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NONTRADITIONAL RESEARCH

Social Poetics as Management Inquiry

A Dialogical Approach

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The author's position in this article is that we create our social realities, meaning, and selves in embodied and situated dialogue. Given the premise that language is metaphorical and sense making a multiply constructed, dynamic embodied practice, then what are the implications for research? The author suggests social poetics is one research practice that offers a way of exploring how, in the flow of our embodied dialogical activity, we relate to our surroundings and make sense of our experiences. Embracing a radically reflexive stance, social poetics elevates everyday, imaginative ways of talking, for example, metaphors, storytelling, and gestural statements. Using excerpts from research conversations, the author explores the practice of social poetics as a form of management inquiry.

> I want to talk about some of the very strange characteristics of our everyday lives together, of the conversational spaces we open up between us, and of the equally strange dialogical realities they create—strange because we are very unused to trying to talk about the nature of our own practical doings, sayings and understandings from within the course of our own doing of them.
>
> —Shotter (1997, p. 345)

John Van Maanen (1996) suggested we operate in communities of researchers largely defined by "the disciplined use of language" (p. 377) and consequently adopt rhetorical strategies legitimized by those communities. Broadly speaking, two rhetorical strategies influence our methods of inquiry and our ways of making sense: a commonly practiced academic discourse rooted in monologic ways of talking and everyday conversational discourse rooted in dialogic practices (Shotter, 1998, p. 86). The former is based on the assumption that social reality consists of phenomena external to participants and that researchers can make sense of what happens by observing and/or questioning those involved. Much researching and theorizing in mainstream social science is rooted in this denotative language game (Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Hassard, 1993; Lyotard, 1984), which claims we can develop authoritative accounts and empirically testable theories that describe the "real" world in objective and accurate terms. From this perspective, the process of theorizing is seen as a purely cognitive act in which the meaning and significance of actions can be understood separately from those actions by using external, theoretical frames. Thus, language is the means by which we describe the realities of others, from an outside, expert stance.

Questions raised about the assumptions underlying this mode of theorizing—initially within anthropology (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1983),

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sociology (Garfinkel, 1967; Gouldner, 1970; Pollner, 1991), and psychology (Gergen, 1994; Potter & Weatherall, 1987; Shotter, 1993)—have spilled over into organization studies and led to more diverse perspectives (e.g., Calás & Smircich, 1999; Czarniawska, 1997; Hatch, 1996; Jago, 1996; O'Connor, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988; Watson, 1994; Weick, 1995). One recent movement is the "linguistic turn" (Watson, 1995), which draws on postmodern, poststructural, and social constructionist ideas to replace notions of language as a means of representing an external reality with notions of language as a means of constituting reality. In other words, "language (and language use) is increasingly being understood as the most important phenomenon, accessible for empirical investigation, in social and organizational research" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1126). Within the field of organization studies, authors employing a linguistic perspective generally assume that knowledge and experience are socially constructed. They have taken a wide variety of theoretical and analytical approaches, from interpretive analyses of the variety of implicit meanings in discourse (Hatch, 1997; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; O'Connor, 1997; Weick, 1995) to poststructuralist analyses of the instability of text and postmodern analyses of discourse as a process of control and discipline (Boje, 1994; Clair, 1994; Cooper, 1990; De Cock, 1998; Townsley & Geist, 2000). This range has been reviewed elsewhere in some depth (see Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998; Potter, 1997; Potter & Weatherall, 1987). The purpose of this article is to offer a research "practice"—social poetics—that attempts to embrace and enact a dialogic approach. In other words, how might we (as researchers, managers, organizational participants, and readers) use social poetics to recognize how we make sense and shape our lives through our intralinguistic activities? In exploring this question, I wish to emphasize the relational, embodied, and often taken-for-granted nature of the process. I will situate my approach within a social constructionist perspective, my "method" in social poetics, and my context in examples from a study of management practice. I draw on assumptions rooted in language as ontology. I begin by offering the reader a broad frame in which to situate and then differentiate social poetics from other forms of linguistic analysis.

Dialogic Strategies: Situating Language as Ontology

It is possible to situate language and discourse-based research methods in two broad frames: those that essentially take a monologic, objectivist stance and view language as epistemology (as method) and a second, less developed approach that sees our social experience being constructed through language, that is, language as ontology (as being). Scholars subscribing to the former suggest organizational realities are constructed and maintained through language and discursive practices (i.e., "characteristic ways of speaking and writing that both constitute and reflect our experience," Ferguson, 1984, p. 6) and that we can understand a particular organizational context or event by studying oral or written discourse and the narratives of participants. The key distinction between the language as epistemology and language as ontology is that the former assumes that language is an empirical phenomenon (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000), something to be studied that helps us decipher already-made significations and relatively fixed meanings. From this perspective, language is used as a research method that helps us surface (or destabilize) the preexisting presents or meanings of original texts. Researchers study the general language systems, structures, and social categories that exist within texts to see how our subjects construct their worlds. So, we come to know the world through language and study language structures to tell us about the world. Discourse analysis, narrative analysis, textual analysis, and conversational analysis are examples of research methods drawing on this perspective.

The second approach, language as ontology, emphasizes the crucial part language plays in constituting social realities and identities and assumes that "meaning is always ambivalent and resonates with the flux of experience" (Höpfl, 1994, p. 468). In other words, meaning is created as language plays through us, as words, sounds, rhythm, and gestures evoke verbal and emotional responses. Three main premises distinguish this approach from the previous one and form the basis for developing a dialogical approach to inquiry: Language is metaphorical, language and meaning are an embodied practice, and language is indeterminate. First, the creative and metaphorical nature of language lies in the premise that our social

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realities unfold and take on images from language itself as we speak, write, read, and listen. In other words, language is allusive (Merleau-Ponty, 1964)—meaning is implied by what is said and what is not said. Suggesting that writing is similar to painting, Merleau-Ponty (1964) emphasized the wholistic nature of language: Just as individual brush strokes gain meaning within a whole painting, individual words create an impression of something more when seen within the particular circumstance and flow of writing or conversation. Thus, "meaning is the total movement of speech" (p. 43) lying in the articulation, silences, gestures, and embodied responses generated by situated language use. It is in this total movement that we shape our realities, meanings, and selves—intersubjectively through our everyday conversations. Poetic language is crucial to this process by expressing complex and multilayered meanings through allusion (Carkic, 1998). From this perspective, inquiry focuses on how we create meaning through our everyday discursive practices, that is, our moment-to-moment, responsive interaction in particular social contexts. This is very different to language as epistemology, which assumes that meaning lies in individual words, has an essence that can be captured, and is consistent across contexts. Authors adopting language as ontology suggest that although threads of past conversations interweave with the present, the unique spontaneity of each interaction means it does not make sense to study facts, structures, or systems of language as already-given representations (Wittgenstein, 1953, No. 89). Instead, we need to focus on the interplay of relations, the shaped movements and connections occurring in our responsive interaction (Cunliffe, 2001), and on how we make meaning in local and provisional ways (Yanow, 2000, p. 8).

