

## CHAPTER 1

# Experiences in life and in art

### Searching for lived experiences

We have experiences almost continuously in everyday life but few are sufficiently important to be preserved in our memories. The ones we do retain are generally rich in emotions and feelings, and are tied to personally meaningful situations. Some memorable episodes are shared with friends in private moments, whereas painful ones may be buried in our unconscious. If we want to learn about emotional experiences, diaries (Oatley, 2009; Oatley and Duncan, 1992) and conversations about emotions which may vary across cultures (Heelas, 1986) are good places to begin. What perspective do people adopt when asked to share significant episodes from their lives? Do they look inward and describe their emotional reactions or outward at the unfolding situations that required action? When reading or hearing about these lived experiences, we become film makers in our own imaginations, interpreting and forming representations of their narratives. We optimize our position relative to the story teller. While we may be fascinated and drawn in at first, we shift toward a more detached stance if the narratives become too stressful.

Listening to or reading about critical life episodes from a number of people can provide some insight into underlying processes. One strategy for awakening undergraduate students to the realities of other people's lives is to have them pick a topic of interest and find appropriate respondents who are prepared to share critical life experiences (see Cupchik, 1993). Of course this is easier said than done but, for many years, I have had students choose a social phenomenon of interest to them and interview four respondents who each share two critical life experiences. The students look for common themes among these narratives and develop an account of the underlying processes before examining their ideas in relation to an existing professional literature. Here are three poignant life experiences that were told to my students by members of their communities.

*Lebanese prisoners in Syria* (translated from the Arabic)

My name is A.D. This name was forcefully taken away from me and forgotten for thirteen years which I spent in the Syrian prisons.

2 *The Aesthetics of Emotion*

Prisoners in Syria were given numbers and my number was thirteen. This particular number was a part of me in three phases of my sufferings. I was kidnapped on December 28, 1987 and released on January 15, 2000 which means that I was a detainee for thirteen years. My cell number in the prisons was number thirteen and, as I have previously mentioned, in the prisons they take a person's identity and replace it with a number so that the individual becomes "nothing," and my number was thirteen. We are told that thirteen is an unlucky number but, for me, it was a lucky one. I retrieved my freedom after thirteen years!

The conditions in the prison were very painful and we definitely endured a lot of torturing. The living conditions were very poor and miserable. Certainly, we endured a lot of suffering: the time right before breakfast or lunch was the worst time for us. The sergeant would come and randomly take a number of detainees to teach them a lesson by brutally beating them. We were constantly in a state of terror and we used to try to hide behind each other to avoid being chosen by the Sergeant. As we used to say: "Allahoma Nafsi" (i.e., Oh "I care about" myself) . . . We always had to have our eyes covered so that we do not see the cowardly soldier . . .

In Tadmor, I was placed in a room with dimensions of sixteen metres by five metres and forty centimetres, with no beds, one toilet, and around a hundred and fifty-three cell mates. The walls were perforated by bullets and marked with shattered blood reminding us what type of risks we were to face every day. We used to sleep like tuna in a sardine box. One hundred and fifty people lying side-by-side so crushed to a point where we could not move. And throughout the night, if someone had to pee, he used to just do it. Sometimes, urine used to flow all over us and we did not get mad or blame anyone. We accepted the situation because it was the reality . . .

*Escape from Kandahar City, Afghanistan* (translated from the Pashto)

In Kandahar, I joined the teaching institute for two and a half years. I completed that, even though the situation in Kandahar was still horrible. I stayed because I had two choices: to join the army or go to another province with endless danger. I chose Kandahar because I was born there. When I graduated two and a half years later, I decided to teach, which lasted for six months. The teachers there would face threats at night from the Mujahideen who didn't want us supporting the government. They threatened to kill us if we did not stop. After receiving my third death threat, my family told me to stop teaching. They had already killed many teachers and I did not want to take my chances. If I had stayed in Afghanistan, I would be forced to join the army or get killed by the Mujahideen.

