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A story of the UK public services over the last 35 years: Social poetics as ethnography?

Abstract

In what follows I sketch out a subject matter which does not appear to have been written about: the living connectedness between the local state and its communities. Everywhere I have ever been in the world this has been a connection which could function better. The raw material for my story telling is from nearly 40 years of continually working to create better connections in the UK. It turns out this is an excellent vantage point from which to also tell my personal story of a journey our UK public services have been on over this period. One impetus to write is that I have never found any writing which communicates what it is like to work in these local state and local community realities. And so I face the challenge of how to write what appears not to have been written. Hence this paper in which I make explicit the lens I want to use to do this kind of writing and also what kind of writing matches that lens.

Introduction

In 1973, age 24, I took my first steps into my adult life: I moved onto a 1930s working class Council estate and within months discovered something of a vocation in life. I discovered I could work as part of a movement of people and exercise leadership. I led a campaign to get zebra crossings and it took me into a way of being in the world and having a purpose in life which I have built on since then. So this paper is also about how to write the story of nearly 40 years of what I have come to call social leadership.

Social leadership can be done by anyone in any sphere and role of society. The key thing is that there is some kind of spiritual foundation in the life of the person. Not only does this fuel their passion for the issue around which they develop their social leadership, but it means they are able to stick to the truly human aspects of the situation and not allow themselves to be captured by power politics or the dominant way of seeing things. There is indeed a self-less element to this kind of leadership. Social leadership rejects abstract thinking in favour of engagement, dialogue and a disposition towards action together with others. Its spirit is captured by Bergson,

> *"deep rooted mental healthiness" expressed in "a bent for action, the faculty of adapting and re-adapting oneself to circumstances, in firmness combined with suppleness, in the prophetic discernment of what is possible and what is not, in a spirit of simplicity which triumphs over complications."* (1935)

Social leadership can be someone on the grand stage of the world like Gandhi. Or it can be the local anti litter campaigner. It can also be people with defined jobs who go well beyond 'the job description'.

For me it has been a stable way of earning a living/supporting my family which at the same time allows me to do what I am good at: be creative in groups of people sharing a social purpose. While it started with making life on Council estates more liveable, my journey has taken me to ways of creating personal and family support, how the people of an area can respond meaningfully to racism and many other issues. However I want to stress the universal nature of this kind of activity. Everywhere I have been in my life the local state and its local people have some kind of relationship: very often, and despite the best of intentions, it is either a significant absence of response or the local state imposing its 'solutions'.

Of course this needs qualifying: some aspects of community activity rightly need to stay separate and apart from meetings with staff in the local state. Similarly many aspects of what staff do needs to remain away from the direct engagement with people in communities. But there are certain issues where local state-community connectedness is really called for. Often these are where the local state is directly impacting on communities, or there are needs in communities which agencies are not responding to. Generally I have taken the view that a public service is there to respond to its publics i.e. to serve particular communities. Further, that in carrying that out the voices of individuals from those communities about how well the state is doing, really matter. If decisions within the local state solely reside with staff, the chances of getting it wrong increase considerably. The possibility of innovative solutions usually diminishes. On a council estate in the 70s repairs were written on a form and sent to the Housing Departments HQ and then passed on to the local depot (which was on the estate!) for action. But pressed by tenants, the Department changed this so the form went direct to the local depot with a copy to the HQ, thereby speeding up repairs considerably. It seems blindingly obvious but it is amazing how lacking 'the local connection', staff caught up in administrative systems, can lose the plot!

Many public services have boards, committees, panels etc for 'participation'. Sadly it is entirely possible for these to sometimes amount to token forums, for them to be dominated by staff agendas, or for them not to be where important issues affecting people in communities are brought. Out in communities, local associations will be in touch with, have visits from and generally know who in their local state system they need to influence. My work has not really been with these formal structures or well established and already functioning community influencing processes. In many cases these kinds of approaches will be offering a sufficient connectedness. But I have worked on issues and with communities where no or very little connectedness initially seems to be possible; but by gradually finding our way forward we work out who needs to become involved and how some real change can happen.

Three phases of my work took place between 1973 and 1991 and reflected the issues of the time in Britain. In each case my work involved bringing people in streets, estates and communities together with people in local institutions. The roles I developed social leadership from within were community development and action research roles. I would describe this as the first era of public service the book will characterise.

In 1991, in a fourth phase of my work, a substantial change in our public services began to take place in earnest. Thus began the importing of managerial values and disciplines from the private sector into our public services. I went inside 'the system' and discovered it was possible to continue exercising social leadership, albeit in limited form, from within these changing public services whilst taking on various quality assurance and systems development roles. I would describe this as second era in our UK public services.

In the mid noughties, in a fifth phase of my work, where I was working, the ultra managerialist approach imploded in on itself. A third era in UK public services seemed to begin to be enacted by the national and local policy and managerial elites. One in which communities and networks of people in society seem slowly to be coming back onto the radar of our public services. However in this third era a level of efficiency focussed managerialism has been maintained and for me, the jury is out on how far this period is being successful in enabling both efficiency and community responsiveness to be functioning well within these local state-community relationships. In this third era there

were more opportunities than in the second one to find new ways of exercising social leadership.

