

Active Contemporary Citizenship as a Research Mode

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Abstract

Active citizenship is a form of civil participation in which direct involvement is emphasized over distanced reflection. As such it seems to be in juxtaposition to the role of the researcher who is typically an external spectator and observes, documents, and analyzes phenomena from outside. This quality of remaining in a state of professional distance and scholarly reflection can pose a dilemma when the multitude of problems in the world is obvious and the need for direct intervention becomes undeniable. Are active citizenship and scientific enquiry opposing modes of participation or can they be complementary? For the duration of 11 months, we pursued a first-person study, seeking to deepen a sense of engagement with the challenges of the time while simultaneously maintaining our role as researchers. We aggregate our findings into four categories—"feelings," "insights," "changes in perspective" and the "wrestling to find a balance between inertia and conscience." The results are contextualized within the broader literature of the self, pointing to facets of identity that encompass both a local and a global form of "active" or "contemporary" citizenship.

Keywords

active citizenship, first-person enquiry, qualitative methods: dialogical feelings

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Conducting research is in many ways a competitive business. It typically involves a group of people fervently working on the frontline of their respective discipline—and shielding their progress equally fervently from leaking through to other researchers until the work has been published under their name. For obvious reasons, these are not ideal conditions for working on the complex and multifaced social, environmental, and economic problems that are evolving in the world. What is more: though research often enough has direct implications for applied settings, its contribution toward solving societal problems is typically of a more indirect character. Based on some form of careful documentation and analysis, the researcher ideally gives advice on how to do things—for example, provides guidelines on how to teach reading; how to conduct psychotherapy; how to question eye-witnesses; and so on. Actually teaching reading, conducting psychotherapy, or questioning eye-witnesses is done by others—and probably for good reasons. But does that mean that in cases where systematic documentation and analysis is too long-winded and direct support is needed, there is no room for science and we would have to become active as colleagues, friends, citizens—but not as researchers (cf. Kiene, 2001)?

The understanding of the role of the researcher as an impartial—and that mostly means: external—spectator is firmly embedded in Western (philosophical) thinking. At least since the time of Enlightenment there is the understanding of a principled gap between the subject and the object of insight (Förster, 2018). The researcher takes a more distanced, outside perspective and documents and advises rather than gets too closely involved, even in cases where the borders are fuzzy, such as in action research or participatory observation. The job of the researcher thus is to reflect, stay “objective,” and ultimately to keep a distance to the subject of enquiry rather than get directly involved. In our own case, however, we felt the distance to the needs of the time often enough to be challenging and we were thus searching for ways to more intimately relate to the state of affairs around us. We did not see an immediate opportunity to travel to the different problem sites and start getting involved in fixing things. But it likewise seemed insufficient to keep searching and researching for advice and documentation when in many respects the need for action was clear and the required type of intervention seemed obvious. As a result, we sought to explore how to resonate with the problems of our time more productively.

A preliminary inspiration for the immersive/participatory approach we have in mind comes from the literature on civil participation—and the concept of active citizenship is of particular relevance in this context.

Active Citizenship

The term active citizenship has been used in various contexts to describe the motivation of people to get involved in social, environmental, or political developments within their communities and beyond (e.g., Kopnina & Saari, 2019; Mattijssen et al., 2019; Steenekamp & Loubser, 2016). It describes the “role of citizens in the public domain” at a time when “many people are concerned about the world in which they live and want to contribute towards the realization of a wide range of public values.” When these people get “concerned about the world in which they live . . . [they no longer remain spectators and instead begin to] contribute to important public benefits across various policy domains” (Mattijssen et al., 2019, p. 1). Steenekamp and Loubser (2016) identify five core dimension involved in active citizenship: “participation in politics; participation in civil society; participation in communities; identity and [. . .] values” (p. 120).

