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Social Research on the Arts is a Wonderful Experience

(Speech on the celebration of 10 years “Lifelong Learning in Music”)

1. Introduction

Actually, perhaps I am wrong at this place. I am not a musician, but a trivial sociologist. Admittedly, I am also an educationalist and have thought with big pleasure about lifelong learning and the deep value of biographical experiences. And here may be a bridge to my function during this day.

Music belongs to my personal biographical learning process from scratch within a family of very active lay musicians. However, it used to become – as the unconventional physician Victor von Weizsäcker says – a sort of my “unlived life”, as it were. When I stopped playing the violin which I did definitely above-average at an age of 19, a quality of life regrettably got lost that I could never restore. Even if playing the guitar through self-learning just to sing children songs with my daughters or participating in ambitious choirs, I got rid of the original feeling to be really within music.

The reason of this radical stop playing on the violin was not, by the way, a frustration as it is the case with some careers of lay musicians. The reason was my political engagement in an extremely left wing group, which forced me to give up this expression of a “bourgeois” life style, immediately. Instead of using my violin to fiddle political songs, I dropped it totally – what a nonsense!

When I began my activities as a scientific advisor here in Groningen six years ago, a part of that “unlived life” seemed to be healed, so to speak. I had to act again quite specifically with music and, nevertheless, could appeal to my social-scientific expertise. Even more than this: I could extend my knowledge as a sociologist critically.

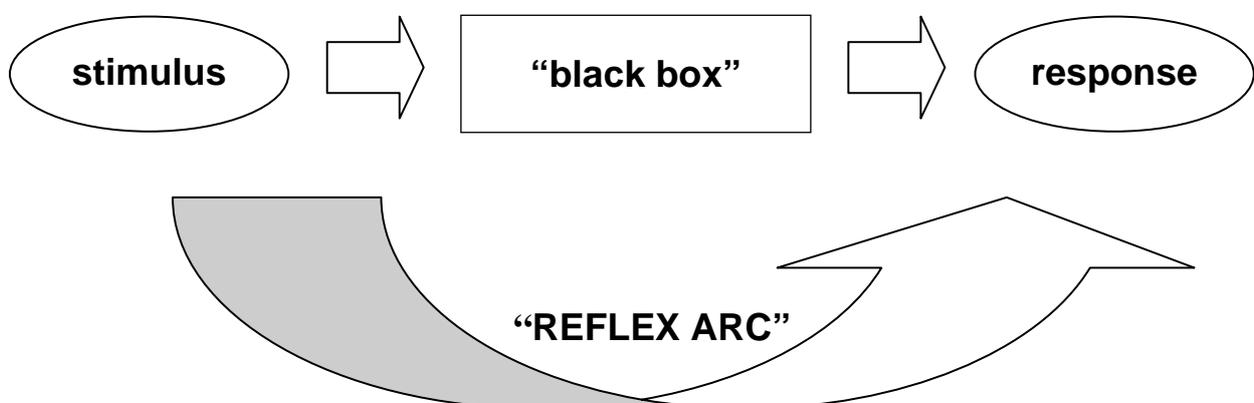
I'll try to describe this innovative practice through a methodological idea that has a lot of similarities to art practice: the so-called **Grounded Theory**. This concept which benefited from the work of the important American pragmatists – from the grand philosopher and educationalist John Dewey, from George Herbert Mead's social psychology, also from the innovative ideas of the logician Charles Sanders Peirce – is the basis of my methodological thinking. And I could apply this constructively to my work in Groningen – a methodological strategy which also framed some PhD projects within the Lifelong Learning in Music research group, not only the excellent doctoral theses of Rineke Smilde and Evert Bisshop Boele.

Despite of these hidden links to the arts, the *grounded theory approach* is not an optional procedure. One can understand it as a theoretically legitimated ‘advancement’ that reflects and controls its own learning process. The actual procedure itself has changed over the course of its practice, particularly with respect to its objects of research. But the basic innovative impact used to persist. First, however, I want to describe the theoretical background of this respective ‘research style’ (Strauss) in more detail.

2. The pragmatist background of grounded theory

Glaser and Strauss developed an idea of the research process, in which the amount of new knowledge is not coming linear from one conventional stage to another – hypothesis generation, method testing, data collection, data analysis, verification or falsification of the hypotheses – but it takes also place during the research process as a **continuous dialogue** between theoretical assumptions and the data obtained, as it were, *‘a spiralled reciprocation between theoretically based ideas and empirically based facts’* (Dausien).

