Joint Action brings together a cross-disciplinary group of fifteen respected international scholars to explain the relevance of John Shotter’s work to emerging concerns in twenty-first century social science.

Shotter’s work extends over forty years and continues to challenge conventional scientific thinking across a range of topics. The disciplines and practices that Shotter’s work has informed are well established throughout the English-speaking world. This is the first publication to examine the importance of his influence in contemporary social sciences and it includes authoritative discussions on topics such as social constructionism, democratic practice, organisational change, the affective turn and human relations. The geographical diversity and disciplinary breadth of scholarly contributions imbues the book with international scope and reach.

Joint Action presents a contemporary reflection on Shotter’s work that demonstrates its influence across a range of substantive topics and practical endeavours and within disciplines including management studies and philosophy as well as psychology. As such, it will appeal to researchers and postgraduate students of social sciences and related disciplines, as well as to those who have heard of Shotter’s work and want to know more about its utility and value in relation to their own research or practice.

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... social constructionism has been a way-station on the way to somewhere else

(Shotter, 2005, 150)

The journey metaphor looms large in traditions that value narrative and attend to language-in-use. And so, for John Shotter to depict what many might see as his most recognisable ascription in this way shouldn’t come as a total surprise. Yet, what we must appreciate in this statement and through the larger contribution he has made is the certainty that Shotter does not make this journey alone. This book’s title, Joint Action, not only recognises one of the key concepts Shotter has developed, it simultaneously reflects the collaborative, interactive process of producing this book. More broadly, it is also indicative of the various interlocking and overlapping ways in which Shotter’s work continues to contribute to ongoing intellectual conversations in the human and social sciences today. One way of thinking about the distinctiveness of Shotter’s work is that it provides a means with which, together, we can become more practically responsive to a world that we actively contribute to making. In looking over his shoulder, at the path Shotter has travelled in producing this contribution, we just might get a sense of how the journey was made.

Shotter has not written much on his life before entering grammar school. This is interesting given his commitment to understanding how life develops as a social ecology. The publicly available story opens around the time he began grammar school in 1949 and his recognition of being marked by the headmaster as different from the general school population. This difference was due to his entry into the fee-paying school on a government academic scholarship. Socio-economic class distinctions followed Shotter when he departed the school at age 15 to take on an apprenticeship at an aircraft factory. Again, he observed the differentiation between workers (of which as a young engineering apprentice he was one) and company management. Reflecting on these experiences Shotter has described how both contributed to his first perceptions regarding the phenomenology of power and relational
dynamics. In particular he noted that those with greater power acted with less awareness of privilege. Conversely, and with more importance, those with less power were more aware of how these dynamics played out.

As well offering an insider’s perspective on the permutations of UK class-based society as it existed in the 1950s, Shotter has also told of his experience of working with metals. Those with a close understanding of his work will know of Shotter’s likening of tools as prosthetics through which we can ‘feel into’ another’s existence. The example he used from his days as an apprentice involved him filing varieties of metal and sensing the tearing of aluminium or the crumbling of cast iron. Later in life Shotter would reach back to these experiences to illustrate a similarity with the way that words, in their speaking, act as a prosthetic allowing us to ‘feel into’ the world with which we engage. When both observations combine, it is unsurprising that one of Shotter’s primary concerns has been to better our social conditions by examining the incredible specificities of language-in-use.

Shotter’s journey to academia, and to psychology more specifically, came about via a complex route. After returning to school and qualifying for entry into higher education Shotter went to study mathematics at Bristol University. It was during this period that his penchant for theatre and the craft of Peter O’Toole was heightened. It was also at this time he met John Barrett, then a psychology student (and later a Faculty member) at Bristol. Being drawn closer to the ideas of psychology it was not long before his interest in mathematics waned to the point where Shotter failed his course exams and was forced out of the university.

Shotter quickly moved on to complete National Service, and served in the Royal Air Force for two years as a radar operator. Then, in 1959, he exited the RAF for a job as an electronics technician in the Phonetics Department at University College London. During his employment there he met sociologist Basil Bernstein who introduced him to the works of three theorists who continue to have considerable influence on Shotter’s positioning: American philosopher/psychologist G.H. Mead, German philosopher Ernst Cassirer and Soviet psychologist Alexander Luria. In 1962, this was followed by another technician’s post in the Department of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics, where he helped establish new laboratory facilities.

