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► **To cite this version:**

Magali Ollagnier-Beldame, Véronique Servais. Refreshing and expanding the meaning of research. Donata Schoeller; Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir; Greg Walkerden. Practicing Embodied Thinking in Research and Learning, Routledge, pp.100-116, 2024, 9781003397939. 10.4324/9781003397939-9. halshs-04671340

HAL Id: halshs-04671340

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04671340v1>

Submitted on 14 Aug 2024

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7 Refreshing and expanding the meaning of research

On the use of the TAE process in a micro-phenomenological research project

*Magali Ollagnier-Beldame and
Véronique Servais*

Introduction

In this chapter, we propose an account of the process of applying *Thinking At the Edge* (TAE) in the course of an ongoing micro-phenomenological research project named “Investigating the Experience of Connection to Nature” (ExCoNat). We applied the protocol proposed by Gendlin (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004) while we were in the process of analysing the data of ExCoNat. Overall, the TAE process was deeply involving, and it contributed to our uncovering the values that stand at the heart of research for each of us. It also invited us to a somewhat different analysis of our data. We propose here to give a first account of this process. After providing a short account of our journey and having explained how we applied TAE to our research, we’ll address the issue of what the TAE process did to our research practice: what it did to the ExCoNat research, and also what it did to our research practice in general.

We show that the whole process entails a particular relationship to language and meaning in the making. In particular, a special place is given to “the still unspoken,” *i.e.* that which has not yet been put into words, but which nonetheless constitutes the flesh of the experience – what in micro-phenomenological research is called “pre-reflective meaning” (Petitmengin 2010). This is the case at the level of the micro-phenomenological interviews that were part of ExCoNat, with their focus on the pre-reflexive experience (*i.e.* un-named) of the interviewees, but it is also the case at the level of our experience as researchers using TAE: what this brought to the ExCoNat project, how it nourished and enlivened it, and how it amplified the power of the micro-phenomenological approach that is at the heart of our project. All this leads us to a radical reflection on what research can be, from a critical position of how TAE can transform research practice and researchers themselves.

What is the ExCoNat project? A short presentation

ExCoNat is about the perception of the environment as *responsive*, and why it is important to find words to talk about such experiences as the encounter with a forest. According to Bird-David (1999) and Tim Ingold (2017), to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003397939-9

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perceive an environment as responsive is to perceive it as responding to one's feelings, emotions, thoughts, movements, actions, or any internal or bodily change. ExCoNat was created thanks to the collaboration between Véronique Servais, Magali Ollagnier-Beldame, and Pietro Varrasso, Professor of Theater at the Ecole Supérieure d'Acteurs in Liège. The collaboration between the three of us began in 2019, when we decided to bring our expertise together in order to scientifically explore the experience of "connecting" with nature. Our question was: given the severe disconnection – especially within cities but not only – between people and the rest of the living beings in our western cultural tradition (Abram 1996), how do people manage to nonetheless connect with natural beings? On what cognitive, perceptual, sensory, bodily, and imaginary resources do they build their experience? How does this experience unfold? As two of us (Magali and Véronique) are trained in micro-phenomenology, we decided to study these questions with micro-phenomenological interviews about actual encounters with a forest environment.

It is obviously impossible to experimentally provoke an experience of encounter with nature. Indeed, such encounters often occur unexpectedly, surprising even those who experience them (Halloy and Servais 2014). This is why we decided to work with a protocol that would increase the *probability* of connection experiences, without this being presented as an explicit objective to the participants. We devised a protocol based on previous protocols that were developed by Pietro Varrasso as part of his teaching at ESACT. It took the form of a three-hour workshop in the woods, conducted by Pietro and his assistant, Nathaniel Hendrickson. Participants were eight Dramatic Art students and four current or former PhD students in anthropology.

