Shotter’s Legacy

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Abstract
This paper sets out and reflects upon two central concepts in John Shotter’s work and emphasises their ongoing relevance. Shotter’s work is first situated in its intellectual and cultural-historical contexts. His linked concepts of ‘joint action’ and ‘knowing of the third kind’ are then briefly explained, and their relevance for recent social science developments including the ‘new materialism’ and the ‘affective turn’ is highlighted. We conclude that, in these turbulent times, Shotter’s is a legacy of hopeful aspiration.

Introduction
This paper is a reflection on the work of John Shotter, who died in December 2016. Probably best known in psychology for his foundational work of helping to establish social constructionism as a vibrant alternative to mainstream cognitive psychological approaches, Shotter’s work also influenced other disciplines. It is appropriate to reflect upon Shotter’s work here because of its significance and continuing influence; because of the range of philosophical and conceptual resources it brings to bear; but mostly, perhaps, because of the way that it shows how psychological research can be conducted in a thoroughly philosophically informed and historically aware manner.

Below, we first briefly summarise Shotter’s career and working life, before sketching some key aspects of the intellectual, cultural and historical circumstances within which his work developed. Second, we describe his approach to language and social constructionism, an approach that emphasises embodied communicative activity rather than mere individual speech and which, with its central concept of joint action, foregrounds the inherent relationality in humanity’s use of language – in speech and communication, to be sure, but also, and just as importantly, within the recesses of personal deliberation. Third, we outline Shotter’s concept of ‘knowing of the third kind’. An integral component of joint action, knowing of the third kind refers to how we quite literally feel our way into and through our social relations by relying upon a continuous embodied sense of what is appropriate – a sense that all at once compresses the normative expectations of our culture with those of the particular current interaction.

Biography
Shotter’s entry into academia came via an unusually varied route. When he was at school in the UK, the country’s publicly funded education system had two tiers: grammar and secondary modern. Grammar schools provided a more scholarly education, whilst secondary modern schools emphasised technical or practical skills. In 1949, Shotter won a government-funded scholarship to study at grammar school, which was followed when he was 15 years old by an apprenticeship at an aircraft factory. Some years later he entered Bristol University, to study mathematics. However, whilst at Bristol, Shotter first developed what became his life-long interest in theatre, as well as
gaining an introduction to psychology. Due in part to these interests taking up his time and energy, Shotter failed his mathematics exams and was forced out of the University.

Shotter then completed national service in the Royal Air Force, where he served for two years as a radar operator. Subsequently, in 1959, he joined Birkbeck College as an electronics technician. At Birkbeck he worked alongside Basil Bernstein, who introduced him to three theorists who would in different ways shape his future work: G.H.Mead, Ernst Cassirer, and Alexander Luria. Then, in 1962, Shotter moved to the London School of Economics – still as a technician - to help establish new psychology laboratory facilities.

However, Shotter was also studying part-time at Birkbeck during this period, and in 1963 graduated with first class honours in Psychology with Mathematics and Statistics. Shortly afterward, he moved in 1964 to the Department of Electronic Engineering at the University of Nottingham, working on a project on visual recognition. Then, in 1966, he gained a lectureship in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham, where he stayed until 1987 when he moved to take up the post of Professor of General Social Science at the Rijksuniversiteit in Utrecht. This was followed in 1991 by his final move before his retirement, to the University of New Hampshire, USA, as Professor of Interpersonal Relations.

Interesting and relevant though they are, such bare facts tell us relatively little about the developing cultural-historical fabric of ideas, values and concerns within which Shotter was embedded – the fabric to which his work spoke and contributed, and which continuously shaped his distinct intellectual trajectory. In this regard, two considerations are especially noteworthy.

First, as Billig (2016) observes, Shotter’s innovative contributions were not well-received by the mainstream of psychology. Both through his reading (of social theory and of philosophy) and through his involvement in a series of research projects, Shotter relatively quickly decided that the cognitivism that was beginning to dominate psychology simply could not provide answers of the kind that he was seeking. Consequently, from the late 1960’s onwards he began to seek alternatives. Yet rather than treat his search as the possible beginning of an interesting new approach: “He was considered a shameful renegade, a heretic beyond the bounds of decent psychological society – someone who had no right to be employed in a department of psychology. Shotter’s scholarship, far from being a saving grace, only made things worse. Orthodox experimentalists viewed his deep knowledge of Wittgenstein and of philosophy generally with great suspicion. They believed that Shotter was trying to hand back their discipline to unscientific philosophers” (Billig 2016, p.10)

It is both telling and unfortunate that the circumstances Shotter first encountered almost fifty years ago will be familiar to some readers of this journal today. Seen in relational terms, these circumstances engendered a lengthy (if unequal) dialogue with the psychological mainstream, a dialogue within which Shotter elaborated a sophisticated critical stance towards its unresolved Cartesian inheritance, its mechanistic character, and its consequent inability to properly recognise, let alone understand, the intricacies and nuances of everyday life and thought.

