How novels and short stories are resources for learning about the other

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Following a study of fiction written by young, black South African authors, narratives written by highly acclaimed, young authors in Norway are discussed as codifications of generative themes. In Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, thematic investigation of generative themes formed the starting point of conscientization. Initial codification of the themes was then discussed in groups of learners. In their de-codification dialogues learners’ own experiences and insights about the theme resulted in a new codification that was discussed and decodified again. When reflection is coupled with action, this ongoing dialectic allows for change in both the learner and the world in which the generative theme is located. The question is posed in this paper as to how thematic investigations in novels and short stories can serve as a resource in this learning process aiming at greater understanding of and even empathy for the other. This study points to four generative themes investigated by the young Norwegian authors. Finally, these themes are briefly discussed in relation to Galtung’s calling for empathy as a necessary ingredient of peace, Bourdieu’s theory and research findings on modernity in Norway.

Key words: fiction, thematic investigation, conscientization, generative theme, codification, de-codification, culture of peace

Introduction
Social science has researched and theorized variations in cultures within societies. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, claims that a sub-national culture is embodied in what he calls habitus conditioned by variations in the composition of cultural and economic capital as well as the volume of the specific mix of these two forms of capital. When cultural encounters occur, the parties may have few experiences and scattered knowledge of each other even though they are citizens of the same country. And when foreigners arrive, they are met with this range of cultures within a new society. Their encounters in the new land may be further complicated by the lack of a common history, common language and a new political system. In addition, visitors from the outside carry with them a specific habitus from their own countries. A multitude of possible encounters among cultures is the result.

When I - like the birds – migrated to South Africa in the winters of 2008 – 18, I learned about the country, its history, current challenges and future plans in many ways: Readings in advance, meeting colleagues and students of development education at the University of South Africa, encountering people in everyday life and sharing experiences and impressions with friends. I visited museums and tourist attractions and read biographies of those in leadership of the liberation struggle. And I started to wonder about how the transition from apartheid to democracy had been experienced. I decided to search for answers in novels written by young, black authors because I thought that their growing up with the changes would be reflected in their writings. I was not disappointed.
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They wrote about how it was to grow up as a black child in apartheid and how it was to suddenly wake up in the 1993 democratic state and participate in the new project of democracy. Had the brutal and murderous colonization over many centuries finally come to a close when this dramatic change from apartheid occurred? Formally yes, but these authors made me well aware that history has a way of joining us in the present and beyond.ii The young authors wrote about unspeakable experiences in the encounters between white and black people as children in the apartheid state. They made me aware of how traumatic early childhood experiences were part of the socialization of smiling youngsters I passed by on the sidewalk. And the stories I read made me feel that I understood more of what my colleagues at the university might have experienced along with their children and grandchildren.

And this awareness of the other’s experience is important in any cultural encounter. As explained in his theory of peace, Galtung (2013) sees empathy as understanding the other as the other understands him- or herself. And this quality is important in relation to transformation of conflicts and healing of past and present traumas. Even equity as a product of cooperation for mutual and equal benefit depends upon empathy. Earlier I have discussed how Galtung’s theory of peace is essential in peace education.iii In this paper I shall focus on how novels and short stories can be a resource in learning empathy defined as learning how the other understands him- or herself. In the last part of the paper, I pose the question as to what extent the other’s self-understanding includes considerations – and may be analysis – of how contextual conditions may have impacted his or her self-understanding Haavelsrud, 2016; Haavelsrud, 2017; 2020, ch. 6 and 7. This enlarged understanding of what empathy entails may be different from a self-understanding in which the person does not reflect upon influences in his background growing up under specific contextual conditions.

Methodology

Based on my learning from young black authors in South Africa, I assume that fiction is an important learning resource in thematic investigations for use in learning about the other. The stories told in fiction are dense with expressions, feelings, and interactions among characters. Authors have, like the actors in a theater, such a sophisticated feeling for others that they can describe how cultures are embodied in their characters and in encounters among them.

