky noted, “it was the functional use of the word, or any other sign, as means of focussing one’s attention, selecting distinctive features and analyzing and synthesizing them” (1986, p.106) that played a central role in concept formation; it was “the *word* which at first plays the role of means in forming a concept” (1962, p.56). Put in other terms, it is a use of language which we as 1st-person participants in an conversationally conduct activity *tell* people things, rather than as a 3rd-person observer *report* something.

              Crucial to a telling is, in Bakhtin’s (1986) terms, its “expressive intonation,” which is “one of the means of expressing [a] speaker’s emotionally evaluative attitude toward the subject of his [or her] speech... which resounds clearly in oral speech... [but] does not exist in the system of language as such, that is, outside the utterance” (p.85). In our actual speaking (but not in our *reporting* of a person’s speech), “the meaning of [a] word,” says Bakhtin (1986), “pertains to a particular actual reality and particular real conditions of speech communication. Therefore here we do not understand the meaning of a given word simply as a word of a language; rather, we assume an active responsive position with respect to it (sympathy, agreement or disagreement, stimulus to action). Thus, expressive intonation belongs to the utterance and not to the word” (p.86). Hence ‘there’, in each present moment of a person’s speaking, ‘invisibly present’ in the unfolding contours of their utterances as they voice them in spontaneous response to features in the surrounding circumstances their talk, is the ‘point’ of their talk – what mimetically or indicatively they are *gesturing toward* in their talk. A speaker’s expressive intonation not only gives one a sense of ‘where they are coming from and going to’, it also gives one a sense of one’s own positioning as a listener, i.e., what the speaker’s expectation is, as to how one should respond (i.e., relate) to it.

              In other words, there is something at work in living speech which has to do with, not to do with our intellect, to do with what we *know* about the world around us, but with how we actively relate ourselves to it, with the stance or attitude we take toward it – where by stance or attitude we mean something quite complicated, to do with a whole dynamic set of background expectations, anticipations, and readinesses to respond to events occurring around us *in a certain way*, in a certain *style*. At issue here, then, is, I think, something that has not had an airing in the social and behavioural sciences for many a year – at issue, I think, is a kind of talk that can influences us not in our intellect but in our will.

“**Withness-talk and -thinking” versus “Aboutness-talk and -thinking”**

Wittgenstein (1980) makes this distinction thus: “What makes a subject hard to understand – if its something significant and important – is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (p.17).

              Currently, talk of “the will” is somewhat archaic in modern psychology and social theory, in which notions of information processing and evidence based processes are predominant, but let me again refer to Vygotsky’s (1966) work to note how he sees its thrust: “We could not describe this new significance of the whole operation” he says, “otherwise than by saying that it is *mastery of one’s own process of behavior*. It is surprising to us that traditional psychology has completely failed to notice this phenomenon which we can call mastering one’s own reactions. In attempts to explain this fact of ‘will’ this psychology resorted to a miracle, to the intervention of a spiritual factor in the operation of nervous processes...” (pp.33-34).

              Clearly, in this, Vygotsky is right. We have failed to notice this phenomenon. Too often, as Raymond Williams (1977) makes clear, rather than dynamic structures of *feeling* being an aspect of our very being in the world, we take it that as thinkers we inhabit systems of *representation*, which are thought of as static, objective structures (formal, social, etc.). The view that Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, and Bakhtin all propose throughout their work is the opposite of this. The role of the living, active, embodied individual is fundamentally that of an unceasing judge who must ‘orchestrate’ within him- or herself an appropriate set of inner mental movements to make the best sense of their ongoing confrontation with things. This involves us in the wilful inner organization of our attitudes to our surroundings (Luntley, 2003), and that organizing is done by allowing ourselves to be responsive to the interplay occurring between our own outgoing (responsive) expressions toward the other (or otherness) and their equally responsive incoming expressions toward us as the activity occurring between us unfolds. As Bakhtin (1986) puts it with regard to our listening to another’s speech: it must be an “actively responsive” listening which “constitutes nothing more than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in what ever form it may be actualized)” (p.69).

