



LUND UNIVERSITY

Understanding an unlived life, arts and research as means

Lonnert, Lia

Published in:
Beyond methods. Lessons from the arts to qualitative research.

2015

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lonnert, L. (2015). Understanding an unlived life, arts and research as means. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *Beyond methods. Lessons from the arts to qualitative research*. (Vol. 10, pp. 17-23). Malmö Academy of Music, Lund University. http://www.mhm.lu.se/sites/mhm.lu.se/files/perspectives_in_music10.pdf

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

CHAPTER 1

Understanding an unlived life, arts and research as means

LIA LONNERT

In 1996 I saw Mats Ek's version of Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*. The leading part was danced and acted by Niklas Ek. Somewhere in the middle of the play Niklas Ek danced a solo. I remember only fragments of it: he was close to a pillar, he was lying on his side at some time during the solo, his toes moved. The fragments I remember do not seem important to me. What I remember is how the performance moved me, how I felt his movements in my body although I was myself sitting still without moving—as audiences normally do. It was a physical understanding of the character, of his pain, and the conflicts he was undergoing. Dancer Niklas Ek could create an understanding across space and time for a character in a play from the 16th century. Through his dancing the complexity of the character was deepened. It was an emotional understanding beyond intellectual understanding. I could understand another human being, or maybe myself, with arts as a means.

The unlived life

Landquist (1920/1971) maintains that we have two different roles in life, building on Goethe who says that every human being has two roles to play: one real role and one ideal role. Landquist's slightly different approach is that the first role is the life we live, and the second role is the life we could have lived. The life we could have lived is not only about the choices we made or were forced to make which led to our life taking one direction and not another, but it is also about understanding the lives of others. Sympathy, which is the term Landquist uses, means to connect to other selves without confusing them with our own self. This is similar to how Bresler (2013) describes empathic understanding. Landquist (1920/1971) maintains that an aesthetic experience does not depend on a unity between object and subject but on the relationship between them. He stresses that it does not have to be an experience of

beauty; it could also evoke other emotions, such as repulsion. The possibility to understand others through art creates a way of evoking the capacity for a hidden understanding. Thus, the empathy we use to understand aesthetic expressions is related to the lives we could have lived. This concept of living different lives through art is appealing. It would mean that we can have an understanding and empathy with others through the arts.

Alheit (1994) uses the term “unlived life” and claims that this unlived life has can be a means of changing the life lived.

We dispose of a biographical background knowledge with which we are able to fill out and utilise to the full the social space in which we move. None of us has all conceivable possibilities open to him or her. But within the framework of a restricted modification potential, we have more opportunities than we will ever put to practice. Our biography therefore contains a sizeable potential of “unlived life”. (p. 228)

Alheit here describes the unlived life as an on-going process, since our lives are full of choices and possibilities. However, Landquist claims that the unlived life also has the potentiality to facilitate an understanding. An unlived life triggered by an aesthetic expression—or by a performer or artist—has the potentiality to create an unlived life previously unknown to the listener/viewer/subject experiencing the art form.

It is possible that one can have a deeper understanding of an unlived life through art, in the sense of having a deeper understanding of other human beings and the self. The knowledge of an art-form may be essential to this understanding but perhaps not the personal experience of performing the art-form itself. There is a possibility to have a vague understanding of something different—a different life: the unlived life evoked by the artist. This should not be confused with understanding the artist, or having a “true” image of what the artist intends. However, the question is whether one’s empathic understanding of an art-form only is dependent on choices in life and the lives one chose not to live. Gabrielsson (2013) maintains that powerful experiences (which Gabrielsson refers to as “strong” experiences) of music do not have to be dependent on previous knowledge of the art-form. Unfamiliar music can give powerful experiences. It is possible that unfamiliar art-forms can also facilitate understandings of another person.