Inspired by Freire’s work, I argue that novels or short stories contain thematic investigations that are useful for selecting generative themes in conscientization. I value the author’s thematic investigations as an initial resource in learning about the theme. Readers can critically supplement and improve on the author’s insights. In such de-codification they can elaborate on the generative theme in light of their own experiences, theoretical understanding, assumptions and beliefs.iv

I shall value the authors’ thematic investigations as preliminary codifications of generative themes in the sense that the text can be critically received by the reader. Even the author in question may be critical to the story.v The story is in a way not finished and it could also have been different. But the author has at least made a first attempt at communicating the theme in the story to others. And the reader has the opportunity to de-codify the author’s first codification of the theme and come up with new and maybe alternative insights according to own experiences with, and thoughts about, the theme at hand.
Just like in the South African study, I have selected young authors because I believe that the stories of younger authors may better reflect their experiences in being socialized into society as developed the last decades. Older authors whose primary socialization happened in a society quite different from a modernity as it is now, may not be in the same position to provide the insights of young authors.

I have selected two male and two female young authors. Three of the authors have received prizes for their first book and the fourth was nominated for the Brage prize in 2020\textsuperscript{vi}. And as will become clear, the selected stories relate to different settings in Norwegian society.

**Encounters**

In the following stories the reader learns about experiences and relations of protagonists dealing with everyday life in a modern society. Everyday encounters are framed in contextual conditions that are either explicitly communicated in the story or can be ‘read by implication’ through the experiences and relations highlighted in the story.

**Self-centered urban woman**

Her whole life, Karin has fled from everything and everyone who wants to possess her. She has a daughter she rarely contacts, a job she never dreamed of, and she largely socialises only with men she meets on the internet. But when her daughter’s marriage becomes at risk of falling apart, she is forced out into a world that demands something from her (www.booksfromnorway.com).

In her debut novel entitled *Nada*, Stoltenberg (2020a, 2020b)\textsuperscript{vii} portrays a middle-aged and middle-class Oslo woman who keeps her distance to everything and all who requires something of her – including her own daughter and frequent lovers searched on the internet for brief experiences.

The protagonist has an antenna for everything that may take her ‘freedom’ away, leaving lasting relations with others unwanted. Even her daughter and her family are peripheral in her life – at least until her daughter invites her for a weekend trip to London. Her egoism, or self-centeredness, is difficult to keep up with when her daughter needs her help. That weekend provokes memories of past relationships with men she has ‘loved’ over the years demonstrating how discontinuity in a strange way turns into an experience of continuity. The fragmentary becomes a whole. Mainly short-term relationships with men, and continuous attention for more men, has kept and keeps her busy on the internet dating sites.

The weekend in London provokes memories and thoughts about herself, her daughter and former husband as well as episodes that have been left untouched for so long. After her memorizing some of these episodes, the reader cannot but reflect on how her life may have been void of a higher purpose - restricted to a fragmentary narcissism that ends up in little of permanent value for neither her nor her family. Maybe this is the meaning of the title of the book – the Spanish word for nothing – nada – a reminder of the text in the tune by Kris Kristofferson ‘freedom is the word for nothing left to lose’? If this commonsense daily labyrinth of short-term relations in the middle class of urban Norway should serve a higher purpose, it might have to be related to some theme, goal or value beyond itself.
In London they meet some successful middle-class old school friends of the daughter. They do not hint to an outside view of themselves until two of them reveal their working class (Jack) and upper middle-class roots (Ed), respectively. The latter asserts that the City of London is corrupt and that the government governs the city like a mafia (p. 107). Jack, who grew up with a single mother in the working class of South London - and now a lawyer! - could not resist to suggest that Ed´s complicity in the system he criticizes is clear from the fact that his father owns 6 apartments in London. And even worse, he says, is that his father´s school mates from Eton occupy half of the departments in that government he had criticized – adding:

I will actually say that the most solidaric act you can do is to be brutally honest with yourself and the opportunities your background have given you, which companies you have been included in, and not the least what you have been able to get away from. I am a lawyer, I know it (my translation – p. 108).

This class conflict ends up with the agreement that all - including Jack from the working class and now a middle-class lawyer - need brutal self-criticism as they are all complicit in the system. But this introspection of own weaknesses is not easy, says the daughter - because a person cannot move away from his or her origin. This sense of being stuck in the past reflects the ethos of the novel in that the life of the main character never gets close to finding out much about why she thinks, feels and behave the way she does. It is as though her passivity and lack of engagement in anything except her dating, sexual activity, sporadic and self-centered loneliness and detachment points the reader to an epiphenomenon leaving any explanation of why out of the novel.

