
Article

**Finding the Place of Everyday Beauty:
Correspondence as a Method of Data Collection**

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Abstract

Researching aesthetic engaging with one's surroundings in everyday life led the author to use correspondence as a method of data collection. In this paper she presents her research design and discusses correspondence as an underused method. She introduces the concepts of invisibility, time, and tangibility in defining correspondence as a method. The topic of the correspondence in her research was beauty. In common use *beautiful* signals that which is desirable. As an evaluative and a future-oriented statement everyday beauty seems to have a place in steering our lives. The participants accounted as beautiful the different meaningful relations they had formed over time to their surroundings. These relations were in constant change as the participants themselves changed over time. The author argues that correspondence is a method that works well in cumulating data for research. It has also proven to be a rewarding method for the participants.

Keywords: correspondence, data collecting methods, everyday life, beauty, everyday aesthetics, engagement with surroundings

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I think that if you had interviewed me it would not have been as genuine. In the letters the writing comes with feelings in it. . . . Even if one has to be briefer in writing letters the feelings are still more genuine that way. (Seija)¹

Introduction

Seija is one of the 4 participants in my research. She writes from a village of some 30 inhabitants located in the north of Finland. Daily life in such villages is often portrayed either through the mythical rhetoric of tourism or that reflecting depressing results of national statistical welfare research. Villagers' relation and engagement with their surrounding environment is either idealized, or the changes for worse in it highlighted. Accounts of everyday life of and by particular villagers in particular villages are needed to bring shades to this overtly black-and-white image.² By asking in my research what the villagers find beautiful in their daily life, I aim to pass over to them the definition of what is desirable in their lives.

In this paper I present my research project in the field of education in which I have collected the data through a yearlong correspondence with 4 participants. Letters were exchanged once a month in such a way that everyone read everyone's letters. I asked the participants to write about beauty in their everyday lives. The aim of this project is to explore aesthetic engagement with one's surroundings as part of managing one's everyday life. The research is conducted in a small Lappish village. Through the insights from this one village I will eventually address my central interest as a researcher in education: How do we engage aesthetically with our surroundings in the process of constitutive and perpetual growing as human beings? Such an interest aims at filling a gap in educational research. Everyday aesthetics and the concept of beauty in particular are virtually missing from educational research or are misguidedly restricted to only formal art education.

I focus in this paper on defining and evaluating the data collecting method that I have adopted for my research. I discuss correspondence as an underused method in qualitative research of everyday life. I will do this through the letters produced and exchanged in my research but also through the supplementing interviews conducted with the participants before and after our correspondence year.

I introduce the clustering concepts of invisibility, time, and tangibility to distinguish and define correspondence, journal writing, and letter writing from various other forms of written data. Invisibility refers mainly to the solitude of writers and readers, time to the extended period of data gathering, and tangibility to concrete words on paper by the participants themselves. To further distinguish correspondence as a separate method from journal and letter writing, I address the aspects of relations and reciprocity in them. The methodological argument of this paper is that correspondence is a valid and distinct method in researching subjectively experienced phenomena unfolding in time. In this research the phenomenon is everyday life as lived by the subject.

The place of the everyday lives researched here is the village of Suvanto, located in Eastern Lapland, in the north of Finland well above the Arctic Circle. From this village of 30 I found 4 women willing to engage in correspondence with me: Seija, Erja, Kaarina, and Laura, whose ages range from 35 to 75. Of these 4, Seija is a native to the village, and Erja has just recently moved there. The two others have lived in the village for longer. I found these participants by presenting my research idea to the villagers during a field visit prior to the correspondence year.

The Place of Beauty in Everyday Life

Although this paper is mainly methodological in focus, I will begin by developing the concepts and arguments of my research. I will then proceed to clarify the method: how and why I came to use correspondence in the first place and what was the form and content it took. To focus the accounts of everyday to shed light on her engagement and relation to her surroundings, I asked each study participant to write about beauty. This choice of beauty as a relevant concept in relation to everyday life and education is not common and needs to be argued for.

Everyday life has been characterized in research by concepts such as time, space, rhythm, bodily movement, and tradition (Ellegård & Cooper, 2004; Ellegård & Vilhelmsson, 2004; Jokinen, 2003; Lefebvre, 2004; Lehtinen, 2006). Such concepts embrace an idea of a continuum and refer to everyday life as subjectively experienced and actively engaged in. As such, everyday life is a contextual process but one that, nevertheless, defies definitions bound in time and space. This is because as subjectively experienced, it entails simultaneously the past, the present, and the future as necessary for the managing of it. By managing of everyday life, I mean a practice that consists of constant reflection, evaluation, and steering, but one that we are mostly unaware of engaging in. We are, in a way, creating our everyday lives as we go. This makes the everyday a subjective construct instead of an objectively definable unit such as “a Monday,” so instead of an attempt to tame the vague notion of everyday as something universally shared, this research delves into particular individuals’ everyday as uniquely managed continuums (see Highmore, 2002).

Even if subjective and ongoing constructs, our everyday lives are created also in relation to others. Following Taylor’s (1992) ideas of the self and Mead’s (1934) idea of the generalized other, I take that a background of social relations is there with every subjective process and endows our everyday lives with meaning. For Mead, a generalized other is a collective: “an organisation of the attitudes of those involved in the same process” (p. 154). Only by taking on the attitude of the generalized other can we hold internalized conversation or, in this case, write letters. We need to imagine a context for our thoughts. Writing about beauty is, thus, writing about your subjective relation to your surroundings but doing this in relation to the organization of attitudes of the group you belong to.