The concept of active citizenship is anchored in the understanding that our environmental and social problems are not a natural, inevitable given within a mechanistic regime of predetermined causes and effects. Rather, the human being has the capacity for ethical behavior and the potential to balance diverging needs, pursue meaning and personal goals without exploiting others or the environment. As humans we are able to take the grief and suffering of others to heart and initiate action to create an environment that respects the dignity of free individuals and the requirements of the world we live in (cf. Bühler, 1971; Maslow, 1954; Miller, 1991; Robbins, 2016). In light of the massive rate of exploitation and injustice on numerous fronts in the world, the dissatisfaction with prevailing systems and the motivation for change continue to increase. Mattijssen et al. (2019) point to how widely prevalent the concern for the world by now is and how it propels many people to social and environmental initiative as they feel uncomfortable with the developments they witness. Where possible, this happens in collaboration with the local authorities in charge—but often enough without or even in conflict with them.

Active citizenship (or civic consciousness, as it is sometimes called) can be understood as a culturally anchored skill which is strengthened and cultivated during early learning (Cheung et al., 2004). Kopnina and Saari (2019) point to the importance of promoting critical reflection and discussion early on in this context, such that existing conventions are “made explicit, interrupted, and shifted” (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016, as quoted from Kopnina & Saari, 2019, p. 11). The perspective of an inner sense of connection to (or: distance from) the periphery is thus not a natural given but evolves during (early) socialization.

Unfolding the concept of active citizenship in more detail and exploring its facets further, Steenekamp and Loubser (2016) identify a range of core dimensions which they compare cross-culturally. Of particular interest in their nomenclature is the dimension of “identity,” that is, the rate with which survey participants experienced a connection to their community, country, or the world as a whole. In five of the seven countries surveyed, people’s identification with their community was higher than with their country. Furthermore, in all countries, people identified more as members of their community or of their country than as world-citizen. And yet, in six out of seven countries, more than 70% identified as world-citizens. This is a remarkable number. A certain degree of interwovenness with our environment thus seems to be a natural capacity that perhaps needs attention but that in principle is there and can be called upon.

Taken together, the “whole” thus finds resonance in the individual to a significant extent. Our issue in the current context was whether the concept of active citizenship can be extended and integrated into the (self-)understanding of the researcher and her mode of approaching a respective field of enquiry. That is, is it possible to balance the perspective of the distanced spectator and at the same time to become directly involved in the contemporary challenges around us? This does not need to mean to be interventionist in an external sense; it can also take a more contemplative turn. Taking up the term active citizenship, in the following we include issues or challenges in the (local) community that we are members of. At the same time, we also include issues that affect us because we are citizens of our current time—contemporaries. In the following, we hence speak of active contemporary citizenship.

Aim of the Current Research Project

As contemporaries of a time filled with numerous problems and forms of injustice, one can feel torn in a seeming dilemma: traveling to the respective emergency sites feels mostly beyond the capacities of an otherwise already stretched daily regime of tasks and commitments. At the same time, we experienced the increasingly dramatic problems in the world around us as wakeup-calls that made it seem almost absurd to continue with our routine protocol of merely documenting and reflecting on problems as researchers.

Our way forward was an approach by which we sought to connect more intimately with our time and with the problems in the world around us. To begin with, we were searching for moments of active contemporary citizenship within us—instances during which we went beyond merely reflecting about those problems as they were presented in the media in uncounted

numbers as if on a conveyer belt. Instead, we sought for ways to relate to them more personally. Examples are: how do we relate to the treatment of animals; to the issue of environmental pollution; to the development of family culture; to the reduction of personal contact at a time of increasing globalization. We used a first-person approach in an effort to get more deeply in contact with our own experiences and in turn to link up more intimately with the respective problems around us—while at the same time not losing but redefining our role as researchers. In part II of our enquiry, we also reflected on our role as scientists in this process.

Introducing First-Person Science

Speaking to the methodological aim, we sought to conduct our research using a first-person mode of enquiry. Such an introspective approach is a form of qualitative research in which the observer enquires into his or her own inner world. On the background of the current context, the advantage of such a method seemed to be that more profound and differentiated facets of experience can be uncovered because the researcher is exploring his own inner world directly. The classical subject–object divide that is immanent in the typical psychological/experimental setup is transcended, creating a stage that enables the search for deeper resonance with the world as mentioned above. A first-person approach seemed in place because phenomena with a primary first-person character (such as most forms of qualitative experience) can ultimately only be adequately explored using a first-person mode of research. Second- or third-person approaches will inevitably have to renounce the directness of immediate experience and deal with symbolic representations that abstract from the primary experience, thereby providing only an indirect access to the information in question. On this background, different scholarly traditions such as phenomenology and humanistic psychology have hence pointed to the importance of taking an integrative approach: rather than excluding the scientist's point of view (i.e., the first-person perspective) from the research process, it is included in a reflected and systematic manner, transcending the classic black-and-white dichotomy of subjective versus objective data acquisition (e.g., Mey & Mruck, 2009, according to Döring & Bortz, 2016; see also Payton, 2016).