This 30-year-old female novelist has chosen to write about the life of a detached and self-centered middle-class Oslo mother and grandmother without few considerations to societal issues and explanations. It is a diagnostic novel in the sense that the reader is left with few answers as to which influences in that society may have contributed to this personality. The reader is left with few answers to questions of why the author has selected this special character without revealing more of forces at work in Norwegian society. It is as though the author´s detachment from social analysis may be part of the message as it brings forth the ethos of the detached protagonist. Maybe this is a form of empathy in which the author sees the world as the protagonist does? We learn about the self-centered code of a protagonist living her life as though she is the center of the world detached from expectations and responsibilities beyond her loose relations to own family and short-term relations to one man after the other. At the same time the country and the world is confronted with the most difficult issues challenging attitudes of political indifference.

This protagonist does not fit the stereotype suggested by Kittelsen (2019) that many women give, but never ask others for something because they give priority to the will of others. Øverland (2019) points out that the protagonist´s family exemplifies a modern and dissolved, but to some degree, communicating family. Mother and daughter both come from family relations that have given them lasting wounds that tend to be reproduced. Urke (2019) finds this novel to be centering around the theme of what the costs are of being free versus having responsibilities towards others. And how ridiculous we are on the path to find ourselves when we end up in losing ourselves in either meditation and vegetarianism or network dating.
A teenage girl stuck with the rural beast

Svisdal (2019) studies human relations in a remote mountain valley in Norway (Landro, 2019). The author tells in an interview that the novel is his version of growing up on a farm in Sunndal at the foot of the Dovrefjell Mountains. Svisdal was born in 1985 and his protagonist is a teenage pregnant girl from this farming community on her first summer job at a tourist cabin. She becomes a witness to the dysfunctionality in the community. The teenager finds herself in the midst of explicit gossip about conflicts and strong contradictions. She has left a dysfunctional family herself, and in her summer job she listens to stories involving people and families she knows about in the neighborhood. Opinions about others are clearly and verbally expressed – but also expressed in more hidden sentiments strengthening the novel’s main message of self-destruction of both persons and the community as a whole Andersen (2018a, 2018b).

The author notes that it is important and revealing how people think and talk about others close to them and that gossip says as much about the gossiper as about the person(s) that the gossip is about. The young, female protagonist is exposed to gossip about people and families she knows very well, and these destructive stories may have lasting consequences in her relations in the community. The author feels that rural communities still exist where intense and evil struggles among neighbors live on. An example is how a family is described by one of the characters in the novel as a chaos of pettiness, insanity and evil will.

The author asserts that he believes that functional families in our society is in minority. The title of the novel Seg til inkjes means that a person aims at self-extinction. This conflict-ridden locality or ‘community’ in rural Norway is exposed through six characters voicing their opinions about others – in past and present events. Is this not the code of the Norwegian rural beast? The author says that he has tried to make an honest portrait of the rural community, but that he has been afraid that the book is too negative.

The author’s father knows the history of his own as well as neighboring farms back to the 1600s. This knowledge of local culture, the author thinks, is a condition for the strong feelings attached to the locality including conflicts among neighboring families stretching back for generations. The new generation becomes complicit in the reproduction of conflicts in the past. In spite of this pride in local history, traditions and culture many rural communities experience that young people leave for the city. He thinks that many are frustrated by being in a situation that does not suit their plans and their abilities. Many feel that they are stuck in a choice made either by themselves or a choice made for them.