This workshop took place in May 2021 in Belgium. On the morning of 17 May, in the middle of the Belgian countryside, in the pouring rain, the participants were invited to follow Pietro in silence, "together but alone," with the instruction to "take care not to disturb anything." Of course, it is impossible not to disturb anything when walking in the forest, but we wanted to explore the kind of relationship that would be induced by this instruction. Our hypothesis was that the instruction "take care not to disturb anything" would induce a mode of relationship to the environment where attention would be focused on "the effects of my actions on the world around me," which could also be read as "how the environment *responds* to my actions," *i.e.*, a relational and responsive perception. We hypothesised that this would open the potentialities of connection to nature. Furthermore, Pietro also aimed through this type of workshop to help his students move from a language-centred perception of the outside world and to open them up to other logics of perception than discursive ones. The three of us believe that "the ecological crisis is a crisis of perception" (Abram 1996) and that decentring perception from language and refreshing it is critical (see also Hinton 2023). This workshop was thus intended to make more likely experiences of encounter/

connection with nature, which we could then explore in detail through the micro-phenomenology interviews.

The interviews took place between a few hours and two days after the workshop and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. In line with the micro-phenomenological tradition, we invited the participants to go back to “a moment when something happened in relation to Pietro’s instruction not to disturb anything.” The interviews proved to be extremely rich, touching, and interesting. They were transcribed and then processed, and in September 2021, the analysis process started, and the first results began to emerge.

It seemed fundamental to us to remain in empathy with our data. Within micro-phenomenology, the study of subjective experience and the unquestionable status accorded to it are accompanied by a total acceptance – during the interview, within the interviewee’s verbatim – of what may seem paradoxical, surprising, or even incompatible with what the interviewee has already said, with other sources of information about the evoked experience described during the interview, or with the literature on the topic. With micro-phenomenological data, the experience is studied from a first-person point of view, that is what may seem paradoxical at first sight rather highlights the person’s point of view, in its pre-reflective dimension (Petitmengin 2006), meaning that finds its way into her/him, below logic and rationality. The sensitive dimension of the experience is palpable, sometimes in its transmodal (Petitmengin 2007) or synesthetic dimension, often intuitive (Petitmengin 2001), and sometimes even poetic and creative.

As systematised by Claire Petitmengin (Petitmengin, Remilieux, and Valenzuela-Moguillansky 2018), the micro-phenomenological analysis of interviews is a rigorous and long process that aims to extract the dimensions of the description of an experience. The experience analysed is the first-person, embodied account of a lived moment, in its various dimensions. But analysis tends towards abstraction, and there is always a risk that contact with the interviewee’s experience is lost. Indeed, the micro-phenomenological analytical protocol invites the researcher to leave out the “content” of the experience (the “what”) to focus on the process (the “how”). For ExCoNat, we developed an alternative method of analysis, inspired by the “resonance salience” approach of Jean Vion-Dury and Gaëlle Mougín (2020, 2021), which is closer to traditional anthropological methods. We were less interested in describing the cognitive processes, which is the main objective of the micro-phenomenological analysis, and wanted to stay in touch with the content of the experiences: the imagination of childhood, hunting, games, etc. All these elements seemed important to us to understand how our participants related to the living or non-living elements of the forest environment; the saliences-resonances approach allowed us to do so.

Despite this, after several months of conducting the interviews, transcribing them, processing them, and doing the analysis, we each felt a sense of distance from the project, a lesser commitment. This was unfortunate, because in our

view, a micro-phenomenological project requires an intimate and embodied contact with the research data in order to make sense of it. In our case, this is all the more important, because we chose to use “resonance salience” (Vion-Dury and Mougín 2020, 2021) as a method of analysis. Indeed, during its second step, this method requires one to let the data and the saliences identified during the first step of the analysis “resonate” with the scientific knowledge and also the personal experiences of the researchers. A high degree of availability and commitment is therefore needed for the researcher to be able to carry out this analysis effectively.