During these years Shotter was also studying part-time at Birkbeck College, and graduated in 1963 with a first class degree in Psychology with Mathematics and Statistics. After this, from 1963 to 1964 Shotter completed a Medical Research Council studentship at Birkbeck College, working on a mathematical study of ‘choice behaviour’ in rats. Then, from 1964 to 1965 he worked as a research assistant in the Department of Electronic Engineering at the University of Nottingham, contributing to a project on visual recognition and ‘photo-multiplier’ binoculars.

In 1966, this led to a lectureship in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham, where he stayed for some years. It was whilst working there
he studied for his PhD ‘The Explanation of Action in Social Life’, which was awarded in 1982 with Rom Harré and Liam Hudson as his external examiners. During his time at Nottingham, Shotter also supervised the PhDs of a number of other psychologists who would subsequently come to be significant influences themselves, including David Wood (known for his work in developmental psychology), Dave Middleton (who, with Derek Edwards, inaugurated the discursive study of collective remembering) and David Pilgrim (now an important scholar working in the clinical psychology of mental health).

In 1987 Shotter (by now a Reader in Social Psychology) left Nottingham to take up the post of Professor of General Social Sciences at the Rijksuniversiteit in Utrecht in the Netherlands. This was followed in 1991 by a move to the University of New Hampshire in the USA, where he occupied the post of Professor in Interpersonal Relations. Whilst Shotter has now officially retired from this post, those familiar with his work will know he continues to write and publish at an impressive rate, and that his innovative ideas continue to develop in conversation with those of others.

Such is the bare outline of Shotter’s unusual journey, one that first led him into and then eventually, in some ways at least, out of psychology. We, along with many others, are appreciative that this striking journey produced a distinctive body of scholarship with implications that have been taken up across the humanities and social sciences. We now briefly outline how our eminent contributors have assessed and responded to his work.

There are many different ways we could have organised the chapters in this book. Their diversity and richness continuously echoes and expands upon key themes in Shotter’s own work, but in ways that mostly cut across, associate, compare or contextualise them, rather than treating them in isolation. In this fashion, the contributions actually mirror Shotter’s own work, where certain central issues related to language, the body and social relations constantly intertwine. In so doing they provide a coherent refutation, of and counter to, approaches that would mechanistically and artificially treat these aspects of the human world as somehow separable from each other. At the same time, their complex braiding within each chapter means that we have had to impose a sequence upon them that will, perhaps inevitably, seem somewhat wayward.

That sequence derives from repeated reading and extended discussion, by which we identified five significant issues or themes running through the contributions to this book: history, context and biography; language and social constructionism; bodies and embodiment; singularity and improvisation; and being and relating. Clearly, others may have identified different unifying themes; nevertheless, those are the ones we responded to. Having done so, we compared each chapter against them in order to discriminate, for each, a theme which seemed especially resonant. And this is where the further arbitrariness of their ordering becomes evident, because most chapters quite clearly speak to more than one theme, and so could have comfortably
fitted into more than one place. The linear organisation of the printed text nevertheless demands that an order of presentation be imposed, so this we did. Within these thematic alignments, we further tried to order the chapters such that they fell into sequences which, where possible, signalled overlaps and connections between one theme and the next. This produced a thematic organisation, and a corresponding ordering of the contributions, which looks like this:

**History, Context and Biography**  
Michael Billig  
Betty Bayer  
Andy Lock  

**Language and Social Constructionism**  
Ken Gergen  
Sheila McNamee  

**Bodies and Embodiment**  
Jim Cresswell and Cor Baerveldt  
John Cromby  

**Singularity and Improvisation**  
John Lannamann  
Hari Tsoukas  
Ann Cunliffe  

**Being and Relating**  
Tom Strong  
Tim Corcoran  
Dian Marie Hosking  

The contributions by Billig, Bayer and Lock are of interest for many reasons other than the important work of situating and contextualising Shotter’s ideas that they perform. Hence, as well as supplying information that helps the reader place Shotter’s work in the context of his life and times, allowing it to be understood in relation to disciplinary and other shifts, Billig also writes of dialogue, improvisation, joint action and other more scholarly concerns. Likewise, Bayer also writes of the significance of gender difference in relation to historical epistemic shifts across recent decades, and Lock writes of developmental psychology, computing, linguistics, language and the Higgs Boson. In so doing, though, Bayer and Lock supply details and insights that begin to show how Shotter’s concerns during his earlier intellectually formative years were related, not only to debates current at that time in the humanities, social sciences and philosophy, but also to their broader cultural
and social climate, the emergent sensibilities and what Raymond Williams called the ‘structures of feeling’, within which his work initially took shape.

Elsewhere in the book, too, other contributors supply important biographical, historical and contextual information that shows how Shotter’s research relates to the various contexts to which it speaks. For example, Gergen’s chapter provides biographical and historical information about the inauguration and emergence of social constructionism, whilst Lannamann’s chapter materially situates some of his own engagement with Shotter’s work on the New Hampshire campus where they worked together. What is more, similar overlaps and convergences apply to most of the other chapters. With these caveats in mind, then, we now briefly summarise each chapter.

Michael Billig begins our detailed consideration of Shotter’s work by exploring some of the contribution made to Shotter’s work by his reading of the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer was a German philosopher who (like so many other prominent figures) was forced to flee his country in the 1930s when the Nazis came to power, and Billig describes how Shotter shares with Cassirer a rejection of any possibility of a ‘pure’ or technical psychology that could somehow be detached from its intrinsic philosophical presuppositions. Making frequent reference to Shotter’s concerns with temporal uniqueness, his efforts to understand how we both ‘make and find’ a kind of order within a flux of once-occurring events, Billig also draws out the fundamental incompatibility of Shotter’s psychology with the mainstream – for example, with respect to its dominant methodological practices which are designed, he argues, precisely to eliminate any appearance of this sort of uniqueness. In this way, Billig also begins the necessary task of locating Shotter’s work with respect to other approaches.

This task is further progressed in Betty Bayer’s chapter, which places Shotter’s first book, 1975’s *Images of Man*, into dialogue with the contemporaneous classic feminist text *Dialectics of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone. Bayer situates both of these texts within the intellectual and political ferment that shaped them, showing how both of them simultaneously speak to and instantiate aspects of the questioning, the hopes and the anxieties of their age. Rather than draw the almost irresistibly easy critical contrast between a classic piece of feminist writing and a book whose title presumes ‘man’ as the generic term for humanity, Bayer instead supplies a close reading of some of the presuppositions and conditions of possibility of both, and in so doing pulls out various commonalities between them. Bayer highlights a concern with life forms and spans, a culture of crisis (in regard to what is meant by nature and what is meant by humanity), and the generation of what she calls ‘practices of wonder’ as aspects of a style of thinking that she discerns jointly within both Shotter’s and Firestone’s works.

It would be insufficient to say Andy Lock retells a history of his relationship with Shotter. Certainly, his chapter recounts their relationship from its beginning as teacher and student, on to the present day as co-authors. But the
account given by Lock also clearly identifies Shotter’s central concern with entanglement and the way in which an understanding of this can be applied to what they have experienced along the way. As such, the chapter stands in recognition of how Shotter’s shared interpretations of Dewey, Macmurray, James and Merleau-Ponty brought clarity to their ongoing intra-action, to use Barad’s terminology. The difficulties Shotter experienced with appropriating a language capable of sustaining living relationships is something the chapter, by its own account, values as indispensable to communication.

Above all else, Ken Gergen writes of the significance his relationship with Shotter has had for his own career. Gergen does not come to his review without reservation. His chapter explains, in precise ways, how his own thinking has diverged from Shotter’s over time. Nevertheless, such distinction cannot mute the eloquent praise he has for a long-term friend and companion. One example comes from Shotter’s mobilisation of the concept of joint action and how diverse acts of individuals mysteriously contribute to our forms of life. Another involves the pragmatics of language use in relationships as available ontological discourse. Together, Gergen and Shotter share distaste for the kind of final truths their histories in experimentalism had once demanded, instead opting to attend to more practical efforts dedicated to sustained social change.