Andersen (2018b) points out that the conflicts in this book are mirrored in the young female protagonist who is exposed to it all at the mountain cabin. It is a prism for a world of miscommunications and anger. The main theme is the quarrel among ordinary people in a place where things have fallen apart. This dysfunctionality and fragmentation keep the interactions going among the characters as they are drawn to each other. This dysfunctionality of everything creates a shared experience. But in the distance urban life is ‘heavy as concrete’ and its sound is noticeable, he writes.
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Drop-out and left behind
Dale (2016, 2017, 2018) is born in the municipality of Froland in Southern Norway and his short stories in Working Hands have to do with those who have fallen by the wayside, who did not manage to get through school, and dropped out. The unskilled. Those who never left home. Those who never found anyone to settle with, and those who were abandoned. The short stories all take place in the same environment and deal with ordinary people’s lives and work. All of them are toiling away with their own problems: love, economy and themselves. Some are trapped in situations they cannot extricate themselves from, while others have to choose who they want to be and how they want to live. He received the Tarjei Vesaas Author’s Debut Prize in 2016 and Sørlandets litteraturpris 2017, an annual award dedicated to authors from the Southern region of Norway (www.booksfromnorway.com).

One of the classmates laughed and said that he had bigger tits than Leonora – a girl they both knew – and that he was in the wrong shower. This episode begins the first short story, and the bullying ended his gym participation. He quit the German class because he felt bad when the teacher asked him to read the language aloud or to answer questions about irregular verbs. He quit secondary school, and as a grown man he still worked on short-term ‘contracts’ in a brewery. Upon a visit to his widowed mother, she grabbed his hands and uttered in pride that he now had working hands like his father. But the uncertainty of continued work, and no completed education needed for applying to better paid or permanent jobs was hard to stomach as his girl was expecting. He did not even have a driver’s license.

Tilflytteren (The newcomer – my translation) is another short story. Frank in his 40ies is still living with his mother. He used to listen to others talking rather than talking himself. On a snowy night in the small rural community, he makes an expedition to the hamburger joint for something to eat. Another motive is his curiosity of, maybe attraction to, the new woman working there. His male friend, who is also single, turns up as well and they discuss the ‘altruistic’ motive of safely accompanying the woman on her way back home to a remote part of the hilly landscape in the harsh weather. The protagonist is able to convince his friend that the woman has a bad reputation and that he should stay away from her. His friend departs upon hearing this, and the reader can only guess what happens later in the evening when the woman finishes her work, and both leave the joint.

I grøfta (In the ditch - my translation) tells the story of a drive to a cabin and an evolving conflict of tastes and styles among the youngsters. One of them had invited a person unknown to the others and this disturbs the cultural norms in the group. The story ends by one of them leaving after conflictual observations and talk about taste and style especially focused on the newcomer. These cultural encounters with strong social class tones are clear manifestations of preferred behaviors, talk and language, style of clothes and food preferences. Beer versus wine and poker versus chess. A ‘masculine’ juicy hamburger and potato chips with a can of beer versus ‘gay food’ like beef and creamed potatoes with a glass of wine. Processes of exclusion and inclusion are at the center of the story operationalizing social class background, belonging and aspirations in modern society.
This cultural encounter ends when the former school drop-out leaves the group, even before they have been able to get the car back on the road after ending in a ditch. The preference of those who prefer chess instead of poker may have been the final provocation.

Jon is the title of the story of a divorced, unemployed man with health issues, suicidal tendencies and thoughts of aggressive acts towards people he meets. His many job applications have been turned down in spite of the fact that he had taken a course in the social services administration on how to write a good application. In his dismal situation he begins to think about his best childhood friend that he has not seen for years. And when he knocks on his door after all those years, his wife opens and invites him in for coffee. She tells him that his old friend is now an engineer with a good job in a respectable firm – that he is in the gym and expected back soon. He decides not to wait for his return, and as he walks away from the house, he notices a car turning into the driveway. He does not turn around to meet his successful friend.

This book is a valuable study in the manner in which exclusion processes are rooted in everyday interactions in present-day society. As one reviewer writes in the 2017 edition, the book highlights a geographical and social point of view outside the urban middle-class and gives us an insight into what it is like to be an unskilled worker in the new, flexible world of work.

Mother of autistic child
Nilssen (2018a, 2018b) was born in Førde, Western Norway in 1977 and lives in Bergen. Her novel was nominated for the 2020 Brage Prize in fiction. The jury found her novel to be a touching letter from a mother to her beloved, firstborn nine-year-old autistic son who needs to be cared for around the clock. The author, who is also the narrator, is on sick leave after exhausting days with the child, and at the same time dealing with a rigid bureaucracy in line with a diagnostic ideology.

