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When Science Meets Art: A/r/tography As a Potential Research Approach

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Abstract

The article is situated in the area of contemporary qualitative research, presenting a qualitative methodology with a hermeneutic-phenomenological profile, supplemented by abduction and creative practice. It explores the intersections of science and art in qualitative inquiry through the lens of Art-Based Research (ABR) and the a/r/tographic method, which integrates the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher. The main research problem seems to be expressed in the question: What functions do artistic activities perform in scientific research? The paper discusses the functions of artistic activity in research, such as deepening understanding, multimodality, diversity, katharsis, fictionalisation, reflexivity, evocativeness, densening, curiosity, emancipation, and openness. These functions show how art serves not only as a cognitive and expressive medium but also as a means of social participation and personal growth. The author draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, combining academic research with art and art therapy practices. A key element of the theoretical discussion is the reference to the phenomenon of narrative and theories that treat narrative as a cultural text, a social phenomenon, and a means of understanding the world and humanity, including the (auto)narrative shaping of identity, thus combining a narratological and biographical approach with the phenomenological-hermeneutic research tradition. Using a/r/tography as a methodological and epistemological frame-

work, the author reflects on the fluid, performative, and dialogical nature of knowledge creation.

Keywords: art-based research, a/r/tography, qualitative inquiry, self-narratives, reflexivity.

Introduction

An important element of the project, based on a doctoral thesis defended in 2025¹, is art, which forms the basis of art therapy communication and enables insight into the experiences and feelings of the subjects. The main purpose of this article is to present considerations on the potential connections between science and art in the research process. The search for an area for artistic activities that open up new fields of exploration of individual experience for researchers. Science and art can be integrated at various levels and complement each other, because art is not only connected with sensory cognition, but, just like science, it uses analytical thinking and leads to the verbalisation of observations.

Looking at reality from a scientific perspective, we see an orderly structure characterised by certain regularities that organise it; science is supposed to discover relationships in the diversity of information. Rational research activity is intended to help gather and select this information and then, by reconstructing reality, arrive at a coherent theory in the form of knowledge about the discovered relationships (Kowalik, 2020). When looking at reality from the perspective of art, we do not assume that there is some hidden structure organising reality by means of laws. We find characteristic information available to our senses, collect it selectively, and then process it in such a way as to attract the attention of others. Patricia Leavy (2018) points out that artistic activities have much in common with qualitative research practice. Artists, like qualitative researchers, illuminate a particular fragment of the world and

¹ Doctoral thesis "Self -narratives and Scripts. The Use of Art Therapy in the Context of Developing an Awareness of Parenting" prepared and defended at Department of Educational Sciences Lodz University in January 2025. Supervisor: dr hab. Magda Karkowska, prof. UŁ.

strive for a deeper understanding of it. Both practices are of artisanal nature, involving the creation of “connections and bridges”, appropriate arrangements for the emergence of given situations through which we gain access to information. These practices require reflection, holistic thinking, courage and openness to dynamic, intuitive actions. This view has recently been gaining popularity. Previously, it was controversial due to the dichotomous perception of science and art.

The term Art Based Research (ABR) was coined by Elliot Eisner in 1993 when he gave a conference presentation under this title. In the same year, the first institute for art-based research was established at Stanford University, led by Eisner, who argued that art, not only in the form of 45 artefacts, but above all as a creative activity that accompanies us in our development from the earliest years of life, can help us understand the problems that arise in education and upbringing (Bielecka-Prus, 2020, p. 20). The aim of art-based research is to broaden and deepen our understanding of the world, opening up avenues of inquiry that are essential for gaining knowledge about human beings and the world in which they live and create their lives. This type of research did not exclude the validity of evidence-based research (EBR), quantitative inquiry, or other qualitative methods. However, it pointed to the limitations of capturing the ‘full story’ with its diverse values (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and drew attention to the role and influence of the researcher in the process of learning about and interacting with the subject of study.