In focusing on the everyday lives of particular people in a particular context, I am interested in the tiny steering maneuvers that we undertake daily but rarely notice. They are micro level adjustments that I take as analogous to concepts such as Lefebvre’s ‘moments’ (Elden, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 2006). These constitutive moments are points where one is able to evaluate one’s place and change one’s direction, to grow as a human being. They are fleeting but decisive moments, points of rupture and sometimes even revolutionary. Time for Lefebvre is closer to cyclical than linear, like a curl of smoke, but above all to be approached as lived and not as measured (Elden, 2004; Harvey 1991; Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield 2006). Lefebvre’s moments are memorable and thus not obviously a daily occurrence. In this research I take from Lefebvre the approach to time as lived. I concentrate on the fleeting moments of orientation that take place in daily life but do not quite make it to Lefebvre’s moments as they might not stand out on their own. They might go unnoticed if I do not ask my participants to look out for them and write them down for me.

The approach to everyday life in this research emphasizes everyday life as lived and meaning-making within particular frameworks. Central are also the conception of place as lived in in human geography and the discussions taking place in the emergent field of everyday aesthetics.³ All of these approaches favor the particular and the contextual in approaching questions at the core of our meaning-making processes. Within education as well as in aesthetics there has been a move

to emphasizing the particular. According to this view, the different contexts of our lives and of our growing as humans have been neglected. Humans or humanity in educational research should no longer be approached only as universal phenomena but also as and through research of actual persons engaging with their concrete social, cultural, and historical contexts (e.g., Wulf, 2002).

To follow this contextual emphasis on aesthetics is to balance out the analytical and art-centered approach by defining the aesthetic and, as part of it, beauty, referring to particular individuals and their everyday life context (Haapala, 2005; Mandoki, 2007; Saito, 2007; Sontag, 2007). The value in such an emphasis is the resulting focus on the significance of particular self-environment relations and interactions. Such focus on locality and dwelling finds a niche in a world that seems to worship globality and mobility.

In defining the concept of beauty, I align with Mandoki (2007) in that “beauty is a linguistic effect used by a particular subject to describe personal experiences and social conventions . . . a linguistic categorisation of a non-linguistic experience” (p. 8). I take beauty, thus, to be an effect of the relation between the experiencing subjects and certain objects. Despite the ambivalence that surrounds beauty as a concept in scholarly discussion, it is to be noted that it has remained in constant use in everyday conversation of common experience, where *beautiful* still signals admiration, excellence, and that which is desirable (Winston, 2008). Beauty is therefore future oriented, bringing about replication, distribution, and a wish to protect (Scarry, 2006). I argue that as a concept and word of everyday use, beauty orients us to concentrate on the desirable in our lives at present. In doing so, it guides us to evaluate this desirable in light of the past and commits us to replicate and protect it for the future. Embedded in the use of the concept of beauty there is, thus, a continuum of evaluating and relating one’s relation to one’s surroundings.

I argue that beauty is not merely an evaluative statement of taste irrelevant to actual life as lived but is essentially tied to our actions in daily life. These actions are like tiny steering maneuvers. We make everyday decisions with real consequences based on aesthetic judgments but rarely pause to notice this: We prefer bright colors to more subtle ones even if the former requires chemical treatment and the latter natural dyes (more ecological arguments in Saito, 2007). As I argue that beauty matters in daily life, I set to find out just how it matters in particular everyday lives and face my first challenge: how to do this empirically.

The correspondence: Design and outcome

I started out with the notion that representations of life in small northern Finnish villages are biased. I traced this bias to the stereotypical rhetoric produced for marketing purposes and to the research approaches focusing on macro scale welfare through statistics. I set out to address this bias and approach everyday life in these villages from the viewpoint of the villagers as particular subjective processes in time. To obtain accounts of the participants’ engagement with their surroundings and to strike a rare positive chord on research of northern villages, I chose beauty as the core concept. The approach of my research is decidedly phenomenological but in a direct rather than indirect way, akin to how Titchen and Hobson (2005) have defined phenomenological sociology as, for example, seeking participants’ understanding of their conscious ways of construing situations and their conduct in them, as revealing the taken-for-granted, and as asking how they judge their own situations.

In the beginning I juggled three possible ways to collect data: interviewing, observing, and collecting writings. I did not have to try long with observing to find out that the main data of my research would not be collectible in that way. My physical presence observing someone’s everyday life would not yield me data on the fleeting moments of that life as a subjective process

(see also Alaszewski, 2006). After getting several disappointing results with interviews, I realized that the nature of the phenomenon I was researching, beauty in the process of a subjective everyday life, called for a different approach.

In trying out interviewing, I kept asking questions along the lines of “What do you find beautiful in living here?” and getting very short answers like, “This is a beautiful village. It sure is. I’ve lived here since I was a child,” “There’s harmony here how the buildings are built and spread out, how the woods have been kept,” and “Well . . . I think it’s that there are always these things [woodwork, crafts] to do here, it never stops.” The villagers were used to being interviewed by architects and cultural historians, who have concentrated on the buildings and the history of the village. I heard the usual replies, but I wanted to hear of their everyday lives unfolding today and tomorrow and beyond the narrow objective definitions of what “should” be beautiful.

By wanting the villagers to tell me about beauty in their everyday lives, I was asking them, in effect, to tell me what they found desirable in their lives. Such a request, I soon realized, demanded considerable engagement, reflection, and quite simply time from the participant. To be able to discern what is beautiful in your everyday life, you need to evaluate your daily life in light of the past, the present, and your hopes for the future. Such an evaluation is highly contextual and very subjective. I had to engage a few villagers in a process that would yield them the motivation and the necessary space and time to provide me with answers. This is how I came to correspondence.