First-person enquiry is a form of inward-directed phenomenology that stands in the tradition of Brentano (1874), Husserl (1995), Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1958), or Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009). Other phenomenological traditions that incorporate specifically the first-person perspective into the research process are Participatory Action Research (e.g., Reason & Bradbury,

2008; Whyte et al., 1989); Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000); Heuristic Enquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990); Neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996) or Microphenomenology (Petitmengin, 2006). In these approaches, the role of the researcher and that of the participant in the research process merge, as the research is conducted while the person participates in an applied, real-life setting. The core difference of our approach to those mentioned is the focus of the current approach on the unfolding phenomenology of the researcher's own internal psychological—and often: mental processes. The researcher takes a longitudinal approach to enquiring into facets of her own experience in a field setting (i.e., in real-life situations). In participatory action research, the researcher is embedded in a community of other agents, for instance, colleagues or peers of a business or school setting. In the current approach, by contrast, the researcher enters a contemplative space rather than a field setting to begin with and enquires into his mental/psychological activities directly. Only in a potential (but not mandatory) second step are concrete real-life actions implemented.

Method

Participants

Both authors (U.W.—Researcher 1 and K.H.—Researcher 2) participated in the study. They both have a year-long history of conducting introspective/meditative work. Both are psychologists—one works in an academic setting, the other as a psychotherapist in private practice. They both give workshops on first-person or meditative enquiry and both have collaborated on similar projects in the past (Weger & Herbig, 2019, 2021). They were the sole participants of the study—and while being small in size, such a case-study format is not unusual in qualitative and in particular introspective work where a persistent level of individual work is required over several weeks or even months (e.g., Weger et al., 2016; Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, 2015b; Ziegler & Weger, 2018).

Procedure/Materials

The main observation phase stretched over a period of approximately 11 months, from mid April 2019 to early March 2020. We both worked individually with intermittent telephone conferences and an in-person meeting at the beginning and the end of the trial. At the outset stood the question how we could relate more intimately to the challenges of the time. By “challenges of the time” we mean the social and economic hardships that many people in

various parts of the world (e.g., refugees or victims of warfare) are confronted with. But we also included examples such as environmental, energy, or water crises, military escalations or diplomatic fallbacks, moments of suffering or grief in the world, animal welfare—and other ad hoc examples. These issues typically appeared to us to be beyond our immediate capacity to fix them. And yet, they were likewise too important to only be attended to tangentially and then being quietly left behind as we were returning to the daily business at our doorstep. One of us deliberately chose specific contemporary challenges and worked with them, whereas the other focused more on issues as they emerged. Field observations were included (i.e., experiences that occurred during the normal progression of the day)—as were contemplations in a more seclusive space of inner quietness during which we withdrew from the regular mode of active business. The latter was by far the dominant mode of working in which we created a more contemplative mindset and typically sat quietly and with closed eyes in a tranquil place.

To clarify our approach to dealing with “challenges of the time,” we wish to illustrate it with a more concrete example. One of the themes we worked with was the dilemma of environmental (traffic-related) pollution. When looking at one’s own dealing with such a theme from a naive perspective, one may notice a range of more stereotypical responses—such as tending toward a general condemnation of society’s negative footprint; or prioritizing the need for social encounter one-sidedly, thereby tacitly endorsing traffic-related pollution. In the context of our approach, the attempt was to focus more deliberately on such a dilemma as one example of a challenge of our time. The method of working now might include different steps (although this varied between us) and could also change across occasions as it needed to be adjusted to different types of questions): (a) We spotted an opportunity where we could be on our own and sit with closed eyes in a convenient posture for at least 10 to 15 min. We sought to inwardly turn wide, remain awake and present in the here and now and become perceptive and open to experience. We would also attend to areas of warmth within us. We would then change our inner viewing position to look at ourselves from a bird’s perspective—gradually zooming out to take the bigger picture into consideration without losing the qualities of being wide, awake, open/receptive, and warm, as described above. For more details on these elements, see the mindfulness and the loving kindness meditation/psychotherapy literature (cf. Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Zajonc, 2008 see also Weger & Herbig, 2021). From this more distanced position we would place the respective challenge and the questions/pictures surrounding it in our mind in an open and balanced way. This involved withdrawing from rapid assessments in a black-and-white manner. Instead we attempted a more phenomenological (open, deliberate, intensive,