There is no question in my mind that if we encourage much more writing which reflects on the last 40 years, we will have a far better basis for the future development of this crucial aspect of society: how the real lives of ordinary people, how communities and the local state and its staff find ways to get along more constructively than is currently the norm. There is much to write.

The main purpose of this paper is to address which, among a diversity of intellectual/ academic perspectives on power, language, identity and culture will serve to support such writing. This translates into what the lens is through which it is being written and what kind of writing reflects that lens (Alvesson & Deetz: 2000 -Interpretive Repertoire). These are the sorts of considerations that seem to me to become fundamental once a decision is taken not to simply write, as it were, direct from the action, in some purely descriptive way but to achieve a writing which gets the 'culture' onto the page in a way that fires the imagination of readers in their very different contexts. Czarniawska in her article about how to write about organizing concludes,"*The general advice ...would be to write as you like to read, imitating authors that you like*" (2008)*.* While there is for me a truth to this, what I have found is that a great deal of pre-planning and prior thinking is necessary: what this paper is arguing is to bring far greater consideration to the act of writing than has been customary.

The topic
What we have are three arenas. The first is what I would call the national policy generator (central government) together with the local executive/senior management elites. These are worlds where logical and sometimes quite abstract enlightenment-type thinking dominates. At the local level in the UK this is also laced with a kind of one dimensional pragmatism to acknowledge and take into account, to some extent, the practical impacts of policies and managerial options. In truly Foucauldian fashion however 'implementation' is generally far far weaker than the decision making about the change needed and all the paperwork expressing that. It does not seem to matter sometimes that what is done is not at all matching the intention. I say Foucauldian because Foucault exposed awful practices carried out in the name of enlightenment thinking, claiming for itself universal benefit (1961). And our public services are quite capable of the same: to have a thought out policy, but one which in practical terms can be countering its intent or just plain dysfunctional. This senior level talk also is not fundamentally relational in character.

Very different from this is the second arena of practice whose logic and ways of working are fundamentally relational and about shared meanings through embodied language about doing. These are worlds where professionals/practitioners employed by the local state work directly with individuals and families in communities (albeit sometimes communities which are fragmented). But these practice worlds are also subject to their local rationalistic policy oriented managerial elite. A very key way the local managerial elite tends to try to demonstrate its power over the practice world is through endless re-organisations: to see re-structuring as somehow offering solutions to the quality of what individual practitioners do day to day with individuals in communities. I have come to see this as symbolic of the differences in these worlds ways of thinking and doing things.

To illustrate these differences, here is an example, from a front line world of staff running several childrens centres, of a key aspect of their shared struggle. They came to feel their senior managers were just not part of their shared struggle. Alison, one of the centre

managers, says, *"The nitty gritty of this work is still to be stood talking to a parent for half an hour listening to what she wants to tell you".* Alison had invited the director of the Department down to spend a day with her centre and its staff.

> *"I said, `why don't you come, you`ve never been`. He was struggling……. so I invited him and I rang him back and said I meant that invitation and he came and spent a day with us".*

Alison takes me into the conversation, re-enacting it for me and telling me the story. Did this visit have much impact? Alison again,

> *"…they don't really know. I don't know that they want to know….They don't understand and it doesn't really have the true meaning for them because it`s all about peoples` lives. It`s about families` lives, childrens` lives, what support and what network is in place for them to enable them to move on".*

And through their struggles together to shape their work, their shared understanding was of a thoroughly relational world, but their senior managers kept themselves to a much lesser informational `relationship`. The tensions between these two `ways of going on` ran right through this front line world.

The third arena is the community and voluntary sector and it too (but in different ways) is fundamentally relational and about shared meanings through embodied language about doing. The community and voluntary sector has tended to have a much less pronounced managerial elite than its practitioner counterpart inside the local state (although this has been changing of late).

The gravitational pulls in these networks of power, language, identity and cultural differentials tends to keep the second and third arenas apart from each other. What I think my text will show is that only when community and voluntary sector people and local state staff mix with each other and communicate purposefully together do we get a responsiveness that no rational debate could anticipate or implement.

What the text will also show is that the managerialist targeted efficiency of delivery (which UK public services, generally speaking, have now established), without this human engagement, consistently falls far short of what public service should or could be. Relying solely on managerialist efficiency can be seen I think as storing up future problems which make the problems stemming from the minority rogue or degenerate public services (which invariably make it to the media) appear small in scale. A volcanic metaphor would not entirely inappropriate here and especially the image of communities and their local state being somehow like techtonic plates rubbing up against one another: on neither 'continent' do its people necessarily have a particularly good appreciation of 'the other'!

There are distinct 'sub cultures' within this. Standing out is the local NHS where a degree of investment in scientific-like talk extends right into practice communities, in ways not experienced in local government.

