Collaboration, Generativity, Rigor & Imagination:

Four words to focus and animate our practice-oriented inquiries.

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Abstract

This paper presents the view that clients, therapists, and practice-oriented researchers can share a

common interest in addressing concerns or problems as stalled forms of inquiry. Four words are

offered to conceptually guide how to such stalled inquiries can be optimized in ways that

animate clients, therapists and researchers.

Now 'we' know how to go on.

(with apologies to Wittgenstein, 1953, aphorism 179)

The aims of modern research have typically been lofty. Science seemed capable of answering humanity's most important questions in methodologically authoritative ways that should, in effect, put such questions to rest. However, nowadays, in the social sciences, particularly in human service related research, putting research questions 'to rest' seems at least suspect as an aim. Depending on your view, social scientists will always be unable to discover equivalents to the laws of gravity, given the diverse ways people go about life. The notion that social scientists, as social engineers, could develop ultimate knowledge that MUST direct social affairs, like therapeutic practice, passed from being a modern dream to becoming a postmodern anxiety. But, human questions, and how to answer or address them in personal and situation-specific ways, is also the stock-in-trade of those involved in professional helping services.

Lately, most helping service researchers seem more humble. When before, many sought to know correct or appropriate interventions or diagnostic questions – so that scientifically warranted helping could be mapped out in advance of a client or concern – 'knowing' itself has now come to mean less definitive things. Some forgot the wisdom of the adage: when in Rome do as the Romans do. By analogy, outcomes from a 'well-controlled', social science inquiry in Rome seemed, at the height of the modern era, to warrant a prescription along these lines: when in Trondheim do as the Romans do. Social service research, in my view, is still learning to curb this over-reach, this lack of humility. In this paper I rent and bend Wittgenstein's humble phrase about going on and consider it in the context of four words that can focus and animate practice-

oriented research: collaboration, generativity, rigour, and imagination. My aim is to interest you in some of the local potentials of these words when applied to questions we and our clients face.

Background

I am old enough now to have lived through two vastly different eras of scientific virtue (Shapin, 2008). I began school just as scientific education was being re-tooled in North America, in response to Russia's Sputnik and I was completing my doctorate as the deconstructionists and postmoderns tore into the modern science and scientific claims of psychologists (e.g., Gergen, 1982). For the great Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1990), differences between such eras exemplify what he described as the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of meaning making. For Bakhtin, humans never get to a final word on any matter - scientific or otherwise. Going to public school when modern science was in vogue was a very different experience from dealing with Derrida's or Latour's views on science in grad school. The antiseptic (schizoid?) endeavours of Sputnik era social scientists in being 'objective' (Daston & Galison, 2007) were harpooned by critiques over reflexivity (Latour, 1988) and human disconnection (e.g., Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991) just over two decades later. Qualitative research was a centrifugal yet relationally focused response to an increasingly shared recognition: that studying humans was different from studying rocks or trees. And, oh how diversely and immensely it grew (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2005). It would be foolhardy to abandon rigorous inquiries for ungrounded speculations and intuitions, however. For Bent Flyvberg (2001), our inquiries need to engage people in addressing what matters to them.

There needn't be a tension between my previous two sentences. Rigorous inquiries, in the conventional sense, use well-established, well-controlled, research methods in ways defensible to

others who can scrutinize how reliably such methods were used. Therapists, too, have trod this path, equating properly practiced therapy with adherence to evidence-backed conversational scripts. Look closely, as a social scientist or a helping professional, at such research or 'helping', and you'll find participants and clients handed bit parts in researcher or therapist crafted dramas. The tension mentioned earlier dissipates when curiosities, judgments, efforts and outcomes are shared, when the conversations or interventions undertaken, are undertaken together. Staying local in any claims-making from the shared research also helps.

