What else life if not awkward?

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> For the word (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible that a lack of response (Bakhtin, 1986, p.127)

Only after having been invited by the editors of this journal to respond to Jonathan Potter's (this edition) attentive piece, did I come across the following:

> …there is a third term to the relation between man and nature, culture, which is not genetically inherited but communicated to man after birth as a "second nature". It is this third term that psychology, in its attempts to be "scientific", has ignored (Shotter, 1975, p.136)

This statement comes at the end of a very short and yet still remarkably relevant text, *Images of man in psychological research*. Apart from the obvious coincidence – 'Second nature' (hereafter 2N) being the title of the paper prompting Potter's article - I draw attention to this quote because it lives within a tradition in which I situate the kind of work I am interested in pursuing as a psychologist. In important ways it is a different kind of work from the work Potter describes and herein I shall continue to highlight the tensions evident between forms of discursive psychology maintained by epistemological constructionism (DPEC) and forms premised on a discursive psychology reliant on ontological constructionism (DPOC). Both approaches, I believe, intend to address second nature accounts of human being and yet it is in

how they signify and carry out their intent that their purposes may be known. Having highlighted some points where DPEC and DPOC crossover I will go on to discuss three areas where difference is at its most evident: our relationships to tradition, to data and to people.

Crossover

To begin this response, in the spirit of Bakhtin (see above), I would like to thank Potter for his attention to the 2N paper and participation in the ongoing dialogue concerning discursive psychology (DP). Predictably, Potter's riposte works incredibly hard to show my (mis)understanding of DP. I shall outline below how much of what Potter suggests about 2N is what one would expect from typical academic debate. In sum, differences (presumed or actual) are far easier to promulgate than similarities. Whilst I accept the importance of engaging distinctions I nevertheless want to immediately highlight some of the similarities I see apparent between DPOC and DPEC. So, to our first point of potential agreement. It is a fair suggestion, made by Potter, that binary divisions may create an impression of simple mutual exclusivity. This was never the intention of the 2N paper. In fact, therein I called for collaborative efforts by discursive psychologists in resisting the impact of first nature psychologies. Thus, the initial point requiring emphasis is that DPOC and DPEC assumptions should be encountered, not as distinct and independent poles but instead engaged as related positions linked by their interests in discursive psychological applications. Future developments in the theory of DP will add to working through the nuances of this field, a DP no longer heralded as notionally homogenous yet recognisable in and by the field's maturing tradition.

Further similarities can be recognised in an acknowledgement of complexity and variability in social action. As those conversant with DP will know, studying descriptions created via talk and text is central to this work. I agree with Potter that analytic focus should attend to areas of joint action (Shotter, 1995) 'where intersubjectivity is a contested space, as both parties draw on the normative resources of talk' (Potter, 2010, p.31). But here I am also indebted to Wetherell (2007) and a concurring account of DPOC (although in Wetherell's paper the terms 'discursive psychology' and 'ontological constructionism' are not entwined). The normative resources Potter refers to and Wetherell discusses are the words and meanings people use to describe themselves and others in daily activities. In 2N I looked no further than our own backyard:

> As psychologists we, along with other professions that form and inform available discourses pertaining to human being, share a responsibility to acknowledge our belonging to and existence in language. It will be from this acknowledgement that psychology can chart the means to create, in a proactive sense, a language of potentials, enablement and respect that serve as alternatives to the more historically dominant languages of constraint, disablement and disrespect (Corcoran, 2009, p.379).

As participants in joint action, our professional use of normative resources (often those sourced from first nature psychologies) continuously calls on us to make ethical choices. We

should, I believe, remain vigilantly aware of our relationships to\within discursive traditions and it is to this concern my attention now turns.