What I think the text will also show is that while the policy and managerialist arenas have been through what I would call three distinct eras since the mid 70s (something like shifts in what Foucault called 'discursive formations'), the worlds of practice in the local state and the community/voluntary sectors worlds have always been wanting to work in a particular embodied way, and this is an untold story. If you like it is these worlds that provide a continuity of perspective on our changing public services over these last 40 years and it is undoubtedly understanding this continuity that holds important lessons for the future of local state-community relationships, and not just in the UK.

Not Meetings!

I have brought community people together with staff in local statutory and other agencies for shared purpose, consistently over a nearly 40 year period. And it is from the standpoint of the understandings gained and insights to be had in doing this that the material for the book comes. The core activity in bringing such different people together for shared purpose is meetings. The text is not directly reporting the detail of nearly 40 years worth of meetings! Rather it tells the stories which have come out of the flow of meetings. It is communicating some shared understandings in this flow as well as how the worlds that come into being in this way work and what you understand about the surrounding context when you do this work.

That the book is not about meetings might seem a bit counter intuitive. Also I am sure there will be occasion to quote directly from the odd meeting or two. However as a general rule it is the understandings which come meeting by meeting and which when pulled together and turned into stories are what the text will communicate. Merely reproducing transcripts of fully recorded meetings inside organisations is, as Taptiklis, shows is 'of no use at all' ,“*Like the oratorical and declamatory speech recording of yesteryear, it is bland and unengaging when separated from its origins*” (2005)*.*

More on the Relational

Watching the policy and managerialist elites grappling with the then latest policy fashion of Health Action Zones in the early noughties, Su Maddock despaired their inability to engage satisfactorily with practitioner and community/voluntary sector realities. She concluded,

> *“There is an urgent need for a theory of social change. The enlightenment was a real advance on fatalism, but the twenty first century requires a greater confidence in people to transform their relationships. Such transformation is not a rational process and requires confidence in the effect of learning about oneself and relationships. …There is a transforming theory of change waiting to emerge, which is much needed because it would provide an anchor for innovators and for transforming public bodies” (2002: p35).*

This is echoed in Reardon's work that in our day to day work lies the change in paradigms where we must change ourselves and our immediate realities and relationships if we are to change social structures and patterns of thought (Urbain: p217).This is also strongly featured by great social leaders such as Thoreau (Bosco et al:2009), Gandhi (Fischer: 1997), King (Morehouse:no date), and Ikeda (1996). All these giants of social leadership and social change, sought out fresh thinking from both the world of ideas and from within themselves as they sought to elevate their own lives through the very engagement itself. Relational therefore can be taken to mean engagement (including developing leadership) in a cause or process of social action in which I am working on myself, on continually developing my capabilities through relationships, while at the same time grappling with the world of ideas. Relational includes generating fresh ideas together with others similarly engaged which somehow seem to fit or work in the situation at hand. We used Alinsky (1969) and Freire's writings (2006) to this effect on a council estate in the mid seventies. Stacey's writing on chaos theory helped do it in the institutional racism environment we found ourselves working in in the mid nineties (1992). Just to give two examples.

Perhaps implicit in this kind of focus on the relational is also the view that structures and systems are wholly dependent on how the people in or using them think and react. So this is not to deny a view from Foucault that within these enlightenment thinking structures people are nothing more than performative ciphers discoursed into taking positions (McNay:1994). There is a truth to this as Marsh and Macalpine have found in their training work with health and social care managers (1999). What they (and others) found is that

some managers swallowed the rationalist managerial discourse of new public management (NPM) hook, line and sinker, while others held on to the social purpose of 'the public service' being the main driver of their efforts to manage. And even in studies of the police at the height of their investment in NPM, asked whether there were ANY forces or operational arenas that had bucked this trend, the answer was yes. And what research shows is that in the way that NPM and a performance culture operated, sergeants still mixed it, as far as they could, with their relational 'base' (Weir & Marsh: 2008). We should note Hood too, who at the beginning of the onset of NPM in UK public services wrote extensively about it (1991). In a more recent work he expresses surprise that NPM has not made more headway in the public sector than it has (Hood & Lodge:2006). From my perspective this is about the resilience of those embodied relational worlds to continue to work the way they want to work.

So in bringing written accounts of the gravitational pulls in these networks of power and cultural differentials onto the page, I am arguing away from deconstructionist or post structuralist approaches and towards a kind of social constructionist approach, in which there is acknowledgement of the discursive as an aspect of these realities (especially the policy and managerialist worlds and the 'eras' they have been through). I am arguing for a writing capable of humanistically portraying actual acts of human responsiveness, in which people are fully present, active and engaged. If we take these two statements:

> *"What`s really distressing.....is that though my sister is surrounded by people spouting the `rhetoric of care` no one seems to give a damn about her personally."* (Council on Social Action, 2008: p3)

And by contrast

> *"The patient not only brightened but shifted her whole demeanour and stance. Where before she had appeared depressed and disconnected, now she became energised and present" (Katz and Shotter, 1996: p7)*

I am looking for a mode of writing which will bring out the latter tendency, without denying the reality of the former.

