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# A Body of Knowledge: The Role of Human Experience and the Living Body in Knowing

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## Abstract

The study of ways of knowing is a major topic in psychology and cognitive science. However, one might argue that subjectivity and human experience as roots of knowing are seldom addressed, despite the perspectives that they may offer. Our work investigates the epistemic status of experience and the living body in knowledge processes. It asserts that human experience contains a myriad richness and argues that a first-person epistemology and precise methods are needed to genuinely conduct experiential research. The stakes of such a proposal are not only epistemological but also nourish an ethical and societal goal.

## Keywords

human experience, knowledge, first-person science, bodily sensations, explication and micro-phenomenology interviews

The study of the ways of knowing is a major topic in psychology and cognitive science that has particularly attracted the attention of philosophers, especially phenomenologists, as well as psychologists. However, one might argue

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that subjectivity and human experience as roots of knowing are seldom addressed, despite the perspectives they may offer. Along these lines, our work investigates the role of human experience and the living body in knowledge processes. More specifically, we contend that experience, when probed with a suitable epistemology and methodology, can be a source of knowledge. Thus, this article aims to consider the epistemic status of human experience and invites questions on broadening the ways of knowledge. Taking the measure of what knowledge owes to subjective experience with all its richness, the stakes of such a proposal are not only epistemological but also nourish ethical and societal goals. In the first section, we present human experience and its major properties from a phenomenological perspective. The second section examines the invisible part of experience, that is, the Implicit and the Pre-reflective. The third section is dedicated to bodily knowledge in connection with some of our results from two first-person studies using the explicitation interview method. The fourth section examines the question of epistemic access to human experience and focuses on the need for specific experiential methods that fully take experience into account. Before concluding, the fifth section anchors our contribution to the field of first-person epistemology.

## Experience as a Myriad Richness

Every living human being has experience at every moment of their life. We consider experience an ongoing process that is lived “from within.” For Depraz et al. (2003), “experience is always that which a singular subject is subjected to at any given time and place, that to which s/he has access ‘in the first person’” (p. 2). The subjective experience unfolds within the social and material interactions in which the subject is engaged and in their body’s state at a given moment. It is the *hic et nunc* experience of the event that affects the subject. This refers to the German concept of *Erlebnis*,<sup>1</sup> that is, the fact of having lived something as well as the set of thoughts, perceptions, and sensations that this experience has aroused.

The experiencing subject is an “I” who is not merely a consciousness directed at the world, but is also affected by the world: They affect the world as much as they are affected by it (Henry, 2008). The subject is engaged within a “dual” active/passive movement:

With experience there is something like an encounter between a subject and a reality that transcends him and which, by its novelty, creates surprise. From this, we may conclude that experience is, for the subject, both active, in so far as it represents a formative trial, in the sense of an attempt at knowledge of

what is encountered, and passive in as much as it is a trial in the sense of an ordeal. (Depraz et al., 2003, p. 171)

This dual property of experience (both active and passive) implies that it needs to be considered from a relational perspective. The real is a lived world—an experienced world—that is necessarily given to the subject from their particular perspective. This approach is centered both on the subject and on the world, and in so doing, tones down the duality between subject and object. This relational position is also that of Nagel (1974), for whom a living being's experience of the world is what defines them as a being:

Clearly 'what it is like to be' a bat or a human being refers to how things (everything) look when being a bat or a human being (. . .) A phenomenon, in the most original sense of the word, is an appearance and therefore something relational. By definition, an appearance is indeed what something is for something else; it is a being for by opposition to a being in itself, to what something is independent of its apprehension by another entity endowed with apprehensive abilities. (Depraz et al., 2003, p. 125).

When an appearance (a phenomenon) occurs to a subject, their experience is characterized by its holistic nature. Vermersch (2006) highlights the different layers of the lived experience, which relate to its perceptual, cognitive, motor, or emotional aspects. This typology echoes John McCarthy and Peter Wright's (2004) four experiential threads: the sensual thread (sensorial involvement in experience), the emotional thread (meaning attributed to an object or a person on the basis of our values, objectives, and desires), the compositional thread (relations between the parts and the whole of an experience), and the spatiotemporal thread (the links of experience to the past and to the future). McCarthy and Wright's fourth experiential thread refer to an essential component of experience: time. Although the time of lived experience is always the present (Stern, 2004), it integrates both the past and the future. From a phenomenological perspective, one aims at the study of things as they appear or are given to our experience, in the present moment, with a microtemporality (seconds and fractions of seconds). However, for Husserl (1996), in the present time one finds echoes of the past (retentions), and what he calls the future of the present (protentions). Husserlian retentions are the immediate past, whose echo is still heard in the present moment, a little like the "tail of a comet." Protentions point to the potential future of the present moment. Retentions and protentions are thus both part of present-time experience and belong to a global, unified, and unique experience occurring in a subjective now (Husserl, 1996). This fundamental property of experience,

*that is*, being situated in time, means that it can only be approached from the study of a peculiar and specific moment (Vermersch, 2012). Otherwise, one is instead dealing with a class of experiences or with generalizations.