Relating to traditions

I think it is important to restate my position, which resonates with Hepburn's (2006), that an important aim for critical psychology is to 'disrupt rather than destroy' contemporary disciplinary accounts, including those emanating from DP. Acknowledgement of this point leads to an acceptance that we cannot erase tradition from our forms of language use. 'The text lives', Bakhtin (1986, p.162) states, 'only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue'. And so, it is from within the ongoing dialogue that is disciplinary psychology (including its responsive relationship to philosophy) that I am unsure how Potter can claim that DP is 'defined by its analytic studies and their success rather than a priori stipulations. It is not a project grounded in philosophy' (p.4). Immediately, this reminds me of the difficulties I have had with engaging certain methods for I am doubtful whether researchers, when asked to do so in the pursuit of their investigations, can actually suspend the posterior and anterior of their situatedness in the world. If, what Potter is requesting, is that psychologists should be wary of the constitutive nature of discourse, as in Vygotsky's (1978) method as tool-and-result approach, then yes, we would be in agreement. But I do not understand how anyone (or any text) can be removed or suspended from dialogue. How then is DP work not related to philosophical discourse?

This line of discussion draws me to what I see as being one of the central places where Potter and I disagree. It would seem that Potter is looking to rally the masses to fight against the power that is first nature psychologies and the discourses supporting such work. It should not come as surprising that we stand shoulder to shoulder on this front. However, I foresee possibilities in working with as well as against dominant viewpoints so as to actively remain in the dialogue. This seems to have been misinterpreted by Potter as he positions me as advocating for forms of objectivism (p.3 or p.12) or mentalism (p.15-16). This is a strange occurrence given the efforts made in 2N to distinguish between first and second nature accounts of personhood. Most directly, this confusion will be cleared up below as I discuss how I understand the theorist's relationships with the people whose lives we describe in the work we produce. Briefly put, my position does advocate for academics respecting a person's availability to choose the kinds of discourse with which they engage in their worlds. But a crucial distinction needs to be made here. Respect for such volition and an ability to engage with their position, with a purpose other than merely reporting its occurrence, is pragmatically different from endorsing particular discourse – another inference mistakenly made of 2N by Potter. Potentially, the reason for such misapprehension stems from the fact that there remain aspects of psychological understanding, to do with human nature, that have not been accounted for in disciplinary discourse or by DPEC.

Relating to data

'[D]iscursive psychology' Potter proclaims 'is a technical and analytic enterprise' (p.15). This proclamation should come as no surprise given the way in which Potter continually

grasps for, and almost mantra-like, invokes the concept of 'naturalistic materials'. The point of harvesting data like this is to provide accounts of how our social worlds are relationally responsive via their conversational, as opposed to statistical or causal natures. I have no issue with the discursive psychologist as farmer metaphor – no doubt, it has greater appeal than being a dead scientist. But I am afraid, that contrary to Potter's claim, there is no 'magic' (p.20) to naturalistic data. The suggestion regarding 'naturalistic' data is that it 'breaks out of the analyst's agenda' (p.20) because the material already occurs in 'the extraordinary richness of the outside world' (p.20). I wholeheartedly applaud Potter's attempts to address the influence of the researcher upon the 'outside world' but there is one necessary admission I think we both would agree on: magic is a con. Instead of holding up 'naturalistic' data as agenda-mitigated (like the levitated magician's assistant), psychologists should be constantly looking to explicate how their involvement is embedded in the research they present. But the issue is more than one of mere admission.

In a continuance of the farming metaphor Potter suggests that the 2N paper provides 'the barest of sketches and has not matured to provide analytic fruit that can be evaluated' (2010, p.4). For whatever reason, Potter did not seek out the references to my own work provided in the 2N paper (Corcoran, 2003; 2005). If what Potter was doing was limiting his critique to the 2N paper then I would want to know whether analytic bounty can/should only be gauged by empirical study? This question is going to return us to the suggestion that DP work is not grounded in philosophy. Here I agree with Rorty:

> The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay…There is no deep split between theory and practice, because on a pragmatist view so-called "theory" which is not wordplay is always already practice (1999, p.xxv)

Can we agree that the 2N paper alone is a means, much like any other theoretical work, to informing practice? Nevertheless, if theory and practice are to be disassociated – a position I do not endorse – then how was it that the practical (qua empirical) opportunities proffered in 2N were not engaged?