What Kind of Writing

What kind of writing will bring out the full network of power differentials and relationships and will especially enable embodied relational accounts and stories to be communicated to the reader? What approach will support the writing of a text which does communicate the realities of these worlds, but which has a universal quality, and which inspires activists in communities, public services and elsewhere to develop their own social leadership?

It seems to me it is not until postmodernism that we get reflexivity or the putting into the writing the part played by individuals` own thinking and reactions to social realities. In other words what modernist thought downplays, possibly in its aspiration for the scientific, is the possibility that we ourselves are capable, potentially, of infinite variation in our reactions to the social realities we are experiencing (Gergen:1982). It has puzzled me how little reflective capacity or critical insight managers and staff inside public services historically have had into their own patterns of thinking, the language they use and the potentials for them to develop a different way to see things with very different consequences. The kind of writing I sense is needed is one in which the reflective capabilities and reflexive self awareness of the impact of one's thoughts and actions on others and in the talk surrounding the action are on the surface of the text: that a writing is produced which when read by activists inspires them to develop their own reflective and reflexive capabilities, especially in their use of language.

One implication of the above for the writing is to avoid reliance on rationalist enlightenment

type thinking. But at the other end of the spectrum simply enacting a Foucauldian approach to the writing does not seem appropriate either. For me the Foucauldian critique (being discoursed into positions) when taken as prescription for writing, renders historical accounts in an utterly (and literally) de-humanised fashion: in the public sector we simply do not need textual accounts which, in the way they are written, serve to further dehumanise through their impact on readers. Rather we seek a writing in which individuals are able to be portrayed as active in their challenging of the discursive realities in which they find themselves.

What I feel it is appropriate to take from Foucault is the critique of traditional historiography which seeks to represent the passage of time as a logical flow of causally connected events, each of which has discrete significance and forms part of an overall pattern or meaning to history. It needs to avoid events being inserted into a universal explanatory schema and given a false unity in face of the profusion of entangled events. (The network of power, language, identity and cultural differentials I have characterised above clearly is not intended as a universal explanatory schema, but rather a shorthand way of giving the reader of this paper some idea of the focus for the writing.)

Social Constructionist 'Joint action'
The most powerful resonance I have so far been able to discover between the offerings of the academy and the nature of this engaged work between communities and the local state lies in the work of Shotter. One of the key understandings from Shotter is `joint action`,

> *"….we attend to events within the contingent flow of continuous communicative interaction between human beings…..Until recently this third sphere of diffuse , sensuous or feelingful activity, this unorderly hurly-burly or bustle of everyday social life has remained in the background awaiting elucidation in terms of yet to be discovered, a-historical principles of either mind or world. It is within this flow of responsive and relational activities and practices, I shall claim a sphere of activity…called joint action-that all the other socially significant dimensions of interpersonal interaction, with their associated modes of subjective or objective being originate and are formed"* (Shotter, 1997:7)

This joint action exactly conveys a sense of no one individual being responsible for what is under discussion or what is being done; that thoughts and actions that have any genuine currency in the social reality are the result of the deliberations of the many. And so there is, by virtue of this being a `third realm`, a sense that this jointness is prior, that it is in relation to what is jointly existing that individuals orient and relate their opinions and actions, and in so doing further contribute (or not) to the ongoing flow. It seems to me that that was one of the ways Su Maddock found the implementation of Health Action Zones so problematic. That it was proving impossible for policy/managerial elites and practitioners to establish a shared conversation. The lack of ability to use a relational way of talking was encountering a practice world where only a relational way of talking was trusted.

Why does this matter? Shotter again,

> *"For those within a situation feel required to conform to the `things` within it…because we call upon each other morally to recognise and respect what exists between us. Thus as neither `mine` nor `yours` the situation itself constitutes something to which we can both contribute: it is `ours` ……It is a situation in which I feel as if I have made my contribution, and in which you feel as if you have made yours. Unless this is the case, I may feel that I am having to live in your reality, or you may feel that you are having to live in mine, or both of us may feel as if we are having to live in a reality not our own. The opportunity to contribute or not to the*

> *construction of ones social realities is what there is in such situations to struggle over: if social realities are socially constructed, then it is important that we all have a voice in the process of their construction, and have our voice taken seriously, that is responded to practically" (Shotter:1997;15)*

And if there is not a shared social constructing there is not the basis for coordinated effort among the many, for this is what Shotter argues our shared language/meaning making is doing (our shared talk is not just a matter of putting ideas into words).