and differentiated) relation to the challenge/the question to begin with. This meant that we would not judge one side (for example, the sustainability argument) as being apodictically superior to the other (the benefit of physical meetings), thereby condemning cross-continental travel per se. Instead, we looked at the individual needs and the specific constellations of circumstances where such travel was planned to take place. We placed these different facets nonjudgmentally in our thinking and held the corresponding images/options in our active imagination for an extended time, typically for several minutes. (b) The approach required us to experiment with the balancing of active input on one hand (thinking about the implications of one side of the dilemma over the other, such as actively pondering over the environmental challenge). On the other hand, there was the gesture of open reception, for example, being mindful of an experiential echo in response to the active side—such as new insights or intuitions that might emerge. Regarding the earlier example, such an insight might be the realization that it can no longer be a primary aim to pursue unlimited comradeship in light of the current climate crisis. And yet, in certain conditions, the social dimension and the need for comradeship may well outweigh other concerns and has to be put at the center nonetheless. Experiential echoes might also come about in the form of a new weighting of one side over the other after all—due to a realization, for instance, that given a priority will likely be balanced by developments that allow for other forms of compensation, such as more energy efficient modes of traveling in the future. (c) Finally, the approach implied that we would not simply ponder over the dilemma cognitively/intellectually—but also looked out for experiential responses such as feelings—and what character these feelings/experiential responses might have. For example, what were accompanying feelings/experiences in imagining that one would refrain from a planned social activity for the sake of behaving environmentally more sustainably—was it a voluntary/free & laid back experience that appeared meaningful or did it come more with a sense of pressure and giving in to expectation that was externally imposed and could not be made one's own? We explored whether and how these experiences informed cognitive assessments—both in the short- and midterm. We enquired whether such experientially informed assessments could give rise to different (perhaps more balanced) views or whether they cultivated impulses/actions that were more sustainable rather than being an expression of a spontaneous temper.

As we progressed, we became aware of obstacles that stood in the way of our effort to connect to the challenges of our time—such as inner aversion and inertia, procrastination (“this time I still take my car and turn to my plan to be more environmentally sustainable and use the train in the future”), and the constraints of social conventions or of self-imposed norms that required

self-regulation in both its facilitatory (strengthening wanted behavior) and inhibitory (strengthening unwanted behavior) dimension (cf. Senecal et al., 1995). In turn, in the second part, the focus of our enquiry also shifted toward focusing on remedies for these constraints. We choose gestures of joy and mildness/love and looked out for experiences with these qualities in this second part of the trial (Part II); and how they would affect our dealing with those constraints and challenges.

Both authors made notes—sometimes more regularly, at other times more irregularly. During our telephone or in-person exchanges, Researcher 1 took notes and subsequently aggregated these.

Analysis

Upon completion of the trial, a qualitative analysis of the written protocols was conducted. The method of choice was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). IPA is a method that integrates the expertise of the researcher into the analysis process rather than searching for the objective mode of documentation in which the perspective of the researcher is absent (cf. also: Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis, conducted by the first author, consisted of a series of distinct steps: (a) During an initial in-depth reading of the existing notes, the experiences from the past months were attended to again and a panoramic understanding of the unfolding of the trial was developed; (b) during this re-reading, relevant passages were highlighted and qualified with brief, descriptive labels or codes, typically consisting of one to three informative words. Subsequently, these labels were grouped together under diagnostic dimensions. In an initial round, 27 dimensions were obtained, which were successively aggregated into higher-level categories—ultimately resulting in those that form the basis of our result section. As is evident from this description, the current approach to qualitative research does not pursue the goal of blinding/removing the researcher out of the research process. Instead, as Döring and Bortz (2016) put it,

today it is emphasized more that prior knowledge on the researcher's end is not only not filtered out but consulted in a constructive manner for the process of theory building as long as it does not limit but broaden the understanding of the phenomenon. (p. 549, translated into English by Researcher 1).