I came to the research part of my academic career with what some might call an attitude problem. I had been a practicing psychologist for a decade and increasingly, it seemed, research prescriptions, taken up by my employers or funders, were overtaking the areas that I thought were part of my clinical judgment. While I embraced the view that research can and should inform helping practice, I'd grown uncomfortable with having to cast my clients' problems in psychiatric terms because that was *the* scientific language for them, or in being restricted to using cognitive therapy because it alone had scientific backing (Strong, 1993; 2008). However, while I respect that elders and scientists have wisdom worth heeding, I don't see either making my judgments for me; but informing them, sure. The classic modern, social science view was that experimental outcomes and scientific evaluations could provide *the* foundation from which people's lives could be directed and corrected, even if those correctives and directives were not well-received (cf., Schwandt, 2001). Therapists of this persuasion regard what I am raising as client 'resistance', while others see such resistance as a call to develop more collaborative approaches to being helpful (deShazer, 1984).

Fortunately for me, a convergence of ideas and practices for enhancing collaboration awaited my return to academic life, ideas and practices which marginalized people (women,

cultural minority groups) played huge roles in shaping. And, where dominance had prevailed, research methods and therapeutic practices were being developed to address such dominance (e.g., Reason & Bradbury, 2001; White & Epston, 1990). Such collaborative ideas helped research and practice to be done *with* people, not on them. It is not a huge step to see concerns and questions clients, therapists and researchers initially try to address and answer as stalled forms of inquiry (Andersen, 1995). So, I am interested in how dialogue can focus and animate us in collaborative, generative, rigorous and imaginative inquiries for going on together.

The background I have been sketching brought me to the four words that I offer to focus and animate your practice-oriented inquiries, on helping services, or otherwise. Such research or inquiries, as I've come to understand them, involves countless decisions researchers or helpers make; decisions that inescapably implicate other people. So, I've become interested in what I bring to such practice-oriented inquiries that contributes to shared decisions. I used to think my role was simply to be there for others to articulate *their* understandings and actions – a Carl Rogers (1961) phase of my career, so to speak - but I came to think that such passive contributions in helping my inquiry partners ultimately diminished the potentials of us both. A fine balancing act follows from that recognition; not one I'd suggest balancing alone. This would be like suggesting that one person can unilaterally give to a relationship what it needs. Instead, words like collaboration, generativity, imagination, and rigour take on very different meanings when seen as an ensemble challenge that researchers and helpers can play key roles in inviting, bolstering, and sustaining. It is to that ensemble challenge we now turn, considering each word as a conversational object talked into significance and action by research partners.

Collaboration

I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, as cited in Wertsch, 1998, p. 116)

It took collaborating with a Norwegian (Ottar Ness) for me to be reminded that this word – collaboration – has a checkered history of use. Collaboration as experienced in the Norway of Quisling is not the kind of relationship I will evoke here. Instead, I am using the word to suggest that the shortest distance to get people collaborating is via a shared intention. Shared intentions are not something one person can transmit to another who must then oblige. That is how many North America parents use the word 'cooperate' with respect to expectations of their children – often unsuccessfully. A sense of mutual, consensual, engaged, and negotiated relating pertains to this elusive construct: collaboration. It is not intended to be an all-purpose construct either. As a parent, I wouldn't want to be negotiating with a 7 year old over whether playing soccer on a busy street is a good idea. Some forms of mutuality don't fit for me either: my professional ethics or personal dignity are not negotiable. But, collaboration in research and helping can be best appreciated as a social practice initiated and sustained by shared or shareable intentions.

Collaboration, between people, can be a transient accomplishment that waxes and wanes according to circumstances and empathic efforts, however. In contexts like therapy or community research, it can be helpful to adopt the language of discourse analysts (e.g., Wooffitt, 2005) who speak of people talking conversational projects and objects into significance and action between them. It is this notion of the **between** that is most challenging for those steeped in a view that individuals alone determine social outcomes. Teamwork, singers in musical harmony, and elegant partners dancing together; all illustrate where individual efforts are

transcended by something greater. The relational challenge in each of these examples – beyond shared intentions – is relational *coordination* of effort and understanding (Kelso & Engstrom, 2006). The dancer doesn't coordinate the dance alone; she or he does this through ongoing initiatives and responses to one's partner. Therapists, as well as researchers, have sometimes made the mistake that an initial agreement on goals or intentions equates with the kind of coordination mentioned. By such a view, the research or helping professional elicits from participants and clients the ends or outcomes of their collaboration; then, it is the professional's job to get them there, as might a taxi driver. Collaboration as I understand it needs feedback from all parties that it is on track with changing intentions that often arise. The destination might change or remain the same but the means for getting there might require ongoing negotiations.