In educational research letters and letter writing have been used as pedagogical and professional tools having to do with teaching or assessing the outcomes of it (e.g., Kirms, 2004; Parkinson, 2005; Prendergast, 2001; White, Wright-Soika, & Russell, 2007, to name but a few recent ones). The use of archived or published letters in educational research is not unheard of either (recently see, e.g., Fitzgerald, 2005; Tamboukou, 2006). What has not been so frequently reported, however, is correspondence being used as a primary data collection method in research that is not about tools of intentional pedagogical practices.

I asked around the village and eventually found 4 women willing to participate in my research. They are between 35 and 75 years of age, some have children, one is single, two have lived in the village for more than 40 years, and two have moved in within the past 15 years. I met with these participants in their village before the correspondence started, and we agreed on the form of it: posted letters instead of e-mails at the rate of one a month. We decided that everyone would write one letter a month, and one of us would then make five copies of everyone’s letters and send the copies out for everyone. In this way everyone got to read everyone’s monthly letters. Thinking back, the idea of everyone writing to everyone came from the participants. In retrospect it might have been one of the most crucial factors in the success of the process. The motivation to keep on writing, a great deal of the rewarding feeling, and a sense of togetherness for the participants can all be contributed to the shared nature of our correspondence.

It was definitely so that it gave more strength and commitment to the writing when we got to read each other’s letters. It has been like, interesting. And I have seen that my thoughts really fit in just fine with the others’. That I can’t be all that bad in this. Like, I have thought that we can all write as ourselves.

It might have, if I had written alone, it might have felt like very lonely in a way. Now that I got to see the others’ letters I realised that my opinions are good, that, we are so similar as people. . . . It was a lot nicer this way, that we got to read all the letters. (Seija)

It [the correspondence] left a feeling of being in this together, all of us, writing letters together. Doing things together, that's what's been interesting. . . . The best thing has probably been the kind of spirit of togetherness that this [correspondence] has created between us. (Kaarina)

Having everyone read everyone's letters each month led me to expect an outcome of collective writing, where people would take up each others' thoughts, continuing or commenting on or even challenging each others' writing as the year progressed. I was waiting to prove the power of collective writing through finding deepening insights on beauty. There was, however, virtually no referring of any kind to each others' letters. The letters could almost be read without realizing that they had been written to everyone and read by everyone. Puzzled by this, I asked the participants later on whether they had talked about the letters during the year. They had not. Nevertheless, the most enjoyable part of their correspondence seemed to have been the fact that the letters were shared.

Tackling the aspect of this kind of collectivity in my research design, I have since come to use the ideas of Taylor (1992) and Mead (1934) on the relations between one's self and society. Briefly put, the collectivity in this research should be seen as a social background to four subjective processes, a relevant but not in the least explicit background. The participants enjoyed the presence of others as readers and members of their community, but building something together, ideas or concrete actions, did not seem relevant. The power of collective writing in this research lies in the knowledge of being heard and in being part of something. What is constructed and explored in the letters is the generalized other (Mead, 1934), the framework of attitudes of one's community and surroundings, in which one perpetually grows as a human being. The idea of others reading is enough. Herein lays the power of letter writing and correspondence that I will come back to.

The instruction I gave for the beginning correspondence was for the participants to simply observe their everyday lives through what they found beautiful in them and then write about it. I encouraged them to think about and define *beautiful* as freely as they wanted and could. I gave examples of two things that I had recently found beautiful in my everyday: the sight of frozen red currants in my freezer and the stack of clean, colorful laundry piled neatly in my son's closet. I then progressed to wonder openly why I find these things beautiful, what it tells of me and my life at that moment.

The correspondence was carried out as agreed throughout the year with everyone participating. Only the July letters were skipped by three participants, so 44 letters of between two and six sheets of typewritten text resulted. As supplementary data for my research I have collected both life story interviews and thematic interviews from each of the participants before and after the year of correspondence.

I took part in the correspondence writing letters at the same pace and following the same instruction as the participating villagers. The decision to do this was based on the kind of research ethics I had adopted in my previous and current research groups conducting ethnographic and narrative inquiry: I felt it necessary to participate to understand better. I felt it was important to do the same thing I was asking the participants to do. In this way I would have an idea of how they felt during our year of writing; at least, a better idea than had I just sat at the office waiting for their letters to arrive. In retrospect, my letter writing on beauty in my everyday life was rewarding both personally and professionally. My letters now form a systematic research diary of observations followed by theoretical and conceptual wonderings. Having to write once a month putting my words in a way that others would also understand me sped up the conceptual progress of my research.

Writing letters to the participants made me soon cautious, however. It was unnerving to wait for the others' letters to see whether my writing had scared them off or changed the style or content of their writing. I might have been overestimating the academic tone in my writing or assuming a greater divide between us than there was in reality, for it turned out that everyone seemed to keep true to their unique style and content of writing throughout the year.

Wouldn't it be crazy if you hadn't been in it [the correspondence] as well (laughing)! Maybe that really made it meaningful that there was also someone from the outside who we write to. (Kaarina)

You have written to us about urban life. That has given us . . . like that we have been able to compare with when there's no nature immediately around and here there is. Like it makes us appreciate, that we do have all the seasons and things to do, but in a town it might be really different. And of course also that in a town as well as in here family life and being with small children is the same anyway. That life is the same here or there. But the surrounding environment is different of course. (Seija)

I have not included my letters in the research data proper. As with the interviews I conducted before and after the year of writing, I hold my part of the correspondence as supplementary data. I address my letters in the analysis of the participants' letters as the relevant context.