Hence, upon writing up our results, findings were sometimes paraphrased or written up with additional interpretative qualifications and elaborations to make them better accessible to outside readers. In the

following, the dimensions are presented in the order of relevance as assessed by the authors.

Results

Discovering New and More Subtle Qualities of Feelings

During the observation phase, we became aware how important feelings of dedication and liveliness/joy were in interacting with our environment—despite the fact that our focus was on challenging events. These feelings were of a less personal nature and instead were characterized by a sense of reaching out to the phenomenon and by a softening of everyday emotionality. For example, in relating to the question about sustainability and a negative footprint, we looked at the balancing between what one could do out of a sense of coercion versus a sense of “joy and love . . .” —realizing how important it was to “experience[. . .] joy . . . ; like a moment of resonance.” And in taking part in a demonstration, one of us wrote, “feeling connected and knowing: this is also worth something.” Where these feelings surfaced, they had “no pressing character” of the type that we normally associate with feelings of joy and dedication. Instead, they were of an elusive subtlety that made them somewhat difficult to spot to begin with and required a moment of seclusion among a busy schedule to get hold of. They were of a quality that was “nothing like everyday-feelings” and there was “nothing forceful/emotionally stirring or arousing”—rather, the respective feelings (here in the context of a social challenge—in particular the questions about the future of family culture) refrained from such emotionality and became apparent as “a gentle joy about the light of insight . . .” This dedication and joyful liveliness had the character of being in resonance with our surrounding—an increased intensity “widening and firmness in the heart-breast-region” came about which could even result in an experience of physical warmth—such as “warm hands.”

Insights and Increased Sensitivity to Other's Suffering

We realized that our normal interactions were often driven by routines and ambitions that typically eroded the potential for deeper engagement and attention; and that these routines could be interrupted and be replaced with new modes of openness and resonance. One of us, for instance, noted how “I was surprised to hear that 1000 people in Africa lost their homes” only a month after this had actually occurred: “This had passed me completely.” At the same time, we realized that it was not appropriate to merely “hear” things, take them in and nod them off but that (media-) reports or scenes had to be

made alive individually—"there was an infinite potential for dedication"—"joy and love are important," for example, the joy in giving someone/something in need the attention he/she deserves rather than merely hearing something and moving on. This potential was by some account an as yet untapped resource—available to help strengthen our relationship with a respective question/issue, thereby uncovering its nature in a much deeper way than was achieved through our normal manner of engagement. Note, however, that these realizations often had a primarily cognitive quality to begin with, as "no real feelings came about"—and instead "mental insights" emerged.

Broadened Perspective and Beginning to See the Bigger Picture

A core outcome of our trial was that we would frequently take a broader perspective—moving away from a purely self-centered understanding and instead opening up to what we felt was needed by others or by the world as a whole. This broadened perspective also manifested in the realizations that "what is important is not so much the outcome . . . but the mind-set . . . that can be cultivated while doing it." This broadening could also extend in a temporal sense, taking future developments in their upcoming potential into consideration even though their impact might as yet still be small. An example are "ecological modes of travelling" as an emerging climate-conscious alternative to current modes of travelling. It was typically a more balanced approach to how we had seen things until then: We were less entangled in the dogmatic black-and-white of what had seemed good versus bad to us and instead came to a more differentiated, case-by-case assessment: For instance, we realized that the climate/travel dilemma does not call for "a categorical yes or no; meeting others in other parts of the world is important and that the ecological approach is strengthened." This personalized focus took individual motives and commitments into consideration, as well as situational needs and broader societal requirements. For example, the costs of behaviors with a negative environmental footprint were weighted differently "if you act in the service of a respective thing" as opposed to cases where "you want to have fun."