It was at this point that we saw the potential of applying TAE to our research project, in order to reinvest, renew, and nourish our intimacy with it. Veronique had participated in the TECT summer school in Reykjavik in the summer of 2021 and Magali has an advanced training in focusing (which underpins TAE). Answering the invitation of Donata Schoeller, we decided to apply the different steps of TAE to our project, working as a pair and in ongoing dialogue with each other. The result was surprising and beyond our expectations. Before sharing this process and the results obtained, we should acknowledge that, as we are not native English speakers, writing this account wasn’t always easy. Indeed, we carried out the TAE process in French. We thus faced a double challenge: that of putting pre-reflective meaning into words and *then* translating it into a foreign language, English. There is some risk that the translation, in particular, would lead us to lose the semiotic and poetic nuances that make the TAE process so rich. We’re hoping that these nuances nonetheless come through in our text.

Protocol: how did we proceed?

Firstly, we set up a framework for using TAE together, creatively inventing how to proceed, as we were in two different countries: carrying out the TAE steps on our own, and only meeting online. We arrived at some fundamental principles:

1. We work from our bodily felt sense and our lived experience, which means that we speak only for ourselves.
2. We commit ourselves to practise open, attentive, respectful, non-judgemental, and supportive listening to the other and to ourselves, in accordance with the adage: giving ourselves “freedom to make sense” (Schoeller 2023).
3. We are free to share only what we wish to share.
4. We commit ourselves to share congruently what may be painful for us, when it helps the TAE process, the research project, and our relationship.
5. We commit ourselves to dare to trust the process.
6. We commit ourselves to keep confidential the content we will share and express.

Regarding our way of practising TAE in this project, as this was the first experience of this kind for each of us, we decided to follow the whole process

as described by Gendlin. We worked through the 14 specific steps proposed by Gendlin individually (Gendlin and Hendricks 2004), in three blocks. This process was punctuated by the two of us meeting together and presenting to each other the results of our use of the steps – based on notes we had made as we worked through them – and as we met, we each took time to resonate with what had emerged, working from our current bodily felt sense of what we were listening to. We checked the vitality of our process, ongoing, as we worked together. Indeed, the centre of our process was keeping our relationship with the ExCoNat project alive, in order to remain consistent with the ambition of the ExCoNat project: acknowledging creative ways to give voice to the still unspoken. Keeping faith with this, we started the process from our bodily felt sense of the project at the time of our first meeting – and not the memory of our state when the project started several months earlier, in line with Gendlin’s approach of working with one’s experience *hic et nunc*. This was the starting point, our stage 1, of the whole TAE process, which took place over a month.

Below, we summarise how the process unfolded for each of us, based on key moments illustrated by verbatim excerpts. These verbatim extracts illustrate the TAE process in progress, step by step, for each of us. Typically, one of us expresses her relationship to the project, from her bodily felt sense of following Gendlin’s steps. The other lets what is expressed resonate within her and responds, again from her felt sense. Each TAE step is done by each of us. The whole process allows both an intimate and embodied contact with the project, but also a resonance with the partner’s experience. As we move through the TAE steps together, the process informs us about what really matters to us in the project (some “crux”), and in doing research generally: the process brings out sensitive points and points of convergence or tension between us. Working together in this way has created a positive dynamic that increased self-confidence as well as confidence in the ideas and knowledge that emerged during the process. Below, each of us expresses some of these “cruxes.”

