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THE SOCIAL POETICS OF RELATIONALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH:

Research as Conversation

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To talk of the poetic is to give wing to the imaginative. It is to "express oneself" in words that are "thoughtful." It is to script a sense of "beauty." Also related to the poetic is freedom from the constraints of traditional forms of practice. One is urged, in employing the poetic, to suspend the discourse of "fact" or "form" and invited, instead, to engage in improvisation (literally, "working without a plan").

Yet all of these associations with poetry or the poetic are couched in the image of inner reflections of the artist. It is the poet who plays with language, with interpretation, with imagery. It is in juxtaposition to this portrait of the poet, the poem, the poetic that I embrace the move toward a social poetic. Here we move rapidly from the interior of the poet or the particular poetic moment to the relational nexus from which all meaning emerges. No longer are we strapped with a view of the lonely poet or that difficult to capture moment we call poetic. Rather, we recognize that the "genius" of the poet and the ineffability of the poetic moment reside in the discursive resources that have been generated within relationships. Our resources emerge from our communities, from our negotiated ways of coordinating our actions within local moments.

RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AS A SOCIAL POETIC

By unsettling the notion of poetics from its individualist tradition, we open exploration for the relational ways in which the imaginative, the unsettling, the novelty are crafted in what people do together. To that end, talk about the social poetics of research centralizes the idea and practice of relational engagement. The notion of relational engagement places emphasis on the particular modes of interpretation and action by which participants create their worlds. Research, then, departs dramatically from the tradition where we believe we are able to discover some essential aspects concerning our objects of study. In traditional psychotherapy research, for example, we might be interested in discovering which therapeutic model or theory is most successful in treating particular psychological problems. Here, we would assume that research, conducted in the proper manner, using the proper techniques, could - in an unbiased way - point to the correct model or theory. Or, we might think of research designed to determine from what sort of psychological problem a client actually is suffering. In this case, the proper research method and tools would uncover the true problem. This position ignores the social poetics, that is, the relational engagement, through which realities are crafted.

RESEARCH AS RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT: SOCIAL POETICS IN ACTION

In my own work, I have attempted to break the boundary between research and therapy in an attempt to give life to the relational engagement (McNamee, 1996; 1997) that creates the realities (i.e., that creates the results, the methods, the values, etc.) we study and live. As I have mentioned, to prioritize the relational nexus of meaning construction is to fully embrace poetics (the crafting of new meaning and images) with a social emphasis.

What would happen if we engaged in interested inquiry where we accepted the notion that any action must have a location within which it makes sense? Rather than confront

situations attempting to find the best solution or path, we turn our attention to the various ways in which participants enter into the conversation and how these various ways open multiple possibilities for action.

The notion of relational engagement places emphasis on precisely this process. Attention is directed to the particular modes of interpretation and action by which people create their worlds. When we centralize the discursive ways in which we engage with others, we must begin to appreciate the idea of multiple rationalities, relationally achieved realities, and indeterminacy. What is valued, what is ethical, what is pathologized emerge out of communal interchange. Thus, to position the research process -- and its success or failure -- as relational engagement invites us to foster a sensitivity to and respect for the varying constructions about right/wrong, good/bad, effective/ineffective, successful/unsuccessful that emerge within differing relational communities.

Every person -- whether researcher or researched -- carries a vast network of other relationships, of other communities, and thus of other ways of talking, acting, and making sense. Research that is relationally engaged approaches issues, topics, projects and so forth as challenges in construction rather than as objects or problems to be solved, managed, and planned. From a relational orientation we would ask, how is it that what we are doing together here provides the opportunity for success or failure to emerge, gain viability, credibility, sustainability?

There are several implications of this orientation. First, if all actions are situated actions (i.e., born out of relational engagement with others and thus located within communities and traditions of meaning), there is no longer a notion of an ethical or professional competency that is dislocated from those communities and traditions nor from the interactive moment, itself. What we do with others gives life to entire ways of being. These processes can not be abstracted from the multiple discursive communities we inhabit.

There are no specific techniques or strategies that will "produce" valid research. To set out methods, techniques, or strategies would be to privilege one discursive form over others. Yet I do not want to say that there are no means by which we can evaluate, make choices, or declare one way of talking as situationally better than another. Research, like all other forms of interaction, is situated practice -- it is a social poetic. These decisions can only be made relationally. The ethics, relevance, value, and appropriateness of any research will be judged differently depending upon how one situates the activity.