We talked to a man who had a bus; it was like a Greyhound bus. This bus was used to sneak people past the border and people were hidden inside the engine area. We talked to the man and let him know there were five people that needed to cross the border. There was a 99 percent chance of death. It was an early July morning and very hot. All five of us were crammed into this little corner near the engine early in the morning. At every stop, the police would search the whole bus. There was a very high chance that they would find us. If they found us, we were dead. There was also the possibility that we could die of heat. There was a little opening that connected us to the people on the bus. They could not pass us water because there was no such thing as water bottles in Afghanistan at the time. They would pass us cucumber slices; it was our only supply of food or water. It also cooled us down quite a bit. When the bus would stop, we could see the Soviets through the cracks in the bus. They would walk in circles around the bus.

Now imagine: it's very hot, you fear you may die of the heat, and at the same time, there is someone waiting outside to kill you. When we got on to the bus we knew our chances for survival were slim to none. But we had to face the facts and realize this was our only option. There was an area before the border where there were no army men, no police officers. The bus driver knew this. He stopped his bus and got us out for a while. We stepped out, but were all soaking wet, and had dirt and mud all over ourselves. It looked like we had taken a mud bath. It came from the streets. None of the roads there were paved. They were all crooked streets made from nothing, really. Like I was saying, we stopped near the border. Near us, there was a pick-up truck. He wasn't there cluelessly; it was his job. He had a contract to send people over the border. It wasn't only us; there were many people he had crossed over. He made a lot of money doing this. It was a pick-up truck, like many Toyotas you may have seen, the ones that have a long back piece where you can place things. We were told to go sit in the back of the pick-up truck. We were now going to pass through mountains because we could not go through the main border or we would definitely get caught. We took a different route, but there was a different danger – There were also Afghan and Russian soldiers hiding. They would destroy a car on sight. There was a lot of danger on this route too. We did not know whether we would make it alive. The man driving the car was speeding. I am not talking about regular speeding; he was going as fast as the car could. There was an immense amount of firing but he did not stop driving. If the car had stopped, it would have been the end; we would all be finished. His objective was to get us past the border. The whole journey was like this, but we eventually got to Pakistan safely. We all crossed the border alive.

*Poverty of kindness in Ethiopia*

Well it happened thirty-seven years ago and it still stands out because I remember it like it happened yesterday. It's true and I have always remembered that guy; his name is Lencha, an old classmate of mine in elementary school. We were getting ready to go on a government mission in the countryside in Ethiopia, from Addis Ababa to a western province like 600 kilometres away. And everybody was excited. Everybody was getting ready. I ran into this guy just a day before our departure. We talked and I think maybe we had shared a cup of tea somewhere and then he said goodbye and gave me a 50 cents coin in Ethiopian money which was at the time like 25 cents Canadian. And that was the only money I had in my pocket as I was going on that trip. It took us two days to get to the place. Not just because of the distance but because we were slow. The roads were bad. And I felt increasingly bad about it just thinking about having 50 cents in my pocket. Kids were spending money on the way; you know, buying this, buying that and I was just trying very hard not to think about it. I had nothing to spend and I didn't want to spend the 50 cents on anything. I just wanted to keep it in my pocket for as long as possible. And what my feeling was at the time, of being kind of sorry for myself but at the same time trying very hard not to show it. It's as if I was okay. I chatted with other kids. When the time came to sing and join others receiving us on the way and at our destination, I showed no different emotions from the rest of them. I just did what everybody else did. Except buying stuff. Things to drink, eat, smoke. So me and my 50 cents arrived at the place safe and sound, intact. But thinking back I really, really was struck by the generosity this guy showed me. The way he talked, his body language and everything indicated to me that he would have given me much more if he could because I know that was the maximum that he could have probably given me. Imagine 50 cents being so important and, when I think about it, what strikes me the most is the depth of it, the depth of my want. That I would appreciate a 50 cents gift so much . . . that a 50 cents gift would be so great an act of generosity. From an intellectual point of view that's what strikes me. That's what remained with me. And every time I think about the past, about school days, that's a name that comes up. That face, that name, and I always wonder where he would be and who I would ask to tell me where he is.

**Interpreting lived experiences**

The fabric of meaning, emotion, and being are interwoven into these accounts of lived experiences. We can identify with the respondents and imagine how they felt, though we would not want to find ourselves in their situations. One thing that stands out in the many hundreds of

stories that my students have collected over the past twenty-five years is that respondents did not “package” them in accordance with traditional narrative forms to have an effect on the listener. While many different emotions and feelings were embedded within these stories – fear, anger, relief, sadness, appreciation of kindness, and so forth – the respondents did not focus on their mental or emotional states but, instead, looked outward at the unfolding events. It is almost surprising to read how little reference is made to internal emotional states.