To sum up, “the experience of a given subject is precise, concrete, and individuated. It is centered on particular spatio-temporal parameters, and is thus new and different each time” (Depraz et al., 2003, p. 2). Experience can be a source of knowledge for researchers and for the subjects themselves. To study it “from within,” especially in its invisible part, we need a specific epistemology and rigorous methodology that we will develop in the section *The Need for Specific Experiential Methods*.

## **The Invisible Part of Experience: The Implicit and Pre-Reflective**

Lived experience relies on several types of consciousness. Vermersch (2008) offers a synthesis of Husserl’s theory of modes of consciousness that goes beyond the usual dichotomy of cognitive psychology, that is, one unconscious mode and one conscious mode. He argues instead for considering a trichotomy of modes of consciousness organized this way: First, an unconscious mode that does not presuppose a censorship mechanism like the Freudian unconscious. Rather, it is the phenomenological unconscious, called the Husserlian “pre-givenness field” (our translation for “*champ de pré-donation*”). It is the prenoetic activity, during which the sedimentation of retentions occurs, resulting from the permanent passive memorization of lived experience (Gusdorf, 1951), before any intentional act. Second, a mode of consciousness that Vermersch describes as direct consciousness or consciousness in action (Piaget, 1974). It is a pre-reflective mode of consciousness, because this mode suggests “an immense field of data available for the subject without her/him knowing, and whose access is only subordinated to a mutation of her/his consciousness, a ‘handle’ towards the reflective consciousness” (Vermersch, 2008, p. 58, our translation). Direct consciousness includes all the perceptions (whether visual, auditory, inner speech), sensations, and feelings composing the subject’s experience at a given moment. Vermersch suggests naming these first two modes of consciousness “the unreflective consciousness” to designate all that is unreflected, raw, and not yet communicable. Third, he distinguishes a reflective mode of consciousness, which is what the subject “is aware of” and can relate to easily. As we will develop below (see section *Toward First-Person Science*), the transition from direct consciousness to reflective consciousness is not immediate and requires a reflection phase, which can be supported by the interview methods

we will present in the section The Need for Specific Experiential Methods. This path, which Piaget (1974) calls “bringing to conscious awareness,” allows the implicit part of the experience to become verbalizable; Remillieux (2010) formalizes it by situating the different facets of the experiment on two axes: an enunciation axis (from implicit to explicit) and a consciousness axis (from pre-reflective consciousness to reflective one).

Certain methods, such as the explicitation interview and the microphenomenological interview (cf. section The Need for Specific Experiential Methods), precisely concern the transition between pre-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness, although Petitmengin (2010) questions the relevance of the term *pre-reflective*. Indeed, she is first of all cautious concerning the use of the prefix, which implies that pre-reflective consciousness would be systematically followed by reflective consciousness. Moreover, for her, the metaphor of the mirror within the reflection phase (bringing to conscious awareness) evokes a distancing from one’s experience in order to observe it, whereas the experiential description needs to be as close as possible to experience, in intimate contact with it. Consequently, while affirming that lived experience is partly not immediately accessible to the subject, and that this part must be explored with an experiential interview method, Petitmengin (2010) suggests rather using the term *unrecognized experience*. Many authors whose work deals with experience and its pre-reflective facet point to the importance of the physical dimension of experience and bodily sensations.

## **Bodily Knowledge Touching the Implicit**

The principle of cognition, as an act of knowing, rooted in an embodied subject and situated in a particular setting is the foundation of the theory of enaction (Varela et al., 1993). This theory develops a conception of cognition as an “embodied action,” which is rooted in the constant interactions that the subject has with their environment and by which these two realities co-occur.

In recent years, the “4E cognition” paradigm (for embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended cognition) suggests that cognition involves the whole body as well as the situation of the body in the environment (Newen et al., 2018). The term *embodied* is actually the most general term, encompassing the other three. Indeed, the idea is to take into account the way the body contributes to cognitive processes, the body being always located in a physical, social, and cultural (embedded) environment, which allows us to perceive our environment according to what can be done there according to its

“affordances” (enactive), and finally the body mobilizes objects and instruments of the environment, which also participate in cognition (extended).