Understanding other human beings

The notion of a possible unlived life can be associated with Landquist’s (1920/1971) experiment on himself in which he analysed his own emotions when watching a theatrical performance. He discovered that he felt it was easier to feel empathy for somebody he respected even if he did not agree with the character. He found it was difficult to feel empathy with somebody who was ridiculed, that he was laughing at. How the characters in the play were presented was the result of choices by the writer of the play, but also the interpretation by the director and the actors. Landquist, on the specific occasion when he conducted the

experiment, found himself feeling empathy for the actor rather than for the performed character or role. The understanding of another human being was thus multi-layered; it could be about understanding the author, the role, the director, the actor's interpretation of the role, or the actor.

The struggle to facilitate an understanding as a writer and researcher is reminiscent of the study by Peshkin (1986) whose own empathy and respect was a basis for presenting his research for the presumptive reader even if this was not an obvious choice since his own experiences and standpoint were different than his interviewees. Peshkin carried out a study of a Christian fundamentalist school. Being Jewish himself, he did not share the Christian values of the school. Nor did he share the fundamentalist, dogmatic values. However, as a researcher he saw it as vital to understand the intrinsic values of the school, and to treat his interviewees with respect. Peshkin could have chosen to present his research very differently since his personal viewpoints in many ways were the opposite of the values and ideas of the school and the people he was researching. The writer's ethical standpoint is thus related to the aesthetic choices made and to the possible capacity for the reader to understand: not living the lives of others, or necessarily identifying oneself with someone else, but understanding the lives of others. To Peshkin, this did not mean that he did not use the critical eye of the researcher. It meant that he conducted—and presented—research with multiple layers, using the respectful, empathic researcher I, the critical researcher I, and the personal I. The role of the respectful, empathic researcher is possible to use as a tool for understanding. Peshkin (1988) also states that the researcher's awareness of his or her subjectivity is important in the research process. Subjectivity and the awareness of subjectivity can be used as tools for the researcher.

Actors and writers use words as tools, thus providing the reader/audience with an aesthetic expression that might be more easily understood than many other aesthetic expressions. A verbal aesthetic expression might help the audience understand the story, the actions, the verbal description—an intellectual understanding. However, within aesthetic expressions too, an emotional understanding is central. There might be a vague understanding which is not a formulated understanding. It is possible to have an understanding and at the same time be unable to verbalize it, or be unable to grasp it completely. It might be an understanding that is related to the understanding of others, but also to the understanding of ourselves.

Aesthetic manipulation

To be able to touch the soul of the audience may be a kind of knowledge on the part of the performer. The Danish bassoonist, philosopher and writer Peter Bastian (1987) describes how he was listening to a clarinet player who suddenly smiled at him when playing, aware of the emotions he was evoking. Bastian was surprised since he assumed that music that could affect

an audience was created by a musician that him- or herself was affected. But the experience he had when listening and watching this clarinettist was that the musician was aware of the way he could evoke emotions. Bastian also mentions that he learnt this art himself. However, he states that it is a skill that may not work on all occasions. It might go wrong with the result that the concert will not attain the emotional qualities it might have had. According to Bastian, emotional aesthetic manipulation is an art a performer can learn.

To be able to touch the soul may also be knowledge on the part of the creator of the artwork, such as a composer, choreographer or painter. I recall speaking to the composer Sven-David Sandström about his clarinet concerto in 2008. I told him I found the end so beautiful after the fragmented beginning and he winked at me and said: “But then, you see, that was my intention.” Choreographer and researcher Åsa Unander Scharin is examining the limits of emotion and aesthetic manipulation in her project with music and industrial robots.⁸ In her research the borderlands between humans and machines are examined. According to Unander-Scharin’s work and the conversation with Sandström, emotional aesthetic manipulation may be a choice on the part of the creator of the artwork.

Ideas and discussions about who or what evokes emotions, and how these emotions relate to the emotions of the composer or the performer are not new (Langer, 1942/1951). Langer (1942/1951) claims that the strength of music as an art-form is that music is not a referential form, and not a verbal form. Music is related to emotions. However, she states that the facts that music evokes emotions and that music contains emotions should not be confused. It is not a given that music can evoke the emotions it contains, or the emotions the composer had in mind or was affected by when composing. Music as a symbolic form is relevant as a means to express human life and Langer claims that music can articulate things that language cannot. It is not possible to ascribe *one* interpretation or meaning to music “for music at its highest, through clearly a symbolic form, is an unconsummated symbol” (Langer, 1942/1951, p. 240).