We form dynamic mental representations of these stories which may have an emotional quality. In a sense, we develop a relationship with these virtual events, feeling spontaneously absorbed or standing back. We may be drawn in by a concern for the person or an interest in how the story ends. We can also move further away when the story becomes too painful (i.e., description of the Syrian jail) or elicits a vicarious sense of anxiety (i.e., in the escape from Kandahar to Pakistan). The students who conducted the interviews became sensitive to their shifting interpretive roles. On the one hand, they were *engaged* and fascinated listeners, recording the life experiences of trusting respondents from their communities who may want to spread their stories, as in the case of the Lebanese man who was imprisoned unjustly in Syria. On the other hand, they needed to adopt a more *detached* role while searching for common themes and essential processes underlying the life episodes. There is *plasticity* in the interpretive process as students shift between empathic and analytical viewpoints.

This switching of orientations brings to mind the “actor–observer asymmetry” in social psychology which holds that, as actors, people generally attend to external details of their situations but, as observers, they focus on the behaviour of others and make inferences about the person’s traits (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). Our three respondents were “actors” looking outward at their unfolding situations and, as readers, we could identify with them and adopt their perspectives. In contrast, “observers” assume a more pragmatic attitude, trying to discern predictable sets of stable traits which some readers may have done here. This detachment is ideally suited “to use knowledge about other individuals’ behavior – and perhaps mind states – to predict and manipulate those individuals’ behavior” (Dunbar, 2003, p. 167). As researchers, we too need to switch between being sensitive observers, who gather and distill the essential structures of emotional events, and abstract thinkers who relate these qualities to general psychological processes.

This ability to shift between engaged-actor and detached-observer roles also applies to reflecting on our own emotional lives. In a study of *positive* and *negative* personal life experiences, students demonstrated an ability to shift between one or the other orientation as needed in the narrative context (Cupchik and Hilscher, 2004). Echoing the “actor–observer asymmetry,” students primarily adopted

*engaged* attitudes toward themselves, describing emotional experiences from a first person perspective. They also primarily adopted *detached* attitudes when describing others, focusing on character, actions, and plot development while making attributions related to pride or morality. But they could also *switch* perspectives, *objectively* describing their own physical reactions and withdrawal from situations, or responding *subjectively* in an emotional and empathic manner to the reactions of others.

In a second study, students were instructed to describe *reaction-* and *action-*oriented life experiences (Cupchik and Tassopoulos, 2005). Accounts of *reaction episodes* focused on “events that are filled with personal meaning. These experiences may be connected with earlier events in our lives and touch upon deep feelings.” In contrast, *action episodes* involved an attempt to “adapt to the demands of our physical and social environments or help us try to fulfil our needs and goals. Sometimes these actions are successful and at other times they are not.” As in the first study, these students could readily *shift* between “self”- and “other”-oriented perspectives while focusing on *reaction-* or *action-*oriented experiences. *Plasticity* of viewpoint is fundamental with reference both to the kinds of episodes and to our perspectives on them. We can look inward at our reactions to meaningful or challenging situations and also try to grasp the essential qualities of another person’s experiences. We can also make detached assessments regarding our own actions or those of others. This *plasticity* suggests that engaged and detached viewpoints are complementary. We shift between them when considering the lives of other people, or even our own, in accordance with demands of the situation or our needs and goals.

### Theoretical perspectives on lived experiences

#### *A British perspective*

How deeply can we penetrate the minds of other people and understand their lived experiences? Philosophers of the British Enlightenment were skeptical about correctly understanding lived experiences of others. The British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) believed that “the property and behaviour of objects was determined by their ‘inner constitution’” (Hacking, 1991, p. 120) but we *cannot* fully appreciate it. This Enlightenment tradition led to a belief in making detached, sympathetic inferences about the internal states of others, for example from their facial expressions. In relation to aesthetics, they favoured mimesis and the idea that playwrights could manipulate the feelings of theatre-goers through the judicious selection of familiar scene, plot, and character.