Invisibility, time, and tangibility

Ways to collect data in writing are various, ranging from answers in questionnaires to full autobiographies. The forms of data that are similar to correspondence as a set of exchanged letters are diaries and journals as well as single letters.⁴ They all make possible the addressing of phenomena unfolding in time. They provide data suitable for addressing an individual's meaning making in her everyday life in a way that interviews would not grasp: the taken-for-granted facets of life that cannot be articulated on the spot nor remembered quite the same way in retrospect (Alaszewski, 2006). Correspondence, journaling, and letter writing are ways to collect data at the pace that the researched phenomena unfold in everyday life. The participants are free to choose when, where, and for how long they wish to take part. One participant of this research carried with her a small notebook to be able to jot down things right when and where they came to her mind.

Correspondence, journaling, and letter writing as modes of written data can be distinguished from other kinds of written data through a cluster of three simultaneously present characteristics: invisibility, time, and tangibility. I have come to this threefold distinction through reviewing the experiences of others that have used such methods (mainly Alaszewski, 2006; Alterio, 2004; Harris, 2000, 2002; Marvarene, Nelson, Cade, & Cueva, 2007; Moules, 2003; Parkinson, 2005; and also Decker, 1998) and through my experiences in my research. Although this discussion is also applicable to letter writing and journal writing, I introduce the three characteristics through my research and thus through the data collection method of correspondence.

With respect to invisibility in correspondence, I refer on the simplest level to a physical invisibility of the readers and writers of letters from each other at the time of reading and writing. On another level, I refer to the relations of the participants to each other and to the researcher. The participants of a correspondence might know each other and meet up every now and then. They might also be anonymous to each other, never meeting face-to-face. In either case or any of their variations, the participants are always out of the sight of each other when reading or writing. Third, with invisibility I refer to those for whom the writing is visible, that is readable, and to

those for whom it is not. Different research setups produce different extents and variations of invisibility suitable for different purposes. To unravel this through an example that contrasts with my research design, I will introduce a research project of Harris (2002).

Harris (2002) corresponded with 6 participants over a year's period. Each correspondent exchanged letters only with the researcher. Harris did not meet her participants face to face. She was thus invisible to her participants not only during their writing and her reading their letters but in never meeting them in person. The individual participants were invisible to each other in the same way as they only corresponded with Harris and never met her. In Harris's setup the invisibility in these senses is total. Steps toward visibility could comprise of the researcher meeting up with the participants individually, the participants reading each other's letters or parts of them, or the participants meeting each together.

Reasons to arrange correspondence with any of the degrees of visibility mentioned vary. Harris's (2002) research topic was the life stories of women who engage in self-harm. The establishing of face-to-face contact with such women proved extremely problematic for her. When turning to correspondence as a data gathering method, Harris was able to collect rich, detailed, and informative data for her purposes. She accounted this success to the invisibility that correspondence provided to participants.

My research design is very visible compared to Harris's (2002). I met the participants individually several times, and all of us have met together now three times. We also agreed that everyone reads everyone's letters. There is further visibility as the participants are people living in the same small village and continuing to be very visible to each other even when the research is over. Having said this, I will add that there is still a considerable degree of invisibility present due to the nature of correspondence: Everyone is alone when writing and when reading. Because of this final invisibility the writer has no way of knowing or controlling when and where or in what mood or circumstances the recipients will read his or her words. Even if the recipients are known personally and definitely, as when writing to someone unfamiliar, this invisibility calls for sensitivity and insight into the others' lives. In oral face-to-face communication there is leeway to correct one's tone according to the perceived situation or catch misunderstandings before they mount too high. When writing a letter that someone will read without you present, you must carefully consider your words to be understood and to maintain communication.

Because, because when . . . when you like write to many people you think that you must write in a way that everyone understands. And you write maybe more carefully and try to explain things right. If you tell things to one particular person you kind of imagine what it is that this person understands of your speech or writing. And then you write more narrowly according to that. (Laura)

What this means for research data is that thoughts put on paper can be read as, in a way, weightier for the participants than interview speech. This is also what I trust Seija to mean in the opening quote of this paper when she says there are more feelings present in her writing than there would have been in an interview situation. Because of invisibility the resulting data are carefully constructed. Research that focuses on the likes of communication or conscious reflection, meaning making, and interpretation of one's experiences seems best coupled with this kind of data collection method.

There is like . . . a small . . . conflict with the writing. I feel that you kind of construct the beau[tiful . . . as you're writing, or like that what you've seen and experienced is not necessarily the same that you write down. Because you kind of, maybe even subconsciously or even consciously edit and try to create like a whole of

the letter. So it kind of forms into something, to a form of some kind. And then I get this feeling that I'm cheating, that this isn't the direct [experience] . . . even if I try that it would be the direct experience I've had. But then it necessarily changes when you start to write. (Laura)

Compared to oral face-to-face communication such as interviews, the further two differences in collecting data through correspondence have to do with time and tangibility. These two intertwine and overlap with each other and with the notion of invisibility. By time I refer in this context to the lack of immediacy in the communication through correspondence. It is a time lag caused by the time frame of the concrete sending and receiving of letters as well as the distance or invisibility of the correspondents to each other during this kind of communication. By tangibility I refer to letters as documents: concrete pieces of paper with writing on them.