This wilful back and forth that might be misinterpreted as indecisiveness or randomness has a philosophically and methodologically interesting background in the action concept of American pragmatism. Already at the beginning of the 20th Century, Dewey and Mead had severe debates with the then-emerging behaviourist psychology about their pretty simple model of behaviour. In an epoch-making article about the so-called ‘reflex arc model’ of 1896, it was John Dewey who showed plausibly that human activity does not just work for the simple scheme:

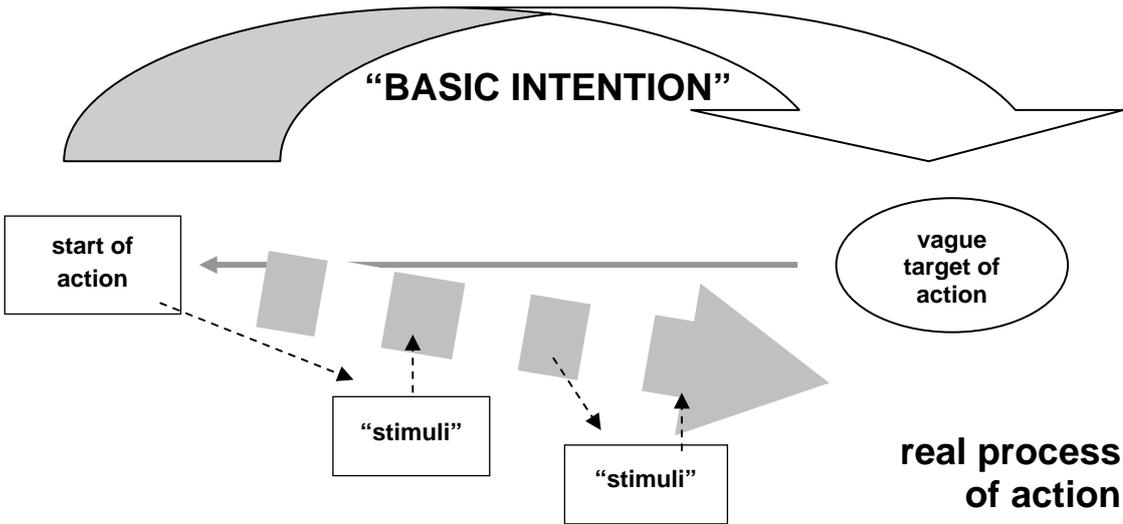


Instead, he made it clear that action must be taken as ‘a *holistic* process’ in which certain ‘stimuli’ as such are principally be perceived. That usually not a stimulus determines an action, but – conversely – the running process selects the relevant stimuli has also been described by George Herbert Mead in 1903 in a little-known essay about the *Definition of the Psychical*.

We can illustrate the plausibility of this astonishing notion with a relatively simple everyday life experience: If we are involved in a particular affair, as to try to convince our little daughter why it makes sense to clean up her nursery, then her defiant stamping with the foot or her objection the father himself would not keep good order at his own desk, are quite relevant stimuli for the following action. The noise of a police car on the road, a just discovered grease spot on the wall or the radio music in the kitchen are irrelevant stimuli and do not play any role for the progress of the plot. This means, the action itself as a 'holistic', continuous process selects the stimuli that are relevant for the progress of action. Only if a ‘stimulus’ calls the entire context with which we are currently engaged into question, for example, if an earthquake caves in, we are forced to make drastic changes of our action plans. Once this is done, we again perceive only those stimuli that are relevant for the actions at issue.

The pragmatists, however, go a step further. Even the idea that action is usually purposeful, intentional action, they perceive as problematic. The idea that a particular aim of action has been set by the consciousness ‘as such’, is not compatible with empirical procedures. “Naturally, action is only diffusely teleological” (Joas), that means, normally we act with a certain basic intention, the specific purposes of the act, however, the concrete purposes of the action use to appear during the process itself

and may cause even the revision of the original intention. – Let us take again our example of the educational situation: Certainly, it was the intention of the father to stop his daughter's disorder, but the educational communication shows that there are good reasons to change his mind. For example could the child demonstrate convincingly that she seeks her togs in vain after a forced order process while she usually finds things in her creative mess. The educational experiment has taken the sequence of action in a whole new direction. Idealtypical purposive action is not usually the case, and especially in educational situations not really eligible. The pragmatic plan of action differs significantly from the behaviourist one:



A very similar plot idea trail Glaser and Strauss concerning the research process. When we enter a new field of research which is still relatively unknown, or if we want to look at seemingly familiar research landscapes with totally ‘new eyes’ because we don’t trust any longer the well-known results, our action process reacts in a very similar way ‘diffusely teleological’ as in unforeseen everyday situations. We have a tentative

idea of what we could expect, but we want to make discoveries and have to be open therefore for everything that could happen to us.