*A German perspective*

German philosophers adopted a more positive view about empathically understanding the emotions of others. The German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) “agreed that we could never completely know the inner constitution. But we can produce detailed and increasingly rich models of the underlying constitution” (Hacking, 1991, p. 121). The German Romantic philosophers Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Schiller (1788–1805), and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) related emotional experiences to the search for a unified self as part of an unfolding life. Thus, contradictory and unresolved emotions were assumed to be parts of life’s challenges. The psychodynamic viewpoint naturally flows out of these ideas. In the later nineteenth century, this tradition stimulated efforts to understand the structure of experience and was embodied in the notion of *Einfühlung* (“feeling into”) or empathy as a process of resonating to the experiences of others in meaningful situations.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) emphasized that we may “explain” the physical universe with abstract laws but we intuitively “understand” (*Verstehen*) the social world and its aesthetic products based on personal history and cultural knowledge. “We always perceive the phenomena as immediately embodying a structural order . . . before they become conceptual” (Müller-Vollmer, 1963, p. 148), implying that there are stages to the development of knowledge. This act of understanding is related to the concept of *Erlebnis*, a “concrete, lived reality” incorporating earlier experiences that enable us to “perceive ‘the essential’ in ordinary circumstances of life” (p. 151). For Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the “facts” of experiences in the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world, are shaped by actions performed in situations and revealed through a descriptive phenomenology (Wild, 1964). Simply put, people act in situations and we do our best to appreciate the structure of their experiences.

Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967), the Gestalt psychologist, adopted a “field theory” metaphor to account for the interface of mind and brain processes, based on “the physics of field continua rather than that of particles” (Ash, 1998, p. 171). Kurt Lewin (1943) applied this metaphor to analyze behaviour in a personally meaningful “psychological space, the life space or the psychological field” (p. 293). He described this process in accordance with the formula  $B = f(P, E)$  wherein *behaviour* (B) is a function of an *environment* (E) that is meaningful to the *person* (P). These environments offer choices and challenges that are more or less attractive depending on an individual’s needs and goals. Similarly, Aron Gurwitsch (1964) proposed a phenomenologically based *field-theory of consciousness* to account for the coherent internal structure of life experiences. Of primary importance is “the *theme*, that which

engrosses the mind of the experiencing subject" (p. 4). This central theme emerges from the field or background of our experiences which have a temporal horizon separating the present from the past or future. The search for essential "themes" underlying the "facts" of lived experiences helped my students empathize and understand the episodes described by their respondents.

*An American perspective*

William James (1842–1910), the founder of American psychology, described *experience* as a "stream of consciousness," a succession of states, or waves, or fields – of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and re-pass, and that constitute our inner life (James, 1902, p. 15). These "*fields of consciousness*" are richly structured and "contain sensations of our bodies and of the objects around us, memories of past experiences and thoughts of distant things, feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, desires and aversions, and other emotional conditions" (p. 17).

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey (1934) offered an elegant account of "real experiences" in "situations and episodes" wherein "every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues" (p. 36). Dewey described a broad range of themes and situations, from quarrels with close friends or a harrowing escape from near catastrophe, to a meal in a Paris restaurant "that *was* an experience" or a storm encountered while crossing the Atlantic by ship. A *meaningful experience* is characterized by "a unity that gives it its name, that meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship" (p. 37). Each experience "has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship" (p. 44). As the episode "moves toward a close" (p. 41), it also has an "aesthetic quality that rounds out an experience into completeness and unity as emotional" (p. 41).

Dewey bridged everyday and aesthetic experiences which have a certain theme or subject matter embedded in a unified structure with an emotional quality. Coherence and unity are qualities that we experience when encountering great works of art, theatre, film, and so forth. Dewey also treated "doing" and "undergoing" as complementary modes of responding to situations. We can willfully engage in *action* ("doing") to realize goals and fulfil our needs or desires. But we also *react* to powerful situations ("undergoing") that elicit emotions linking primitive bodily responses with concrete episodic memories. The artist or author both creates the image or scene and experiences its effects in a unified fashion. This shifting between spontaneous interior and reflective exterior roles is essential for the creation of successful artworks. Interestingly, in the "actor–observer" account of everyday cognition,



people look outward at situations they encounter but make inferences about the internal dispositions of others. In contrast, in aesthetic episodes, artists focus internally on their experiences of the world and then adopt an external viewpoint to critically evaluate the progress of their work.