The book follows the mother and son, and the rest of the family, day by day from the last Monday in November until the third Thursday in May. This is a story about the fine line between accepting and giving up. This is a moving story about love that hits like a fist. Daniel loses his speech and changes personality. For his mother, Olaug, it is the start of a battle, first to understand what is happening to the boy, and then to help him get the care and resources he needs. All in the family suddenly find themselves in a lifechanging, challenging situation. There is a long and painful process shared in this novel written with deep human insight and love in the year Daniel turns 10 years old.

This mother of three has seen her firstborn develop from an unusually awake toddler to an autistic and little communicative nine-year-old. It is a Sisyphus work with daily routines and pedagogical methods that give few results. The mother reveals her feelings of fear of striking back when the boy bites her - in sharp contrast to magical moments of harmony between mother and child – even though the reader cannot forget the toil that has gone before. It is a story about unconditional love that demands everything.

The title of the book has been translated to A Tale of Terrible Times:

“It’s a picture of Mum,” you said from the back seat. “Where’s Mum?” I replied from the front seat. You took a long time to formulate your answer, whether
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because your speech was in the process of disintegrating, or because you were searching for a poetic line. “On the car’s ear” (www.booksfromnorway.com).

This book is a powerful story about what it means to be the mother of a disabled child. And about the fight to allow the child to be who he is, and to get the support that he and his family need.

Pedersen (2020) writes in her review that this novel shows how the mother communicates with different bureaucracies and experts in the welfare state demonstrating the complexity she confronts in trying to deal with her burden as caretaker of an autistic child. The welfare state offers help conditioned upon a capacity of the caretaker to deal with many sectors and people involving a bureaucratic maze that has adopted a diagnostic ideology that itself becomes a problem. The meetings between the mother and the many bureaucrats and experts are analyzed in the study. The latter oftentimes do not know each other, whereas the mother knows them all. Some of the bureaucrats and caretakers even use concepts that may be unknown to other experts. These meetings create a frustration and anger in the mother who says “… it does not matter what you call it” – which is also the title of Pedersen’s thesis (my translation from Norwegian).

The mother uses frustration and anger as a tool in her meetings with the welfare state in the hope to receive help faster – knowing full well that other parents in the same situation may not be as resourceful as she is in dealing with the system. On the way the mother channels her anger into hidden and inner dialogues. But she accepts the terrible diagnosis of autism after doctors and child psychologists have done their studies and examinations required to get access to extra days at a daycare center.

Generative themes
The authors have shown their preference for themes by writing about them. Interactions and encounters in the stories reveal to varying degrees how the characters understand themselves. I can receive the stories shaking or nodding my head, underlining and quoting text I find important. I can join others in dialogue about the merits of the story and to what extent it provides a good rendering of phenomena highlighted in the book. Dialogue with others will certainly bring about new insights and formulations of problems discussed.

The story as told by the author is therefore generative in the sense that the reader(s) can change it in harmony with his or her background, insights and experiences. This de-codification on the part of the reader(s) adds to the original story as told by the author. De-codification involves relating reader interpretation and understanding of the stories – maybe even changing the story to fit own experiences and insights. The reader’s reception of the stories becomes part of the process of building empathy for how the characters understand themselves. I have selected four generative themes in the stories and some of the themes are dealt with in more than one story. Other readers may select other themes.

Theme 1: Individualism, freedom, narcissism
The search for freedom from family ties and requirements from work is combined with individualism and narcissism. It is interesting that the middle-aged city lady carries a strong disposition to this end. The story told about her by an author that could have been her daughter, points towards a theme concerning inter-generational relations among women. And this is especially interesting in a time of some success in building more gender equity in society. Many
questions can be asked about why a young female author give priority to a story about a woman whose dispositions are seeking freedom, lack of responsibilities to others including own family and lack of meeting society’s call for accomplishments. The meaning she finds in life is the meaning of discontinuities and enjoyments in the here and now with partners that constantly change. It seems likely that this is combined with a narcissistic drive as well.