In first-person research, the conception of the body is from a first-person perspective; it is not simply a body, a particular physiological entity, but *my* body (or *your* body) as *I* live it (or as *you* live it; Austray & Berger, 2011). It is the distinction between the objective body, which is a physiological entity—the body as a physical object (*Körper* for Husserl)—and the phenomenal body—the living body or flesh (*Leib* for Husserl). The distinction between the objective body and the phenomenal body should not be considered an opposition (Austray & Berger 2011), since each person has only one body, but rather denotes two distinct and inseparable aspects of the same reality. This distinction, however, is fundamental to understanding the way embodiment is considered by phenomenology, that is, in the phenomenal mode, integrating the whole role of the body in lived experience. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2005), the human body is a permanent condition of experience because it constitutes the perception of opening to the world. For him, there is a co-participation of consciousness and body for which the analysis of perception must account. In the words of James (1892), all thoughts, feelings, and actions are rooted in bodily sensations: “Whenever I try to become sensible of my thinking activity as such, what I catch is some bodily fact, an impression coming from my brow, or head, or throat, or nose” (p. 432). According to him, to know our psychic functions, it is necessary to identify the processes by which thoughts become conscious while deriving their origin from the body.

Gendlin (1992) developed the idea of a radical involvement of the body in relation to the world with the notion of bodily felt sense. It is the observable dimension of experiencing, concretely felt by the subject’s body, that is, the global sensation relating to the whole situation they are living. It is a fundamental resource for the creation of meaning from implicit and pre-reflective experiences, which Gendlin (1992) calls *felt meaning*. In such a process of creating meaning, the living body coincides with the lived body, through its irruption into reflective consciousness. We all know the particular feelings associated with the experience of trying to remember someone’s name. The trace of the name is as if lodged in our body; its feeling is there, present (Preston, 2014). This feeling guides us when we ask ourselves “Is it Juliet?,” and our feeling in one way or another says “no.” “Is it Judith?,” we know that we are getting closer, our felt sense in response to our request. Another example is when an author is looking for their next line of text. There are many possibilities that would allow the novel to be continued consistent with what the author seeks to express, but there is only one line that is good, “validated” by their felt sense. This is the feeling to which Stern (1997) refers to when he

describes the fact that we often feel that the words we use “are appropriate” to what we mean, or are not, as a vague signifying form, a kind of “proto-meaning.” The most famous example of bodily felt sense is given by Gendlin (1992):

Suppose you are walking home at night, and you sense a group of men following you. You do not merely perceive them. You do not merely hear them there, in the space in the back of you. Your body-sense instantly includes your hope that perhaps they are not following you, also your alarm, and many past experiences—too many to separate out, and surely also the need to do something—walk faster, change your course, escape into a house, get ready to fight, run, shout . . . My “. . .” expresses the fact that your body sense includes more than we can list, more than you can think by thinking one thing at a time. It includes not only what is there. It also implies a next move to cope with the situation. But this implying of your next move is still a . . . Your actual move has not yet come. Since it includes all this, . . . is not just a perception, although it certainly includes many perceptions. It is then a feeling? It is certainly felt, but “feeling” usually means emotion . . . includes emotions, but also so much else. Is it then something mysterious and unfamiliar? No, we always have a bodily sense of our situations. You have it now, or you would be disoriented as to where you are and what you are doing. (p. 346)

In this example, the felt sense is a kind of integrated “feeling–seeing–hearing–remembering–imagining–anticipating” sensation that goes far beyond seeing and hearing. Thus, following Depraz (2014), we can affirm that,

contrary to the Cartesian assertion that my senses deceive me, we can affirm with Spinoza that we do not know what a body is capable of, there is an authentic power of corporeality (. . .), this role of absolutely reliable guide that Hippocrates emphasizes. (pp. 132-133, our translation)

In fact, “every living being ‘knows’ from within what she/he is experiencing and can rely on it to adjust her/his following action” (Lambooy, 2003, p. 125, our translation). This “no-word knowledge” (Damasio, 1999, p. 35, our translation) is the feeling that one has when one knows, which is, for Damasio, the basis of self-awareness. It seems to be very close to what Burloud (1927), a French psychologist from the beginning of the 20th century, calls “intellectual feeling” (“*sentiment intellectuel*”). Burloud’s work is in line with the Würzburg School, which argued for the existence of particular states of consciousness—“thoughts”—that are more than sensory content. They come as “non analyzed impressions” and “become ideas, judgements and reasoning” (Burloud, 1927, p. 30). As Burloud explains, “the subject knows what to do but he has no



representation of it.” In a study of first encounters between therapists and their patients (Ollagnier-Beldame & Cazemajou, 2019), we found in our explicitation interviews several intellectual feelings, which were embodied expert conclusive judgments, relying on the therapist’s whole expertise and on all the situations they have experienced in their professional life. These intuitive, expert, and conclusive judgments come most of the time after a series of perceptions and intermediate judgments, as an insight. For instance, during a session, a therapist is paying attention to her patient’s attitude, her appearance, and her silence, and she also pays attention to her own bodily sensations. She becomes aware of her altered breathing and of some tension behind her neck and her head, she makes different judgements concerning the quality of silence in the room and the quality of her presence, and then she comes to the intellectual feeling: “I feel something strange / I feel that something is happening to him which is a bit strange / I am saying to myself there is something there which is not all right.” Of course, what she “feels” is not a feeling strictly speaking, but we can grasp it in the light of Burloud’s work (1927). Gendlin’s major contribution is his study of reciprocity between implicit felt sense and explicit formulation—the “zigzag,” as he calls it.