When we centralize relational engagement, we orient our understanding of the research activity differently. We begin to examine ways of talking and acting. We become curious about how these ways gain viability and how they are sustained within particular communities - how, in fact, they can be deemed objective or true. Our interest in judging ways of talking and acting wanes because any judgement is recognized, itself, as emerging within a particular discursive community. That is, a judgement is located within a relational reality that might be vastly different in its coherence and rationality from the present one.

Judgements, evaluations, decisions and so forth may be (and eventually must be) made. Yet, when we shift our attention to the ways in which participants are relationally engaged, we suspend passing judgement or making "final" decisions until we have made inquiries into or initiated conversation about the communities that grant each action its coherence. This approach has two possible outcomes. First, conversations of "judgement," "evaluation," "decision making," and so forth look, sound, and are experienced differently because participants' actions have been granted a coherence in some relational network and thus have been "understood" as

logical and rational within some sphere. Second, conversations that we commonly know as "judgement," "evaluation," "decision making" disappear. Judgement, evaluation, and decision making take on new meaning as members work together to achieve some form of relational judgement, evaluation and decision making. There is, in other words, a transformative dialogue born out of the different stance we take in the interactive moment. This is what Bateson (1972) calls "the difference that makes a difference."

BREAKING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THERAPEUTIC AND RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS

The therapeutic context has much to offer the research community, particularly therapy conducted within a social constructionist sensibility (see Gergen, 1994). Because therapeutic conversations within this sensibility are recognized as collaborative, participatory practices wherein both clients and therapists recreate their worlds in language, the image of the objective expert is erased (Anderson, 1997). Some of the more creative forms of therapy where communities of helpers come together to work with families and their significant relations serve as outstanding illustrations of research as conversation (see for example the work of Seikkula and his colleagues, 1995). This sort of therapy is most successful in breaking down the strongest distinction our modernist tradition maintains between research and therapy. The distinction I am referring to posits that research is a process of discovery while therapy is a process of intervention. When the research process can be seen as transformative and generative of new discursive communities, then this process takes on therapeutic qualities. This latter description of research is possible when we embrace the relational construction of meaning (Gergen, 1994).

Similarly, when therapeutic conversation can be accepted as a viable form of assessing, evaluating, and documenting aspects of human interchange, identity, and so forth, then therapeutic process takes on research qualities. To achieve this latter stance, however, requires a refiguring of our general beliefs about the "products" of research. Generally speaking, we attribute such things as certainty, confidence, generalizability, and repeatability to the product of research. Our modernist tradition attaches notions of rationality, knowledge generation, objectivity, progress, and universality to the research process. The consequences of these assumptions are that we quickly adorn a problem solving focus, we engage in conversations that pathologize by virtue of our attempts to locate, define, and explain problems, and we place heavy emphasis on quantification rather than on issues of quality.

To this end, research as conversation is sensitive to reflexive critique and multiplicity of voices. If language is our starting point, the entire research process looks different. There is nothing to discover or explain but rather linguistic turns to be jointly performed.

There are several implications of this orientation. First, if the questions a researcher asks are situated actions (i.e., born out of relational engagement with others and thus located within communities and traditions of meaning), there is no longer a notion of an ethical or professional competency that is apart from the interactive moment. The questions we ask shape the "results" we "obtain" and these processes can not be abstracted from the discursive communities we inhabit. In addition, validity is an issue of the politics of the research (of the rhetoric within which it is constructed). Researchers are not simply reporters. Researchers engage with communities when they conduct their "investigations." To that extent, researchers might open the conversation to those who have a vested interest in the project but who might not otherwise be consulted such as neighbors, extended family members, school officials, community funding agencies, etc. As we extend the network of voices involved, we expand the potential for co-

construction among broader communities. We can pose different questions such as, For whom is this a problem?, What would count as successful therapy and to whom?, In what ways, if any, has therapy transformed others beyond the client(s)/patient(s)?, Who among this extended group thinks therapy was effective, transformative, successful?, Who else might have benefitted from this conversation?, What new resources (financial, emotional, practical) might be generated as a result of this conversation?

Research must be viewed as a constructing process which suggests that we construct and reconstruct the descriptions of social life as we actively engage in the research process itself. The traditions of interpretation that we bring to the research context must be coordinated with the people we are studying, with the intellectual community to which we speak, to our own families, friends, and so forth. All are presented in some way in our research endeavors. The questions we ask and the conclusions we draw are coordinated within this complex network of relations. From this process of coordination, constraining and potentiating descriptions will emerge. Consequently, the political nature of research is highlighted rather than denied, as are the multiplicity of voices.