Theme 2: Dysfunctional families
In both rural and urban settings, the stories deal with dysfunctional families. In the rural setting the dysfunction of the community as such is more apparent, maybe because community relations are more transparent than in the city. And the rural dysfunction seems to be related to the attraction of the city manifested in the numbers of young people – especially girls – moving away from rural communities leaving older people behind. This phenomenon may also be related to the call for accomplishing a career requiring studies and work experiences not available in rural settings. Traditionally, girls and women were centers of family life in the division of labor in the primary sector of the economy. With the call of gender equity in modern and neoliberal economic development, their key family life functions are often left behind – especially in rural communities that do not offer opportunities for wanted careers.

Theme 3: Obstacles too high
Dropping out is a result of not having the capacity to tackle obstacles that are too high. Bullying in school may be a beginning of processes ending with loneliness and fear of others outside the home. Dropouts logically leave the place of the greatest obstacle and live with the consequences of inadequate education and short-term work contracts. What it is that starts a dropout process may be difficult to know. Except that it happens in encounters with others and that the origin of the problem may be a question of style and taste. In other words, it may be a question of the amount and composition of economic and cultural capital according to Bourdieu’s theory. This generative theme has been studied in the social and human sciences. It would seem that the theme is illustrated in the encounters in Working Hands in a way not available in scientific studies.

Theme 4: Complex bureaucracy and diagnostic ideology
Modern society is characterized by a complex bureaucracy that all citizens have to relate to in all affairs between the individual and the state. When health services in addition combine this complex bureaucracy with a diagnostic ideology, the citizen who needs services are required to handle this complexity in management and medical expertise. When the two are combined the complexity becomes even more complex. The citizen may experience a wide range of experts and bureaucrats dealing with the case. Different experts, bureaucrats, professions and managers may not even know each other. The time needed for decision may collide with the need of the citizen, as often is the case with applications for refugee status for instance. The mother of the autistic child experienced great problems in light of this combination of diagnostic ideology and complex management of health services. And she is concerned that others may not be in a situation to tackle it the way she did.

Two forms of empathy
If we, as Galtung, define empathy as the quality to understand the other as the other understands him- or herself, the stories are a valuable resource in that interactions reveal emotions, insights and will power of characters. The reader learns about the characters’ self-understanding when their
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thinking, feeling and actions are exposed in the narrative. We learn about their dispositions and habitus, as Bourdieu would call it.

As noted, however, self-understanding may be void of any consideration of how contextual conditions have been of influence in one’s life since birth. And the reader may have to read between the lines in the stories to pick up hints about past influences. The reader can ponder about what might be the history behind specific sentiments, behavior and interactions in the encounters. The influence of contextual conditions may be deduced by implication. This understanding of the other I shall coin as an enlarged empathy in the sense that the other is also understood in light of contextual conditions that have been of influence upon his or her habitus.

The other may not have the insight suggested by Bourdieu (and other contributions in the social and human sciences) that contextual conditions helps explain the formation of a person’s dispositions to think, feel and act. If so, the person may not see him- or herself as part of a macro structure that may have been a causal factor in the formation of his or her self-understanding. This understanding of oneself as an object of external influences has to be coupled with the understanding that the human being is also a subject. This is thoroughly discussed by Richards and Andersson (2021) arguing that because material facts always have cultural roots, transformation of the material world may be the result of cultural changes. And they add that the human being’s potential for practicing ethics could become a major force in transformation of both culture and structure in a world in need of change.

Self-understanding may be quite different from the understanding of a social and human scientist who researches the complexity of how constitutive structural rules might be decisive for cultural expressions, as argued by Richards. The complexity of understanding the dialectic relations between culture and contextual conditions is avoided in theories positing a dualism been culturalism and structuralism. A shining example of a social theorist who attempts an integration is, as noted in the introduction, Bourdieu’s theory. It requires analysis of the embodiment of culture in relation to specific fractions of society defined by a specific mix and volume of cultural and economic capital. His theory also claims that primary socialization is a most important force in the formation of a person’s dispositions and qualities.

Because of my knowledge of, and interest in, Bourdieu’s work, I might use his insights in de-codifying the generative themes above by explaining the characters’ habitus in light of early childhood experiences as expected in a specific fraction of society. Another reader may activate other insights in the abundant flora of theories and research in social and human sciences. And readers without interest in, and knowledge of, social and human sciences can use their own ideas, experiences, beliefs and assumptions in explaining interactions among characters in the stories. Any de-codification would be helped by a dialogue with others who have read the same stories.