To “touch the implicit” within its living and emerging dimension, to describe subjectivity finely, we need to broaden our conception of subjectivity, to go beyond the classical dichotomies (body/mind, inner/outer, subject/object) and to accept being submitted to the authority of life within its dynamic and processual dimension. For Gendlin (1978), “a felt sense is body and mind before they are split apart” (p. 161), it is the overall feeling of the situation in which the person is. Feeling is usually thought of as a purely inner activity, whereas there is no inner/outer separation in the feeling according to Gendlin, since for him the body “is the situation.” Feeling most often mobilizes different sensorialities that intertwine in a sensory blur. This blurring of sensorial modalities is what Stern (1989) describes in his work with infants. For him, before experiencing discretized emotions (as we classically describe them, for instance surprise, joy, anger, and sadness), infants experience affective characters that can only be described by dynamic and kinetic words: “Arise,” “faint,” “transient,” “crescendo/decrescendo,” and so on. For Stern, infants live in a world made of shapes, movements, intensities, and rhythms (Petitmengin, 2006b). These transmodal qualities, transposable from one sensorial modality to another (the “vitality affects”), allow the child to experience a unified and unique world (e.g., the seen world is the same as the heard or felt world). According to Petitmengin (2006b),

Stern’s work leads him to conclude that this transmodal capacity and the world that little children experience are not a phase of their development, which

would then be abandoned to the benefit of another operating mode. Under perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and actions that constitute our conscious experience, this silent stratum remains active throughout our life, though generally below the threshold of consciousness. (p. 89, our translation)

This sensorial indistinctness certainly makes the verbalization of feelings more difficult, which justifies the use of rigorous experiential methods for their description. Among the limits of language for the description of experience (Coupé & Ollagnier-Beldame, 2019), let us note, for instance, that linguistic categories create delimitations in a phenomenon that is lived in a continuous way, as do, for example, the names of colors to describe the continuous spectrum of visible light (Varela et al., 1993). The blur, as it appears within the felt sense, indicates the fringe of the implicit and is not at all arbitrary, empty, or unfounded. It has its own requirement for precision: a verbal or pictorial “handle,” so that, for instance, the author is able to choose between different words to continue their text, relying on a fresh and new feeling (a *felt shift*), associated with the discovery of a real feeling of “rightness” or “adequacy.” This ability to check the implicit “signifying form” of words is evidence, from an experiential point of view, that there is something “here” at the fringe of immediate consciousness—something embodied that can guide to find the next right words (Preston, 2014). Gendlin says, speaking of the bodily felt sense: “IT answers” as if the subject has a modified sense of agency when their bodily felt sense arises. In a study on first encounters (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), we conducted explicitation interviews that revealed that a sense of agency is an important facet of experience. Agency is mainly the faculty of beings to achieve actions, but it also refers to the subjective judgment or experience that one triggers and controls an action, especially an intentional, goal-directed action, regardless of whether one is objectively triggered or responsible for that action. This experience is called “the sense of agency” by Haggard and Eitam (2015). This sense of agency ties in with what Ataria et al. (2015) describe in their research on the phenomenological nature of the sense of boundaries within a long-term mindfulness meditator. They show that for this person, in certain circumstances, things happen “on their own,” spontaneously, without the need for an agent who controls what happens, whether at the thought level or the bodily level. The sense of agency is organized by the contradiction between the sensation that one is being active and the sensation that one is being passive. The reports from our participants show that they tend to experience themselves as the agent of most of their experiences, but that they also sometimes experience themselves being acted on—or moved—by events, as illustrated by these statements: “It’s in my thoughts that it actually opens,” “it surprised me, it

gave me energy actually,” or “it reminded me of the experience with my children” (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019). Our analysis of subjects’ statements revealed that the duality between an active lived agency and a passive lived agency is partly pre-reflective, and that the bodily dimension of experience is a core aspect.

More widely, the meaning given by bodily sensations and the felt sense goes beyond what is verbalized by the person, especially since the categories of the language are limiting, but not only that. Indeed, for Gendlin (1978), “experience is a myriad richness. We think more than we can say. We feel more than we can think. We live more than we can feel. And there is much more still.” To obtain an accurate and faithful description of experience, in order to support the idea that experience can be a source of knowledge, we need specific and rigorous methods, which are the topics of the next section.