### **The aesthetics of lived experiences**

The boundaries between everyday lived experiences and those depicted in literary works or films are hard to define. It is one thing to share powerful experiences that enthral listeners, or to wake up in the morning with a certainty that our dreams could turn into Hollywood blockbusters, and quite another to produce a “treatment” that is accepted for performance or filming. The narrative alone comprises detailed facts of the event; who was involved, when it happened, what was said, what was done, and so forth. But facts are not enough. Herein lies the fundamental difference between everyday and aesthetic processing. Everyday processing is pragmatic so that figures are identified against a noisy and distracting background of irrelevant events.

The relationship between figure and background, subject matter and style, is fundamental to aesthetic structure. In paintings, poems, or plays, complex subject matter or narratives are embedded in a coherent stylistic structure. In art, this background may consist of brush strokes of colour and texture arranged in a certain composition out of which the image emerges. In a poem, the words appear against a background of sounds and metre and, in a story, characters find themselves in complex situations and engage in all manner of actions but the time frame can jump back to the past or rush into the future. This concentration of meaning provides a basis for people becoming absorbed in artistic, literary, or film events, just as we may be absorbed by powerful life stories that people share with us.

Artists and writers are not just telling a story but have a licence to manipulate subject matter and style in such a way as to offer beholders and readers fresh perspectives on lived experiences. A critical question concerns the depth of their aesthetic exploration. At a surface level, they can select familiar scenes and characters but shape the plot so that audiences are absorbed and want to know how the events unfold (i.e., mimesis). At a deeper level, they can present complex characters and life situations that are fraught with contradictions so that audiences are confronted by existential truths (i.e., spirit resonance). The more that style departs from everyday perception and simple logic, the more audiences are challenged to develop connections and reach into their own experiences and emotions to arrive at insights into possible meanings of the work.

There are interesting trade-offs in the relative importance of subject matter (i.e., figure) and style (i.e., background). In highly representational paintings, plays, or stories, the focus is on subject matter that resembles everyday life and the role of background style is to facilitate the construction of mental models. Feelings of pleasure and uncertainty carry the viewer along to the conclusion of the piece. In highly expressionist works, novel stylistic devices work in a discordant manner against the subject matter thereby creating a disquieting atmosphere. Thus, when the work is less “readable” (or easily interpreted), its departure from conventional forms reminds the viewer or reader that an “aesthetic attitude” is needed to appreciate the whole episode. This active involvement provides a basis for depth of aesthetic processing and reflection on the meaning of the work. An ability to switch between the “pragmatic attitude” of everyday life and an “aesthetic attitude” is fundamental to a balanced life.

Another trade-off pertains to how attention and emotional expression are manifested in an artist’s or author’s treatment of subject matter and style. While the artist focuses on the subject matter of a work, emotion might leak out inadvertently in the treatment of its style. For example, while shaping clay to make it look like the seated model, the sculptor might not attend to the way it is applied and tension might slip out, for example, through more intense squeezing of the materials. In a reciprocal way, the artist might attend to formal stylistic issues and not realize that the choice of subject matter is laden with symbolic personal meaning. The disjunction is similarly evident in everyday conversation between what the person has to say and the tone of voice with which it is expressed. A person might attend to the choice of words, which seem neutral, while the tone of voice betrays an element of anger which others notice while the speaker remains unaware. We can therefore find affective or nonverbal leakage (Ekman and Friesen, 1969) in unmonitored channels of communication both in aesthetics and in everyday life.

Thus, *suggestions from the work meet connections in the mind* of the recipient or audience to produce mental representations. The Gestalt psychologists of the 1930s coined the term *Aktualgenese* (Sander, 1930) to describe the process whereby images emerge and become real for the observer during the course of perception. I propose that this underlies the forming of mental representations, a process which might be referred to as *Vorstellungsgenese*,<sup>1</sup> which means to have an idea of or see something in the mind that emerges over time and is not there in

<sup>1</sup> This is a neologism proposed and defined by Professor Peter Vorderer from the University of Mannheim at my request.