Gabrielsson (2013) shows in his research that powerful musical experiences are not always equivalent to the skill of the performer evoking the experiences. He describes powerful musical experiences as a complex combination of the music, the experiencing human being and the situation where it is experienced. But can the possibility to evoke powerful musical experiences also, as Bastian describes, be a skill that might be developed by the performer? Is it a skill that might be developed by the composer, as in Sandström’s description? Understanding the un-lived life—of the self—is possible, and the understanding of a possible different un-lived life—of the self—given by the artist or creator of the artwork is thus perhaps possible. However, it would be naïve to think that music could provide a biographical understanding, or a true image, of an un-lived life.

⁸ Åsa Unander Scharin <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC2LZcQVZ3k>

Emotional understanding—to reach beyond research

Cassirer (1944/1972) suggests that the instability/uncertainty inherent in any interpretation might be the strength of art:

Art, on the other hand, teaches us to visualize, not merely to conceptualize or utilize, things. Art gives us a richer, more vivid and colourful image of reality, and a more profound insight into its formal structure. It is characteristic of the nature of man that he is not limited to one specific and single approach to reality but can choose his point of view and so pass from one aspect of things to another. (p. 170)

Cassirer claims that art has the ability to show the richness and variety of reality. Bresler (2013) argues that a researcher can learn empathic understanding through art. She argues that it is possible to consciously cultivate empathic understanding with the aid of artworks. Thus, this richness and variety of reality can be used as a tool for understanding.

Bresler (2005) maintains that qualitative research involves three directions; towards the object of research, inwards for the researcher, and towards the audience. It is thus central that the researcher can create meaning for him- or herself and for the audience. Barrett and Stauffer (2012) address a similar concern with the concept resonant work, which describes a research process and product in which the researcher, the researched and the audience are involved.

“Resonant” in that the inquiry resounds in the lives of the inquirer and those with whom the inquirer engages, as well as those who engage with what is created; “work” in that it is a practice (verb) that produces an artistic or textual account (noun) that can be shared. (p. 8)

If a researcher, as I did in my own thesis (Lonnert, 2015), conducts research within their own profession the resonance between researcher and the researched is a given. From this perspective, the researcher’s aim to evoke understanding for an audience is also a given. However, the crucial point is the resonance and the understanding the audience can have for the researched.

Miles and Huberman (1994) maintain that one of the criteria for quality in qualitative research is the possible utilisation or application of the research. They also describe possible generalization and transferability as quality criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also consider transferability as crucial. However, researchers, in the guise of aesthetic manipulation and to create understanding an unlived life, also have the possibility of evoking an aesthetic understanding—and an emotional understanding. The tools a researcher uses are mainly words. These words have the possibility to transfer the contents in the research; the scientific results, the new contributions to the body of knowledge and so forth. However, qualitative researchers also have a more profound reason. They can through their tools—their words—reach the reader and thus create an understanding for different possibilities, an understanding for lives they have not lived themselves. The tools they have as researchers are words, but the

very use of words might also contribute to obscuring the possibilities of this empathic aesthetic aim. Stake (1995) uses the concept of vicarious experiences, in which the writer presents the qualitative research so well that the reader sometimes feels as if something happened to him- or herself. He argues that it is the writer's responsibility to give the reader the possibility to construct meanings and to be able use his or her previous knowledge to construct this meaning by using vicarious experiences and naturalistic generalizations. By naturalistic generalizations are meant the possibility to generalize from one's own experience.