## The Need for Specific Experiential Methods

To access subjective experience, the *explicitation interview* was designed by Vermersch (1994, 2012) and Petitmengin (2001). It consists of “guided retrospective introspections” aimed at accompanying an interviewee in recalling a past situation. It does not, however, guide the subject on the content they verbalize, which comes to their consciousness through a movement of letting go. This is possible thanks to a specific posture of the interviewer of guiding the interviewee’s attention with open and noninductive questions, but never inducing the content of what the latter says. During this movement, the interviewee is accompanied by the interviewer to suspend their judgment—this is the Husserlian *epoché* (Depraz et al., 2003)<sup>2</sup>—which allows them to access their past lived experience. The main characteristics of the explicitation interview are as follows:

1. The embodied posture of speech within the interviewee, or evocation, allows them to initiate and maintain intimate contact with the evoked past situation;
2. The concept of “satellites of action” to help make the interviewer aware of the area of verbalization to which the interviewee is referring and to drive the interviewee’s attention according to these areas;
3. Contact with a singular past situation (unique in time and space) to collect specific descriptions rather than generalizations (such as know-how or habits)<sup>3</sup>;
4. A holistic description of the lived experience;
5. The precise use of perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962); and

6. The consideration of the temporality of the experience, carefully explored by the interviewer guiding the fragmentation of the interviewee's experience into a series of very detailed phenomena through specific questions.

The explicitation interview is used by researchers from a variety of scientific areas such as the cognitive sciences (Ollagnier-Beldame & Cazemajou, 2019; Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), learning sciences (Mouchet, 2018), neurophenomenology and cardiophenomenology (Depraz et al., 2017), sports sciences (Lémonie, 2009), knowledge management (Remillieux, 2010), and clinical psychology and psychiatry (Denis, 2016). For example, in one study (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), we studied the experience of first encounters through 24 explicitation interviews and identified descriptive categories of “what it is like to meet someone for the first time.” We thus showed that, in the experiential flow of the encounter, each micromoment results in (a) an act—imagining, feeling, observing, knowing, remembering, questioning, or evaluating; (b) a sense of agency—active or passive; (c) a sensory modality—visual, auditory, olfactory, internal language, or bodily sensation; and (d) a mode of intersubjectivity—to (not) have something in common, to (not) feel part of the same set, to (not) feel close to the other, to (not) identify oneself with the other, to (not) identify the other with oneself, to (not) assign to the other. These results resonate with the work of Siegel (2010) who describes our human capacity to perceive our minds and others' minds. His work especially focuses on the way we can understand our inner lives, getting ourselves off of the routines and moving closer to what we are experiencing. They are also an original complement to studies in cognitive psychology of first impressions, which are based on very little information (Ambady, 2010; Bar et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2000; Schiller et al., 2009; Willis & Todorov, 2006) and in social psychology of the role of stereotypes in first impressions (Abreu, 1999; Branscombe & Smith, 1990; Dukes & Maddox, 2008; Yeung & Kashima, 2010).

The *micro-phenomenological interview* arose from the explicitation interview. It has been enriched, notably from meditative practices (vipassana meditation) and then adapted for research in the cognitive sciences by Petitmengin (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Petitmengin et al., 2015). Especially, the micro-phenomenological interview focused on the awareness of the “felt meaning” of a situation, valuing the concrete material of our experience, as many meditation techniques also work with, their only objective being to transform it in a deeper and radical way (Petitmengin, 2007). This method has also developed a strong interest in the transformation of the feeling of individual identity that sometimes occurs during interviews (e.g., with

the modification of the sense of agency), and as sometimes experienced by meditation experts. Compared with the explicitation interview, the micro-phenomenological interview offers a method of data analysis and validation that is precisely described and documented (Petitmengin et al., 2019). Like the explicitation interview, the micro-phenomenological interview aims to accompany and maintain the interviewee's evocation to precisely describe the experience in an intuitive mode (as opposed to a signitive mode, purely conceptual), that is, based on a presentification of the evoked moment.

The *phenomenological experiential interview* (Vion-Dury & Mougin, 2018), retains some fundamental elements of the explicitation interview, but differs in not only exploring the field of lived (and actually realized) action, but in aiming to discover the infinite extent of the field of lived experience in its multiple modalities (action, perception, imagination). Moreover, it takes into account the constant metamorphosis of the content and form of consciousness, without necessarily returning to a specified moment, and also allows for the explicitation of sets of prototypical experiences. This method aims to open the folds of thought and aims at the explicitation of experiences of consciousness in psychotherapy and psychiatry as well as in phenomenological research.