Second, language as ontology also presupposes language is a form of being—we come to know and create ourselves and our experiences through embodied speech. The notion of embodied language is associated with a number of authors, specifically Merleau-Ponty (1964), Lakoff, and Johnson (e.g., Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). They suggested that conceptual structures arise from preconceptual bodily experiences (Lakoff, 1987). Our feelings, reactions, sensing, words, gestures, touch, and movements all hold possibilities of meaning that we may experience in precognitive and cognitive ways. Merleau-Ponty also talked about an awareness "of the bearing of my gestures or of the spatiality of my body which allows me to maintain relationships with the world without thematically representing to myself the objects" (p. 89). Thus, it is within our embodied, responsive dialogue that we articulate and create relationships with our surroundings and, in doing so, (re)create ourselves, others, and landscapes of possible actions, that is, new forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953, No. 23). This process of creating meaning, experience, and selves is multivoiced, not wholly under the control of one person because it takes place between people in joint action (Shotter, 1993). Social poetics surfaces the living, responsive, constitutive process of meaning making.

Third, language as ontology questions structuralist notions of language having universal and fixed meanings. Cooper (1989, 1990), drawing on the work of Derrida (1976, 1978), argued that language is fundamentally unstable because we use words in a variety of contexts in which the relationship between the signifier (the sound image or words) and the signified (that which is real or present) changes. Meaning is therefore deferred (as we explain what we think is "real," we use more signifiers; this creates distance from the signified and destabilizes any fixed meaning) and absent (never fully present because words derive meaning from their opposite or absent "other"; for example, organization harbors its antithesis disorganization as each struggles for predominance). Thus, language is indeterminate and self-contradictory. Poststructuralists aim to expose this instability and often take a monological stance when deconstructing the written text of others. From a dialogical perspective, poetic language destabilizes order (Kristeva, 1984) and is a contested realm (Shotter, 1993). As we struggle with the tensions and interplay of my voice/your voice, my sense/your sense, what I am struck by/what you are struck by, infinite possibilities emerge.

Why Study Life From the Perspective of Language as Ontology?

Studying life from this perspective is not straightforward. How can we capture an emerging, intersubjective, embodied experience, in which meaning is assumed to be contradictory and indeterminate? How can we take into account the characteristics of language as ontology as we gather data, interpret, and write up our research? Perhaps because of these difficulties, less attention has been paid to language as ontology within organization and management studies. So, why should we consider this approach? If we

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accept that the purpose of research is to tell us something about ourselves and our experience, the dialogic approach has particular relevance because it focuses on the process of how we live life and create meaning together (Halling & Kunz, 1994). Studying organizational life from this perspective can offer rich potential for exploring new forms of knowing and being that focus on practical and tacit understandings, that is, taken-for-granted implicit understandings that are crucial to our everyday lives (Polanyi, 1966).

Language as ontology raises three main implications for organizational researchers. First, accepting research as an ongoing, multivoiced, and multimeaning process requires us not only to explore different meanings and how they may be constituted in particular circumstances but also to recognize that no one interpretation or theory will be adequate in explaining what might be happening. Consequently, new, more participative forms of inquiry are encouraged that accept that research participants ("subjects") have their own practical ways of "theorizing" their lives that are equally as valid as academic theorizing (e.g., Cooperrider, 1990; McNamee, 2000; Reason, 1994). Second, language as ontology not only offers insights into how we constitute knowledge but takes us from a purely theoretical to a practical understanding in which the theory-practice gap is narrowed because the emphasis lies on "knowing how, knowing how to live, knowing how to listen" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 18). As a consequence, we (organizational participants, researchers, and ordinary people) may become more aware of how we construct our lives and identities through our dialogic practices. We may gain critical insights into the impact of those practices on knowledge, relationships, and everyday life and how we might articulate practice in more meaningful and responsive ways. In doing so, we may develop a reflexive awareness of our ordinary, everyday interactions and issues of social accountability and morality. By emphasizing the creative and responsive manner in which knowledge, identities, and organizational and research experiences are constituted through language, we become more aware of a moral requirement to make available communicative opportunities (Shotter, 1993, p. 163) to all organizational/research participants by respecting the rights of those around us to speak. Thus, possibilities arise for relating with others in more reflexive, responsive, and ethical ways. Third, by exploring the interrelationship of language and reality, we may think about management and organizational practice in different ways. Whereas objectivist forms of inquiry view management as a set of formalized activities, competencies, functions, or roles, language as ontology replaces this with the notion of contested, socially constructed realities in which managing is a dialogic and responsive practice—a process of constructing meaning and identities (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002).

In expounding social poetics, I draw on my exploration of how organizational participants, particularly managers, act as practical coauthors of their organizations' social landscapes and their sense of identity. During this study, I accumulated a certain amount of reflexive conversational[1] material in which managers discussed issues, events, and problems occurring in their everyday experiences of managing (Cunliffe, 2001). I offer excerpts from these conversations as a means of illustrating the practice of social poetics. I try to walk the talk and recognize that research itself is a symmetrical, relational process co-constructed by many voices in the research process by enacting a radically reflexive stance (Pollner, 1991).

SOCIAL POETICS: ARTICULATING AND MAKING SENSE OF OUR WORLD

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes). (Wittgenstein, 1951, No. 50, as cited in Pollner, 1987, p. ix)

Discursive analysts draw from a variety of disciplines: linguistics and discursive psychology (e.g., Bakhtin, 1984; Potter & Weatherall, 1987; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980), literary theory (Genette, 1980; B. Richardson, 1994; Wesling, 1993), social constructionism (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1994; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1998; Shotter, 1996; Weick, 1995), poststructuralism, and postmodernism (Cooper, 1987, 1990; Deetz, 1992; Derrida, 1978, 1981; Foucault, 1972, 1979). A common theme across this work is the study of how language constructs, reveals, and influences our social experiences. However, as we shall see, discursive researchers can begin from different theoretical starting points and utilize different analytical methods. My thesis is that social poetics can offer an alternative lens on discursive research. The lineage of poetics can be traced back to the work of Aristotle. The approach offered here draws on the work of authors who focus on the embodied aspect—the poetics of experience. I will begin by situ-

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ating social poetics within the broader field of discursive methods and then explicate the "method" (which I refer to deliberately as practice[2]) of social poetics through examples from my study of managers as practical authors. My purpose here is not to critique other discursive methods but to use them to reveal the unique nature and "analytic" stance of the practice of social poetics—a practice that sensitizes us to the ways in which people orient themselves to others and the otherness of their surroundings.

Linguistic "Methods": Situating the Practice of Social Poetics

Methods of discursive inquiry include discourse analysis (critical and noncritical), interviewing, document and textual analysis, conversational analysis, narrative analysis, and deconstruction. Although there are many versions of discourse analysis, most focus on how language constructs reality (Boje & Rosile, 1997; Czarniawska, 1997; Fairclough, 1993; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1998). For example, Fairclough (1993) developed a theory of discourse as a constitutive social practice. He transcribed, coded, and analyzed conversations between individuals and discourse technology (p. 215) to assess the relationship with broader societal processes of colonization, struggle, and fragmentation. He essentially took a monologic approach, seeing discourse as "a mode of representation" (p. 63) and analyzing the structural aspects (vocabulary, grammar, politeness, etc.) of conversation and texts, that is, discourse disembodied from the moment of speaking. Other discourse analysts study language (written, oral, symbolic) as a means of providing insight into organizational structures and/or processes (Potter & Weatherall, 1987; Schön, 1983, 1993; Tulin, 1997; Watson, 1994). Nikander (2000), for example, analyzed participant accounts to show how expectations about age and age-related behavior (both in work and nonwork contexts) are constructed through discursive means.