Harris (2002) considered time as one of the negative aspects of correspondence as a data gathering method. She identifies as troubling what she calls the time lag between letters sent and received. This meant that some of her participants would forget to answer her questions because of the lack of immediacy between receiving a question and replying in writing. She also found it a lengthy a process to then rephrase and ask those questions again in the next round of letters. It seems that Harris used correspondence to try to gather data similar to that produced from interviews; indeed, she says she resorted to the correspondence method when failing to establish face-to-face interviews with her participants. I suggest that correspondence might better suit research designs where the researcher is not trying to interview people through letters. It definitely is compatible with research that indeed requires the time lag that correspondence provides, as in my research to find place for beauty in the participants' everyday lives. Such is research that uses the potential of correspondence to highlight phenomena that appears essentially as processes in time.

Letters are tangible and time-bound data in another way than, for example, interview transcripts. In an interview situation the weight of the communication rests on both parties. Let us say that there is a situation where a participant is not at all happy with how she comes across in an interview. She has realized this when reading a transcription of the interview. She does not have to compromise her self-image or conception due to this observation, however. She can easily point out reasons outside her that in this situation made her appear as something she is not: the questions or comments of the interviewer, misunderstandings in the communication, to name a few. This is due to the conversational nature of a fairly unstructured face-to-face interview. Had this same person written several letters for a period of a year and then, rereading them, felt unhappy with how she comes across in the letters, the situation is somewhat different. She would be facing her own writing that she had had time to deliberate on and construct in each letter. There would be no other party to point to nor lack of time or an inconvenient situation. Her letters might convince her of actually having been this person she now regrets coming across as. Tangible, written data, especially on delicate issues, might have a long if not lasting impact on the lives of the participants.

Tangibility has been identified as a cause of concern in correspondence as a data collection method. Both Harris (2002) and Marvarene et al. (2007; also Moules, 2003) have asked us to consider carefully the implications that the mode of correspondence sets on writing. Unlike verbal conversations, even if recorded and transcribed interviews, written communication is tangible and can be kept for many years. For the purposes of their approach, therapeutic letter writing, Marvarene et al. identified indeed a danger in the confidentiality of letters (see also Boud, 2001).

Although this rings true in research on delicate and private issues, it is not so in my research; quite the opposite. It is exactly because written communication might be read by others, and in this case will be read by others, that the writing of letters becomes an aspect of living together.

Well I think I would have written more narrowly somehow if I had written to [one person] . . . it [sharing the letters] probably affected so that it made my writing richer when I knew that so many different people would read what I write. And you do select topics and things to put down according to who you write with and . . . it does make a difference. (Laura)

Correspondence is simultaneously tangible and invisible. The tokens of communication are concrete, but the people communicating are not present. This paradox of absence and presence is a fundamental and an established one in epistolary research (Decker, 1998). As discussed, depending on the topic and design of one's research, this characteristic paradox can be seen as a problem, a cause of concern, or, indeed, as in my research, as an asset and an aid.

Reciprocity and relations

I have distinguished correspondence, journal writing, and letter writing from other kinds of written data through the clustering concepts of invisibility, time, and tangibility. It is time to characterize correspondence further as a method of data collecting separate also from the adjacent journal and letter writing. I will use two vantage points to do this: reciprocity and relations between writers and readers. Reciprocity in this context is the back-and-forth exchange of writings between the same participants. Relations are to be taken as those between the writers and readers of this reciprocal exchange.

Letter writing and journal writing seem to yield data suitable for research that focuses on the processes of one individual: developing of her skills and addressing of her problems. The focus is on the reflection that participants engage in when writing. Writing letters is often used and researched as a pedagogical or therapeutic tool. Letter writing is seen as a valid tool in promoting the acquisition of reflection skills. The main objective is then to teach the writer to think critically while integrating her personal experiences with the topic (Parkinson, 2005; White et al., 2007). Letter writing is also a documented and well-constructed tool for counseling and psychotherapy. It has been explored in clinical practice and is used fairly commonly in the counseling community. (Marvarene et al., 2007; also Goldberg, 2000; Harris, 2000; Lindahl, 1988; Marner, 2000; Moules, 2003; Steinberg, 2000; Thomas, 1998; Vidgen & Williams, 2001.)

The writing of a diary or a journal has been addressed in educational research as an interpretative research method of teaching and learning. It has also been used as a professional development tool for teachers and teacher students (Alterio, 2004; Chitpin, 2006; Sá, 2002). Journal writing within educational research and pedagogical practices seems to cluster around the idea of reflection. Journals are used for both developing reflection skills and assessing the achieved reflection (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006; also, e.g., Boud, 2001; Connor-Greene, 2000; Dunlap, 2006; Park, 2003).

What both of these ways of collecting data, journal writing and letter writing, miss and correspondence addresses is reciprocity, the social dimension of writing. One might argue that there is a kind of generalized other present in all writing, and thus the social communicative dimension is there anyway, lending, for example, journals the ability to undergo valid conversation analysis (see Alaszewski, 2006). Such an internalized other or generalized interaction does not provide reciprocity, however. In correspondence the specific other to whom

you write also replies specifically to you. The value in this is the resulting focus on the specific context and the interaction of specific people in these contexts. Correspondence as a way to collect data is thus compatible with research that focuses on both the process of individual reflection and the significance of the reciprocity: of exchanging thoughts with others and “being in it together,” as one participant of this research put it.