Developed at Duquesne University (Giorgi, 2009), the *descriptive phenomenological method* is similar to the explicitation interview in many respects. However, it aims preferentially at the study of existential experiences (for instance, the ecstatic artistic experience, the experience of loneliness, etc.), whereas the explicitation interview is dedicated to the study of ordinary activities. Of course, ordinary experiences can also have an existential aspect, but this is not taken into account within a "strictly speaking" explicitation interview. With its satellites, we find one of the most obvious differences with Giorgi's methodology. Indeed, even if Churchill and Wertz (2015, p. 10) insist that the participant's description might contain "a minimum of scientific rubric, generalization, speculation, explanation, or anything not immanent to the original concrete event," they also write that "experience must be grasped holistically as a relationship in which the subject encounters an object through its meaning." In an explicitation interview, the subject's comments and representations make sense only in so far as they give information concerning the meaning that the interviewee gives to their experience, but they do not give access to what they are precisely doing at the moment when they are doing it. However, the description of finalized and productive acts always comes first and is the condition for accessing the meaning, which always comes as an addition. Moreover, the descriptions that we solicit from our interviewees do not rest on "everyday language" (Giorgi, 2014), but are intended to access the implicit and pre-reflective dimension of

their experience lying behind it; see section The Invisible Part of Experience: The Implicit and Pre-Reflective.

The *focusing interview* (Gendlin, 1962/1997) relies on Gendlin's (1978) philosophy of the implicit and on the possibility of creating meaning from bodily sensations. This method is based on the implicit semantic richness of experience—in the sense of experiencing, that is, in its processual dimension, which contributes to the creation of meaning, serving as a referent for its verbalization. More precisely, experiencing is the living experience, immediate, in constant transformation, which is partly unconscious, as it is felt by a person as a unified whole. It is an ongoing process, always present, underlying, relating to a living and sensitive inner dimension. This processual dimension is what Rogers (1959) calls the “experiential flow.” The experience carries some knowledge, qualified as elementary and “primary,” that is immediate and can be verbalized. The directly observable and felt aspect of the experience is what Gendlin calls (1978) “bodily felt sense.” The bodily felt sense is the global and vague sensation felt by a subject in relation to the whole situation. The first phase of the Husserlian *epoché*, that is, the suspension of “realist” prejudices, is reinforced in the focusing interview by “clearing the space” (Madison, 2014), which is the first step of focusing (Gendlin, 1978). During this step, the person is invited to identify, welcome, and then bracket their concerns as they arise during introspection. The concept of “level of experiencing” (Hendricks, 2001) indicates the degree of connection between what a person is saying and their experience when they say it. This degree is a quantifiable first-person process: There are low, medium, and high levels of experiencing. The focusing interview aims at a high level of experiencing of the implicit to allow words to emerge from it. The experiencing scale (Hendricks, 2009), which measures this process, is a third-person evaluation of a first-person process based on specific linguistic and somatic indicators. As mentioned above, the focusing interview can be conducted from a radically first-person point of view or from a second-person point of view. However, a significant difference from other experiential interview methods is that focusing is not retrospective introspection but aims at describing experience as the subject is living it in the present time.

The field of “scientific” phenomenology, to which the above methods belong, also offers other approaches. For example, the *micro-analytical interview* (Stern, 2004), which aims to represent the experience on a graph, with time on the *y*-axis and various subjective qualities of the experience on the *x*-axis, for example, richness, intensity, or feelings, affects, thoughts, or actions associated with the experience. This interview method can be facilitated by the visualization of the video of the retrospectively evoked moment. In addition, *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (Antoine & Smith,

2017) is based on the subject's report of their experience—relying on their abilities for self-reflection and interpretation of their own experiences—so that experiences can make sense. Interpretative phenomenological interviews can be supplemented by freely written productions from the subject with the help of the researcher in reflexive processes. Last, *descriptive experience sampling* (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006) is a method consisting of radically first-person descriptions (self-elicitations) supplemented by second-person interviews.

## Toward First-Person Science

Contrasting the perspective of the subject experiencing the experience from that of another subject, such as the researcher, phenomenological approaches draw a distinction between first-person, second-person, and third-person points of view (Depraz et al., 2003). The first-person point of view is characteristic of experience as it is accessed by the subject. In other words, it is the subject's perspective. It groups all the methods we presented in the section The Need for Specific Experiential Methods, soliciting the subject's expression on their own experience. This point of view is unique because it qualifies only the one that a subject has in relation to themselves (Vermersch, 2000a). In the case where the researcher collects data about their own experience, Vermersch speaks of a "radically first-person" point of view to denote the idea that the data are drawn from the researcher's own lived experience. The second-person perspective implies,

enabling the gathering of "first-person" data, that is, data that express the viewpoint of the subject herself, in the grammatical form "I" . . . But since the data have been gathered through another person (a "You"), the method has been dubbed "second-person." (Petitmengin, 2006a, pp. 230-231)

This point of view implies a combination of empathic resonance and heterophenomenological observation (Depraz, 2012), that is, an inference from behaviors (whether linguistic or other behaviors such as gestures). For all that the delimitation of what is observed is not fixed, the idea is that a second-person perspective is intersubjective and allows for an indirect point of view from a subjective perspective. The first-person and second-person points of view rely on a first-person epistemology that considers subjectivity as it is experienced by the subject themselves (Depraz, 2014; Varela & Shear, 1999).