Critical discourse analysts, especially those using a Foucauldian approach (Foucault, 1972, 1977), examine how discursive practices, power, and ideology combine to perpetuate and maintain systems of domination and oppression (Deetz, 1992). These analyses draw attention to unconscious rules that lie within discursive practices, rules that constitute both objectivities (social institutions, knowledge) and subjectivities (who we are, what we say, how we act). Clair (1994) studied the discursive enactment of oppression and resistance by examining one man's experience of sexual harassment using his published account and interviews. In doing so, she illustrated the complexities of discursive relations by using the theoretical premise that meaning can be understood through self-contained opposites; that is, acts of oppression are also acts of resistance and vice versa.

Conversational analysts have developed another form of discourse analysis. Drawing from ethnomethodology, they take an interpretivist approach and analyze how people converse, who says what, when, and how this determines responses. Tulin (1997) used conversational analysis to study how talk mediates organizational phenomena (structure, authority, and group relations) in a steel mill. She studied how patterns in conversations, for example, types of talk (presenting, inviting responses) and the use of pronouns, contribute to the "dynamic make up of the organization" (p. 114). Tulin summarized the purpose of conversational analysis—to analyze how structures in talk create, reinforce, and are reinforced by organization structures.

Document and textual analyses incorporate the study of written accounts and textual production (organizational documents) with the idea that the analysis of language, signs, and symbols contained in the production and enactment of texts can lead to insights about organizational processes. For example, O'Connor (1995, 2000) carried out a textual analysis of case studies written by various organizational members along with embedded narratives—texts within their contexts (a story told at a launch event, conversations in meetings, public statements)—as a means of studying the process of organizational change. Rosen (1985) analyzed symbols (objects, such as food and dress, that convey meaning) and speech (language and rhetoric) at an annual breakfast meeting to show how bureaucratic order and control are reinforced within an advertising agency. A further method, narrative analysis, involves the analysis of stories (integrated, sequenced accounts)—what they say and how they are told—to see what they might tell us about organizational life: culture, processes, strategy, and member identities (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Gephart, 1991). Smart (1999) used narrative analysis to examine how bank employees generate and apply organizational knowledge. He identified typified discourse (story themes) from observation, recorded meetings and presentations, organizational documents, reading protocols, and interviews. In doing so, he was explicit about his position—

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narratives are epistemic because they communicate knowledge.

Discourse, conversational, textual, and narrative analysts often take the stance of language as epistemology by focusing on an interpretation of words, language structures, or conventions, in many cases codifying accounts and stories or drawing out general themes. They assume that by finding coherent and causal linguistic connections, we can draw conclusions about reality. These research methods are based on the assumption that the researcher can stand outside the event or conversation being studied and access local intentions, meanings, or strategies through the analysis of oral or written discourse. Many authors adopt a monological approach in which the author as expert bridges two systems of meaning (the participants' and the researchers') and goes beyond the specific speech act to draw conclusions about broader structural processes (Van Maanen, 1988). Some authors are more reflexive in recognizing their own part in this process (e.g., O'Connor, 1995; Watson, 1994). In a recent *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* issue on organizational discourse, Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick, and Grant (2000) addressed a key issue associated with the epistemological approach, that although "discourse analysis has focused on the *outer words* [italics added] deployed to re-present social and organizational realities, it has relatively little to say about the *inner worlds* [italics added] from which such re-presentations have emerged as characterizations of reality" (p. 245). In other words, in using discourse analysis to illustrate broader structural phenomena, we may forget the possibility that the origins of discourse and experience also lie within or, as I am suggesting here, between ourselves.

What makes social poetics so different from the methods described above is that it draws attention to the embodied nature of our intralinguistic practices and their impact on our sense-making and reality-constituting activities. As we shall see, "poetic" language (based on the Greek *poiein*, to create) is about images/imagining rather than literal meaning, about creating possibilities rather than describing actualities, and about multiplicity not specificity. Thus, poetic forms of talk do not give us information about an already structured situation but help "us form or constitute for the very first time, a way of orienting toward or relating ourselves to our surroundings and the circumstances of our lives" (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). From this perspective, poetics is also social because how we come to know, be, and act in the world is both created in, and a product of, our responsive engaged action with others and self, that is, a way of relating in talk (dialogic). Consequently, managing and researching are reframed as embedded interactions that draw on everyday, metaphorical, and poetic ways of talking (dialogic) rather than theoretical (monologic) talk. As Wittgenstein claimed (1981, No. 173), words have meaning "only in the stream of life," and therefore we need to study our dialogical practices, our taken-for-granted utterances, and how they may move us to talk or act in different ways. Let us explore what this might mean. I will ground my version of social poetics in the works of Merleau-Ponty (1964) (see previous section), Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), and Shotter (1994, 1996, 1997) (who drew on the work of Wittgenstein, 1953, 1980, 1981) because each is concerned in different ways with the poetic nature of language.

Social poetics: Living relationships. Social poetics differs from the methods described above because it draws on language as ontology to emphasize relationally engaged dialogic experience. It is a practice because it is concerned with our living responsive relationships (as organizational members/researchers/readers/writers) with others and othernesses (ambiguities) around us. Bakhtin (1986) defined dialogic relations as "possible only between complete utterances of various speaking subjects" (p. 117). He suggested we need to study our utterances, oral or written, primary (unmediated speech) and secondary (organized communication such as novels, scientific research, commentaries, and dialogue with oneself). However, if we study secondary forms alone (typical of methods embracing language as epistemology), we "lose their immediate relation to actual reality" (p. 62) because they are a literary event rather than everyday life. Also, Bakhtin suggested that even though utterances are unique to each moment, repertoires of speech genres (ways of talking or writing) are embedded within. For example, scientific statements (e.g., propositions, hypotheses) pervade certain types of academic discourse. We therefore need to study the complex interrelationship between primary and secondary utterances and also consider the "extreme *heterogeneity* of speech genres" (p. 60) within those utterances. What does this mean for those of us studying organizational life from this perspective? It means focusing on the language used by research participants—not in terms of codes, structures, or taxonomies but language styles, ways of speaking, experi-

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encing, and meaning making that may incorporate individual, organizational, and cultural ways of talking.

A second element of Bakhtin's (1986) work crucial to the notion of social poetics is that of the responsive nature of dialogical practice. Utterances are not made in isolation but draw on previous utterances, speech genres, and actively responsive understandings as speakers become listeners and vice versa. An actively responsive understanding can be "directly realized in action, . . . or it can remain, for the time being, a silent responsive understanding" (pp. 68-69). Given this responsiveness, in studying how we create meaning and action through dialogue, researchers need to consider the "role of the other" (p. 72), that is, speakers/listeners/readers/writers, because meaning is created by each as they interact with each other or the text. In essence, this means focusing on responsive dialogue and the relational moments in which we (researchers, managers, and organizational members) try to shape and make sense of our surroundings.

The value of a Bakhtinian approach to organizational research is that it offers a way of linking individual speech acts to organizational discourse as a means of studying how people create, manage, and are a product of the complex network of organizational relationships—the "language collective" (1986, p. 68) that surrounds them. We can take this further to suggest that as researchers we also exist in a language collective; we have our own academic speech genres that influence the ways in which we write and speak. Our research therefore needs to be a reflexive blend of the speech genres of all participants: researcher, "subject," colleagues, and readers.