My research describes the experience of parenthood, with particular reference to identity narratives created when adults take on the role of parents. The study concerns a group of aware, reflective parents between the ages of 30 and 40 living in Łódź who are parents of their first and only child no older than 3 years. Qualitative research in a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, art-based, a/r/tographic, takes a closer look at the personal and cultural experiences that shape individuals’ images of the contemporary implementation of the parental role. Within them examples of identity narratives are being created, they also demonstrate the process of developing self-awareness that occurs with involved parenting (Bakiera, 2013).

Research background

Art and life intertwine, complement each other, and intermingle – they do not stand in opposition to each other, but rather harmonise. The same is true of the relationship between art and science; these concepts are not identical, but they are combinable, interchangeable, and complementary (Finley, 2014, p. 62), although they differ in the ways in which actors operate. The inclusion of art in science is not intended to replace legitimate, established methods of cognition or to destroy existing paradigms and criteria for evaluating research work.

ABR representatives direct the results of their work not only to the academic community, but also to the people affected by these activities. In their opinion, a creative way of presenting the results of their work has the potential to increase its reach among recipients and to have a real impact on social change. They advocate opening up science to practical life. This opposition is justified when we know that ABR is an approach in the field of participatory research, action research. Their task is to raise awareness among individuals and communities in order to reduce inequalities. Research of this type is conducted by people who are deeply committed to recognising and understanding the problem and who want to attempt to solve it. ABR is closer to evocative autoethnography than analytical autoethnography. The division mentioned here was suggested by Deborah Reed-Danahay in 1997 and later developed by autoethnographers (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The differences between the analytical and evocative approaches lie in the degree of departure from the positivist perception of the research objective. Analytical autoethnography empowers researchers to examine a given problem in various dimensions, look at its individual parts and rework it from the perspective of the researcher's self. Evocative autoethnography, on the other hand, additionally refers to empathy, the emotional attitude towards what we define as a problem, and assumes a deep level of involvement in the research, triggering not only cognitive but also emotional explorations (Kacperczyk & Kafar, 2020). Art-based research is still a new approach. I have not found many studies on this method in Polish literature.

The functions of artistic activities in research – quality and evaluation criteria

What functions do artistic activities perform in scientific research? They are similar to several basic functions of art in general: cognitive, expressive, communicative, ideological, therapeutic and educational (Golka, 2008). They do not necessarily refer to the aesthetic function – the need to commune with beauty; and the hedonistic function – giving pleasure, although the creative process affects the well-being of the creator, often invigorating, activating and influencing a positive attitude. Creative activities affect both the subject and the researcher in the same way, shaping a mutually constructed relationship. Hence my proposal to look at the functions of artistic activities in scientific research from two perspectives:

1. the perspective of the subject – how art affects the subject, what it can do for the subject, what functions creativity performs in the researcher-subject-research relationship;
2. the perspective of the researcher, who consciously and systematically uses this form of expression to achieve research goals, asking themselves why art should be used in science and how artistic expression shapes scientific thought.

Table 1. Functions of artistic activities in scientific research. Own work based on Bielecka-Prus (2020) and Leavy (2018)

The function of artistic activity in research	Description	Researcher's reflections
Deepening	<p>In ABR perspective art is understood as a mean of communication. Research focuses on deepening the exploration of the quality of the phenomena under study, with the aim of acquiring and communicating knowledge about the world and the inner experiences of others. In this case, art serves as a bridge/support for the creation of new knowledge and its representation.</p>	<p><i>As research participants indicated sometimes it is difficult to answer a question about one's own experiences – when they were going through something, something was alive and exciting. I called such state a blurred image; there are so many words or they are so 'hidden' that the answer does not come, 'I don't know what to say'. Then, after asking the question, the participants might take a crayon or brush and they painted colours, lines, dots, anything, and when they were done, looked at their picture and said where the idea for this form of work came from, what it reminded them of, what emerged.</i></p>
Multimodality	<p>Artistic activities are designed to help the subject express their experiences in an expressive manner. ABR assumes multimodality of activities; a person who is emotionally and physically involved in the world can seek a way of expressing their experiences that is appropriate for them, attempt to capture their experiences in various forms.</p>	<p><i>There were created important pieces of art like: drawings, paintings, collage, decoupage, installations, art books during meetings with the participants. The role of the researcher in this case was to create opportunities for different modes of expression. This approach is accompanied by the belief that we can talk about the world and ourselves in many different ways – I treated words as one of many means of artistic expression; they were not limited to cognitive and communicative functions. All the works, although separate, intertwined and together formed a larger narrative, which the participants brought together during the final meeting that concluded the cycle. During it they viewed their creations in an exhibition held in a closed room. People who were involved in my study created different forms of expression within a single theme.</i></p>
Diversity	<p>ABR is a process of creating, collecting, analysing and interpreting various images of individual experiences. The documentation of the complexity of human life, created through artistic activities, reveals the depth and uniqueness of human experiences, as well as serving as a bridge to capturing social patterns and practices.</p>	<p><i>Individual experiences helped to illuminate the macrosocial perspective, connecting individuals with the community, pointing out, revealing, helping an outsider to see the uniqueness of experiences and the intertwining, bridges and bonds connecting people with others. Creating different images of a single experience increases the chances of its understanding by both the viewer and the author. The statements they made referred not only to individual experiences, but also revealed individual interpretations of intergenerational transmission content. They evoked characters, memories, and dreams. The diversity of forms of expression usually concealed the diversity of characters appearing in the captured self-narratives.</i></p>