With its focus on what is 'empirically progressive' Potter's version of DPEC research would seem to set its agenda on a kind of review-mirroring of social action. At this point I am reminded of something Ken Gergen said almost 20 years ago. When discussing the ongoing work of psychologists he proposed: 'Rather than "telling it like it is" the challenge for the postmodern psychologist is to "tell it as it may become"' (1992, p.27). This simple but fundamental point is ignored by the DPEC research agenda. Speaking here, in part as a member of the discipline but just as importantly as an active participant in the glocal community (Brooks & Normore, 2010), I experience the potential loss of such opportunity as egregious for its compliance to an enduring end-game. If the epistemic position is about merely reporting what is taking place in the 'outside world' how will we ever enable research

to harness the power of discourse in service of preferred futures? The issue of exactly whose futures I will come to momentarily. Instead, with DPEC's dedication to naturalistic materials, 'telling it like it is' overrides such concern and ultimately fails to acknowledge that the positions being created, for researchers and those researched, are indubitably ontological ones.

Relating to people

I would not claim, as Potter seems to suggest, that our relationships with those we research should be about the epistemological purity of the process – life is too awkward to search for such methodological relics. In 2N I gave a practice-based example from my years working as a prison psychologist and then a school-based one. The example bears repeating again for it speaks to how forms of psychological practice actually inform methodological and therapeutic engagement. Briefly, I stated that psychologists should be wary of getting ahead of the people they engage. By this I meant that the moment practitioners presume to know where a narrative is going or what the meaning of a turn of phrase is, they no longer are engaged with the person but acting upon them in a form of closed judgement. This is not to say that psychologists do not make judgements – of course we do and this is a fundamental point I have attempted to convey. These ontological commitments are inherent in the ways in which we practice just as they are evident in the discourses people use to go about the living of their lives. To claim, as Potter has, that engagement with talk (e.g. when a psychologist attempts to understand an individual's articulation of racial or xenophobic discourse) is tantamount to endorsement, is plainly incorrect. Judgements occur, no doubting that, but these movements

should present within an ethic of respect for the person we are in conversation with. This is the point I am unsure Potter prioritises as perhaps tellingly he admits: DP '…is not designed in the first instance to build connections with research participants…[i]t is designed to address the community of analysts, psychologists, social scientists and so on' (p.14-15). What might this preference say about ethical and ontological commitments within DPEC research practices?

Conclusion

A fundamental commitment I make as a psychologist is an assumption regarding the capacity for change in human being. Let me caveat that by acknowledging that there are some individuals for whom change is indeed less likely. Such admittance speaks to the very diversity and complexity of human nature. In the few years I worked in prison there were times when I was challenged to maintain a prospective view of people's potentials. Thus, here I should reiterate, mine is not a naive position opposed to all forms of institutional sanction (e.g. incarceration; Corcoran, 2005). Nonetheless, the point with which I conclude centres on psychologists and psychology's commitment to change. This is an ontological commitment for it engages social research and professional practices in what should be understood to be a more prospective kind of relationship. Rather than prioritising forms of technical analysis, as in the DPEC position or say psychometrics, the thrust of the 2N paper was to call for psychological practices oriented towards understanding ontological possibilities from within ethically responsive relationships. These relationships - to tradition,

to data and to people – cannot be denied. Hence, for psychologists, a nagging question recurs: How, via our practices, are we to respond?

One possibility is for psychologists to scrutinise how they themselves continue to translate principles of disciplinary practice. Here, committed engagement repeatedly relies on processes of discursive translation which, fundamental to its purpose, have the potential to create different ways of negotiating meaning. According to Bhabha, we can never arrive at an original or 'totalised prior moment of being', for any culture, discipline or person exists only in relation to another. This exchange between cultures, disciplines or peoples invites thirdness – a heterotopic space wherein new meanings may be enabled to emerge via processes of hybridisation. Bhabha (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211) explains:

> …the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. It does not give them authority of being prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.

In seeking the prospective potentials of second nature understandings, those hybridised and heterotopic ways of accounting and enabling of our forms of life, psychology continues to negotiate through translation the ontological within joint action and intersubjectivity.

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