> *"Primarily it seems they are responding to each others utterances in an attempt to link their practical activities in with those of the others around them; and in these attempts at co-ordinating their activities people are constructing one or another kind of social relationship"(Shotter, 1993: 1)*

What Maddock witnessed was the breakdown of this shared constructing in turn making the co-ordination of activities for change impossible, and in this case happening within the local state. And this is also at the heart of breakdowns between the local state and communities. But Shotter takes us much further. Even when there is a functioning 'joint action' he wants to argue that our modernist/enlightenment socialisation and education to these professional roles has blinded us to the importance of seeing our very language itself as a resource.

> *"As professionals we have (mostly) ignored our embodied embeddedness in this routine flow of spontaneous, living responsive activity. Not only have we let it remain unnoticed in the background of everything we do, but we have ignored its importance as a sustaining and resourceful setting that is always present…."* *(Shotter:1993 p 40)*

It begins to make some sense that a writing which brings the worlds I have been working in, onto the page, simply does not seem to exist (aside from the obvious practical reasons that state and community people, generally speaking are not there to write ethnography, but to do!).

Through their shared meaning making/talk we expect, from Shotter`s work, practitioners to struggle over what is jointly created i.e. that practitioners in public services are not just there to perform tasks as functional `robots`. They more fundamentally struggle with one another over the work situation they are all engaged in so that it is the result of the contributions of the many i.e. it is `ours`. Secondly, following Shotter, we might expect practitioners, through this contested talk and this struggle, to be creating and re-creating a sphere from which all other socially significant interactions come. It is this shifting story, this joint action through shared meanings, that I want to bring onto the page. It is this that comes into view when connecting people in the community/voluntary sector with staff inside their local state and vice versa.

Language as Ontology

Cunliffe has written extensively with Shotter. She has clarified language viewed as epistemology and language viewed as ontology. The former is to try to draw conclusions about and interpret organisational realities from the language which is seen as `representing` or being symbolic of` those organisational realities. Language as epistemology has developed several analytical methods like discourse analysis. As Cunliffe says, these epistemological methods,

> *"Assume that by finding coherent and causal linguistic connections, we can draw conclusions about reality.....they assume the researcher can stand outside the event or conversation and access local intentions, meanings, strategies..through analysis of oral or written discourse" (2002:133).*

In contrast, language as ontology is the expression of lived, shared meanings; so that the reader will gain access to the meanings shared in the action being written about. With this stance our task is to find ways to give expression to an emerging, relational, embodied experience where meaning is contradictory and indeterminate. This is about giving expression to a social poetic which contains far more meaning than what is, as it were literally, said. The relational-embodied nature of meaning making takes us towards aspects of lived speech like metaphor, rhetorical speech, the rhythm and poetic nature of speech and much more. This can include opening up awareness of possibilities which may strike readers. This becomes a way to share meaning. Language as ontology is about how we live life and create meaning: not just researchers studying practitioners but creating shared meanings between research and literary accounts, practitioner realities and readers.

Bringing out in text the gravitational pulls in the network of power, language, identity and cultural differentials (earlier) seems to fit well with Shotter's joint action through shared meanings and both invite the writer to view language as ontology. Indeed Cunliffe seems to be inviting us 100% insiders to come forward to write our stories when she says, *"Ideally, a researcher using a rhetorical-responsive perspective would study meaning creation within the flow of conversation, as an organisational participant" (2001).*

With the above we have some of the crucial "*theories, basic assumptions, commitments, metaphors, vocabularies, and knowledge"* making up what I have been calling 'the lens' or way in which to view the writing (Alvesson & Deetz: 2000). We still need to clarify what all this means for the writing itself.

Lessons from Early Interpretive and Critical Studies
I have found myself appreciating the radical shift in writing Shotter and Cunliffe argue for by contrasting this 'language as ontology approach' with some earlier writings.

With the early interpretive efforts of, for example, Yanow or O'Connor, we sense a desire to open up new voices within social science writing, but that the attempt to `get at` an order or organisational reality (language as epistemology), is calling these writers to both break out of and revert to traditional third person modes of expression (Yanow:1998; O'Connor:2002). There is a contradictory pull within the writing; on the one hand to write `from within`, on the other to maintain enough of a traditional `reference point` of objectivity, to legitimate what might otherwise, by contrast with the dominant norm, be construed as conjectural or subjective: for every `from within` voice there is a counter balancing detached third person voice. I interpret this to be the result of an implicit sense on the part of the writer that there is a quasi scientific realm of thought in which what is really happening is finally decoded, and that this needs to be given expression through the third person detached voice.

In Watson`s critical ethnography most of the text attempts to relate what practitioners are saying in terms of social science theorising (1994). When he thinks there is an academic way to get insight into what practitioners are saying he includes it in the text. Watson uses academic sources to `comment` on what is being said to him by managers. It is as if the book is trying to be a two way door through which the reader is led backwards and forwards: one direction leads to practitioners and the other to academic insight. This too remains unsatisfactory but for a very different reason. Essentially this approach to retaining a distanced realm of commentary breaks down. Without having the language as ontology distinction to use, Watson's text in effect starts having to use language as ontology as he genuinely becomes an insider. During a conversation with middle managers, Watson is told by them to stop writing and find out what he can about a new managing new director! Watson, puts down his pen, responds to the managers, is listened

to and has some influence in how they re-shape their talk. At this point his writing veers, albeit briefly, towards language as ontology.