Table 1 (continuation)

The function of artistic activity in research	Description	Researcher's reflections
Katharsis	<p>Art has a therapeutic function, it creates an opportunity to express suppressed emotions and can contribute to a deep reworking of experiences. The creative process is a gentle process of learning acceptance, overcoming difficulties, gaining courage and a sense of agency. Art is a path to self-discovery and a form of support.</p>	<p>Viewing one's experiences as stories can help to distance oneself from the problems and difficulties one faces. Expressing experiences in the form of creations helps to tame the emotions associated with them, influences strategies for coping with emotions, and highlights areas of concern. When interacting with their own works of art, they released their emotions, often expressing their intensity through crying, tension or laughter. By looking at their creations, they analysed their experiences, repeating the whole cycle of interpretation (they interpreted them, reinterpreted and repeat it again), thanks to which they could find the most appropriate meaning, sometimes they could catch distance from their experiences, and at other times noticed a problem that they decided to face (in their own therapy, outside of the study). From the researcher's perspective, a kind of katharsis is the moment of sincere conversation with the recipient. Result comes not from his/her willingness to answer, but because of an inner need to share his/her experience. This is the moment when information collected during study reach the researcher in the form of a specific statement, transformed from a creative work into a reflection – a real part of real life.</p>
Fictionalisation	<p>Art opens the door to fiction, which does not mean a departure from authenticity, but rather provides an opportunity to view experiences from a safe distance. Art makes things that were previously perceived as familiar unusual and foreign.</p>	<p>Fiction is just as good a source of knowledge about the world as facts; it never works in isolation from reality. Fiction provides a sense of security (as demonstrated, for example, by film therapy and bibliotherapy). Changes in the world presented, its form and structure, allow us to challenge our existing perceptions of the story, making this world new and giving rise to new/different meanings. At the very beginning of the study, I let the participants use their imagination not verifying the authenticity of events or experiences in any way. They fantasised about their own experiences using artistic means of expression, as they were unable to convey the real characteristics of the experience, which allowed them to look at their self-narratives from a different perspective. The search for meaning in abstract representations opens the way to fiction, but the better the relationship I built with the participants, the less fictionalisation appeared in our meetings. The participants sought to learn the truth about themselves and were ready to leave the realm of abstraction and metaphors to describe their world in words.</p>

Table 1 (continuation)