Social poetics: Seeing connections. Shotter (1996) and Katz and Shotter (1996) drew on Wittgenstein's later work to develop a practice of poetics. They suggested that his work provides a number of resources for researchers wishing to adopt a relational, dialogic stance in studying meaning in everyday practice. Wittgenstein (as does Bakhtin, 1986) emphasized a kind of practical understanding that "consists in 'seeing connections' " (Wittgenstein, 1953, No. 122): between aspects of our surrounding circumstances, between ourselves and others, and between action and sense (Geertz, 1983, p. 34). These connections arise as gestural and poetic aspects of our dialogue create "arresting moments" (Shotter, 1996, p. 294) in which we are struck, oriented, or moved to respond to our surroundings in different ways. We are usually unaware of our talk working in this way because our responses are often spontaneous and embodied: "the prototype [for] of a way of thinking, not the result of thought" (Wittgenstein, 1981, No. 541). It is in such moments we connect in dialogue, and some kind of shared significance and possibilities for further talk and action may emerge. Social poetics therefore focuses on oral encounter and reciprocal speech (Shotter, 1993, p. 29) and embodies a precognitive understanding in which poetic images and gestures provoke a response as we feel the rhythm, resonance, and reverberation of speech and sound. This highlights a further distinction from the discursive methods outlined above—rather than codifying or thematizing talk, social poetics emphasizes a practical, involved understanding. What research "practices," then, may we use to try to grasp these features of our talk and their impact?

Social poetics: Reflexive dilemmas. Before discussing social poetics in more depth, I wish to highlight a number of reflexive dilemmas that may be shared by readers of this article. How can we stay close to the contours of this philosophical position? How do we carry out fieldwork that enacts meaning construction as a unique, embodied, and responsive process? If we accept that our readings and interpretations are shaped in different moments and contexts by researchers, research participants, authors, readers, and reviewers, and meaning is unstable, can we ever say anything conclusive? How can we offer an embedded sense of possibilities for meaning construction while including the voices of others (research participants and readers)? What "role" does a researcher play?

Research can be seen as a living process of reconstructing and reinterpreting in which we need to develop rhetorical strategies and practices that enact this process. Social poetics is such a practice because it offers a way of relationally engaging with others (McNamee, 2000), of participating in conversations and coordinating our actions (language as ontology). The research conversation itself is a dialogical practice, a process of jointly constructing impressions. The practice of social poetics repositions the researcher as someone who experiences the play of language and is therefore not separate from the process of meaning making. Recent work in ethnography and postmodernism has challenged the traditional

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researcher role—that of objective, omnipresent observer, someone external to the knowledge being discovered. Van Maanen (1988) first drew attention to the need for narrators of organization theory to be sensitive to different forms of ethnographic expression and examine their own ways of telling a research tale. This project is continued by authors who explore the relationship between narrator and story (e.g., Hatch, 1996), show how the rhetorical practices of the researcher-writer influence theory building (e.g., Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997), and call for stylistic forms of writing that recognize the "fictional implications of social inquiry" (Linstead, 1994, p. 1342). Researchers engaged in the practice of social poetics examine, reflexively, how we each contribute to the process of creating meaning.

B. Richardson (1994) addressed the dilemma of how to write a multipersoned text while not "presuming to speak for someone else." Should the author use *I* or *you*, *we*, or *him*; use an active or passive voice; or move between first and third person? Indeed, one of this text's reviewers commented that "the 'I' of the author, ironically, functions to exclude," and "I would have liked to have felt included." How can we include all voices? One possibility draws on Genette's (1980) argument that the choice is not what pronoun to use but what (narrative) posture to take (see Hatch, 1996). I will try to enact social poetics in the writing and reading of this article by embracing a posture of passionate humility in which I "remain attentive to our multiple partners in conversation" and their local interpretations—as well as being committed to my own (Yanow, 1997, p. 175).

THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL POETICS

> To talk of the poetic is to give wing to the imaginative. It is to "express oneself" in words that are "thoughtful" . . . to engage in improvisation . . . [to move] to the relational nexus from which all meaning emerges. (McNamee, 2000, p. 146)

To summarize, the version of social poetics offered in this article carries the assumption that sense making is an embodied, relational, and dialogic process of making connections: a process "shaped crucially by the peculiarities of human bodies . . . and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 4). Whereas linguistics studies the relationship of various elements of language, social poetics explores the often taken-for-granted relationships between speakers/listeners/utterances/body/experience as each interacts to create meaning. Wittgenstein offers a number of resources that draw attention to these aspects of our talk and to moments in which we make sense or see something in a new way. Such resources involve poetic, imaginative forms of talk and include metaphors, storytelling, irony, and gestural and instructive statements.

- the use of metaphors, images, and analogies that allow or provoke us into seeing connections
- the use of instructive forms of talk to move others, such as "do this," "look at that," "listen," and "finish this by tomorrow"
- forms of talk that reveal possibilities or new ways of connecting: "imagine," "suppose we look at it like this," and "think what would happen if . . . ?"
- the use of gestures: pointing, shrugging, and thumping the desk as we speak
- the use of comparisons, different language games, or juxtaposing words or phrases in unusual ways, so that we are stuck or moved to see new connections[3]

Wittgenstein (1953, No. 89) called these "reminders" because they direct our attention to taken-for-granted and responsive aspects of everyday forms of talk. For example, gestural talk carries with it an unspoken assumption that the other person will respond—if we hold our hand out and say hello, we expect the other person to shake hands. Poetic and gestural forms of talk may have a powerful rhetorical and embodied impact on our sense making because they are evocative and imaginative (an issue I will explore later) and, as such, may move us to act or see things differently. Using such reminders or linguistic resources is a crucial part of social poetics because they focus on how we constitute meaning and coordinate activities within our dialogue. To these resources, I add rhythm and emotion, essential elements of poetic practice because they express "something of the human condition in touching the shared experience of grief, joy, weariness, wonder and so on" (Höpfl, 1994, p. 470). Essentially, these poetic resources allow us to understand how we might connect, make sense, act in, create, and negotiate our way through our organizational lives—not by applying theoretical concepts but by grasping a sense of how talk itself may move us. Social poetics can therefore help us become more reflexively aware of the constitutive nature of our ordinary, everyday interactions. Drawing on these ideas, I will

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outline and explore the practice of social poetics as a means of assessing its potential contribution to management inquiry.

Articulating the Practice of Social Poetics

> 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. (McNamee, 2000, p. 151)

In the remainder of the article, I will illustrate how poetic forms of talk are crucial in creating a shared sense of experience. By surfacing the interpretive relationship between research participants, readers, and myself, I hope to illustrate the possibilities this form of inquiry raises for becoming more reflexive researchers and practitioners. In doing so, I claim no privileged status. My account is tentative (open to multiple meanings and linguistic interpretive acts such as researching/reading/writing) and partial (relative to the many interactive moments in which it was and will be constructed)—an illustration of the "paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 15). I am not attempting to theorize about the discursive communities of managers but to "invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable" (Lyotard, 1993), to offer ideas about how we may create meaning in the language communities in which we live and act. I therefore ask you to see this as a piece of writing that explores the fundamental pluralities of textual construction (Barthes, 1984, pp. 5-7) and exemplifies the imaginative and indeterminate nature of poetic inquiry. In re-presenting the conversational excerpts,[4] I hope to dramatize the intersubjective, continually deferred construction of meaning and create spaces for further responsive understandings about the practice of managing and researching. You may be struck by, and interpret, the images and language in the same or different ways—this is the nature of social poetics.