              In a similar manner, Merleau-Ponty (1964) discusses also the special kind of looking we employ when looking at a painting (by Cezanne, say): “I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I look at a thing; I do not fix its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*” (p.164). In other words, instead of factual, aboutness-seeing, here, we can begin to make sense of what we might call a *withness-seeing*. For, after having seen one Cezanne, we can begin to look over other paintings *with* the image of a Cezanne picture in mind that shapes and instructs our looking, similarly, with a piece of reading in mind. As Steiner (1989) suggests, “the streets of our cities *are* different after Balzac and Dickens. Summer nights, notably to the south, have changed with Van Gogh (p.164)... It is no indulgent fantasy to say that cypresses are on fire since Van Gogh or that aqueducts wear walking-shoes after Paul Klee” (p.188) – it is not that after reading Wittgenstein we see language *as* a game, or *as* a city, and that’s the end of it, but *with* a city in mind (which city: Paris (wheel and spoke), New York (grid), London (mess)?), we look to see if it has different ‘regions’, so to speak, like business, entertainment, university, sports, etc. districts, whether it has a centre, suburbs, a countryside, archeological layers, etc., etc. A seeing that is already ‘primed’, so to speak, to notice the occurrence of possible connections and relations between momentary features of our surroundings that might otherwise be missed.

              With regard to another’s speech or writing, Merleau-Ponty (1962) remarks, more than our readying ourselves in anticipation to respond, there is also “a taking up of others’ thought through speech, ... an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts... [where] their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of deduction from a *gestural meaning*, which is immanent in speech... [So that, as] in a foreign country, I begin to understand the meaning of words through their place in the context of action, and by taking part in a communal life – in the same way an as yet imperfectly understood piece of philosophical writing discloses to me at least a ceratin ‘style’... which is a first draft of its meaning. I begin to understand a[n unfamiliar] philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher” (p.179).....“There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism” (p.179).

              It is this – the power that other people’s living, embodied *expressions* can have upon us, the power of their bodily voiced utterances – that we have failed to take seriously. As children – quite apart from the actual words they say – we can learn from their frowns and smiles, their pointings and other gestures, both an *evaluative* sense of how we are placed or positioned with respect to them, as well as an *anticipatory* sense of how next we should respond. Indeed, as parents, we rely on our children responding in this spontaneous way to our expressions in teaching them the (seemingly orderly) linguistically structured practices we think of, philosophically, as rule-governed practices. Relying on the directionality inherent in the temporally unfolding of living activities, we utter at certain crucial moments in the course of this teaching, along with a whole set of exaggerated facial expressions and other bodily gestures, such 1st-person *tellings* as ‘Stop!’, ‘Look’, ‘Listen’, ‘Look at that’, ‘Listen to this’, ‘Do like this’, ‘Do it like that’, and so on. The crucial nature of the *moment of utterance* cannot be over emphasized: in coming at a particular moment in the already ongoing flow of contingently intertwined activity occurring between them and us, in pointing in their gestural expressiveness from *‘this* past’ toward ‘*that kind* of future’, our children’s activities allow us to intervene at *that* moment, and in doing so, to point them toward ‘*another kind* of future’, toward seeing a connection between events of a previously unnoticed kind [](javascript:WPShow('WPEndnote4',%20WPEndnote4%20)) . And it is within such a process as this that our children can “grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.88).

              But what is the functional or operative difference between these two ways of talking/writing, between 3rd-person *reports*, and 1st-person *tellings*? How is it that, by the use of allusive, evocative, gestural, and emotionally expressive forms of talk and text, can such a form of talk, a *telling*, provide us with (what is becoming known in the management field as) “actionable knowledge,” with knowledge that can *orient* or *direct* us toward the next ‘right step’ to take in our practices, in a way which 3rd-person reports do not?