Aside from these interpretive works, writers in the critical tradition like Boje (et al) offer important lessons. In the presentation of the Choral society to an academic conference, the academic presentation, and the submission of the article about all this to a journal, those in the article are participants in its creation. For Boje and others,

> *"The notion of `a story` is problematic because stories keep being revised and negotiated. Stories are polyphonic, polysemous, and infinitely intertextual (referring to stories outside themselves" (1999:343)*

Perhaps reacting to, as O Connor puts it, "the construction and piecing together", Boje et al argue the postmodern turn is to leave the allegory in its fragments. They consider piecing together to constitute an unwarranted hegemony on the part of the researcher(s). For them story telling is not a jigsaw to be assembled, which privileges the researchers own point of view. They write leaving the many fragments visible to the reader. But what Boje et al define as hegemony cannot it seems be totally squeezed out of the research/writing process as the accounts of the reviewers of the article (included in the article) point out. And in the practitioner quotes they give, some of those subject to the processes of `collaboration` declare an inability to trust this kind of `transparent` research process. I felt that a research originated procedure of leaving fragments in place did not tell me as much as I expected. I had a sense that this leaving of things in fragments subverts practitioners` sensemaking as I have been used to experiencing it in the public sector and it runs contrary to the 'joint action' ways these worlds want to work.

Social Poetics or 'doing' Language as Ontology
The generic way of referring to this kind of writing, which Shotter and Cunliffe have used, is social poetics. This encompasses practitioners having their own ways of theorising their lives which are equally as valid as academics. Social poetics is about ways of orientating to or relating to our surroundings. Practice and research become very similar. Research writing becomes a reflexive blend of speech genres of all the participants: researcher(s), practitioners, and readers. Research is a living process of reconstructing and reinterpreting. Social poetics is a way to relationally engage with others, and to participate in conversations.

A classic example is 'Hearing the Patient's Voice' (1996). Katz and Shotter write about arresting moments as a patient visits a doctor and a `cultural go-between` helps make visible moments of transformation. As a result, the doctor-patient relationship goes in a different direction because of what is noticed: the taken for granted is subverted. The writing is exploring the character of particular 'acts of public service' by a clinical practitioner, and making them more rationally visible from within. This brings out the universal quality of the moments which practitioners in radically different contexts can appreciate and learn from. They bring Wittgenstein, Bachelard, and Bakhtin into the account. From Wittgenstein we understand how language can point beyond our immediate circumstances. From Bachelard we understand how moments of seeing connect us in new ways to our surroundings. And from Bakhtin how the background of my individual use of language is like a 3rd party to our conversation (his superaddressee). This responsive speech opens a world of possibility, rather than attempting to express a fixed realm. The reader is joining in with the experience of it. The writing brings out onto paper a written research `story` in which practitioners, researcher(s) and readers participate. This persistent metaphor of piecing together (or not) is taken up by Katz and Shotter: their version of it is not finding a single standpoint from which to see the truth of everything, but rather to capture the character of the living moment. The significance of the practitioner story has become more and more meaningful as the article proceeds and the reader is

able to absorb a snowballing of meaning,

> *"..ways of talking that draw attention to the new possibilities for interaction the practice itself momentarily makes available, and ways of talking relevant to realising these possibilities. Talk of this kind is neither descriptive talk, nor is it theoretical…it works to reflect on our practices in such a way as to begin to articulate what has previously been tacit for us in the doing of the practice" (Katz and Shotter, 1996:17)*

And in further helping us understand how to achieve this kind of textual communication Cunliffe presents fragments from interviews with practitioners which show the power of metaphor, stories and the gestural in everyday conversation.

> *"From the perspective of language as ontology, stories can be powerful poetic resources. By creating images that strike the imagination, stories may relationally engage participants and help construct meaning and a sense of self." (Cunliffe 2002:140)*

Learning from Bakhtin

Social poetics offers a way of writing, from within worlds of practice. However for ways of thinking about how to construct a book containing these kinds of social poetic accounts we need some broader understandings and Bakhtin can help here (Bakhtin:1986; Vice:1977).

Already with social poetics we have a key understanding of Bakhtin's: dialogic relations between different speech genres. Generally to take on board Bakhtin is to subordinate plot to the exposure of languages to each other. It is through dialogic relations that reader's imaginations are fired, that the text has life, and can inspire meaning for readers in very different contexts. This is very much how 'Hearing the Patient's Voice' works. Bakhtin also attunes the writer to heteroglossia or different types of speech/voice, which can come from, for example, characters dialogue/ inner speech and from speech genres. Heteroglossia can come from differences of world view and not just from manner of expression. So does the text have 'characters'? Polyphony is a third, very Bakhtinian notion to consider. Polyphony is where characters speak for themselves and about each other. With full polyphony characters are represented not as objects who are manipulated and commented upon by an omniscient narrator but as subjects on an equal footing with the narrator. And there is a fourth notion of chronotope or the treatment of space and time which seems to me to offer a lot for the text. An example of a chronotope might be 'the flashback'-dealing with the past by speaking about it from the present as a flashback.