The Context: My Story

To illustrate the practice of social poetics, I draw on a number of research conversations with managers in which we discuss issues, events, problems, and learning opportunities. Initially, my purpose was to explore how managers work and learn in uncertain environments. Over time, I began to rethink and reframe both my philosophical stance and my research practice. My interest in social poetics developed as I read about discursive psychology, social constructionism, and postmodernism. At the same time, I spoke with managers about how they work in a world of uncertainty. I taped these conversations and, as I listened, began to realize that the people I spoke with had very evocative ways of talking about their experiences. Many of the conversations contained poetic language—stories, metaphors, images, and phrases that stuck in my mind and gave me a vivid sense of the manager's experience. This form of language was very powerful in making connections; I could hear it, see it, and feel it in our back-and-forth responses. In other words, much of what I had initially taken for granted in our dialogue (the nontheoretical, the not-directly-relevant-to-my-model talk) had most impact because it struck me and stayed in my memory. I began to question my own assumptions about the nature of knowledge and research and understand that my conversations with managers were not about accessing their realities but offering ways of constructing a shared sense of the managers' experiences. This began a number of arresting moments for me as I connected the idea of dialogic interaction with the lived experience of the research conversations. My focus shifted to reworking management as practical authorship: a responsive, embodied, and dialogical activity of managing. My rhetorical strategy became the relationally engaged practice of social poetics—how researchers and organizational participants (managers and others) together interpret and constitute social experiences through language.

This rhetorical strategy has three threads. First, illustrating dialogical practices and their possible impact on constructing meaning and experience; second, assessing the possibilities for understanding how managers may participate in language communities; and third (to a lesser extent), using a monological form of talk, I will draw on postmodern, poststructural, and social constructionist notions to unsettle some conventional ideas about management. As a means of exploring the process of poetics, I call attention to moments in the conversations that offer connective possibilities because they resonate with me and may resonate with you. This approach of working from within the conversation itself is my attempt to be consistent with the dialogical perspective, to explore the possibilities of what may be rather than present observations of what is.

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Metaphors: Embodied Sense of the "Other"

> There is something strange about language and communication: Although in practice, we use language everyday, and manage not to mislead each other most of the time, if someone asks us how we do it, we are nonplused. We can't seem to "see", i.e., to say explicitly, how it works. (Shotter, 1994, p. 1)

As we have seen, language can be seen as literal (describing reality) or metaphorical (allusive and creative) and that the latter is central to poetics. Aristotle defined metaphor as the perception of similarity in dissimilarity, the creation of relationships or links through the interplay of equivalence and contradiction. Miller (1982, 1985) proposed a sevenfold typology of metaphoric modes or forms of thought (the first four being Aristotle's four types):

- metaphor proper: a comparison of like and unlike through common properties, for example, organizations as "lean, mean machines," comparing the social and mechanical through characteristics of efficiency and synchronization (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 9);
- analogies: relationship through a repetition of patterns or features; for example, "your hands are like ice";
- synecdoche: how parts and wholes hang together; for example, a clenched fist represents a "body" of people working toward a common cause;
- metonymy: natural links through spatial, temporal, or conceptual contiguity; for example, "the bottom line" is the last line of an organization's balance sheet;
- exchange: a relationship of equivalent worth; for example, "I'd give my right arm to avoid this problem";
- translation: of one form to another form of expression through equivalence; for example, :>) is translated as a feeling of happiness;
- contradiction: understanding based on the opposite of what is stated: "either-or" (opposites, e.g., good or bad) or "both-and" (meaning mediated by oppositions, contradictions, paradoxes, e.g., irony—"other than that, everything went great!") (Hatch, 1997, p. 280).

Although Miller saw this typology as an abstract structure or grammar of thinking, as we shall see later, metaphor also plays a central part in language use and embodied sense making. In a poetic sense, metaphors are not conceptual frameworks for viewing the world but implicit modes of speaking/writing that discursively shape meaning and experience in often tacit ways. This distinction will be explained below.

Studies taking a monologic perspective see metaphors in a conceptual sense, as illustrative devices (Alvesson, 1993) or ways of seeing the world (Ortony, 1993). Goffman's (1959) use of the theatrical metaphor, the idea that we are all actors following scripts and performing collaborative roles as if on stage, first drew attention to the use of metaphor in illuminating social processes. This notion of metaphor, along with metaphoric analysis (using a specific metaphor to analyze characteristics of an organization or situation), has been used by a number of organizational theorists (Akin & Palmer, 2000; Burrell, Buzzanell, & McMillan, 1992; Gherardi, 2000; Schön, 1983). Weick (1996), for example, examined how the "fire-fighting" metaphor often used by education administrators to describe their experiences can be articulated and operationalized to create new perspectives leading to better practice. Metaphors are also used as devices for critique in which we surface the impact specific metaphors have on organizational analysis and practices (Boje, 1995; Hatch, 1998; Morgan, 1986; Palmer & Dunford, 1996). Thus, metaphors are seen as constituting reality in unconscious or conscious ways and can be used as a means of providing different explanations or perspectives on social activity, that is, language as epistemology.

Although this approach draws attention to how we use metaphors to frame, understand, and construct reality, they are used as method rather than as a way of relating, feeling, and acting. In a poetic sense, metaphors are pervasive, embedded in our ways of thinking and talking, and carry meaning in an allusive and often unconscious way. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claimed that complex everyday metaphors underlie our material culture and the way we live our lives. For example, they suggested the metaphor "a purposeful life is a journey" is reflected in documents such as the curriculum vitae (our life journey) and in our attitudes toward people who have "missed the boat" or not "found a direction" (p. 63). In other words, taken-for-granted metaphors are embedded in our everyday discourse, embodied interactions, and actions—the images construct our social realities through language use. The practice of social poetics focuses on metaphor as a speech act, rather than the use of metaphors as conceptual tools.

Within language as ontology, metaphors are potent dialogical practices, creating vivid images, immediate reactions, and embodied responses leading to arresting moments in which possibilities arise for construct-

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ing shared significances. This potency arises from their ability to provoke an embodied response from the listener through contrast. Metaphors (building on Miller's metaphoric contradiction) are also the language of the "other" (Cooper, 1989), saying one thing but implying another because the statement places something in a contradictory context (Weick & Browning, 1986). Meaning is never fully present but "a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together" (Sarup, 1989, p. 35), an utterance that is a deliberate lie in which the very act of lying helps give sense to a whole. Therefore, in speaking metaphorically and using words from one context to make sense of another, we are not defining and specifying facts but startling the listener by juxtaposing images of what is and is not. We are creating space for an imaginative, and often embodied, understanding—an understanding that is not literal or universal but polysemic (Johnson, 1987), multiple related meanings being created in the stream of responsive conversation.

I offer an example of how metaphor, as a poetic form of talk, can generate an arresting moment and a basis for making sense from within the conversation itself. In a conversation with Steve, the vice president of a company, we talked about changes his business was facing as a result of government deregulation of the industry. Prior to deregulation, the industry was structured with long-term (10-20 years) contracts between distributor, producer, and service organizations. After deregulation, short-term contracts and cafeteria-style choices became the norm, and his company no longer had exclusive rights to serve customers. He commented on the reluctance of people within the company to deal with these issues, especially the finance department:

> Parts of the business aren't talking about it. The finance side is . . . it's almost like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*; they click their heels and they want to go back to Kansas—and you can't go back. Humpty Dumpty's off the wall—I'm sorry!