Second, and equally important, are the wider social changes that occurred during Shotter’s life and career – especially, perhaps, during the earlier formative years when his intellectual trajectory was being established. Bayer (2016) eloquently describes how Shotter’s work both resonated with, and was suffused by, the vibrant cultural climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s. These were years when ardent, persistent questioning – intellectual, political, personal – became so widespread that its accompanying tone constituted an integral part of what Raymond Williams (1971) called the
‘structure of feeling’ of those years. Young people questioned expectations of deference and conformity, women questioned expectations of their gender role, ethnic minorities questioned expectations of inferiority and marginality, gay and lesbian people questioned expectations that they conceal or deny their desires for each other. These diverse questionings coalesced together to produce a distinct counterculture in music, art, and social relations that had not only political but also intellectual dimensions.

Hence, Bayer (2016) observes that his first book (Images of Man in Psychological Research - Shotter, 1975) was just one of many books published during that era with remarkably similar titles. The profound intellectual question of what it is to be human, of how we should understand and reflect upon our human being, was being raised across many areas of the humanities and social sciences. Frequently, Bayer explains, this intellectual questioning was described as either producing, or being the product of, crisis. For example, questioning settled gender relations led to a crisis in understanding the nature of nature itself, since it unravelled the chain of assumptions upon which the presumed broader settlement between biology and culture was founded. At the same time, Bayer recalls, this questioning broached the possibility of re-enchantment, of the rebirth of awe and wonder at the marvellous complexity of being and existence that might be produced if the debate between the ‘two cultures’ of the humanities and the natural sciences (articulated in the 1950’s by C.P. Snow) were to be resolved slightly differently. Bayer concludes that all of this questioning, all of these interwoven strands of intellectual, political, cultural and personal experimentation, thoroughly permeated Shotter’s work.

By the 1970’s this questioning had begun to overtly impact upon psychology. This is exemplified by Armistead’s (1974) seminal attempt to reconstruct social psychology, where Shotter’s contribution sat alongside influential Marxist, feminist, and other radical critiques of the discipline. Challenging though it is, however, critique is in some ways the easier part of (re)constructing an intellectual trajectory. Reconstruction requires new substantive foci, new conceptual frames, maybe even new methods. The trajectory upon which Shotter eventually settled was one that prioritised the attempt to understand, in all of its contingency, variety and mess, the intricacy and flow of everyday human communication. In this, of course, a sophisticated understanding of language was central.

Language Use and Joint Action

Above, we made mention of Shotter’s rejection of cognitivism, the prevailing psychological theory of the mid part of the last century. As Shotter’s own academic voice developed through this period, his work responded not only to the dominance of cognitive theory, but also to movements spawned by such work. For example, social constructivism, as an epistemological position, is indebted to cognitivism in its retention of a dualist separation of mind and world. Such theory continues to this day to be used to explain ways in which individuals make meaning of their world, a world built upon stable universal foundations. But Shotter envisaged more, particularly for the ways in which we use language to relate with one another and our surroundings. He suggested that words embody a unique prosthetic function through which people can make sense. He notes:

“Acting towards the future, prospectively and creatively, in the saying of an utterance, we attempt to use [language] both prosthetically, as a device ‘through’ which to begin to express our meanings, and, as a tool-like means to ‘move’ other people. Indeed, we can go as far here as to say that this prosthetic-tool function of speech, or words in their speaking, works on one’s surroundings formatively, to specify them further” (1993c, p. 117-118, emphasis in original).
Herein, Shotter’s contribution to what is recognised as social constructionism is identified. Unlike the epistemologically static and disjointed life of more dominant psychological theories, Shotter sought to emphasise “both the contingency and the creativity of human interaction – on our making of, and being made by, our social realities – that is, I think, common to social constructionism in all its versions” (1993c, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Thus Shotter’s concept of joint action, which he posited as characteristic of all unconstrained (i.e. ‘naturally occurring’) human communication, highlights these dual aspects of contingency and creativity. Understood as joint action, communication is always open-ended, unfinished, to-be-determined. Conversations can always take unexpected turns, and outcomes neither anticipated nor crafted by any single participant, frequently emerge. Our mutual responsiveness, each to the other, produces a dialogic realm of which language is the most obvious and accessible manifestation, a realm which lies between rather than within us. At the same time, this realm ‘between us’ is not simply a detachable, optional context wherein epistemological counters are traded and mere knowledge worked up and accumulated. In joint action we not only exchange ideas and information: at the same time we also become – by acting into and through our shared communicative activities – the (unfinished, emerging) persons we (at least momentarily) find ourselves to be.