Thought of as a mostly conversational project, collaboration involves keeping people's differences focal to 'going on' together. That can get complicated when considering what is at stake for whom as this conversational object (shared intentions) is kept in dialogic play, or negotiability. At the heart of 'creative collaboration', for Vygotsky scholar, Vera John-Steiner (2000), is belief in our partners' capabilities. This extends to our openness to our partners' feedback, to be open to being 'client-directed', in the sense that Miller, Duncan and Sparks (2004) describe. The logic here is that we develop our sense of being 'on track' with each other, by being responsive to each other's initiatives and reactions, in negotiations and inter-subjective modifications that we accept without much notice. A doctoral student I work with, Hillary Sharpe, is looking at how horse and rider do that sort of thing, as they attune to each other's movements and 'intentions' in equine facilitated therapy.

I became a family therapist just at the time that profession developed great ambivalence about the mechanistic, cybernetic metaphors (Rosenblatt, 1997) that had informed the thinking

and practice of many therapists. By the cybernetic view, families and other systems were guided by feedback from within and without that was used to keep things acceptably familiar, much like a thermostat that knows when to fire up the furnace when the room temperature gets too cold, or shut it down when it gets too hot. For humans and groups of humans, threats to what is acceptably familiar are akin to the information that activates or deactivates the thermostat. It is not a stretch to liken human responsiveness to what is acceptably familiar (or not) as being also like the functioning of our immune systems (cf., Douglas, 1966). As family therapy went 'post-structural', the cybernetic, mechanistic metaphor was discarded by many, though it still has merit. With respect to collaboration what matters is people's resistance or differences over how to go on together - the equivalent of temperature lowering for setting off a thermostat. This would be an obvious sign that collaboration is no longer collaborative, that the conversational object or project no longer seems shape-able by at least some of the partners involved.

Generativity

It's the clichés that cause the trouble.

Jeannette Winterson, 1993, p. 10

I have the great pleasure of working with graduate students who are preparing themselves for careers as academics. Early on in our discussions, we talk about their research – about research questions 'that keep begging more questions'. Part of the challenge in collaborating, whether on research or therapeutic questions (and I often think these questions are related), is with staying generative. This is a challenge for any relationship that begins in one set of circumstances and preferences only to face different circumstances or partners' preferences later.

Some ways of relating and talking are more generative than others, but most lose their generativity over time if they become routine, or the words and actions become cliché.

Wittgenstein's (1953) insights into our communications, as 'language games', help to highlight how some ways of speaking or interacting are identifiably patterned. Sometimes being generative is a matter of finding more resourceful ways of communicating and interacting than staying ensconced in ways of interacting or talking that grow too familiar. Like the family who innovates by introducing a new food or shared activity, and then finds such an innovation go stale - researchers and therapists, along with participants and clients, face similar challenges. Humans have a habit, as Newman and Holzman (1997), of 'fetishizing and fossilizing' understandings and interactions – to the point that they thwart people's efforts to be generative together. A spirit of social inquiry, since the postmodern and social constructionist turn, has embraced both constructive and deconstructive aims. While most people accept that research can constructively help to inform and enhance practice, deconstructionists have a different aim. They revisit how well the field is served by what dominates understanding and practice. Part of becoming generative can involve what Newman and Holzman (1997) refer to as practical-critical activity, inviting people to engage with the inadequacies of taken-for-granted understandings and practices. Questions like 'why this understanding or action over others' invite critical attention to and possibly re-politicise the actions and understandings by which people live. Such a deconstructive language game becomes generative at precisely the point when people recognize what dominant understandings and actions have crowded out from their consideration.