In this example, business operations are placed in the contradictory context of a story. The incongruous images of black-suited finance people desperately clicking their heels and Dorothy in pigtails and checkered dress resonated and engaged my attention. The images evoked my sense of the naiveté of the finance department in longing for the security of the good old days back home in Kansas or on Humpty's wall. Even in reading this statement, you may connect with the contradiction and get a sense of Steve's experience or feelings. Certain implicit assumptions lie within this dialogical practice; the words are not to be taken literally—there is a deliberate lie (presumably people in finance don't really wear red shoes?). Later in the conversation, Steve commented,

> My job has turned to high risk since deregulation—even though it is still highly regulated. Before it was real easy, now I feel like Paul Revere's horse—it was the horse that ran from Charlestown to Lexington—Paul yelled; nobody remembers the horse! That's the way I feel!

This was said with some humor, and we both laughed, but the image of the horse and a sense of him doing all the work and getting little or no recognition resonated with me (haven't we all felt like that?). In exploring responsive speech acts, resonance allows the listener to sense and maybe feel and connect with what those implications may mean. Is the speaker trying to engage the listener's feelings in some way? Steve's use of metaphor and contradiction not only created a sense of his living, embodied relationships but had a perlocutionary effect—in other words, I felt incredulous, I sympathized—whether this was his intent or not. His words also generated a much more powerful and lasting response from me than if he had said, "The finance department is naive in thinking things are going to revert back to the old way of doing business," or "I get little recognition." In this way, poetic talk can make a crucial difference to the way we respond, act, and make sense of our experience because it engages attention, invites response, leaves much open to the imagination, and gives color to a situation—the listener (reader) is provoked.

Other managers described their organizations in similar poetic ways using different root or underlying metaphors. One manager (Vince), the president of a small textile company, commented,

> In 1987 I worked in sales and marketing, and I was making all sorts of promises to the customers. . . . And I just worked with a few people—I wasn't that involved [with production]. Here I ended up in operations, coming into work each day finding that machines weren't working, and I'm saying to myself, "Is this the norm; is this really the way it is?" And the people who had been involved were now laughing at me saying, "Yes, this is the way it is!" And one of the issues I wrestled with as operations manager is how I minimize downtime and make our situation here predictable so that we can now meet the demands of cus-

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> tomers. This was my baptism, as it were, realizing that things don't run smoothly when it comes to inside operations. . . . I realized at that point that somehow Murphy's Law prevailed, and I have to live by that and become very, very creative in ways of circumventing the potholes—and there are many . . . things within the physical plant and the environment.
>
> (*and later in the conversation*) I live in this world of uncertainty. I am not naive any longer—I come in in the morning now and I'm a skeptic, I say, "OK first tell me about all the casualties, I want to set priorities—what are the things that might take us out of business today?" I'm not being wise, I'm being a realist. Right now we're wrestling with keeping two boilers up and running.

This dialogue created an arresting moment for me because of the language Vince uses to describe his organization. I was struck by the words *casualties*, *wrestling*, and *take us out* and the metaphor of the battlefield. In dramatizing his experience—telling a story; using rhetorical questions: "Is this the way it really is?"; describing responses: "were laughing at me"; his tone of voice; and poetic language: "wrestling" and "baptism," he seemed to emphasize his living, relationally engaged activity and allowed me to connect with what he may have been feeling and experiencing as organizational "realities." As Vince said later in the conversation, "I've painted a picture and now you're going to come up and see!" I was struck not only by the images he created but also connected metonymically; memories of being a small girl visiting my grandmother in a dank, noisy weaving mill came to mind. I went to the plant with those images—and still have them—though I cannot say now whether that was what I experienced. In this way, poetic practices can evoke embodied connections and responsive understandings that help construct images and our sense of reality. The other (listener, reader) is active in this process of meaning making because poetic language, although being evocative, is also imprecise—meaning is created between us in a responsive way. Your response may be very different from mine.

What might this tell us about creating meaning in organizations? Is the metaphor of organization as battlefield generic? As Bakhtin (1986) suggested, the diversity of speech genres is inexhaustible. Although none of the other managers I spoke with used the same metaphor, within Vince's organizational language community, the underlying metaphor of the battlefield seemed to be shared organizational discourse. Other managers used similar images:

> You plan something, then "boom!" something happens. . . . That's one of the biggest dark tunnels. (Dave)
>
> We try to satisfy small one-off orders . . . to keep customers in our camp. . . . It's such a shotgun approach! (Chris)

Thus, shared meaning, a language community, can be created and maintained through rhetorical strategies, responsive dialogue, and oral and written speech genres. For example, Vince's question, "Tell me about all the casualties?" may shape the responsive utterances and the movement of conversation. We "speak in diverse genres without suspecting that they exist . . . sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic and creative ones" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 78). In this way, language communities, our sense of organizational realities, and our actions can be created by our discursive practices. If so, this process involves a complex, interwoven relationship in which it is difficult to distinguish between the world and the way we talk about/act in the world. The reader may also experience this intertextuality of identity/language/experience in the way Vince speaks of his sense of self. The metaphoric mode of contradiction can be seen as he talks about changing from "naive" to "skeptic," being "wise" or a "realist": Comparing the efficacy of believing, he can control things with accepting he has no control, perhaps contradicting the very idea of what "good" managers should do? If we view this as an example of Wittgenstein's reminders, the juxtaposition of these words can move us to make new connections, new ways of seeing how we (researchers) and organizational members might construct shared meanings and experiences.

Lisa, a manager in a different organization, uses similar rhetorical strategies of contradiction along with contrasting archetypes:

> I'm either the virgin or the whore—as a woman you either get to be tough or nice, but somehow you can't be both!

Her words gave me a deep sense of her dilemma, of the instability of identity, because of the images and different ways of relating they conjured for me. Archetypes have been defined as cultural symbols, images, and myths (Campbell, 1972), common psychic patterns (Jung, 1964, as cited in Marshak et al., 2000) that give meaning and shape experience at a collective level. Such archetypes may resonate and draw on our unconscious feelings, our tacit understandings of

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what each means, to create some sense of shared meaning. From a poetic stance, this form of understanding is not conceptual but embodied and relational—meaning is created intersubjectively. In the moment of speaking, I didn't view her comments objectively or work through the theoretical implications of each archetype, but they resonated, and I instinctively "knew" what she meant—perhaps an example of Jung's notion of a common collective unconscious?

In a poetic sense, Lisa's use of archetypes created a strong impression for me about her sense of self, impressions that may also strike the reader. As an interpretive researcher, you may be interested in how the different stories of actors, along with other symbolic resources, create shared understandings/actions within the organization. As a discourse analyst, you may be interested in how such archetypes relate to issues of gender, culture, or power. As a critical discourse analyst, you may be struck by implicit themes of oppression and resistance. From a postmodern perspective, we may be reminded that our days "become a chaos of competing opportunities and necessities" (Gergen, 1991, p. 73)—a multiphrenic condition in which we acquire many, often contradictory, views that we attempt to deal with through argumentation with others and ourselves. As a "social poeticist," you may be interested how Lisa's use of archetypes helps us understand how she/others may construct a sense of self/other—a dialogical self (F. C. Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998)—through intralinguistic practices. From a radically reflexive perspective, we might also examine the impact of our own ways of talking and interacting in the research conversation on the process of constructing meaning/self.