The function of artistic activity in research	Description	Researcher's reflections
Reflexivity	The ABR researcher reflects not only on the collected data, but also on the entire research process. The work is accompanied by questions concerning the very process of knowledge creation (epistemological reflection) as well as a kind of confessional reflection related to the autoethnographic method of describing the analysis, interpretation and results of the research.	<i>Art combined with science opens various door to describing/understanding the world. The fundamental reflection accompanying ABR researchers is self-reflection. My own reflections were following: do I have the competence, knowledge and skills necessary to create these connections, bridges and bonds? Am I able to lead this process in such a way as to behave in accordance with the ethics of a researcher, while at the same time acting in accordance with the postulates of art – openness, allowing things to happen over which I have no control in the process I have initiated?</i>
Evocativeness	The aim of ABR research is to evoke various experiences in the recipients. Through empathetic understanding, they can participate in this process, enabling them to understand themselves or understand the world of someone close to them.	<i>The research process is a process of building relationships between the researcher, the subject and the recipient. The meanings and interpretations associated with the process of creation itself are agreed upon between the researcher and the recipient. The creative presentation of research and knowledge emerged illustrates this research process through emotionally charged images that influence the recipient without imposing a single perspective, allowing them to decide how they want to exist in this relationship and what they want to take from it for themselves.</i>
Densening	Generating different images of reality – human experiences – aims to lead to a denser description of the world. ABR researchers do not seek to create a single, correct image of reality; quite the contrary. What is important to them is consensual validation (Baron & Eisener, 2012).	<i>Art does not directly show human experiences, but it is a clue leading to their understanding. The more clues we receive, the more aspects of reality we perceive. Thanks to the multitude of images of experiences, we can discover common and separate elements, reach the particles that build the continuity and coherence of human life, as well as the elements that have a destructive effect on the individual. We discover the complexity of experience, on the basis of which we try to capture a contextualised description. Some examples of density in recipients' experiences were: an image of a dangerous steel umbrella with teeth, created by one a woman. An umbrella was supposed to protect what was most valuable to her in life: her 'self', her self-determination also reflecting her need to develop self-confidence and to get rid of feeling guilty in situations where she rejected the requests of others. However, she came to this conclusion at the end of the series of sessions not while creating</i>

Table 1 (continuation)

The function of artistic activity in research	Description	Researcher's reflections
Curiosity	ABR research is helpful in creating new concepts and catalysing new research questions. It uses metaphors and symbols that leave room for new questions. We generate new ones based on knowledge gained from observing the problems posed by researchers.	her contribution. Another example -the father participating in the study created two works on the theme of the lifeline. His wire sculpture showed a difficult, confusing childhood, a quiet adult life and an interrupted present. The map he created on the same theme showed childhood as full of dangerous places, swamps, slopes and dense forests, and the present as terra incognita, unknown territory. Next he added a branch made of delicate golden wire to his sculpture. This element helped him understand that it is more difficult for him to cope with the entanglements of past experiences than with the swamps, and that the broken piece of the present will remain terra incognita unless he begins to describe this area – how? In various ways, hence the branch in his work.
		When we create art, we not only create a product, but also a space for it. We do not want to prove anything to anyone, present a single truth, or reach a conclusion that closes the subject. We want to create a space for new questions arising from the experience of contact with the product, questions for which there are no quick answers. Questioning is associated with stimulating the viewer's reflectiveness. It assumes the possibility of opening a dialogue. An example of opening dialogue was the experience of one of the mothers who, as part of the meetings, built a model of the house she wanted. In the building she created out of cardboard, she carefully decorated all the small elements (including gluing curtains). It was only after several meetings that she noticed that one room remained without any accessories, was grey, and she did not want to change anything in it. There was no door or stairs to it either. In the end, she said that this was a room where she wanted to hide all the patterns, generational experiences and phrases that she now recognised as harmful to her, and which she did not have the strength to fight now, but she really did not want her daughter to enter this room and draw on the negative aspects of her experiences; she really wanted to protect her from this room. This room revealed itself in each subsequent meeting, raised more and more questions, stimulated the subject's internal dialogue, and also became the subject of her psychotherapy (outside of the research).

Table 1 (continuation)