Thus far three strands have been envisaged in the writing. There is the community-public service story of journeys from within the local state and communities. Secondly, there is my journey in doing this. Thirdly there is the journey through ideas. So how might these understandings from Bakhtin add to this?

With speech genres the possibilities include local policy/managerialist speak, local practitioner speak, and local activist speak. Straight away we have dialogic relations within the telling of the community-public service story. However the main area for dialogic relations is I think a slight shift in tone between the telling of the main story and my personal experience in being part of that story. I am wondering about this being more diary-like and also perhaps more confessional in tone. I am also considering treating ideas as characters, of them being part of the story telling since they become part of the community public service story.

Heteroglossia could potentially get out of hand. As well as speech genres it could take a literary form. Inspired by Tracey (2008) I am wondering about a short poem starting each chapter. I am also wondering about peppering the text, where obviously appropriate, with quotations from wide ranging sources. The scope for the non literary is somewhat excessive such as extracts from minutes, emails, quoted information, official documents,

notes taken at the time, short biographical pieces, and 'the letter'.

It is unlikely that the text would go so far as unbridled polyphony. With a few exceptions I know about the various characters only in relation to the work. Giving them independent 'life' would, I think take this aspect of the text into the realms of fiction, casting doubt on how 'real' readers might see the rest of the text. Does partial characterisation necessarily mean characters cannot be seen as being on an equal footing with the author? There is an equality 'feel' about doing this work (in developing spaces in which the voices of all participants can be heard, and in which voices of people not present can also be acknowledged) and the text needs to express this. There is a voice that I would like to give expression to but I am still not clear how to do so. How to give expression to the meanings felt and lived by an emergent 'us' at distinct moments of a kind of breakthrough when it is no longer a matter of conversations between a few individuals but a genuinely shared community wide sentiment. These are moments when what is felt as shared is genuinely an 'ours', to coin Shotters way of talking about it (earlier quote), and in which the many have had a hand in shaping that understanding.

The text will have a (near) historical dimension to it: it goes back to the 70s. And at odd points is likely to make reference further back. In some test chapters, as they stand at present, I use the chronotope of a threshold right at the beginning: stepping over the threshold of adolescence into full adulthood, a universal experience.

Bakhtin is strongly interested in the public square or the communal life giving way to the privatised. The estate where I worked was built in the 1930s to move from 'public square' (aka 'slum clearance') to private space ('a street door of our own'). The family support work brought individual lives and private spaces into a personalised relationship with the communal. The anti racist work was almost by definition highly communal, but ironically was perhaps the first time staff revealed many private aspects of their lives in such a way that the professional and personal began to be connected. The work inside the system witnessed the destruction of more communal ways of thinking about public service organisation and its literal privatisation.

Another chronotope is for there to have been an alteration in the end in whatever state or situation there was at the beginning. And is there a 'super chronotope' to the text as a whole, somehow tying all the disparate elements together? Perhaps the overall chronotope is less on the communal-private axis and much more about the distinct eras or shifts of zeitgeist when looking through the official eyes of the policy and managerialist elite (one of the ways of 'telling the time' in the text) versus the sheer continuity of the embedded and engaged worlds of system practitioners and voluntary sector and community worlds?

Is it an Impressionist Tale?

For a variety of reasons, since 1985 I have kept a notebook. I am up to notebook 342. These notebooks, my (calendar) diaries and various papers to do with the work now form an organised archive. For the early period (1974-85) I have quite a body of papers. As well as the notebooks and papers, scattered across the archive, I have cassette tapes and videos. Since the late 1990s there is also a body of electronic material. Talking about impressionist tales Van Maanen notes that the "*intellectual activities that support such understandings are unlikely to be found in daily records*" (1988:p117). Suffice to say I have a reasonably solid body of material to trigger recall, interpretation and from which to write. In 2008/9 I wrote 6 test chapters, trying out the idea of drawing from the archive. This confirmed for me that there was enough to draw from but also that I was not ready to write and needed to think through the kinds of issues tackled in this paper. So what kind of writing will it be?

According to Van Maanen, writing ethnography is the narrative account of a personal sense making in interaction within the field. The text is also more ethnography than social history. The most immediately relevant academic literatures seem to be:

Local state	Civil society
Normative Public Service literature	Civil society literature
Critical Public Service literature	Community studies
Organisational studies	Community development
	Ethnographies of groupings and networks

But this subject matter of community-public service/social leadership is more than community studies and organisational studies combined. I want to argue it deserves recognition in its own right.