Some may know of Gregory Bateson's (1972) dolphin research and what he referred to as deutero-learning. Bateson observed that dolphins that had been trained to do particular actions eventually performed a variety of unanticipated actions consistent with, but far beyond, those for

which they had received training. Deutero-learning, for Bateson, occurs when people learn to learn – or in the case of generativity, when they acquire an infectious ability to be generative or resourceful in ways that far exceed what might have been anticipated when they started on a research project. Of course not everything generated by people coming together to address a common ambition or concern is going to be deemed useful. As advocates of 'brainstorming' can tell you, a generative context needs to be welcoming of what is new, before turning to critically and collaboratively evaluating what has been newly generated.

A number of authors take up a flipside to what I've been describing; they talk about 'play' and its relationship to generativity (Bakhtin, 1986; Gadamer, 1988; Holzman, 2009). When social interaction and meaning have become excessively formalized or overdetermined, the antidote can be to creatively break with convention, to develop new ways of understanding and interacting. Among researchers and practitioners, a challenge some refer to as methodolatry, an excessive focus on method (Chamberlain, 2000; cf., Nylund & Corsiglia, 1994), can overtake curiosities, relationships, and enthusiasms helpful in being generative. Bateson (1972) also wrote of how animals (including humans) alternate between responding to circumstances and each other seriously and playfully. Needed are ways to indicate and recognize when invitations to one mode or the other are called for and taken up. People collaboratively engaged in inquiries can benefit from balance both rigorous and playful ways of doing their generative work together.

Rigor

…what is called knowledge cannot be defined without understanding what gaining

knowledge means.   Bruno Latour, 1986, p. 220

There are many reasons why we ended up with the modern social science that currently dominates our professions and disciplines. Chief among those reasons is trust in what counts or passes for knowledge and wisdom. In the hands of corrupt authority figures (e.g., some kings, priests, mystics), it seemed UP could be DOWN, and that prescriptions of what was best for people could come out of less than exact deliberations. What mattered to Enlightenment era scientists were rigorous processes that led to defensible claims of truth or knowledge. Rigor is an often used word in research circles and it typically refers to what scientists do to invite others to put faith in their claims-making. The notion of rigor in research can be seen to owe something to what some have referred to as a 'politics of prescription' (Hallward, 2004) or an expectation that good science should determine good practice.

The hallmark of research rigor, until recently, has been the objectivity undertaken in any inquiry. But, words like objectivity and rigor have a quirky history of meaning, particularly when it comes to how inquiry was to be guided by them (Bernstein, 1983; Daston & Galison, 2007). With respect to inquiries in areas like therapeutic or community concerns such words require meanings that can't be pre-ordained – and that's where a new kind of rigor comes in; the kind that Michael White (1995) wrote of in suggesting that we work from within an inch of clients' experiences and preferences. This is a kind of rigorous *inter-subjectivity*, and one that, where values and preferences are involved, and what Thomas Schwandt (2002) described as shared, "deliberative excellence". This applies as much to the interpersonal politics of description (how to name people's experiences) as it does to any politics of prescription (how to go on together).

One of the biggest challenges to collaboratively-oriented therapists and researchers in the postmodern era has been what to make of knowledge and practice that comes from beyond, or before, the immediate relationships in which such collaborative inquiries are undertaken. How

much stock should professionals put in the outcomes of others' social science research, or the traditions of practice passed on to them by their supervisors and professions? Such a question, for me, points to the relationships in which we want the outcomes of our inquiries to matter, or find their 'uptake', so to speak. Family therapists know what I am describing all too well. Helping a family member or a subsystem, like the parental relationship, to make changes is not an isolated matter. A change in Mom or Dad, or their relationship, has significance for the kids, for the extended families of Mom and Dad, and possibly further relational ripple effects. Rigor, in this way of thinking, involves recognitions of how one's social ecology plays a role in both motivating an inquiry and in being affected by its outcomes. Similar considerations arise among social scientists concerned with extending and applying service-oriented knowledge. They, too, operate in a social ecology where one is expected to acknowledge what comes before and beyond any inquiry. Rigor, in the ways, I have been describing has an important social and cultural element; an element that recognizes a central principle of constructionist thought (e.g., Lock & Strong, 2010), that socially shared realities are socially negotiated ones. This is a strikingly different stance than the one often taken when objectivists use their science to gain the upper hand in the politics of prescription.