In this sense, Shotter’s account of social constructionism offered much more than other approaches developed through the 1980s and 1990s. His approach was not simply a way of knowing about the world represented in an epistemological sense. As will be elaborated below in discussing knowledge of a third kind, his approach orients us to how, following Wittgenstein, our ways of being are socially constructed and how we, and all that exists, participate in creating its possibilities. In his later work, Shotter rearticulates his position from one of social constructionism to ontological constructionism (Shotter, 2010, 2012; see also Corcoran, 2009). This was an important shift in how Shotter explicated his position and one which heralded the inclusion of ‘real presences’ always existing and participating with us in meaning making (Shotter, 2003). As recently recognised by several authors (Lock, 2016; Cunliffe, 2016; Strong, 2016), this move makes way for comparisons to contemporary works connected to what is presently known as new materialism (e.g. Barad, 2007).

The similarities at play between new materialist notions like intra-action, and Shotter’s cornerstone concept of joint action, are worthy of further intellectual attention. Shotter considered joint action to be a unique category of activity, wherein features of human agency and worldly events must be engaged equivalently. For psychology this is nothing short of a game changer. Borrowing from earlier theorists such as Vygotsky, Volosinov and Bakhtin, Shotter sought recognition for shared existence and the influence within our lives of materialities beyond the embodied individual. He recognised that there are always “opportunities or enablements offered to us by the ‘otherness’ both around us, and within us. Thus our mental life is never wholly our own” (1993c, p. 110). As psychosocial beings, we live in joint action, relationally responsive to all that exists with us. Such acknowledgement has the potential to change, in monumental ways, how we make sense of our ways of being and knowing, orienting us to possibilities previously obscured.

**Knowing of the Third Kind**

So Shotter’s understanding of language, which powerfully shaped the influential social constructionist movement of recent decades, was organised with respect to his concept of joint action. At the same time, joint action integrally situates communicative activity in what Shotter called ‘knowing of the third kind’. Knowing of the third kind is a sensuous, embodied knowing that spontaneously arises in the flux of everyday interaction, a moment by moment felt disclosure of how, in its particularity, the conversation is unfolding. It can be distinguished both from knowing
that (e.g. that Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*) and from knowing how (e.g. how to swim) because it is, instead, a knowledge of how to be. More specifically, it involves knowing how to be for the others (and the ‘othernesses’, as Shotter put it) with whom we are currently in dialogue, such that a flow of mutual communication can occur optimally and with minimum impediment. This knowing is constantly, mutually updated in real time through the exchange, mirroring and reciprocity of bodily gesture, posture, expression and movement, as well as through words and their various affective loadings (emphases, hesitations, changes in speed and tone etc.). It produces, in those sufficiently sensitive to its movements (the great majority of us) an unfolding background feeling of how we should be if the conversation is to go well.

This background feeling, then, signals how we should go on. It is about movement, intention, goal and direction: it is a feeling that helps us, in Wittgensteinian terms, to find our way about. Knowing of the third kind is a feeling for (what we understand to be) the intentions and feelings of others, at the same time as it is a feeling constitutive of our own desires and intentions. In his writings, Shotter uses a dramatic image to convey this:

> “The image we need is, I think, something like this: it is as if we are living always within a thick fog, and must work like blind persons in terms of ‘touchings’ rather than in terms of ‘seeings’. However, what we have to gain a sense of through our touching and feelings, is not of what actual objects are there before us, but of the *possibilities* these actualities present to us for our next possible steps” (Shotter, 2010 p.4)

Thus, knowing of the third kind is a precondition for effective relating. As feeling it remains in the background, ineffable, only indirectly communicable and not always the focus of attention (Cromby, 2015). At the same time, its sources are multiple. It is most fundamentally enabled by the bare fact that we are embodied beings, and this embodiment bestows limits and potentials (however unclear these may be) upon what can be felt. Within these indeterminate constraints, Shotter describes (across many writings – there is not a single source) how what is actually felt is reflective of different sets of influences.