Whenever I’ve received letters I have many times, when going to get the mail in the morning and then gone to work, I have come back and always saved them . . . that when going to bed I have read them, the letters. It is really interesting. . . . Maybe I learnt to see the surroundings differently, the beauty around, and appreciate it, when I’ve had time to think about this. (Seija)

Well it was absolutely wonderful [reading others’ letters]. Always. And then I had the pile ready, all the letters piled up, I had to have a special time when I had peace and quiet to read all of them. And really enjoy them, the moment, that was wonderful. (Kaarina)

It was great fun! I always saved like, when I had time during the day I would open and take a peek and think: oh, tonight I will read them. And always when going to bed I read the letters and they were so funny, it was really nice. And you learnt from them. About, like, how the others see something and all that. Really nice. It would not have been so interesting [without the others] and it made you keep on persisting to write when the others wrote as well. (Laura)

Reciprocity inherent in correspondence points to the usefulness of correspondence when collecting data of phenomena that are both introspective and communicative by nature. Considering beauty in your everyday life is introspective in that addressing it requires subjective reflection, time, and space. It is communicative in a way that once you have addressed it the process becomes meaningful when shared.

When I think about this, like if I think of a method where I would write a diary for you or write by myself and then hand it to you after a year had passed, it would be a lot more uninteresting than writing these [letters]. Because in this there’s kind of the others’ support also, it makes you enthusiastic about writing when the others are writing also. And it’s great to read them and you like write to others with pleasure that way. Somehow the idea of a journal feels like . . . that it just disappears somewhere, that it’s not in the minds of anyone else but the researcher and . . . it’s the social dimension in this that has been especially good. (Laura)

Hennion (2005) has written of taste as an activity accomplished through a collective that provides a frame. She wrote of taste much in the same way I have adopted the concept of beauty: as a long-term process and construction; formed as it is expressed and expressed as it is formed. Although unable to go into the conceptual distinction between taste and beauty here, I draw grounds from Hennion’s thoughts to my research design. In having everyone read everyone’s letters, I am also shedding light on the collective frame within which the writers express their taste, their judgments of beauty in their lives. This frame is thoroughly contextual and social in nature. It is negotiation between intersubjectivity and social relations; between language, thought, and action, and the constraints of social structure (Manning, 2001).

Correspondence set up in a collective way, as I have done, sets a task for the participants to evaluate, observe, and interpret the desirable in their lives in a way that is acceptable to others living in the shared everyday life environment. In reading the letters, I am thus reading the

writers' subjective accounts of beauty but also their exploration of each others' attitudes as a community. Mead's (1934) concept of the generalized other is at play here. In living as a community, specifically as a small northern village community, the participants in their letters are reflecting this generalized other. They are, however, not merely passively reflecting but actively creating and altering it as they write.

Because they lack reciprocity, letter and journal writing as methods of data collecting emphasize the process of writing. The process of reading is rarely discussed except as part of the teacher's or researcher's analysis of the writings, as is with Parkinson (2005) and Alterio (2004). In this research the participants' specific and special routines of reading each other's letters as they arrived tell of the significance of also receiving and reading letters. Correspondence as a method of collecting data opens up the possibility of focusing on both the introspective and the communicative in writing letters.

Correspondence can be further distinguished from journal and letter writing as a method of data collection by looking at the relations between the writers and readers. This is an angle related to reciprocity but shows the relations between writers and readers more closely. Letters for research purposes are usually written by the participant and read by the researcher. The writer does not personally know the reader of her letter and vice versa. The reader can reply but usually does not.

Journals for research purposes are usually written like this as well: Participants write individually; researchers read and interpret. To brutally simplify, these kinds of settings are like one-way designs, akin to questionnaires. The researcher sets a task, which the participant completes in writing; he or she returns the paper, and out goes the researcher. Albeit highly more informative qualitatively than questionnaires, the letters and journals written for an unknown researcher who does not reply lack again the focus on communication and interaction between specific persons in specific contexts that correspondence can grasp.

There are exceptions. Introducing collaborative journaling, Alterio (2004) suggested that journal writing should not be solely an individualized process. The participants of Alterio's research, 9 professionals in different fields, wrote a single journal for a 12-month period. The paper-based journal circulated between the participants, with the researcher also participating in the writing. The members of this journaling had decided to remain anonymous to each other and not to meet face-to-face. Alterio claimed that writing and reading a journal collaboratively contribute to the construction of knowledge, foster creativity, and aid self-directed learning. The true advantage of collaborative writing is that when we write with others, we can gain multiple perspectives on the issues at hand.

In the correspondence of this research the participants had not only met but knew each other well. In all there were 5 writers and 5 readers in our correspondence. The 4 villagers wrote to each other as well as to the researcher, and everyone replied 11 or 12 times. Such a design can be thought of as participatory in nature, even if I as the researcher stayed away from the "field," or the village, most of the year. Correspondence with people that all live in a small village entails a different kind of motivation than one with anonymous writers: The success of the communication is important as everyone keeps on living next door to each other even after the correspondence is over.

The fact that those writing knew the ones reading, apart from me, is of importance for the content of what was written. The participants admitted having left out things they did not want everyone else to know. Had my research interest been a more sensitive phenomenon, it would have been wise to organize the correspondence between anonymous participants or engage in several correspondences between myself and one participant at a time. But as I did not think my topic to

be too private, I went along with the request from the participants to share our letters with everyone. This decision turned out to shed light on the forming of a negotiated and jointly produced a story of the village and its everyday life.