A gap of understanding and approach between social science researchers of therapy and frontline clinicians widens or narrows here, depending on one's approach to professional helping. A significant portion of my career as an academic has been focused on narrowing this gap, and in part I became an academic given concerns I had about researchers' prescriptions (and about institutions and managers following their prescriptions) of a language for client problems and 'correct' interventions hinged to that problem language (Strong, 1993; 2008). The modern view, imported from medicine, and which still dominates, is that problems could be correctly

described and addressed. For many, this is a comforting thought, as it means that being helpful can be seen as a 'rigorous' practice of mapping client concerns to the professional's language of diagnostic categories, for which use of particular interventions has been scientifically warranted. This is a tidy, pre-established clinical world in which client and therapist enact well-defined roles in a well-scripted encounter ready to unfold in predictable and evidence-supported ways. Understandably, this approach to helping has been well-received for those who see enacting their roles as a logical extension of medicine. But, for those who struggle with the assumptions and associated rigors of this approach (e.g., that problems must be described in the symptom language of individuals, that conversational interventions are equivalent to medical procedures or prescriptions), and its uptake by health institutions, a major gap occurs.

A fascinating dialogue has been occurring over what should decide help-oriented inquiries (Denzin & Giardina, 2008; Larner, 2004). On one side is the approach just mentioned: evidence-based practice, or 'best practices', carefully controlled research that warrants such practice(s) and expectations that practitioners adhere to practices that are evidence-based. But, a response has come from the frontlines of practice where clinical work is less controlled: practice-based evidence (e.g., Barkham, Hardy, & Mellor-Clark, 2010; Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). Both sides of this dialogue seek practices that clients find helpful, and both are based on the assumption that proof of such helpfulness is generalizable, and thus provide scientific backing in the institutional and cultural arenas where Hallward's (2004) "politics of prescription" matters. Rigor has come to mean something akin to what I described in these evidence-generating lines of inquiry, and so it should, for seeking evidence for prescribed practices. Rigor can also develop in collaborations guided by ongoing efforts to share intentions and ways of going on together.

Imagination

Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity.

(as cited in Keeney, 1983, p. 94).

Some might wonder what imagination has to do with good research, until they remember Archimedes having his Eureka moment in the bath tub, or Einstein watching the telephone poles zooming by as he took a train to work, and stumbling on to 'relativity'. In the 1960s it was not uncommon to have industrial think tanks where one of the members was an artist or philosopher. Among qualitative researchers, it has almost become an axiom that all forms of research occur within an interpretive framework or set of assumptions. For some die-hard realists, once a theory is purportedly proven, then it crosses over from being an assumption or interpretation of the research phenomenon to TRUTH about that phenomenon. The imaginative (i.e., theoretical) part of research can be left behind, goes this line of thought. But it is also by this line of reasoning that a chemist sees being human in terms of chemical properties and interactions; a physical therapist would see the human in terms of bones, muscles and mobility; a psychologist goes somewhere else in her or his understanding, and so on. There are lots of ways of understanding the same human, without any way, or combination of ways, of understanding offering a more complete understanding. Such interpretive frameworks for understanding humans are different, even incommensurable to use Kuhn's (1962) language for scientific paradigms.