One set of influences comes from history and culture. Here, Shotter (1993c) turns to Vico to understand how a community’s shared sense of its past and its circumstances become collectively embodied as feelings that effectively demarcate, for members of that culture, the ways to think, speak and act that are consonant with its values and commitments. Vico described these collective feelings as ‘sensory topics’. For Shotter, their presence within his knowing of the third kind lets us understand how the cultural boundaries of selfhood are felt, sensuous, moral and ethical in character.

Taking a more micro-level focus, a second set of influences that shape our knowing of the third kind arises from the situated demands of the current encounter. In this sense, background feelings come to quite literally embody the interactional possibilities seemingly available in the present moment. Shotter (1993b) again uses a dramatic example: choosing the most auspicious moment in a new relationship to say ‘I love you’ for the first time. Whatever the outcome of your declaration, it will utterly transform the relationship: it is important, then, to get the timing right. Shotter explains that we make such decisions not on the basis of any rational calculation of odds and probabilities; we rely instead upon our felt embodied sense, arising in the moment, that it is possible now that our declaration might be reciprocated.

What we feel, and how and what we say, are related but not coterminous. As our words unfold they nominate some potentials and circumscribe others. Our speaking, our thinking and our feeling are in
mutual dynamic interplay, each with the other. This is so to such an extent that subjectivity itself is a ‘boundary phenomenon’ (Shotter, 1993a), always emerging on the blurred edge between personal and public, always enmeshed within temporally unfolding trajectories within which the relational, the societal and the individual are inseparably enmeshed. As we think and relate there are constant transactional movements between on the one hand the concerns of self and other, and on the other hand between the relative fixities of language and the relative vagueness of feeling. To understand this, Shotter quotes Vygotsky:

“the relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement backward and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process, the relation of thought to word undergoes changes that themselves may be regarded as developmental in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfils a function, solves a problem. (Vygotsky [1986] in Shotter, 1993b, p.43-44)

Thinking itself, then, is both embodied and social. It implicates the words that give it communicable form, that enable us to re-present it both to others and to ourselves. But it is most fundamentally shaped and directed by the feelings – what Vygotsky (1962, p.150) calls the ‘affective-volitional tendencies’ – that give it import, direction and purpose.

As we have seen, these feelings are never mere individual matters - any more than the private dialogues that Vygotsky characterised as ‘inner speech’ are merely individual. They are continuously organised by the acquired sensory topics of our culture, and constantly interpellated (‘called out’) by the exigencies of the present interaction. In this way, Shotter’s knowing of the third kind is part of his understanding that what psychology calls cognition is, in actuality, already both relational and sensuous. Thinking is already as much a matter of ethics and morality, of a lived feeling of how to be in accord with a set of shared values and emerging relational expectations, as it is a matter of mere information processing.

For Shotter, the computational metaphor that underpins cognitivism is wholly deficient in its failure to recognise this. Cognitive psychology casts human thinking as something that a machine could equally do, in part through the sleight of hand of the ‘Turing Test’. This test renders seemingly irrelevant the different material instantiations of communication as conducted with machines, as opposed to solely between humans (Shotter, 1993c), just as it brackets off from serious consideration its own peculiar contrivances. But perhaps more tellingly still it substitutes an after-the-fact evaluation of outputs for any consideration of process. However effectively computers might come to mimic some of the products of communication and thought, Shotter shows that they will never do so by following the same process as humans. Conversely, then, a psychology founded upon a computational metaphor will never actually understand human thought, however effectively it might occasionally predict its movements. For all that it implicates the various processes of compiling, assimilating, evaluating, comparing, contrasting and summarising bits of information, the human process of thinking is – simultaneously and primordially - embodied, sensuous, felt, relational, cultural and historical.

Whilst Shotter’s knowing of the third kind can be traced back at least to the early 1990’s, it has some possible renewed relevance in contemporary academic contexts due to its resonance with debates surrounding the ‘affective turn’ in the humanities, social sciences and psychology. The affective turn describes a heterogenous intellectual trend to foreground, and to overtly include within theories and analyses, the phenomena described by the terms affect, emotion, mood and feeling (e.g.
Like any prominent intellectual trend it has engendered critiques as well as praise. A recurring strand of critique concerns the claimed tendency of some theories and analyses, especially those that either deploy broadly Deleuzean concepts or those which invoke theories of basic emotion, to separate affect or emotion from meaning (Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012). If emotions are hardwired responses called out automatically in response to stimuli, in themselves they are meaningless. Any meaning they bear derives only from their place in an S-R chain, and from any consequences that their triggering sets into motion. Likewise, some Deleuzean analyses place affect beyond or before language, treating it as a pre-personal motivating precondition for meaning construction that never itself enters awareness. Ruth Leys (2011) cogently argues that this renders affect itself non-intentional and, again, effectively meaningless, since there are no necessary connections between the content of any given affect and the stimulus that triggered it. Feelings and emotions, on this account, therefore get disconnected from sociolinguistic meaning, and thus from belief, from values, ethics, morality and politics.