In summary, the potency of metaphor lies in the way images may strike the listener and create strong impressions and/or feelings about the situation. We may sympathize, be incredulous that such things could happen, or laugh ironically and say, "Yes, that's my experience too!" In other words, if images resonate with us and we react with an embodied response, some kind of meaning or sense emerges: We may be moved to speak or act within our shared linguistic community. This potency may not be based only on resonance and connection but also disconnection as we may be repulsed by the image and react with "oh no! That can't possibly be!"—a process of contestation/contradiction.

Storytelling: Connecting in Responsive Ways

> We all tell stories, and during the better performances we feel the adrenaline pump as word pictures dance in our intellect and we begin to live the episode vicariously or recall similar life events. . . . As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience. (Boje, 1991, p. 107)

As Boje said, stories can be very powerful ways of connecting with others and understanding our experience because of the embodied and imaginative responses they can create. Stories can help construct our "everyday realities" from childhood through life: As a child, we may be convinced Red Riding Hood's wolf is under the bed; as an adult, the image may embody fear. Organizational theorists also recognize the potency of stories, which are seen as having a number of functions such as cultural transmission, socializing or disciplining organizational members, and sense making. Each will be discussed briefly before exploring the poetic aspects of storytelling.

From the perspective of language as epistemology, stories about organizational events, people, or "heroes" are analyzed as a means of drawing conclusions about organization structure, culture, and practice (Boje, 1991; Ott, 1989). In contrast, postmodern analyses focus on the oppressive and disciplinary aspects of storytelling (Boje, 1994; Boje & Rosile, 1997). Stories break organizations into warring factions or collectives that recruit followers, establish and monitor story lines, include some members, and exclude others. Interpretivists see stories as ways of making sense, of "handle(ing) the hurt" of organizational experience (Watson, 1994).

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. "My" managers told many stories about their experiences. We can explore how meaning may be poetically constituted, and language embodied, through a story from Steve. He is describing the difficulties he faces in his job, particularly the impact that regulatory bodies can have on his decisions:

> The worst part of my job is that every decision I make is 20-20 hindsighted by everybody: by the ___ com-

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> mission and by my supervisors. December of 19__ was my worst nightmare. We began on Thanksgiving Day with 40 consecutive days of the coldest temperatures ever recorded. We were having a new pipeline installed that was scheduled to be completed November 1—with the new supply coming in—didn't get completed until December 18th. I had planned to have that supply there—it wasn't. I had to go out and use our other supply that was running through. Our supply ship coming into ___ got hit with a hundred-foot sea on December 22nd—was scheduled to be in on the 25th coming over from Algeria. It took a huge crack in the bow, and two people got killed—I didn't anticipate that.
>
> Then by December 22nd I was a certifiable genius—I was the only one in [the] region with any supply left. I got a call at home by Governor ___ at 8:30 at night to tell me I'd be in his office at 9:00 the next morning. I was either going to give him 100,000 gallons or he was going to take 500,000 gallons. . . . "Have a nice night—see you in the morning!" We had to call the attorneys; I was up all night, "Could he do that?" Yes!
>
> Then it was the warmest January ever recorded—the warmest February ever recorded—then we went from not enough to too much. I sat on the witness stand [at the ___ commission who wanted to disallow $1 million from the company] for 22 and a half days explaining every decision I made!

In this example, the poetic nature of talk is highlighted because Steve's language created a relational opportunity—an embodied reaction from me. As his story unfolds, it drew me into his world, and I reacted both to the story and the way he told it. This responsiveness is expressed in our gestural language (Wittgenstein, 1953). Steve reconstructs the event in a vivid way through a dramatic buildup and use of dialogue. His talk changes from a conversational, modulated tone, with pauses for thought and a calm, even pace, to a more dramatic presentation with short, pithy sentences: "I had planned to have that supply there—it wasn't"; a dramatic buildup: "We had to call the attorney; I was up all night, 'Could he do that?' Yes!" He bangs his fist on the desk at "yes," an incredulous tone and facial expression, dramatic pauses (my metaphorical translation)—all these drew me into his story and gave me an emotional charge. Not only did I have the impression that the manager felt very deeply about the situation, I felt it with him. It was not until I replayed the conversation that I was struck by the impact of all those different elements and how they affected my response, how they drew me into the dilemma he faced on having to give up his supply. I can hear myself responding by gasps and "Ohs"; I lived his experience vicariously but through the "spatiality of my body," the precognitive understanding described by Merleau-Ponty (1964). As a reader, you may also experience Steve's situation vicariously, or supplement his/my story with readings of your own.

Steve also uses irony through statements such as "have a nice night!" and certain phrases or words stressed through intonation and volume. Irony is both a form of allusional pretense (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995) and metaphoric contradiction (Miller, 1982). In the former, we allude to certain conventions (social, behavioral) in a sarcastic way, as in the example above. Irony is also linked to contradiction or otherness, that is, "what is" (a nice night!) is "not." Perhaps this emphasizes the incongruity of the governor's expectation—this is what I felt as a listener. Irony is linked to metaphorical ways of talking because of the blatant difference between the metaphor and its subject of comparison. Both overturn literal meaning, and this may be the reason for their potency and why one may be struck by their "untruth." An alternative approach sees irony as opposition; for example, organization is ironically constructed in the mediation of ongoing internal tensions between organization and disorganization (Cooper, 1990). Vince's battlefield metaphor offers an example of ironic opposition, a flickering of presence and absence (Sarup, 1989), as Vince struggles with the tensions between disorder and order in the fight to win the battle for "organization."

A risk of misinterpretation exists with ironic speech acts, of being taken too literally, as insincere or deceptive (Creusere, 2000). Some suggest nonverbal expressions (laughter, facial expression) minimize this risk (De Groot, Kaplan, Rosenblatt, Dews, & Winner, 1995); others suggest that they have no effect (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991). In the example above, in the moment of speaking "have a nice night!" Steve used gestural statements and a sarcastic tone and raised eyebrows. My unconscious, later conscious, response was that this was not to be taken literally. The responsive nature of this dialogue and the tacit understanding of otherness (that the words are not to be taken literally) are heard as I respond to this drama by interjections and some back-and-forth irony as talk continues:

Steve: The commission asked me why I didn't know it was going to be the coldest December and warmest January ever recorded.

Ann: If you knew that you'd make a lot of money as a meteorologist! (*laughter from both*)

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Steve: I said, "Do you really want me to answer that?!? . . . I dropped my crystal ball and broke it!"

As a participant, this was one of the arresting and responsive moments in the conversation for me, as we connect over the irony of this occurrence and I respond in a like way. The potency of the moment was further emphasized by Steve's gestural statement; his tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures when he made the comment "the commission asked me" all seem to express incredulity, the absurdity of being asked such a question. I reacted to that with humor, and there is perhaps a connection or some sense of mutual agreement as we laugh about it, and the manager again responds with a statement and tone emphasizing what he saw as the ludicrousness of the question. In this sense, by using irony, he is possibly disconnecting himself from the scene—that what others were saying did not make sense to him, and therefore he distances himself from the talk. Hatch (1997) suggested the impact of irony lies in its contradictory nature, its negation of a recognized convention and the edge of surprise. The example here supports her point that irony requires an appreciative audience (p. 278), someone who recognizes and holds the oppositional tension as part of meaning. The story was certainly persuasive in making me feel and respond the way the manager perhaps intended me to; he re-created the situation in a dramatic way and drew me in through ironic humor.