- I found it very nice when I read the letters and noticed that Seija was writing about this and Kaarina about that and Erja about that. And I thought that well, it's good that they write about those things when I didn't (laughing). I kind of real[ized] . . . thought that hey that actually is beautiful. Many times it was about . . .
- The same.
- Yeah, when we like live all in the same place anyway . . .
- It can't be all that different.

But it was a very healthy process. Because in the end you really don't talk all that much with your neighbours of stuff like this. With some yes but with some others not that much of course. But that, like . . . I do think that this correspondence taught us to know each other more. (Erja)

Reading the correspondence

Everyday life as well as the writing of it is a process in time. In the aesthetic focus of this research they are processes essentially bound to seasons and changes in one's immediate natural environment. The structure of the data gathered over a year is thus chronological and progressing as well as deeply contextual. This calls for a reading that is both thematic yet resisting the fragmentation of this sequential data (Lee & Fielding, 2004). This is how I have tackled the reading or analysis of the letters as well. I have singled out recurring themes in the letters of both one individual and of all participants, which I have then reread as they appear sequentially. It is clear that the letters need to be read as a continuum as the participants keep developing ideas and thoughts over time. The main argument of this paper, that beauty has a place relevant to orienting in the process of managing one's everyday life, is addressed also in the reading of the data.

To begin to trace a place for beauty, I have gone through the letters of one participant, Laura, concentrating on a single chore she repeatedly and elaborately addresses in her letters as beautiful: laundry hanging (Rautio, in press). The place of beauty in Laura's writing on laundry is an occasional checking of direction and of position. Her writing is easily read as addressing directions and positions of her everyday life on many levels. She frequently engages in existential wonderings over her place in time, in the long family lineage, in her present family, and as a human being in her natural environment. In this quote, extracted from a notably symbolic letter, Laura seems to feel her place in both concrete and abstract cycles of changing seasons and her life as a whole.

I continue to take laundry outside to dry, at least on the few fair days. Even if it doesn't dry completely, the linens straighten out and get a lovely scent. I wash bed sheets and hang a wide light green double sheet next to a narrow white sheet. The sheets wave in the autumn wind like sails. Against a cloudy brownish green landscape they look like light signals, one a messenger of the summer and one of the coming winter. White and green sheets on the line are beautiful because they are clean, easy and clear. And as such, also a little surreal. They are symbols of the summer gone and the winter to come—from afar everything looks clear and simple. The naked autumn landscape around is much more complex and demanding. Together they are beautiful. There is the whole spectrum of life.

Whatever I find beautiful touches something inside me. It changes when I change.

This checking of direction and of position happens in relation to changes both in the context of Laura's everyday life and in her as a person. This is because beauty as used by a particular subject is not fixed but changes and mirrors the changing of that subject herself. As an evaluative statement beauty works in asserting, assessing, and challenging the status quo of one's life. Through aesthetic relating to one's surroundings, one's place in life can be evaluated and the direction changed. These are not steering maneuvers on a grand scale. They will not change Laura's life course in a memorable way, but they serve a purpose on the level of her daily life. Eventually such minute adjustments and orientations of everyday scale contribute to one's life course and cumulate toward the more critical turning points.

In addition to reading individual participants' letters, I have read everyone's letters as one whole correspondence. I have done this asking not only what the place, function and space, of beauty in one's everyday life is but also within which kind of social frame is this place expressed to others. I have searched for shared topics in the letters and have then, based on these shared expressions, sketched a social frame within which the participants write and with which they also want to write themselves as different from others. This is a frame that seems to challenge the idealizing or depressing rhetoric of life in small villages of the North. With this frame I can begin to bring the shades of gray to the black-and-white rhetoric, which I set out to do in the first place. Such a frame is to me what Brice Heath and Street (2008) have called metanarratives of a group. These metanarratives are shared, jointly produced reasons as to why we do this and not that, and serve a purpose of keeping up an idea of a unique identity.

The collective frame I have traced from the correspondence data is this: There is beauty in surviving. Everyone writes of piles of snow, low degrees of frost, wet summers, old houses, long drives to work, and seasons of unemployment. Everyone also writes of the majestic fells and of growing plants, picking berries, and spotting black grouse and reindeer here and there. The elements of prevalent stereotypical rhetoric, the misery and the idyll are there, but the way these are tackled as everyday life contents challenges both kinds of rhetoric. Most instances of beauty described in the letters have, surprisingly, to do with the miserable: overcoming resistance, such as extreme weather or unemployment. To survive is to know and endure something that others living elsewhere do not know nor would endure but instead label misery. The relation to one's environment comes across as one of daily surviving in a particular place instead of a romantic and authentic connection to some universal nature that we all used to have but have lost.

Afterword

I will conclude by addressing the similarities between everyday life as a lived phenomenon and correspondence as a method to grasp that phenomenon. I will further justify correspondence as one valid method among others and as a successful one in this research and sum up the findings of my research.

As correspondence holds levels of invisibility, one's everyday life also appears as if invisible. Our daily lives are filled with actions and events so fleeting and familiar that they have become mundane and as if invisible to us. In a phenomenological line of reasoning, for this taken-for-grantedness to become an object of inspection, a stimulus is needed. The request to write letters has had such an effect in this research. Invisibility in the method thus compliments the invisibility of the phenomenon: One needs time and space, usually also solitude, to make the everyday visible.

As much as correspondence is essentially a process of reciprocal communication in time, one's everyday life is a contextual process unfolding similarly dynamically in time. In addressing either

as experienced and lived processes, it makes little sense to concentrate on a single slice of time: one letter out of a correspondence or one Monday morning out of everyday life. Phenomena in time call for methods in time.