The function of artistic activity in research	Description	Researcher's reflections
Emancipation	<p>Art in research is supposed to challenge accepted assumptions, structures and theories, paving the way for a revision of judgements and conventional ways of perceiving the world by introducing elements of uncertainty, dislocation and disruption.</p>	<p>Artistic activities challenge dominant narratives, often expressing dissent and requiring activity on the part of creators, an idea that the artist attempts to capture. Art liberates audiences by enabling them to see other perspectives on a given thing. Art and creative activities open the ability to liberate themselves from oppressive structures. Their main role is to develop self-awareness and reflectiveness, and their goal is to create new worlds that are better for the individual. The creative activities at the beginning of our meetings made the participants feel uncomfortable, often causing a sense of awkwardness, a kind of inadequacy. Through creation, the participants overcame their limitations and patterns of thinking resulting from their educational backgrounds. They learned how to use artistic means without judging their creations before finishing their work and without expecting a specific outcome from the creative process. They unleashed their potential by attempting to create in a safe atmosphere.</p>
Openness	<p>Art-based research is characterised by openness and egalitarianism. It often concerns marginalised and socially excluded people. It is a form of participatory research, assuming symmetry in the researcher-narrator relationship and openness to presenting the research results to a wide audience.</p>	<p>What does it mean for an artist to lock their work away in a drawer? Can we compare locking away the results of research involving a group of subjects in a long-term, emotional biographical process in a scientific journal available in academic libraries? An ABR researcher, like an artist, is involved in the process, takes up topics that are personally important to them, and cares just as much as artists do that their work sees the light of day and becomes available to people who are interested in the issue they are addressing. ABR researchers ask themselves: who outside the academic community will want to read a dozen-page article or scientific paper with theoretical chapters and methodological considerations? So they create art that they present to their audience. As an artist, I took on the role of narrator and created several short stories depicting scenes from the lives of young people in their role as parents. The stories are still waiting for their moment to come on stage and connect with the audience.</p>

Sources: Author's research.

The above functions largely overlap with the characteristics of qualitative research described by Dariusz Kubinowski (2016). The use of art in scientific research does not disrupt the order of scientific cognition; it is an activity aimed at creating additional space for cognition, opening up to data flowing from sensory cognition, inviting the researcher to self-exploration and sharing their discoveries. Art Based Research, like Action Research, is a research model that sets out a research path leading to the adoption of a specific research method. In the case of ABR, one such method may be a/r/tography

A/r/tography as a method of studying self-narrative

A/r/tography is a method combining three perspectives, presenting six renderings concerning the articulation of aspects of the artist/researcher/teacher, implemented through the activities of artist-teachers who follow the path of constantly asking questions (Muszyńska, 2013).

The combination of creative activities, reflection, critical analysis, the process of reasoning and research activity is a way of looking at how knowledge is constructed (López-Peláez-Casellas & Garcia-Herrera, 2019). Rita L. Irwin (2022), one of the authors of the method, points out that the practice of a/r/tography explores the world through a continuous process of creating art. Irwin, like the creators of ABR, argues that combining art with science is not intended to illustrate what is already known, but to create additional and/or enhanced meanings of what we learn in the creative process (Irwin, 2013). A/r/tography is therefore a research method, a creative practice and a performative pedagogy, situated in the space between (Irwin, 2013). This space in between is constructed through the integration of three roles that the researcher takes on.

This method does not contain a list of rules, steps or tools to be used to reach an important conclusion; instead, the creators of the method encourage the adoption of a living form of research that is fluid, flexible and continuous (Schultz & Legg, 2020), activities of artists and teachers, resonating and connecting with acts of research. Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Sylvia Wilson Kind (2005) point out that being involved in the practice of

a/r/tography means exploring the world through the process of creating art and writing. I lead conversations with my research subjects using various forms of communication. I use art and artistic activities to evoke information and extract meaning from it. Various forms of expression develop a path through creation towards cognition – discovering ways of experiencing and understanding the world. It is for this purpose that a/r/tography combines knowledge (theoria), creation (praxis) and performance (poiesis) – to create new forms of cognition and knowledge creation, moving away from traditional divisions – this process does not end with the determination of a single acquired truth, according to the assumptions it is continuous, and knowledge is always in the process of becoming and comes from different perspectives. A/r/tography is rhizomatic in its nature, so one should not seek to define its end or beginning; it is polyphonic, engaging the researcher, the researched and the audience; it is open, as one can enter the process from many different points of view, constituting itself in the process, research questions are imagined, problematised, constructed and reconstructed along with reflection and experience of one's own images, narratives and counter-narratives (Schultz & Legg, 2020, p. 245). A/r/tography is constantly being created, so it is a process that involves double imaging – art and words combine and intertwine, creating additional meanings without illustrating each other. Art is meant to be an element of conversation, a starting point, a means or a turning point in a conversation.