              Well, without the unique individualized understandings occurring at crucial moments in our particular exchanges with our children (and others), our attempts to train them to be active participants in the shared forms of responsive expression prevalent in our culture, would be impossible. Indeed, at many junctures in our relations with others, certain 1st-person expressions expressive of our ‘inner lives’ are clearly required if we are to sustain our 3rd-person talk about events out in the world between us. For example: A theater director says to an actor: “Say it like *this* (intones an utterance), not like *that* (intones the utterance again, differently).I want you to offer your uncertainty to her *as a gift*, not *as an accusation*.” In saying this, the director refers to that precise moment in time when a male actor utters a particular word to his female co-actor. “It makes a difference whether you refer to this or to that moment... The language-game ‘I mean (or meant) *this*’ (subsequent explanation of a word) is quite different from this one: ‘I thought of ... as I said it’,” notes Wittgenstein (1953, p.217). The difference it makes is in terms of the background expectations and anticipations aroused.

              To emphasize this last point, consider voicing the utterance: “The cat sat on the mat, the mat was red, the cat was black.” Again, we can get the picture quite clearly, but – “So what?” How might we act in relation to such an account? If it arouses any expectations at all, they are so vague and non-specific that they lack any action-guiding force. It is a *report* on a state of affairs. But if the utterance is voiced in the following manner, as a *telling*: “The cat...(pause)... sat... (pause)... on the mat,... (pause)... the mat... (pause)... was RED!? (emphatic intonation)...(pause)... the cat was (...) BLACK!” Then... is it the beginning of a ghost story?... or of a murder story?... or of a mystery to do with black cats and red mats? It’s clearly not the beginning of a policy document on the state of the social sciences today. Whatever it *is* the beginning of, we *feel* it is the beginning of something we might like to follow further, we feel *engaged* by it, ‘arrested’ or ‘struck’ by it.

              In other words, what is occurring here is the arousal of our capacity to respond to living movement *expectantly*, i.e., in terms of expectations of what should come next. The flat enunciation of the sentence, the report: “The cat sat on the mat,” did not *express* an evaluative attitude.

              This comparison, between 3rd-person reports and 1st-person tellings, suggests another distinction, a distinction between ‘withness-‘ and ‘aboutness-thinking/talking/writing’:

*•            Withness (dialogic)-thinking* is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with an other’s living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their ‘works’. It is a meeting of outsides, of surfaces, of ‘skins’ or of two kinds of ‘flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty), such that they come into ‘touch’ with each other. They both touch and are touched, and in the relations between their outgoing touching and resultant incoming, responsive touches of the other, the sense of a ‘touching-’ or a ‘moving-difference’ emerges. In the interplay of living movements intertwining with each other, new possibilities of relation are engendered, new interconnections are made, new ‘shapes’ of experience can emerge. This reflective encounter is thus not simply a ‘seeing’, for what is sensed is invisible; nor is it an interpretation (a representation), for it arises directly and immediately in one’s living encounter with an other’s expressions; neither is it merely a feeling, for carries with it as it unfolds a quite unique, *‘shaped’* and *‘vectored’* sense of our moment-by-moment changing placement within our current surroundings – engendering in us both: 1) a unique *evaluation of our placement*, i.e., to anticipations as to what-next *might happen* to us, 2) along with, so to speak, ‘action-guiding advisories’ as to what-next we might do.

•            While in *aboutness (monologic)-thinking*, “(in its extreme pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness... Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.293). It works simply in terms of ‘pictures’, thus, even when we ‘get the picture’, we still have to decide, intellectually, on a right course of action.

              It is in being able to ‘move’ us, to elicit from us, creatively, responses not previously expressed, that ‘withness’ styles or forms of talk/writing can do what ‘aboutness’ styles cannot. Like Heineken beers, they can “Reach the Parts Other Styles Cannot Reach.” They can work both to *‘deconstruct’-in-practice* our current practices, and enable us to re-construct them selectively. And they can do this by guiding us toward eliminating previously unnoticed misleading tendencies, and by directing our attention toward ones of a more enhancing kind.