Wittgenstein's (1967) notion that the experience is the explanation in itself and not a description of the experience when referring to music might be worth considering from this angle since it highlights words as a researcher's tool and as a carrier of experience. Words in a qualitative report should of course be relevant to the tradition in which it is written and are important to the quality of the report. But, an additional quality could be that the words are used as tools to reach an emphatic understanding. It is possible as a writer to have the awareness of the clarinet player in Bastian's (1987) anecdote. This is an aesthetic manipulation, but it might be necessary for the writer to develop this tool. This involves trying to transmit the unspeakable, in the sense of Wittgenstein, with the help of words. To be able to evoke understanding and empathy—is this not what qualitative research is all about? However, this does not imply that the researcher should not use the critical I, or the critical eye.

To learn from performing

For a qualitative researcher the aim is not only to be able to understand an unlived life him- or herself, but primarily to be able to transmit an unlived life for someone else to understand. The researcher here has a task in between those of a composer and a performer. The relationship *composer—performer—audience* has an analogy in *object of research—researcher—reader*. Furthermore, the researcher as well as the performer co-create or interpret the object of research or the musical work.

Leaning on Landquist's (1920/1971) experiment, the question is whether the empathy is with the researcher or with the objects of research – the interviewees, the informants or the observed. Who does the voice or voices belong to? For the reader of qualitative research, in the best of texts, there is an emotional understanding beyond the results of the research. Respect, in the sense Peshkin (1986) uses it in his work, is thus central. Peshkin's choice to present his topic and his interviewees as human beings that it was possible to understand is an ethical choice by a researcher. It is also an aesthetic choice. We should not only confirm ourselves through art—we should expand ourselves. We should not only confirm ourselves through research—we should expand ourselves. What we cannot fully grasp may be the most important part. Even though the communication of the research is through words—which can easily facilitate an intellectual understanding—it might be equally important to facilitate an

emotional understanding. I would claim that what affects us and provides us with new unlived lives—as researchers, as readers—are the things that really matter to us. They may even touch our souls.

What the researcher can learn from the arts is that the communication of qualitative research is not only through research results. It is also through the readers emotional understanding, perhaps of an “unlived life”. The aesthetic communication by the researcher through words is a means to reach the emotional understanding through empathy. In this process, the researcher can be seen as an artist and a performer of a work by another artist—similar to a performing artist, musician, dancer or actor.

References

- Alheit, P. (1994). The ‘biographical question’ as a challenge to adult education. *International Review of Education*, 40(3/5), 283-298.
- Barrett, M. S., & Stauffer, S. L. (2012). Resonant work: Toward an ethic of narrative research. In M. S. Barrett, & S. L. Stauffer (Eds.), *Narrative soundings: An anthology of narrative enquiry in music education* (pp. 1-17). Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London & New York: Springer.
- Bastian, P. (1987). *In i musiken. En bok om musik och medvetande. [Into the music. A book on music and consciousness]*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand.
- Bresler, L. (2005). What musicianship can teach educational research. *Music Education Research*, 7(2), 169-183. doi: 10.1080/14613800500169399
- Bresler, L. (2013). The spectrum of distance: Empathic understanding and the pedagogical power of the arts. In B. White, & T. Costantino (Eds.), *Aesthetics, empathy and education* (pp. 9-28). New York: Peter Lang.
- Cassirer, E. (1944/1972). *An essay on man*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Gabrielsson, A. (2013). *Starka musikupplevelser. Musik är mycket mer än bara musik [Strong experiences with music: Music is much more than music]*. Möklinta: Gidlunds.
- Landquist, J. (1920/1971). *Människokunskap. [Knowledge about the human being]*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.
- Langer, S. K. (1942/1951). *Philosophy in a new key. A study in the symbolism of reason, rite and art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lonnert, L. (2015). *Surrounded by sound. Experienced orchestral harpists’ professional knowledge and learning*. (Doctoral dissertation). Malmö: Lund University, Malmö Academy of Music.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis. An expanded sourcebook*. Second edition. Thousand Oaks, London & New Delhi: Sage.
- Peshkin, A. (1986). *God’s choice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity—One’s own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 17-21.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1967). *Lectures and conversations on aesthetics, psychology and religious belief*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.