THE SOCIAL POETICS OF MULTIVOCALITY

Finally, at the pragmatic level, we might begin to suggest practices that move us toward a relationally engaged research process. To me, research that invites the multiplicity of voices - for the researcher(s) as well as the research participants and the "audience" for whom the research is intended - goes a long way in achieving the social poetic about which we are talking. This multiplicity can be realized in several ways.

Expanding the domain of participation. As suggested earlier, we might invite "interested others" into the research conversation. Those others might include funding sources, policy makers, legal officials, extended family relations, social communities or neighborhoods, school officials, and medical professionals. Typically, members of all these groups have some involvement or vested interest in the effectiveness of psychotherapy. The very act of including their voices in research about psychotherapy simultaneously expands the description of psychotherapy, its effect, and its success as well as provides a powerful forum for community reform. Often legal officials, school officials, medical professionals, and family members must work together on what appear to be different aspects of the same case. We well know that these different representatives are more likely to be at odds with one another than in concert concerning the appropriate action to be taken, concerning what counts as success, and also concerning what the most important aspect of the situation/case is. By bringing these voices together in the research conversation, the community of involved participants might co-construct an understanding of the situation that does not combat the important concerns and tasks of others involved. However, this can only be achieved if the research conversation is created within a context that respects the coherence of these multiple communities and facilitates dialogue rather than debate.

Inviting the Internal Others. Another way to invite multivocality is to encourage ourselves as researchers to draw upon our own multiplicity. Can we ask questions, conduct observations, analyze data, and interpret "results" from our various identities: researcher, curious person, detective, gossip, care giver, scholar, defender of social constructionism, etc.? Can we invite multiplicity of voices by inviting others to assist us as researchers - or by inviting those participating in the research to think of themselves as the researcher -- what information would they want to know, what questions would they ask to get that information, how would they ask questions or, better yet, how would they gather their information? And finally, could we ask

questions that invite the research participants to bring their "internal others" (the voices of their other, less obviously relevant, relationships) into the conversation?

Engaging in Reflexive Critique. The practices mentioned above can be encouraged by approaching the research process from a stance of curiosity or interested inquiry. While we have a professional responsibility to conduct focused, meaningful, and valid research, we must realize that too much certainty of method or understanding negates the argument for relationally engaged research. In addition, we must respect that what constitutes valid research in one community might not secure the same position in another. The rhetorical force of a particular discursive argument can vary dramatically from community to community. In other words, we must be constantly asking ourselves which discursive tradition warrants these particular questions, observations, and conclusions? Why this discourse and not another? Which community is being represented here and by virtue of its representation, which communities are being erased? This sort of reflexive critique is what relational engagement is about. It illustrates the social poetics of conversation to the extent that it recognizes the possibility of other discursive communities and traditions and through such recognition might grant them voice.

Dialogue as Metaphor. The relationally engaged research process I am advocating embraces the term "dialogue" both practically and metaphorically. While the practical dimensions have already been sketched, it is worth pointing out that to engage in dialogue is not necessarily to be an active part of the conversation as we generally understand that term. Here I am referring to the erroneous belief many have that to engage in dialogue is to have everyone talking. Quite often, the "voice" one chooses to contribute is the voice of non-participation. These voices should be respected just as those that are "at the table" should be. To engage in dialogue does not mean everyone participates in the same way. It means that participants engage with each other in the way they feel is appropriate - which might include lack of "physical" participation. Yet this is a very active form of participation too. There is a marked difference between being invited to join and deciding not to, as opposed to not being invited at all.

Yet, dialogue is also used as a metaphor for talking about research. As a metaphor it is contrasted to debate which does not attempt to provide participants with a forum for articulating the coherence of their realities. In debate, one only tries to convince the opponent that one's position is correct, true, just. Dialogue, in contrast, attempts to engender a conversational arena where participants become curious about the coherence and rationale of alternative views and garner a genuine respect for those coherences. This is not to imply that participants will agree with or accept another's way of talking about the situation. It is to suggestion, however, that their curiosity and respect make possible significantly different conversations. I would suggest that these different conversations are potentially transformative in that they provide the possibility for coordination among disparate communities.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Social poetics describes how participants in relation jointly create meaning and how, in that meaning, the seeds of transformative dialogue are sewn. Research, when viewed as a social poetic, also has the potential to invite transformative dialogue. This view of research, as relationally engaged, is dramatically different from our common understanding of the research process. Yet research is itself another form of conversation. And it is in conversation -- in relationally engaged activity -- that our worlds are circumscribed. The world can only be "imagined" in language; that is, in what we do together. To cast research as a poetic activity is to call attention to research as a conversation -- one that is situated and relational and can therefore expand the array of possibilities -- of images -- for further forms of social life.