According to Rappaport, engaged ethnography ought to both critique and enlighten members of one's own society. And Tedlock articulates a public interest ethnography which directly engages with critical social issues of our time (2003:p158). Since my text comes from a lifetime of engagement perhaps it can be called 'lifetime ethnography'?

Alvesson defines a self ethnography as,

> "................a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. Typically, the researcher works in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes. This research is, however, not a major preoccupation, apart from at a particular time when the empirical material is targeted for close scrutiny and writing. The person is thus not an ethnographer in the sense of a professional stranger or a researcher primarily oriented to studying the specific setting. Participant observation is thus not a good label in this case, observing participant is better. Participation comes first and is only occasionally complemented with observation in a research-focused sense"(Alvesson,1999:10)

And Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural. Stories provide a way to create multiple layered accounts. Autoethnography uses conventions of literary writing, for example featuring concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self consciousness, and introspection expressed in dialogue. There is a good deal of experimenting with alternative forms of writing and reporting. Autoethnography provides an opportunity to create new and provocative claims and the ability to do so in a compelling manner. It helps the writer make sense of their experience. Autoethnographies are also political in nature and engage readers in important political issues and often ask us to consider things or do things differently.

It would seem that in this 'life ethnography' I have both self ethnography and autoethnography (rather than autobiography) coming together. And from the many kinds of tales Van Maanen characterises, which comes closest? The short answer here is that it undoubtedly is an impressionist tale. I would particularly draw attention to:

- The power of a story to spark interest and involvement is as much a function of staying close to the sequential, immediate and tightly linked flow of events as of the substance of the tale itself;
- Impressionist tales need to use stories for their ability to condense, exemplify, and evoke a world;
- Not to tell readers what to think but to show them the experience and draw them immediately into the story and work out its problems and puzzles as they unfold;

- A learning process is suggested by impressionist tales;
- Book length versions are particularly effective because they embody theoretical and topical digressions.

Impressionist tales convey a highly personalised perspective. Van Maanen's view is that the writer can slip out of the story from time to time to make a point or two, but must keep the continuity going to keep the narrative rolling or risk losing continuity with audience and that supporting players must be give lines to speak. And this may be a valuable tension with the Bakhtinian subordination of plot to dialogic relations. For it to work as impressionaist tale sufficient plot/story line needs to be there to hold the reader. Echoing Bakhtin's polyphony, characters in impressionist tales must be given names, faces, motives, and things to do, if a story is to be told about them. Impressionist tale telling relies on the audience absorbing the spirit of the tale, not just the literal words and allows the writer to exaggerate a point, omit tedious documentation, to entertain, and intensify the relived experience.

In tone impressionist tales show a *"silent disavowal of grand theorising"* and a *"radical grasping for the particular"* (Van Maanen: 1988). They are eventful, contextual and unusual. They attempt to be as hesitant and open to contingency and interpretation as the concrete social experiences on which they are based. And,

> *".............coming to understand a culture in a way even remotely similar to those that live within it is a continuous ...deepening interpretive process" (Van Maanen: 1988, p118)*

Knowing a culture, even our own, is a never ending story. Events and conversations of the past are forever being reinterpreted in light of new understandings. According to Van Maanen the magic of telling impressionist tales is that they are always unfinished: with each re-telling we discover more of what we know. Van Maanen likens the impressionist writing process to learning to play a musical instrument rather than solving a puzzle: how to appreciate the world in a different key.

Some Conclusions

There are still a few loose ends like details of the intended audiences, more on the broader relevances of such a text, some ethical issues (for example following Tedlock to conceal all personal and organisational identities but revealing my actual identity as author). In the interest of brevity these have been omitted. However the paper has covered the topic or focus of such a text and whether/what kind of ethnography it is.

I asked at the outset which, among a diversity of intellectual/ academic perspectives on power, language, identity and culture, will serve to support a story of community-public service/social leadership over the last nearly 40 years, including a story of my journey in doing this and also a journey of ideas?

In summary the answer has been a lens comprising:
- Emphasis on the relational;
- Acknowledgement of 'being discoursed into positions' as an aspect of these social realities;
- But that we ourselves are capable, potentially, of infinite variation in our reactions to the social realities we are experiencing and can engage with discourses;
- That 'joint action' exactly conveys a sense of no one individual being responsible for what is under discussion or what is being done; that thoughts and actions that have any genuine currency in the social reality are the result of the deliberations of the many;

- That this jointness is prior, that it is in relation to what is jointly existing that individuals orient and relate their opinions and actions, and in so doing further contribute (or not) to the ongoing flow;

- That shared constructing in turn makes the co-ordination of activities possible;

- In this constructing and co-ordinating, seeing our very language itself as a resource.

And the writing matching this lens turns out to be:
- language as ontology;

- Social poetics;

- Story telling (not finding a single standpoint from which to see the truth of everything, but rather to capture the character of the living moment);

- Dialogic relations, heteroglossia, polyphony, chronotope;

- An impressionist tale (a highly personalised perspective)

And this 'life ethnography' will be both self ethnography and autoethnography (rather than autobiography).

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