There were occasional insights into subtleties of the situation that we had not considered before: A respective problem of global relevance (e.g., a given type of pollution) became apparent in its context-specific implications, that is, it was no longer universally relevant but depended on situational, region-, or age-specific factors as it became apparent, for instance, that certain technical developments were actually "more problematic for grown ups than for children" who are better prepared to adapt.

We realized how important it was to bring the needs of the time and one's own resources and capacities into balance rather than one-sidedly prioritizing one over the other. We thus realized that it may be too much to commit to a task at a given moment although we felt it would have been timely and adequate to do so. For example, in a given situation, one's own capacity for quietness and calmness—which one of us called “islands” or “oases of silence”—could already be enough—and could even be more adequate than outright intervention in light of our momentary resources, even though it was evident that someone had to do something about it. At other times, by contrast, we had a realization that our striving for new insights and impulses from our trial was hypocritical because “I have already enough answers and inspirations/ impulses” In other words, we already had an awareness of what was needed and a knowledge of what went wrong—and we lacked behind drawing even the most elementary consequences from these insights. Such revelations were especially challenging.

When attending to flaws in the world, we realized how important it was to abstain from simply retaliating (even in our mind). At the same time, it was important to point to a problem and to make it at the very least visible to others when one could not successfully confront it at the moment. For instance, with regard to an example of man-made/technical pollutants, we realized that

opposition . . . is important to create a sensitivity—which is important, so that complaints can be [. . . addressed] on the basis of evidence. Without this [. . .] preparatory work, complaints will not find any resonance; this is why protest is important.

Wrestling With One's Own Shortcomings

We realized how preliminary we often still were in our effort to implement constructive insights that we had—and how much inertia there was within us to take action even in cases where we had already realized that action was needed and was in proportion to our resources. In view of an as yet unaccomplished task, for instance, one of us deliberated, “Am I really ready to change? The other thing . . . is still pending; try to address that one first, there you can bring more change about.” In another case, the realization emerged: “I already know what is possible and realistic—try to get active there before moving on.” The dilemma between inertia and bad conscience was a frequent experience and—as mentioned above—a particularly challenging one.

There was the frequent realization of one's own self-focusing as well as an awareness of the regular ignorance regarding the suffering of others. As one of us put it, “time and again I thought about the pain of others but [the experience] stayed largely on the outside, I did not let it in.”

The experiences that we considered closest to our enquiry “did not have a pressing character” and did not come about in the form of “dogmatic” impositions that played with our bad conscience; instead, they unfolded more as an option or opportunity that “left me free.” They allowed us freedom of choice—and the realization that negativity would mostly be counterproductive because it does not solve but escalate things as “radicalization in one direction triggers radicalization in the other.”

Summary of Core Points

Disaster news tend to grab attention—but in a rather focused and short-lived way. The approach we experimented with in the current study yielded a set of what we experienced as personally sustainable alternatives. Of core interest were new qualities of feelings that differed from the more mundane emotions in their subtlety and gentleness. These feelings served as a door opener to new facets of a respective challenge. For example, it allowed for a broadened perspective that took new and hitherto neglected aspects into consideration, such as the mid- or long-term consequences of (sustainable) modes of traveling. Instead of falling into the simple black and white dichotomy of good versus bad effects, a more holistic view appeared possible and the feelings we noted proved to be a more balanced compass toward different (long-term) implications of one’s own and others’ behavior. Those feelings could also nourish intentions in a more sustainable way, for instance, by pointing to a manner of opposition that is *not* retaliatory in nature but that rather seeks to make the consequences of a problematic behavior apparent. The enquiry also pointed toward individual constraints within the authors, such as the wrestling between inertia as an inhibitor of action—and a bad conscious as an overactive promotor of (premature) action.

Part II

Observations from the first part were mirrored and deepened in the second part where we focused more on ways to circumvent the obstacles/shortcomings that inhibited our dealing with the needs of the time. Specifically, the experiential qualities of joy and dedication as transformative impulses were increasingly noticeable as we became aware that “duties, obligations, inner resistance can only be conquered through joy . . . further obligations do not help.” Perhaps as a counterweight to an increased awareness of the challenges an appreciation of the small things in the world around us came about, such as “the joy about an idea” or the recollection of a brief encounter which “resonated in my memory for the rest of the day.” They created brief experiences of “inner activity and vitality” that appeared to be keys to

open new spaces or perspectives in transforming our ruminations over problems.