Let us have a look at how recent research on modernity in Norway can provide explanations and insights in the de-codification of the stories as told by the authors. According to Madsen (2018), for instance, modernity has produced a culture of accomplishments in which it is required to get ahead by showing off in competition with others and documenting oneself. He poses the question about what this new generation in modernity is missing in his book entitled Generasjon Prestasjon (Generation Accomplishments – my translation). Market-driven individualism and competition
give little space to family life as it used to be, and solidarity is not a priority in a system that calls for a never-ending struggle to succeed. Those who do not adapt to this modernity, lack capacity to participate in the competition, or encounter obstacles too difficult to overcome, are excluded and left behind. The results show up, for instance, mental and somatic illness, fearing the other and turning inward in narcissism – as has been told in some of the stories above.

Skårderud (1999, pp. 128-129) describes narcissism in modernity in reference to the works of both Lasch and Ziehe. It is characterized by atomization of communities, loneliness, strong self-centeredness and relations that are in increasing risk of breaking down. There is a tendency to isolate or withdraw in order to save oneself. Behaviors include great interest in one´s body, healthy lifestyle and diet and longing for intense life experiences: “It is characteristic of a culture that has emotional pain, that it tumbles into the emotional – a state that fears deeper, more demanding emotions” (Skårderud, 1999, p. 108 – my translation).

Conclusion
As noted, the variation in cultures is present in all societies. This means that the empathy for the other is one ingredient in building a common or cohesive culture within societies. When people move beyond their own culture it is argued that learning from the interactive world in literature may assist in understanding the other – and even the other´s self-understanding.

The interactive world in novels and short stories can of course not replace social and human science. But the opposite is also true. And the advantage of fiction is that it is a learning resource for all - including the non-academic reader. Without knowledge of the social and human sciences a non-academic reader carries with him or her a knowledge system within which both codification and de-codification processes can evolve. As Freire asserts, the most important in liberating pedagogy is that learners experience that they are in charge of their own thinking and that no one is ignorant.

The above stories evolve in the same modern society. Different themes, settings and characters have been selected in the stories, and it is reason to believe that the authors´ subjective perceptions of life experiences have guided them to write what they have written. The stories are temporary formulations in the sense that they may be criticized or applauded by the reader, who may have divergent insights and views about the theme and characters at hand. The story may be seen as a ‘report´ or documentation of the author´s dialogue with him- or herself about experiences made. In the language of Paulo Freire their stories can be seen as codifications – or literary and artistic formulations – of the author´s preferred generative theme(s). I have noted, therefore, that the author has provided a first and preliminary thematic investigation of generative themes grounded in perceptions of reality. And the reader can utilize the author´s insights as a departure for new codification and de-codification processes. As noted, I believe this dialectic can also be done in each reader´s mind. Dialogue with others, however, is more in line with the conscientization process.

In this paper I have noted the importance of developing empathy by considering the connection between interactive cultural expressions and their framing in contextual conditions. The stories are heavily focused on the interactive level. It is by implication that we learn about society at large. One exception is the novel by Olaug Nilssen when interactions with health services and bureaucracies are explicitly included. Bureaucracy and New Public Management as a generative
theme might be of great interest to anyone needing social and health services - including newcomers from abroad who is bound to relate to the state either as refugees, asylum seekers or workers.

It has been argued in this paper that interactions and cultural encounters should be understood in light of contextual conditions. It is a great learning task to move towards an explanation of why interactions are like they are in the stories. This widening of the stories to include explanations of structural frames is therefore needed in the ensuing dialogues about each story. One example would be to discuss the novel from the mountain valley in relation to economic policies in neoliberalist society contributing to urbanization leaving rural communities less attractive for the younger generation. This implies that another economic policy might reduce the move to cities by younger people, which again may have positive influence upon dysfunctional local cultures. This process of constantly improving the understanding of contextual conditions may be a most important part of developing strategic knowledge for finding solutions and actions effective in transforming (in some cases even eliminating) perceived contradictions. This form of enlarged empathy in understanding human action and interaction is important.