Magali

From the very beginning of the process, during the first group session, the idea of “strata” came to my mind. In fact, when I was in contact with my physical senses from the ExCoNat project, I felt a dome above my head and in my diaphragm. Then a succession of domes in between, with a gradation of colour. There was a very clear sensation and at the same time an image of these strata in the form of domes piled on top of each other. I then let the words come out of this physical sensation: “*In which stratum of the ExCoNat project am I most interested and want to be in?*” This question was the initial impulse for the process with Véronique and stayed with me throughout the three weeks of the TAE process. During the third collective session, the work on strata continued and showed me that this was central

to my relationship with the project. What came out of my felt sense was: *“The joints [between adjacent strata] are assembled, connected, sliding AND dislocating, and clinging together. There are multiple strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and unique communications/circulations.”* Véronique brought a resonance from her own bodily felt sense that emphasised “what slides”: *“What hangs and what slides is like a waterfall. Singular circulations. The important word here for me is singular. Paying attention to each one. These cycles are not anodyne.”* At that point I realised that what was important to me was not so much knowing which stratum I wanted to be in – and choosing one – but recognising the plurality of strata that engaged me in this project, and my need to link them, to let them slide, while respecting their singularity. This was a major breakthrough in my relationship with the project: what’s important are the spaces and relationships that hold the strata together. In the end, it’s the unity that counts, not the separation of the strata.

Another moment, later in the process, came in Session 5 with the facets representing the concrete facts. Following Gendlin’s suggestion, working with these facets led me to several models – and associations amongst models – of my relationship to the project, such as these particularly relevant ones: *“Model 3: True openness is achieved in simplicity and trust; Model 4: There are joints to be created and protected between seemingly incompatible aspects; Model 4-Model 3: There are joints to be allowed between seemingly incompatible things while remaining open in trust. Model 3-Model 4: True openness allows joints between seemingly incompatible things.”* In these models I saw that joints made it possible to overcome apparent paradoxes by holding together seemingly incompatible aspects of the project without choosing and remaining in unity. I then saw that these “joints” between different aspects/meanings of the project needed an openness, a (cognitive) space with specific qualities such as simplicity and trust. This was echoed by Véronique from her felt sense: *“True openness allows us to create joints/links between seemingly incompatible things, without dwelling on logical paradoxes. To really create joints between these things, you need true openness. Otherwise, they remain conceptual links. (. . .) We create in-between spaces, dedicated spaces where things can remain temporarily vague.”* These two selected moments demonstrate the power of using the bodily sense to refresh and reinvigorate one’s relationship to a research project, offering fresh insight into the important aspects of the project and how they fit together.

Véronique

When I ask my bodily senses about the ExCoNat project, the felt sense is a swelling in my chest. A thickness, an extension. The words that come to me are “It’s alive. Joy, exuberance. Cheerful.” I then formulate the following question: *“How do we keep it alive? How can we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep it alive – in ourselves and in our work, particularly*

in what we are going to pass on?" The whole process will ultimately revolve around this question. It will lead to a profound understanding of the writing process and of what links me to my fields of investigation (the respondents in the ExCoNat project and, more generally, animals and nature). At first, the bodily felt sense associated with the word "living" is "*the feeling of circulation, of a nourishing cycle*"; then it gives way to "*something rumbling from the depths – like a volcano.*" What catches my attention then is the property of lava that "holds itself." The meaning I give to this is "*to trust the fact that things stand on their own.*" At the end of Step 5 (Dropping and dipping: "expand what you wanted each word to mean by writing fresh, linguistically unusual sentences"), my question becomes: "*How can we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep the joy, the important thing, the relationships, flowing through the cycle and trusting the fact that things hold together?*" The most interesting moments come during the search for facets and models, at Steps 6 to 9 of Gendlin's TAE scaffold. One of the facets is about living writing, which seems to me like a relationship that you take up again, with someone you meet from time to time along the way. "*Writing in a mosaic, in small leaps, keeps something open.*" "*On the other hand, writing that owes nothing or doesn't respond to someone is meaningless, dead, closed.*" The overall model that emerges is that of the call. "*Staying alive means responding to this call, which is a call to be recognized and treated well.*" Magali resonates with her own bodily felt sense: "*To be in touch with what is alive, in me and around me. It can be an animal, a photo, a relationship that is being established. Staying in this contact by accepting not controlling. To hear its call, the call of the living, to hear this 'call to be considered' in dignity.*" At the end of Step 9 ("Write freely" after having searched for emerging models and patterns), I write the following paragraph: "*Living beings manifest themselves to us and call us to a path of writing that is like a friendship, a relationship that grows out of openness, risk, and the fear of making mistakes. To remain open is to remain vulnerable; intellectualism is a convenient protection, but it breeds frustration. To respond is to engage in a relationship.*" At this point, I understand that the question of "how to respond to the call" is not just a theoretical question. It's a practical question, the answer to which lies partly in how I articulate my thoughts and emotions. "*Staying alive also means staying in debt (with the fieldwork), in a cycle of giving and receiving.*" Finally, "*a responding writing draws a path, and to draw a path is to hold and be held. This is how writing responds. To hold and be held implies accepting deviating from the path, accepting being disturbed (by the actors' power to act) and remaining vulnerable.*"