Shotter’s ‘knowing of the third kind’ potentially speaks to this debate because there are at least two senses in which, for him, feeling is already meaningful. First, it is meaningful because it is always already inextricably bound up with flows and exchanges of conventionally meaningful words (and other signs and symbols). Rather than being separable from the sociolinguistic, the feelings that constitute our knowing of the third kind run always within and alongside it, such that word and feeling are thoroughly entangled and interpenetrated. Second, the feelings that constitute our knowing of the third kind are meaningful in themselves because their intensities and valences already load what we say with intent, desire, and purpose. For Shotter “people’s feelings guide their action” (Shotter 2013, p.14), they are “to do with our feeling our way forward while moving around in the world” (Shotter 2010, p.2), and they “are of an ethical nature: they not only indicate what the others around us might or might not ‘allow’ us to do … but also what it is about our own ‘position’ for which we alone can be ‘answerable’” (Shotter 1993c, p.xiii). Thus, in speaking to contemporary debates within scholarship associated with the affective turn, Shotter’s concept of knowing of the third kind may have renewed resonances today.

Conclusion

For a psychology still largely dominated by cognitivism, albeit a cognitivism increasingly linked to putative individual neural processes presumed to underpin its functioning (processes identified primarily by using scanning methods that first isolate the person and then study their performance on repeated sequences of artificial tasks), Shotter’s critique and repudiation remains as valid and insightful as it ever was. Simultaneously, for a qualitative research tradition in psychology that is still growing in volume, quality and influence, is still frequently rooted in some version of social constructionism, and is still frequently dependent upon data that are wholly or mostly linguistic in form, the percipience of Shotter’s approach to language and communicative activity remain supremely relevant. In closing, though, we wish to emphasise how Shotter’s work also has continuing relevance in other fields.

We have already touched upon the way that Shotter’s ‘knowing of the third kind’ could illuminate debates that have recently arisen across a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines - to do with the ‘affective turn’ and the potentials and problems associated with some notions of affect and emotion; and also to do with the ‘new materialism’ and its unpicking of the presumed separations between humans and their material circumstances. In addition, and as demonstrated by the range of contributors to our edited volume celebrating Shotter’s work (Corcoran & Cromby, 2016), his ideas have already been taken up in many other disciplines. For example, Shotter’s thinking has been
influential within management, business and organisational studies. Cunliffe (2016) explains how her reading of Shotter helped her to develop a style of organisational investigation that steers a path between poststructuralist relativism and positivist certainty, and so avoids the absolutism of technocratic ‘solutions’ to organisational dilemmas. By contrast, Tsoukas (2016) writes of how Shotter’s process orientation helped him to develop a performative science of organisational life focused upon singularities and particularities rather than abstract generalities. At the same time, Shotter’s ideas have also been influential in psychotherapy and Corcoran (2016) shows how he was able to use them to develop effective ways of working with potentially vulnerable individuals – both children in schools, and adults in prisons. Simultaneously, both Mcnamee (2016) and Lannaman (2016) illustrate the relevance and influence of Shotter’s thinking within communication studies.

Academic debates of whatever kind cannot be separated from the political conditions of the day. In 2017, amidst the chaos of Brexit and the murky shadows cast globally by the Trump administration, it could be said that now is a prime time for Shotter’s oeuvre to be embraced. As disconnectedness is elevated to what seems to be a leading policy position of Western (so-called) democratic governments, Shotter’s work orients our attention to making our way out of the undesirability of the here-and-now to preferred futures where ‘a new ethics of existence’ (St. Pierre, Jackson & Mazzei, 2016, p. 4) can be lived. In his recent book The Idea of Socialism, Honneth (2017, p. 62) asserts: ‘...the only criterion for social improvement consists in the liberation from barriers to communication and from dependencies that prevent interaction’. Shotter did not leave us with neat answers in the form of finalised provisions to explain human nature. Instead, he dedicated his life to assisting us to sense our way through communicative difficulties so that, in joint action, we might make good what possibly comes next. His is a legacy of hopeful aspiration.

References