They are defined this way as opposed to the third-person point of view, which does not allow the study of the experience as it focuses on behaviors and examines them according to predefined categories. This point of view

implies a third-person epistemology in which subjectivity and lived experience are generally viewed as epiphenomena or as lying beyond the reach of science (Vermersch, 2000a).

First-person epistemology is often undervalued in comparison with third-person approaches, on the assumption that an external point of view offers greater objectivity. However, the limits of this last statement have been stressed, and the epistemic validity of first-person approaches has been analyzed in detail (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009). In particular, claims denying subjects' introspective abilities (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) have been rebutted (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Petitmengin et al., 2013). Moreover, external observations based on third-person epistemology leave aside entire facets of the studied phenomenon, which simply cannot be accessed since they occur "within" individuals, "behind" physical movements, and "in front" of patterns from neuronal imagery. These classically inaccessible facets of the subjects' activity, their experience, can, however, be reported, hence the benefits of accompanying them to do so with a particular method. As for reducing introspection to solipsism (Zahavi, 2017), we contend that "gathering authentic descriptions of lived experiences is the first and necessary step to ground our research in the things themselves and access the invariant structure of experience" (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2011, p. 36). As we wrote in Petitmengin et al. (2015), once a corpus of singular descriptions of experiences has been collected, the entire task of reorganization, analysis, and formalization is necessary in order: (a) to identify the possible structure of the described experiences, that is, a network of relationships between descriptive categories, independent of the experiential content and (b) to detect any generic structures, progressively extracted from the initial descriptions through a succession of operations of abstraction (Petitmengin et al., 2019; Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati, 2019). After all, research on lived experience, which is recognized as crucial in philosophical and empirical approaches to the study of the mind, is confronted with the problem that each examination of experience seems to change the experience itself. Many have taken this so-called "excavation fallacy" (Kordeš & Demšar, 2018) as undermining the possibility of first-person inquiry as a scientific practice.

It is important to bear in mind that first-person epistemology is not an epistemology of immediacy since experience, although lived by the subject, is not immediately known by them, despite its apparent transparency and familiarity. Experience is not directly accessible to the subject, and the first-person perspective should not be confused with immediate givenness, that is, for the subject, a sudden, clear, and distinct illumination (Vermersch, 2000b).



Indeed, being epistemically related to facts about oneself is not a sufficient condition for first-person perspective taking: You can also have an objective, third-person view on your headache [. . .] What is needed is a difference not in terms of the epistemic object but, rather, in terms of epistemic access—even if it may turn out to be necessary to refer to specific epistemic objects in order to clarify what the specific kind of access is. The decisive point seems to be that there are certain features of oneself that require a specific kind of epistemic access. (Pauen, 2012, pp. 37-38)

## Conclusion

In this article, we investigated the epistemic status of lived experience and of the living body in knowing. We introduced why it is important, in order to conduct experiential research, to rely on a first-person epistemology, and make use of precise methods.

Specifically, we showed that these methods, dedicated to the study of human experience, are particularly powerful for studying its invisible part, that is, the Implicit and the Pre-Reflective. We exposed the privileged role of the body and bodily sensations within intuitive knowledge. The different methods of experiential interviewing presented in this article are based on the *epoché*, which is at the heart of the phenomenological and first-person science approach and whose target is to return to the very things and to let some “fresh” meaning arise. Indeed, according to the phenomenological perspective, the natural attitude (the idea that what appears is truly the state of the world) can be bracketed by this suspension act, which can then lead to a reorientation, that is, a conversion from the *what* to the *how* of experience. This latter act, called *reduction*, makes then possible to investigate the *how* of the experience, which is the main aim of the methods we presented in the article. Finally, returning to the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy is potentially possible. Concretely, during an experiential interview, the interviewer aims at performing the *epoché* for themselves when they guide the interviewee with noninductive questions about the content that direct the interviewee’s attention to their inner experience—to let the interviewee’s *epoché* arise concerning their own experience. The idea of such an accompaniment is to gain access to new knowledge whose starting point is the person’s experience. Questioning the person’s experience with an experiential method aims to temporarily and as much as possible suspend representations (those of the person and those of the researcher who is questioning), in order to access and then describe the person’s experience beyond a natural attitude. For example, in explicitation interviews or micro-phenomenological interviews, the interviewer is highly attentive to the

perlocutionary effects of their questions and reformulations, to accompany the interviewee to let a past experience return from their passive memory. With these two methods, the experience is evoked in all its richness, including the pre-reflective part of which the person was unaware and which was “below” its obvious narration. Access to the content of this pre-reflected part very often leads to discovery by the person who has lived it, frequently constituting a source of knowledge for them, and for the researcher who seeks to find out what it is like to live such a situation. Within Focusing interviews, the *epoché* is also practiced by the interviewer in their guidance. For the interviewee, it is the bodily felt sense—and some felt shifts—that is the source of fresh meaning and knowledge. We think that along the lines of this proposition, a new relationship to the body as a source of knowledge can be sketched. Berger and Vermersch (2006) speak of “bodily *epoché*” to describe some practices that

involve a break with a certain habitual relationship to the body, to let a listening, an observation, and a feeling come that lead to the constitution of a specific universe, the latter only happening in these actual conditions of reduction. (p. 46, our translation)