> By its novelty, a poetic image sets in motion the entire linguistic mechanism. . . . It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. (Bachelard, 1991, p. xiv, as cited in Katz & Shotter, 1996, p. 927)

These responses and issues were not obvious to me in the moment of speaking. I responded to Steve in an un-self-conscious way. It was not until I began to think about a dialogical approach that I saw the responsive nature of our dialogue. Although I didn't explore these issues at the time of our conversation, I could have asked Steve for his reaction—were we connecting? How? As a means of exploring the poetic aspects of meaning making, I began to videotape my conversation with managers. I then videotaped a second conversation where I and the manager watched the first video and commented on what "struck" us, how we connected and created meaning. I will give an example in the following section.

More Gestural Statements: Embodied Sense Making

We have been exploring some of the ways in which we attempt to create meaning and fashion our social experience through our relationally engaged dialogical practices. Given the indeterminacy and vagueness of this process, how do we manage, in the circumstances, to connect or go on with our lives? Wittgenstein (1953, No. 154) suggested that one way is through gestural statements, verbal and nonverbal statements that consciously or unconsciously direct our attention and open up possibilities for creating connections. We have seen examples of such statements in previous conversational excerpts, of how in the moment of performance, meaning can be supplemented by the listener/reader in spontaneous, responsive, and often embodied ways. Shotter (1996) suggested gestural statements may be verbal, striking forms of talk, such as "imagine what would happen if . . . ," or nonverbal, pointing to something, shrugging our shoulders, and our tone and rhythm of speaking. Such gestures may be more specific or vague. Examples of specific verbal gestures also include instructional statements, such as "look at that" and "do this." One manager, Mike, spoke of the potential constitutive effect of this type of language as we spoke about performance reviews:

> You see things like, "is able to . . . right?" "Understands how to . . . "—you know? So it's not . . . a category might be problem solving but the dialogue that's there [on the review form], the instructions, the informative words that are put there, encourage you into a real reactive kind of mode. It's like: "exhibits ability to . . . "; it's very bounded. It's bounded language, you know? It's saying objectify this like an objective statement: "This person is a good problem solver—check 'is' or 'isn't.' " I think too few managers reflect upon even how to answer that question—it's a very reactive answer.

He gives examples of how language (here in the form of instructional statements) can influence our responses and judgments. We went on to talk about using language that leaves room for more reflective, participative dialogue. This is where an understand-

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ing of the constitutive nature of language might help us develop a more reflexive awareness of our assumptions, ways of talking, and how they may influence our practices.

An example of a more vague form of gestural statement and its perlocutionary effect emerged in my conversation with Rob:

Rob: It's very rare [as a program manager] that things need to get resolved today.
Ann: So the problems you deal with are different to those you dealt with in manufacturing?
Rob: Problems are at a much higher level of abstraction: Nothing is designed; nothing is given; everything is what you decide it is. If you ask somebody, "What is this product going to do?" "Well I don't know, you tell me." "When is it going to be finished?" "Well I don't know, you tell me." "How much is it going to cost?" "Well I don't know, you tell me."

He speaks rhythmically using alliteration: a gestural statement that has an aural impact through repetition and emphasis, usually of a primary syllable or word (van Mechelen, 1956). Rob's repetition of words, "nothing is designed; nothing is given. . . . Well I don't know, you tell me. . . . Well I don't know . . . ," and his rhythmic speech played through me, and I felt the unrelenting nature of these problems. His way of speaking, his gestural statements, drew on a tacit, embodied understanding as I responded to the words and their rhythm. A final illustration of the embodied nature of gestural language emerged in my second conversation with Mike. We were watching the video of our initial conversation when I noticed our lack of eye contact with each other, something I hadn't been conscious of at the time:

Ann: You can almost see reflection going on. . . . You say something and I . . . look, you loose eye contact with me; I say something and you look away.
Mike: It's as though you are no longer in communication with that person. . . . It's like a dark side of reflective conversations because I'm no longer hearing what you have to say . . . so if you said other things to illuminate what you just said, I'm not getting it. You can see it in the body language.
Ann: We're making some initial connections and then we back off to consider.
Mike: There's a missed opportunity for communicating.

In other words, the intersubjective constitution of meaning may be a complex ebb and flow of connecting/disconnecting, dialogue with self/others, listening, and feeling—a responsive process of meaning making that is not solely within you or me but in our relationally engaged embodied activity.

SUMMARY

Central to our discussion here is the idea of language as ontology—as constituting ways of being and meaning. If, as I suggest, meaning emerges as people coordinate activities within embodied language communities, the implications for our methods of inquiry are significant. We need methods or practices that explore the originatory, taken-for-granted, and responsive nature of our interactions as managers, researchers, and ordinary people living our lives. Social poetics offers one way of highlighting, from within the conversation itself, how people jointly create meaning through relationally engaged activities. Poetic researchers explore how the vibrant use of language—metaphor, stories, irony, poetic imagining, gestural statements, and resonant ways of speaking—may construct shared experiences and meaning.

This form of inquiry is not without its challenges. I have highlighted a number of reflexive dilemmas, not the least being how to interpret and write about lived experience in ways consistent with the philosophy of language as ontology. One way is to take a radically reflexive approach in which we accept research itself as a socially constructed process and explore how we (all research participants) constitute meaning between us. Whereas many argue this relativizes everything and subverts theory development and explanation (Norris, 1990), I suggest that a radically reflexive social poetics grounds our research in everyday practice as a more symmetrical, participative process. Consequently, we may begin to understand how people coordinate their activities within specific language (organizational) communities and how we may develop linguistic resources to relate to others in more responsive and ethical ways.

NOTES

1. Reflexive conversation explores the tacit assumptions that subsist in our ways of talking and how our own actions, conversational practices, and ways of making sense (as managers, practitioners, and academics) may create and be sustained by particular ways of relating. Essentially this means focusing on "the dialectics of the relationship, the interstitial area, the exchange of perspectives" (Linstead, 1994, p. 1327) from within our own experiences.

2. I refer to social poetics as a "practice" (a) because by drawing on language as ontology, situated and embodied meaning emerges in responsive interaction and (b) to distinguish it from "methods," rooted in language as epistemology, that abstract meaning and theorize about reality.

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3. These "reminders" are summarized by Shotter (1996, pp. 301-304).

4. I selected particular parts of my conversations with managers because they either "struck" me at the moment of speaking or because, when I listened to or watched the tapes of those conversations, certain parts of them resonated with my rhetorical strategy. In other words, I experienced the embodied and rhetorical-responsive aspects of our dialogue and am re-presenting those images here. The excerpts of dialogue in the text are contextualized to the moment of speaking because the focus of the article is an exploration of the practice of poetics rather than an examination of what managers do.

These conversations were discussions in the manager's office. In this sense, they are outside the manager's organizational relational-responsive relationships and dialogue. Does a dialogic perspective mean engaging in the interaction between organizational participants? Do we (as researchers) need to become actively involved in the manager's world? These are important reflexive questions. I suggest these research conversations be seen from the perspective of an embodied dialogical practice in which manager, researcher, and reader co-construct momentary connections about how each makes sense of the interpretive experience.

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