              Their force in practice, is that they can bring previously unnoticed, alternative, intrinsic possibilities to our attention. In short, the voices of others can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is that their “‘otherness’ which enters into us,” says Steiner (1989), that “makes us other” (p.188) – *they*, in arousing *dialogically-structured* responses in us, can create possibilities for change within us that we cannot create within ourselves alone.

**Conclusions**

I have set up the issue here as if it is solely concerned with our role as social scientists helping practitioners to refine and develop their practices. But let me end by pointing out that the initial establishment of a new research community, just as much as in an action research project oriented toward the problems of particular practitioners, is much more a matter of imagining and grasping new *possibilities* than a matter of understanding current *actualities*. And members must fashion between themselves, dialogically, new shared, and sharable, sense of how they *might* go on together to act in new ways. In other words, the issue here is not a matter of *discovery* but of *creation*.

              Hanson (1958), influenced by Wittgenstein (1953), drew attention to this issue long ago. The task of understanding “unsettled, dynamic research sciences like microphysics” (p.1), he pointed out, cannot itself be conducted according to classical scientific methods, the methods use in “finished” sciences. For what is often at issue between scientists in a research science, is not so much how to describe (represent) its subject matter accurately as to determine (constitute) what it *might be* – a difference between, not what the facts *are*, but of how they *hang together*, their meaning, their inter-relations [](javascript:WPShow('WPEndnote5',%20WPEndnote5%20)) . The differences involved might seem to be subtle differences mattering very little in practice. But the difference between finished and research sciences – to do with the connections and relations they sense as existing within the phenomena of their inquiries – would, nonetheless show up, as Hanson (1958) puts it, “in ‘frontier’ thinking – where the direction of new inquiry has regularly to be redetermined” (p.118). Thus, cautions Hanson (1958), in outlining what is involved in studying dynamic, research sciences, “let us examine not how observation, facts and data are built up into general systems of physical explanation, but how these system are built into our observations, and our appreciation of facts and data” (p.3) – in other words, rather than aboutness-thinking, it is withness-thinking we need to understand, if we are to understand the character of a research rather than a text-book science.

              Such an approach, of course, calls into question both the Platonic assumption that human activity can be explained in terms of theory, and the central place the Cartesian tradition assigns to the conscious subject. And it takes instead, the spontaneous occurrence of the ceaseless, living, expressive-responsive, bodily activity that happens to us in our meetings with the others and othernesses around us, as its point of departure. And to repeat Hanson’s (1958) claim above, rather than discovery, its concern should be with creation, with ‘moving on’ from where we are to somewhere else more refined, yet more developed, more uniquely suited to what happen to be our contingent needs – an understanding that we now realize cannot be stated in terms of a set of eternally true, abstract, general principles, but which will need stating in terms of a whole set of particular details, unique to the activities in question. Thus we must abandon the requirement that, if it is to be a proper science, it still must have as its final Cartesian aim, the discovery of God’s pre-established laws. That is an aspect of fundamentalism (or foundationalism) which I think we can now live without. Instead of the either-or oscillation between formal systematicity and creativity as fixed and static ‘points of view’, surely there is now a need in all of science to understand how, dynamically, we can move between them, and in so doing, dialogically (or chiasmicly) inter-relate them in a meaningful way with each other.

              Indeed, this was Bakhtin’s (1984) dream. “It should be pointed out,” he said,

“that the single and unified consciousness is by no means an inevitable consequence of the concept of a unified truth. It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. The monologic way of perceiving cognition and truth is only one of the possible ways. It arises where consciousness is placed above existence, and where the unity of existence is transformed into the unity of consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.81).

“Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110).

And that is my dream here, today. Thank you.

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**Notes:**