It is a *sine qua non* that transformation involves both the learner and society. As Pierre Bourdieu so eloquently argues the subject’s habitus and society tend to seek harmony. This force towards harmony can be supported either by change in habitus or by change in contextual conditions – or by simultaneous and synchronous change in both Haavelsrud, 2010) xvi The action and reflection relation, however, is there all the time, so no actor needs to wait for more analysis of contextual conditions before acting. In fact, just by being in and interacting in problematic conditions contributes to developing better understanding of the conditions.

In this paper I have mainly discussed cultural encounters between citizens of the same country. As noted in the introduction, however, I found great value in reading stories of South African authors as a newcomer in that country. When a person crosses borders and migrates to another country their first-hand experiences in the new land might be full of surprises. They may be offered courses in learning a new language, customs and laws. And they can learn from stories told by writers of fiction in their new environment. xvii Their integration depends upon a deep understanding of the new country and its people and literature should therefore be valued as a learning resource and help in cultural encounters between newcomers and hosts.

When the cultural variety of newcomers from abroad encounter the variety from within, learning opportunities arise for both newcomer and host. As the newcomer also most often has roots in a literary world it might be important in the integration process to exchange stories between host and newcomer. The same mutual exchange of stories among the variety of cultures within the same country may be an important road towards building empathy as part of integration and cohesion. The value of mutual exchange of stories among specific cultures within a country may be as great as the value of mutual exchange of stories among newcomer and host.

Sharing stories (and the world of the stories) with others is contrary to isolation, fragmentation and narcissism and requires *empathy* for the other. And, as pointed out in theorizing about peace, this quality is essential in combination with healing traumas, transforming conflicts and reducing equity gaps.xviii Stories - and art in general - may be a source of awakening a beginning curiosity
about, and may be even empathy, for the other. Wanting to learn more of the world of the other may become a spin-off effect of reading stories. It may also become a source of communication crossing borders and breaking down walls of isolation, fragmentation and fear of self and others. Putting together what has fallen apart – integration - may be the result of growing empathy. Maybe this is what Fyksen\textsuperscript{xix} means when he points to the need for more points of contact between the literary universe and the life lived by the majority of the population.

*The author served as the Exec. Sec. of the Peace Education Commission of the International Peace Research Association (1975-79), was Carl-von-Ossietzky Guest Professor of the German Council for Peace and Conflict Research (1978-79), co-founder (with Betty Reardon) of the Global Campaign of Peace Education (1999) and Distinguished Fellow of the South African Research Chair in Development Education, UNISA (2008-18).*
How novels and short stories are resources for learning about the other

References

Endnotes

i I was fellow at the South African Research Chair in Development Education directed by professor Catherine Odora Hoppers, funded by the Department of Science and Technology, managed by the National Research Foundation and hosted by the University of South Africa.

ii I have reported on what I learned in Haavelsrud (2016; 2017; 2020, chapters 6 and 7).

iii Haavelsrud (2020, chapter 11)


v An example is Svisdal who expresses a concern that he has been too negative about the rural community in his novel Seg til inkjes (cf. heading below A teenage girl stuck with the rural beast)

vi The Brage Prize (Norwegian: Brageprisen) is a Norwegian literature prize that is awarded annually by the Norwegian Book Prize foundation (Den norske bokprisen). The prize recognizes recently published Norwegian literature (Wikipedia)

vii The author is born in 1989 and received the Tarjei Vesaas Author´s Debut Prize in 2019. The book has been translated to Serbian.

viii The rural beast is a translation of the Norwegian word ‘bygdedyret’. It was introduced by the poet Tor Jonsson and refers to negative aspects of rural communities.

ix He received the Tarjei Vesaas Author’s Debut Prize in 2018 for this novel.

x End it all – as translated in www.booksofnorway.no


xii See Haavelsrud, 2020

xiii “Det er karakteristisk for en kultur som har vondt i følelsene, at den velter seg i føleri – et føleri som frykter dypere, krevende følelser” (128)


xvi Haavelsrud, 2007 and 2010

xvii The argument can be made that literature in a foreign language is not easily accessible to newly arrived migrants. In the case of Norway, a list of recently published novels translated to other languages are available on www.booksfromnorway.com.


xix Review of Dale: Arbeidsnever by Bjørn Ivar Fyksen, Klassekampen