Three perspectives in research and six explanations

A/r/t is a metaphor for the combination of the roles of artist/researcher/teacher. The researcher is simultaneously an artist and a teacher (in my case, an art therapist). These roles are intertwined. One person observes the research participants from different perspectives. In this approach, the researcher is not the main interpreter, but the inventor of knowledge. Revealing the meaning and presenting the way of understanding the experiences that can be extracted from the dense fabric of the research subjects' narratives is no longer the main goal of the researcher. From the outset, they assume that

there is no single correct answer to the question posed; what they discover is complex, relational, singular (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008), and also depends on the moment in which it is revealed. Being an art therapist meant creating and co-creating the research process, supporting the creative process of revealing experiences leading to a change in the subjects' understanding of themselves of experiences, actions and processing of products that arise as a result of deep reflection. It is a role that attempts to capture phenomena, things and experiences through artistic activities and within them. As an a/r/tographer, the artist transforms the knowledge they have acquired into a story aimed at a wide audience. They create a narrative in a form that suits them – they may write a novel, create a collage, film, installation or dance the results of their research, as Patricia Leavy mentions in the book mentioned earlier. As an artist I created some narratives (short stories) coming from my reflection and feelings induced within meetings with narrators.

The teacher performs their daily role, is with the group, leads and supports it. This role is connected with the 'natural' or 'existing' perspective. Activities take place in a complementary environment, a place close to the teacher and the research participants. By assuming the role of teacher-a/r/tographer, we take on additional responsibilities related to the research process, changing our perspective rather than necessarily introducing additional scenarios for action. The teacher-artist is a person with natural competences, skills and resources that allow them to realise their creative aspirations in non-research situations. Research takes place in the spaces between roles, in the so-called third space (the space in between).

The activities resulting from the performance of roles and activities consistent with one's own identity are intertwined. As Muszyńska writes, "a teacher learning from an artist and a novice researcher is, in a/r/tography, a term for the first degree of hybridisation of new creative activities – inquiries" (Muszyńska, 2013, p. 340). An a/r/tographer constantly strives for understanding, opens the door to diverse interpretations, and remains in their roles, thus gaining and creating knowledge from different perspectives. Most important was to be constantly attentive, to notice details, those cracks and gaps, and not to overstep the boundaries of the subjects' willingness to learn about

themselves. This process is underpinned by a narrative paradigm in which the participants' identities are dynamically constructed through the stories they tell (Bruner, 1990), enabling them to give coherent meaning to their scattered aesthetic experiences. The interpretations of the works were created in dialogue; the creators were those who pointed the way to understanding the work, and I deepened their understanding by means of open questions and paraphrasing, so the interactivity of the interpretation was key. This study showed me how important it is in qualitative research to wait patiently for the phenomena of experience to emerge spontaneously in the situations created by the researcher. Despite my curiosity, the lack of intrusive questioning helped me to deepen my ability to listen to the respondents.

The authors of the a/r/tographic method point to six renderings – proximity, living research, excess, echoes, metaphors and metonymies, openings (Springgay et al., 2005). These are features that help to better understand the approach, elements whose preservation allows us to determine the affiliation with a given research method. They can also be understood as theoretical spaces through which we can reach artistic ways of cognition, of being a researcher and an artist at the same time. For me, they set the perspective for action and constitute a point of reference in the methods of data collection I create.

Conclusions

In summary, conducting a/r/tographic research involves full engagement in lively inquiry, in which we combine the roles of researcher, artist and teacher, just as we combine art and science. The process of combining should result from a life attitude, the practice of deeply experiencing life, reflectiveness, openness to meanings flowing from sensory cognition, the body, the mind and emotions. The fluidity, uncertainty and temporariness accompanying the research are combined with the performativity of insight and knowledge acquisition.

A/r/tographic actions and explanations are not simply art or text presenting a developed concept or research results. The research process gives rise to

various possibilities for creating meanings, which we should not confine to one specific form. Leaving the door open to interpretation and reinterpretation of statements, collecting content captured in excess by the a/r/tographer, requires a diverse approach to creating analyses: visual, aesthetic, textual representations, which, as the authors of the method point out, dance and play alongside each other (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 908).

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