One of the things that hermeneutic or ethnomethodological research makes clear is how differently reality can be understood and practiced – with unquestioned success. To suggest otherwise is to claim that there is a correct way to understand and practice reality, when people of different cultures go about their interactions successfully using different understandings and practices. The point I am building to is quite familiar to constructionist practitioners, or those

who talk about framing and reframing, but it can be extremely important to the outcomes of our inquiries. A few years ago I attended a workshop by Sallyann Roth in which we were asked to consider the hermeneutics of our questions. She asked us to gain a sense and appreciation for how our questions or therapeutic curiosities related to our development and current experiences within particular meaningful contexts. This reminded me of a joke about a young paediatrician who, when asked about having a family of his own, responded that he wouldn't have children because all they did was get sick. The concerns, aims, and conclusions we live by arise from and make sense in such meaningful contexts. For Gadamer (1988), such contexts afford particular horizons of meaning and possibility, our interpretive or imaginative ways of not only understanding but of formulating questions and ways of addressing them. And this all comes before our ways of making sense of the outcomes and applications of our inquiries.

One of my concerns over the last few years has been the narrow range of ideas that typically have guided our inquiries and helping (Lock & Strong, 2010). Hermeneutic scholar, Paul Ricoeur (1976), suggested that we often need to conceptually distance ourselves from, or make abnormal, our accustomed contexts of meaning so we can bring new imaginative resources in recontextualizing our inquiries and concerns. If research is to produce new knowledge what can be needed, to paraphrase Buddhist scholar Pema Chodron (1994) is to drop our storylines, or we might persist in getting more of what we are accustomed to. By storylines, Chodron refers to the narrative insight that horizons of meaning and possibility can also be understood as stories of meaning people take forward – usually without reflecting on their stories' plotlines.

In the past two decades there has been an explosion of new ideas and methods pertaining to the social sciences, as evidenced in such things as the near doubling of *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2005) in just over a decade. Some of this

explosion has been because of the increased influence of postmodern and social constructionist ideas and practices. When the focus of research shifts from correctly discovering or evaluating things 'as they really are' to finding effective ways of understanding and addressing how things are, previously unthought of possibilities can emerge. A potentially big challenge is in having others appreciate the horizon or context out of which our inquiries emerged and are to be understood – particularly when those others are policy-makers and institutional managers.

Inviting others into new horizons of curiosity and possibility, finding convincing ways of thinking beyond our accustomed horizons, and joining others in their accustomed horizons of possibility and curiosity – these are forms of *imaginative work*, whether we are talking about joint inquiries or therapy. I've come to see my cue to doing that kind of required imaginative work as coming from client or inquiry-partner 'resistance', to enable collaborative inquiries to stay 'on track' by being guided by misunderstandings, differences and so on. For Vico (2005/1744), getting stuck, being misunderstood, disagreeing are signs of 'linguistic poverty' and a call for what he termed 'poetic wisdom'. Poetic wisdom applied to imaginative work calls for a kind of wordsmithing (Strong, 2006), where people creatively and critically try on not only different words, but different 'language games' to use Wittgenstein's (1953) phrase. An example of what I mean by language games was offered earlier in different efforts to understand humans according to chemical or anthropological 'language games'. When people speak of 'thinking outside the box', this, too, could refer to talking from a different language game or context. To make good use of Vico's poetic wisdom researchers and practitioners need to recognize how specific uses of language enable and constrain possibilities for going on together with others.

Some might find it a stretch to equate language games with what I earlier described as horizons of meaningful possibility. But, a practitioner who can shift out of one model of practice

and into another, or conceptualize a challenge within a different language game, and then engage others from a shift in language game, is a truly gifted wordsmith. Couples therapists know this all too well, when they try to help partners exit blaming and defensiveness language games for other more relationship-friendly language games. For Heideggerian thinkers and practitioners attentive introductions of new language where current language isn't being generative, can enable the disclosing of 'new worlds' (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997):

> Instead of ordering our inconsistent experiences to make them consistent, we can articulate their genuine differences. Indeed, once we abandon ordering arguments or concerns as giving us either our true identities or our only genuine access to the world, we can begin nurturing our various cultural concerns and their various modes of inquiry. (p. 158)

Seen as a conversational activity of staying attentive to, and resourceful with, language use, imaginative work as it relates to collaborative, practice-oriented inquiries can productively heed the caution and advice of Spinosa, et al (1997). Such imaginative work is triggered by indications that the current language is not working for one or more inquiry partner.