Such an *epoché*, allows “a renewed relationship to the body, more present, different from a mechanical relationship” (p.46). As such, it offers a renewed trust in the body, in all its sensoriality. This practice evokes the work of Kingsley (1997), according to whom our understanding of certain ancient Greek texts is erroneous when we assume that our senses are unreliable for apprehending the world. Instead, Kingsley asserts that sensoriality offers an enormous potential for knowledge. He claims that our senses are unreliable only as we know them, because we were never taught how to use them.

Finally, we claim for a holistic approach to knowledge processes, integrating various ways of knowing such as the intelligence “which knows” and the intelligence “which does not know that it knows,” and considering human subjectivity in detail, beyond the normativity of subjectivity. The stakes of such a proposal are not only epistemological but also nourish ethical and societal goals. Indeed, our proposal finds its roots in a double observation we make as a citizen within a society that is massively weakened by environmental and humanitarian crisis: We observe daily the destructive tendencies of our society with respect to human and nonhuman life, causing harm to nature and a waste of life. But at the same time, we also observe that human beings have the (broad) capacity to get closer to life, in its creative and emerging dimension, *via* their experience. With others (Abram, 1996; Fisher, 2013; Bendell, 2018; Petitmengin, 2020), we affirm that the current

environmental and humanitarian crisis is partly due to our way of life, which depletes the earth's resources. This way of life, and the disasters it generates, are to us profoundly related to forgetting what is closest to us: our own lived experience. We maintain, in line with (Petitmengin, 2020), that rebuilding contact with our lived experience is the prerequisite for regaining our lucidity and finding the courage to change our model of society. Thus, in line with Fisher's work<sup>4</sup> (2013) and the development of a radical ecopsychology, we challenge the idea that the current systemic crisis stems from a violation of the life process as it unfolds in us and around us (Gendlin, 1962/1997, 1978). We need to root scientific investigation in lived experience, contributing to a shift "from ego to eco." In this context, the practice of *epoché*, broadly speaking, can be considered not only as a key phenomenological concept but also as a living practice, which can help reduce the ordinary violation or waste of life. We hope that this article can modestly help to rethink the inscription of human beings in a nature that they would no longer seek to control while destroying it, but of which they would be a part of, and with which they would be constantly in touch *via* their lived experience.

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## Notes

1. This approach can be distinguished from those studying experience as a synthesis act of already temporalized phenomenal configurations, which can be related to the German concept of *Erfahrung*.
2. According to Depraz et al. (2003 p. 25), “one accomplishes the *epoché* in three principal phases:

A0: Suspending your ‘realist’ prejudice that what appears to you is truly the state of the world; this is the only way you can change the way you pay attention to your own lived experience; in other words, you must break with the ‘natural attitude.’

A1: Redirecting your attention from the ‘exterior’ to the ‘interior.’

A2: Letting-go or accepting your experience.”

3. For Vermersch (2012), this fundamental property of experience, that is, being situated in time, means that it can only be approached from the study of a peculiar and specific moment. Otherwise, one is instead dealing with a class of experiences or with generalizations.

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## Author Biography



**Magali Ollagnier-Beldame** holds a PhD in cognitive science from the University of Lyon in France (2006) and joined the French National Centre for Scientific Research in 2012. She is interested in “embodied ways of knowing,” especially the prereflective part of knowledge in its bodily dimension. As a researcher in the field of human interactions, she is interested in the emergence and the creation of “shared worlds,” especially in situations of interaction between two people. She is leading a scientific program on intersubjectivity with a micro-phenomenological approach, using first-person interview epistemology and methodology. She is the

founder (in 2014) and a co-chair of the Thésée Project (THEories and Explorations of Subjectivity and Explicated Experience). The main goals of this project are better understanding intersubjectivity “from inside” and exploring the conditions under which an experience can be shared by two persons. She investigates the ways these processes unfold and are co-constructed through interaction, in their affective, cognitive, and sensory dimensions. She has been trained in micro-phenomenology since 2007, and she is a certified trainer in explicitation techniques, under the direction of Pierre Vermersch/GREX (research group in explicitation). Since 2017, she has been training in person-centred therapy and focusing.