Finally, correspondence results in letters that are tangible objects to keep. This adds to the weight of the words that are written. Through these tangible objects the writers claim presence in the communication in spite of their absence as persons. The fleeting everyday life also manifests through concrete, tangible focal points such as household objects (see Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007) or commuting routes. Just as the words we choose carefully to write down, the tangible objects that we take to stand for the everyday are telling. Both are attempts to conceptualize and materialize something quite abstract, fleeting, and ever changing.

In addition to the defining concepts I have mapped, an interesting methodological finding of this research is the connection between writing letters and the social skill of empathy. I have argued that correspondence as a mode of communication requires the writers to carefully consider how they choose their words. It requires writers not only to take into consideration to whom and what they are writing but to think of various possible situations of the other person's everyday life where their letter is being received and read. In requiring considerable insight into the other's frame of mind, correspondence seems to call for reflective skills and certainly social skills, especially that of empathy.⁵ In writing about your own life, a considerable part of the embedded reflection is directed toward evaluating your own life seeing it through someone else's eyes. This is worthy of further exploration.

In planning this research, I wanted to know what people find beautiful in their daily lives. I was looking for a list of objects, events, sights, and sounds and the like. As the letters kept accumulating, I began to realize that beauty locates a little differently. A yellow peg is not beautiful because one likes yellow or pegs; it is beautiful precisely on one autumn day when one is alone and feeling a bit lost and notices the peg along with other random yellow objects in her garden and decides to plan one's day a little differently. This is when I rephrased my focus to aesthetic engaging with our surroundings. Beauty is in the relations we have and make to our surroundings. Beautiful things in one's everyday life are not merely found; they are created in continuous engaging with one's surroundings.

The significance of thinking of beauty as something we do rather than as something that exists objectively is in the realization that we can change what we find beautiful. Beauty as used by a particular subject is not fixed but changes and mirrors the changing of that subject herself. In realizing beauty this way, it becomes a source of reflection into our growing as human beings. It is no longer irrelevant or vain that I prefer wildflowers to cultivated ones. Beauty is an entry point to the intricate webs of significance with what we connect and relate ourselves to our surroundings but rarely acknowledge.

Could I have come to this same conclusion about beauty as something we make in order to feel connected by using other qualitative data collecting methods? I could have interviewed the participants 12 times over the course of a year. I could have lived in the village and had regular informal discussions with the participants. In this way there could not have been the same kind of detached collectivity as in reading each others' letters, however. We could have met as a group, but based on the two group interviews I have conducted with these participants, I assume that two participants would have done all the talking. I would not have been able to address the collective frame in their writing and challenge the prevalent view of everyday life being miserable in the north because of the need to survive. I would not have realized that surviving per se is felt to be beautiful as it connects members to a community and to a particular dwelling place.

In having the participants talk instead of write, I would also have a less structured data now. The letters read as thought-over narratives of each month's undertakings. They are reconstructions of jotted down notes. Writing in itself has been an act of creating something beautiful. Had I wished to grasp authentic first-hand experiences somehow, this would be a flaw in the method. I am, however, interested in the aesthetic engagement with one's surroundings as it is used in the managing of daily life. Reflection on such engagement is essential.

I think that the writing of a beauty-experience is a whole another experience. It has to do with the beauty of telling a story, of combining things, the joy and beauty of reflection and interpretation. . . . Even if one is not writing beauty-letters the same thing happens anyway when noticing something beautiful. You in a way store it in yourself either for your own use or for to tell someone about it. (Laura)

Finally, the motivation for the participants to engage in this research seems to have come from expecting a complete year of their lives written down at the end of the research and from a feeling that they were doing something together when also reading each others' letters. I am not arguing for correspondence to replace any other qualitative data gathering method as superior in research of everyday life. I am, however, arguing that it is as valid as other methods but still underused.

Notes

1. The quotes presented in this paper are from the interviews conducted after the year of correspondence (February 2007–January 2008) unless stated otherwise. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms.
2. I am conscious of the threat and simple appeal of blaming the media for “false” representations and offering “true” ones through this research. Such is not my intention. The rural north is an ever evolving mesh of countless definitions, driven by countless interests and viewpoints. I argue that the viewpoint of the villagers' daily lives, especially that of women, has contribution to this mesh, not that it would replace the mesh altogether. See especially Malmsten (2004), Hakulinen, Komppula, and Saraniemi (2004), and Ingold (2007).
3. See Taylor (1992), Mead (1934), Dewey (1916/1985), Corbett (2007), Winston (2008), Plummer (1996), and Denzin (1992); in human geography, for example, Luoto (2008), Karjalainen (2006), and Tuan (1977); in aesthetics, for example, Haapala (2005), Saito (2007), Mandoki (2007), and Light and Smith (2005).
4. I distinguish single letters from correspondence, referring in this chapter to the former as “letter writing” and to the latter as “corresponding.” By single letters I mean one or more letters written without a set time frame and/or without reciprocal exchanging of letters. By correspondence I mean writing letters for a set time (either preset or retrospectively narrowed time frame as with archived correspondence) and in a way that there is recurrent reciprocity. I also realize that there are other modes of written data that could be added to this list; for example, blogs and e-mails, to name a few obvious virtual ones. My list of three—correspondence, journal, and letter writing—serves here as a mere example.
5. Having researched children's letter writing, Brill (2004), for one, concluded that the significance of imagination and empathy in letter writing is worthy of further exploration. She noted that the opportunities for developing imagination and empathy are usually located within narrative writing and that letter writing is seen only as functional writing and as such not applicable.

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