However, we are researchers. Our particular way of doing things differs from usual everyday behaviour, as we have to account for our line of action. Our research howsoever they may differ from conventional designs, should be 'reliable'. Therefore the 'openness' with which we meet the new field has a methodological limit. If we would enter the field totally unprejudiced, we would face two serious problems:

- (a) We could easily overlook that our alleged 'openness' is in fact not enforceable. At least our everyday experiences can't be turned off in new situations. And their intuitive knowledge structures are prepared to compare each new situation with already known ones. They are based on a 'typification' of the social world that is accessible for us. This process is not a conscious one. It takes place as it were '*a tergo*', which means: 'in the back' of someone. Whether we like it or not, we always have 'pre-judgments' about new 'worlds' that come across us.
- (b) The complex new constellation usually does not present itself in way we look through immediately. From the data we collect in the ideal case 'without reservation', new theories don't 'jump up' automatically. Certainly, also the alien has its rules and orders. But how should we perceive them if they are totally unfamiliar to us? That means, we have no chance to come up to it if we refuse to compare. We can understand the strangeness only if we relate it to the known field. Any empirical research, any form of generating theory needs the *comparison*.

After all we touch here an almost philosophical basic problem of empirical research: If important new conclusions about social reality - logically and practically - can not be gained by uninfluenced observation (the logical conclusion preferring this way is called usually '*induction*'), if it is likewise problematic to gain empirical judgments about expected social reality through testing hypotheses derived from well-known theories (the logical conclusion of this process uses to be called '*deduction*'), what alternative is left over then?

Let us remember once more the idea of the pragmatists: Social action is usually, as we have seen, '*diffusely teleological*' (Joas). That is, it does have a vague idea of what is to come out of the action. But the everyday experience shows that the action process itself can change its original intention, perhaps even revise it entirely. Action, we could say, has a 'target-oriented openness', a 'directed flexibility'.

Exactly this quality grounded theory is aiming at in its research: a 'planned flexibility'. 'Planned' in so far as certain hypothetical assumptions are necessary and useful also about a new research field, 'flexible' and 'open' because these presumptions can change during the research process. From the first contact with the field they are enriched and extended with new informations, and at the end if anything they may postulate the opposite of what they had originally believed in. The logician of the pragmatists, Charles Sanders Peirce, who has already developed this idea in the beginning of the 20th century describes it as the astonishing accomplishment to put something in relation to what "we never have dreamed about before" (Peirce [1903]), and he calls this process of a logical conclusion '*abduction*'.

The appealing idea that research could be systematically related to creativity, however, must now be somewhat limited. Every artist knows that creativity is based on utmost discipline. Only when the tools of the sculptor or the piano virtuoso, the composer and the poet are developed and deployed by really intense experience, then a new aesthetic quality can be found. Very similar tools offers grounded theory method to facilitate that abductive 'discovery' of theories.

3. How arts are influencing social research

I go back again a century ago, to the sources of the American Pragmatism which are topical till this day. And I would like to refer once again to the great philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey. He introduced us in what experience really is: There is a level of experience that he used to call 'primary experiences'. They are comprehensive and do not make a distinction between subject and object. These are incorporated experiences which we need to establish the fundament of our life – the ability to go and to grasp, to eat and to drink, to show annoyance and to be affectionate.

But there is another level. Dewey calls it 'secondary' or reflective experience'. It is the level of knowledge production and theory building, from the solution of everyday conflict situations up to scientific research and philosophical reflection.

The third dimension comes to experience – according to Dewey – if it is connected to art. In the work of art this dimension manifests itself in a special way assuming that 'work of art' means more than just an object

of art. The interaction of this object in the 'experience' of the artist as well as the recipients gives the 'work of art' a broader dimension. Hence, a creative, poetic potential is already inherent in the perception of a piece of art. Because Dewey understands art as the most universal form of communication. "Art as Experience" is to be understood at the same time as another important contribution to his communication theory, including social and political aspects.

That means: experience is nothing banal, and art is nothing artificial which can be separated from the basic experiences in life. The art and the social belong together. Studies which want to understand social connections can't – according to Dewey – be realised without a concept of art.

The Research Group Lifelong Learning in Music of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences has internalised this programme. And it represents not only an innovative variation of research in music, but also a real breakthrough in the area of social research. The connection of art, learning and social analysis shows a wonderful triad which helps to solve important social problems in the future. And I am quite sure that the Research Group Lifelong Learning in Music will contribute to the solutions in noteworthy way.