Toward Collaborative, Generative, Rigorous and Imaginative Inquiries Together

> The inquirer's relation to this (practice) situation is *transactional*. He shapes the situation, but in conversation with it, so that his own models and appreciations are also shaped by the situation. The phenomena that he seeks to understand are partly of his own making; he is *in* the situation he seeks to understand. (Schön, 1983, pp. 150-151)

Throughout this paper I've taken the view that human problems can be seen as arrested inquiries, places where people are stuck in finding the language and means to 'go on', in

Wittgenstein's sense. This view of knowledge is consistent with what is sometimes referred to, with reference to Aristotle, as phronetic knowledge (Bernstein, 1983; Flyvberg, 2001), in contrast to the normal objectified knowledge one expects from the social and other sciences. The latter kinds of knowledge – generalizable, objective – have been the realm of modern social scientists, typically using quantitative methods to 'prove or evaluate things'. It is the norm, when entering the service sector's politics of prescription, to have such proofs or evaluations, so that one has, for example, 'evidence-based' practices. But, there has been considerable debate about what counts as science in warranting such evidence-based practices (e.g., Norcross, Beutler & Levant, 2005). In this paper I've advocated a more humble view of inquiry.

Like most therapists and action researchers, my interests are with the people with whom I am engaged in re-dynamizing arrested inquiries, but seldom beyond those people. While I don't ignore evidence and ideas from elsewhere, I'm with Bakhtin (1986) who took the view that people have to make understandings and actions their own through dialogic processes. They can't simply transmit or prescribe such understandings and actions. They could choose to take them up, modify them to their circumstances and preferences, or discard them, however. In this sense shared inquiries and the meanings and actions arising them, are like most other human relationships; they are negotiated.

My paper's title suggests that collaboration, generativity, rigor and imagination, **focus** and **animate** our shared inquiries. By focusing, I am referring to how these four words can be used to keep our shared inquiries on track; to be words we can return to for guidance should we find our inquiries arrested in old and new ways. By animating, I am referring to how shared inquiries can be undertaken in engaged and spirited ways – the opposite of the kind of detachment one associates with many forms of social science research. In the kinds of inquiries I

am imagining feel that the stakes of those inquiries are being worked out at almost every conversational turn. For Bakhtin (1986; Morson & Emerson, 1990), it is precisely through such spirited interactions that our words, and the actions that follow from them, come alive. Being focused and animated together is not something that is easily sustained. As a practitioner and a researcher I've struggled with two poles of concern, and have presently settled for a middle and engaged approach to working with people on their arrested inquiries. The first of these poles was Foucault's (1977) concern that professionals needed docile bodies in order to do their people-oriented work. Good clients and research participants, by that logic, needed to be information providers and willing recipients/enactors of our expertise. The second concern crystallized in a wondering after some years of practice: must I deaden myself to enliven my clients?

The middle territory between these poles is more shared, much less certain, and requires a lot of practitioners and researchers, to live up to their part in not only embodying and enacting these words, but in inviting and sustaining the same from people they join in forms of inquiry. There is an element of improvisation required to stay collaborative, generative, rigorous, and imaginative - with others - in this middle territory (cf., Holzman, 2009). It is easy to fall back on the methods and words we find have worked for us before, while losing sight and connection with the people engaged in inquiries that matter to them, in front and ahead of us.

One of the mantras these days of critically reflective practice (Flyvberg, 2001; Fook & Gardner, 2007) is that we are shaped by, and shapers of, the understandings and actions we might take for granted together in what I've been describing as shared inquiries. That means we need to be mindful of using words like collaboration, generativity, rigor, and imagination – to not simply reproduce what is already coming up short for us in our inquiries. But the same words also can apply to going on together, in new ways, in differences that make a difference, to use a

well-known Bateson phrase (1972). No doubt, there are more words that could be useful focusers and animators of our shared inquiries, but they can hopefully come from future inquiries.

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