Moreover, the realization was confirmed that the ultimate aim and scale of reference was to enable experiences of joyful liveliness and dedication—both in oneself and others; and that this was the gate to truly enter into resonance with our inner being and with our environment—even though this was sometimes hard work: “when I try to love them [i.e., those who inflicted a respective injustice]—a feeling of strength comes about . . . at the same time it is hard work to love” It was important to unmask problematic events or developments and to point to their negative quality even though we might not be able to do something about them at the moment.

Insights About Our Role as Scientists

During our research, there was also the occasional insight regarding our role as scientists—and the “mission” of science as a whole. We became acutely aware of the often utilitarian approach that lingers in the background of scientific enquiry—the frequent temptation to exploit the subject under enquiry and to harvest as much insight from it as possible: the *what is it like* often enough falls behind the “*what can I use it for*,”—a kind of “objectification” that was not conducive toward genuine insight and discovery. It leads to problems “especially in psychology: if I want to use the other, a genuine insight is not possible.”

By contrast, the sense of joy, openness to novelty, and mildness/love was instrumental in transcending this utilitarian approach and allowed a quality of humanness to return into the encounter with a phenomenon that reduced distance. It allowed the phenomenon to maintain its “dignity” which enabled a different type of “encounter” than the search for ways to profit from it. It seemed evident that to strive for knowledge and in-depth discovery is by no means bad in principle—but it needs to be balanced with an open receptiveness that keeps the individual in balance with what is going on in the world around us: “a receptive approach (peripheral perspective) vs. a central perspective (where I only want to know something). Both can be connected through warmth. Both are quite different approaches—but both is needed in science.” Treating the phenomenon under enquiry as an entity that deserves respect and open attention gives it a kind of dignity that overcomes objectifying tendencies and allows for deeper resonance. It paves the road for what is perhaps a more humane type of science in which the researcher works to let the phenomenon tell its story: “the respect of the researcher is expectation-free research.”

Discussion

In facing the challenges of our time, the researcher is confronted with a dilemma. On one hand, the reflective nature of the profession calls for the perspective of the impartial witness/spectator from outside. For instance, as psychologists we might research what helps and hinders people in avoiding a negative environmental footprint. On the other hand, many of the problems require obvious and ad hoc intervention and support rather than reflection, systematic documentation, and analysis. Do we have to leave our role as researchers and move toward more explicit forms of interventions (for example, of climate activism) when we want to attend to this aspect of the problem? In our current study, we sought to explore ways to deal with such dilemmas and to overcome the subject-object divide that seems to inevitably distance the scientist from her field of enquiry. Our method of choice was a first-person (introspective) mode of research which allows for an immersive immediacy that enables a deeper resonance with the phenomenon under enquiry compared with the standard external/reflective point of view.

In light of our findings, we suggest three stages of what we began to call active contemporary citizenship: (a) The first is to expand one's perspective and take note of the needs of the time. This stage is a form of inner engagement with contemporary issues that is contemplative in nature to begin. It implies turning receptive, becoming wide, staying awake, and attending to warmth—and taking a more distanced perspective to the contemporary issues under enquiry. And while it is a contemplative form of engagement to begin with—is also directed toward action (and that of course also implies: research) in the outside world. It is a state of open, deliberate, and engaging attention that stays away from rapid assessments. In this sense, we would describe it as a more phenomenological relationship to begin with—in contrast to the more expectation- and profit-oriented approach in science. (b) The second stage is to enter into a dialogue with these needs in a way in which (mental) action and reception alternate. Providing a receptive space for experiential echoes opens the door for the phenomena to reach deeper and move us more intimately. The readiness to take in rather than to merely pity is the signature quality of this second stage; in its research-related expression it translates into the effort to question a phenomenon rather than to control it. (c) The third stage is to navigate between the impulse to act in a merely *reflective* versus in a merely *reflexive* or “actionist” manner and include the feeling realm to mediate between both. The approach thus calls for becoming involved on all three fronts—thinking, feeling, and action; prioritizing any single one of them over the others bears the risk of one-sidedness: merely expanding one's perspective and thinking of others would remain a reflective approach—the