Sheila McNamee recognises the radical presence Shotter has with those in contact with his work. As McNamee elaborates, radical presence is a form of acting within the world, not upon it from a distance nor separated from it as a mere bystander. Instead, she extols Shotter’s oeuvre for its capacity to generate specific ways of being compelling us to identify our activities as the proper unit of analysis for understanding the social world. McNamee’s chapter is littered with ‘Shotterisms’ or phrases/expressions she has recorded from their own relationship. These are dispersed across the chapter to illustrate Shotter’s commitment to radical presence sustaining participation in life from an ethic of responsivity. Such responsivity, she writes, is one way in which we know of our embodied and embedded being in the world.

Jim Cresswell and Cor Baerveldt explore some of the ways in which Bakhtin’s work infuses Shotter’s approach to psychology. They do so with respect to the notion of virtue in relation to psychological research, a focus which enables them to emphasise the fundamentally and intrinsically ethical or moral dimensions of human experience. At the same time, by relating morality and virtue to the notion of polyphony developed by Bakhtin – a notion that also informs Shotter’s writings – they show how we can orient towards forms of virtue that are enacted in talk but which are, nevertheless, embodied in the actual relations we live. They show how Shotter shares with Bakhtin a concern with how we embody language, with how what Bakhtin calls ‘emotional-volitional tones’ inflect our talking and thinking, and with how the dialogical realities we jointly create are, therefore, realities with an inescapably moral character. As a consequence, they argue, psychological research might usefully engage with what they call ‘sympathetic co-experience’
in order to promote modes of investigation sensitive to our continuous reproduction of our morally and ethically charged actualities.

For John Cromby, several important aspects of Shotter’s work have prefigured contemporary work associated with what is being called the ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences and humanities. Primarily, Cromby’s chapter interrogates Shotter’s use of feelings and how this has informed the development of his distinctive version of social constructionism. Cromby suggests that feelings are, in Shotter’s account, inseparable from the language with which they combine to enable communicative activity. Cromby perceptively calls out Shotter for his more recent explicit orientation to process philosophy, and an understanding of this contributes to knowing of the third kind. This, Cromby elucidates, is what is meant by felt knowing or knowing how to be a certain kind of person within the commotion of everyday being. Of course, a process orientation places our interest specifically within the realm of joint action.

John Lannaman offers three rich examples to illustrate a distinction between knowing about life as an observer separated from social action and Shotter’s orientation to knowing from within living processes. In adopting this ‘withness’ approach social researchers may engage different ways of understanding our responsive relationships in the world that are emergent and unfinalisable. The first example comes from Lannamann’s own relationship with Shotter and the bodily coordination of movement required in attempting to stay dry under a shared umbrella. The second example explores a ship’s captain recounting the embodied sensibilities emerging from piloting a boat in the open seas. A final example seeks to understand the responsiveness a musician experiences as a player in a jazz band. Each account strives to communicate the kind of ‘withness’ that exists when one is in accord with the (linguistic-embodied-improvised-unfinished) flow of joint action.

According to Hari Tsoukas, Shotter’s process orientation provides fitting resources for enabling a performative science of organisational life. This is knowing of the third kind or knowing from within joint action that moves understanding from abstractions regarding regularities to singularities emerging from open-ended processes. From this way of knowing, organisational enactments such as routines cannot be fully defined prior to our involvement in them but emerge from our unique engagements within a certain practice. As such, our conceptualisations are performative because these are epistemologically incomplete until described by agents involved within the action. This gives singularities, as Tsoukas refers to them, the distinction of difference implicit in the particularity of things.

Ann Cunliffe’s chapter clearly sets out some of the implications of Shotter’s work for management studies, a field consanguineous with psychology and one which has often tended, in its psychological borrowings, to favour dominant, mainstream individualist approaches. Cunliffe describes how Shotter’s work – with its combined focus on between-ness, knowing from