prototype of research in its conventional but also unbalanced manner. Likewise, merely getting active and striving for intervention would be at risk of remaining an “actionist” approach that comes at the cost of neglecting the commitments at one’s doorstep and one’s own physical and mental health. The compass of feelings can serve as a bridge between the “contemplation” of a problem and its reflexive strive to fix it—while at the same time serving as an anchor to the here and now of the individual. Feelings can of course also be one-sided when they lose connection to the other realms—hence the importance of a trichotomic integration. In isolation, any one of them bears the risk of becoming one-sided.

We conclude that providing an inner space for resonance is a form of connection that we experience as deep and meaningful in itself. While mere reflection often seems abstract and detached, it is likewise not always the order of the day to hasten to action and get involved in a manner that channels resources away from other obligations. Between reflection and reflex unfolds the inner space of resonance—and from this space, moments of attention, dedication and joy can spring forth. This middle ground of the feeling realm was an important harvest from our enquiry. It is mindful of both outer needs and individual resources.

Joy is of course a surprising response in a context where we are exploring grief in the world. It would be a misinterpretation to imply that we propose to answer to the misery of others with experiences of joy. It is true, moments of joy were evident—and perhaps even crucial (see also Weger & Herbig, 2021). But rather than inevitably being self-sufficient, such experiences can also be an indication that one experiences a resonance with another person and feels close to him or her. The joy is thus not a joy about the grief of others. Rather, it is a joy about discovering another human being more individually/intimately.

On this background, we consider it suitable to distinguish between the moments of joy that are of primary relevance to the person experiencing them on one hand; and moments of joy that are of diagnostic value regarding what is going on in the world around us on the other hand. In this sense, one can perhaps speak of a distinction between what can be described as personal versus dialogical joy—or personal versus dialogical feelings in a more general sense. As such, a dialogical feeling can involve a larger configuration of aspects, for example, the context that may have prompted it, but also the responses that may have ensued in the protagonist or in other people. It involves the individual and at the same time is anchored in the world and stays in resonance. A dialogical feeling in this spirit is not only a response but also a “sense organ” (Hardenberg, 1802/1968; Steiner, 1921/2005 cf. also: Carter et al., 2016; Scherer & Moors, 2019)—it can become an ocular toward

what is going on in the world. Above we have referred to this as “a moment of resonance”—and experience this as being different from more normal feelings (“nothing like everyday-feelings”) in that the experience described here is rather “subtle” (“no pressing character” and “nothing forceful/emotionally stirring or arousing”) and includes an aspect of “feeling connected” rather than being self-focused.

Joy and presumably also other feelings hence do not need to be self-indulgent *per se* but have a relational component that is anchored in the respective phenomena and can hence enter into dialogue with the world around us. We hypothesize that these relational or dialogical feelings can give rise to thoughts that are likewise capable of staying more in tune with our surroundings—rather than being ultimately self-centered and merely reflecting over things outwardly; and to actions that are not solely the expression of an impulse to intervene or of an urge to relief a bad conscience—but are a freely chosen compass of compassion that enters into resonance with the world. Thus, dialogical feelings allow for thoughts and actions that are more thoroughly impregnated with the calls of the time.

On a more general level, feelings, thoughts, and actions can not only be understood as expressions of the individual but as symptoms of their time and context. This trichotomic compass can thus be understood as having a productive but also a receptive dimension as it is interwoven into both personal and social affairs. Keeping the three faculties in balance—among themselves and in the interplay between the individual and its social context—is by no means a natural given, as the three can all too easily drift apart. This is evident when ethical or moral thinking does not resonate in corresponding feelings or thoughts (e.g., people loving and eating animals at the same time; people arguing for the illusion of free will while still arguing for freedom of speech etc.). It is also evident when feelings emancipate from the realm of thinking or will, as in cases of emotional contagion or mass hysteria. Synchronizing the three realms can be effortful (cf. the earlier quote “it is hard work to love”) but perhaps effort is a signature quality of a form of active citizenship in which local and global aspects of the self enter into resonance.

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