In what follows, we present what we consider to be the main results of this work of deep listening (to oneself and to the other), knowing that the examples used are a selection and that other extracts could have been chosen. This selection was difficult because the material is very rich. We have selected significant extracts in relation to the questions that guided us.

Results. What did we learn?

What we learned emerged gradually, becoming more refined and deeper as the TAE process unfolded. Over time, some themes have become stronger, and others have disappeared. In order to account for the processual dimension of TAE, we have chosen to divide the presentation into three parts:

1. The effects of the use of TAE on the way we analyse our data.
2. The effects on our relationship to the project and to research in general.
3. The amplification of the properties of the micro-phenomenological interview arising from the use of TAE.

Let's make it clear that these three points were not explicitly mentioned as such during the TAE process. We didn't decide in advance to document these three points. We just wanted to know what TAE would tell us about our research. It was only when we came back to the material, after the process was over, that we discovered that it could be interpreted as telling us something about these three issues. Finally, and before presenting the results, we feel it is important to recall that during our first meeting, from our bodily felt sense, the following questions emerged:

For Véronique: "How do we conduct our study/research in such a way as to keep it alive – in ourselves and in our work, particularly in what we are going to pass on?"

For Magali: "Within the ExCoNat project, which stratum am I most interested in and want to be in?"

As we said before, these questions were the starting point and gave the impetus to the whole process presented in this chapter.

1. TAE and data analysis

The practice of TAE opened a reflection that proved to be useful in guiding the analysis of the ExCoNat project data. Firstly, the need to analyse our data with a great deal of openness arises from the outset. For example, the notions of strata and porosity/connection between them and furthermore of movement/circulation/joints between these strata testify to this need for openness. This is the case during our meeting 3:

"There are several strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and singular communications/circulations" (MOB, TAE step 3);

"About the word 'living': A volcano that brings very deep things to the surface. Another simple word would be 'circulating' – another possible word is 'lava', a living thing that holds its pieces together" (VS, step 3);

“How do we conduct our study in such a way as to keep the joy, what matters, the relationships, circulating in the cycle and trusting in the fact that things hold on by themselves?” (VS, step 5);

“In this project I need to keep the relationships, the joy, the circulation. To stay connected with other people. To stay alive and for the collective to stay alive. Stay confident, everything is already there” (MOB, resonance with VS step 5).

These extracts testify to a need to respect the articulations and connections in our analyses, *i.e.* not to break these links, sometimes between different strata, that we have in our data. They also reflect an understanding that familiar logics are not necessarily the best guide to identifying meaningful connections/articulations within our data. It also commits us to deploying a more intuitive analysis, not focusing on the need for things usually categorised as the same (or of the same kind) to be connected, and perhaps instead directing our attention to see articulations, relations, between things of ordinarily regarded as quite different. Secondly, in these verbatim extracts, the notion of unity manifests itself, inviting us to notice, and then to respect, the coherence that exists in what we study and the relationships between the parts. If we remain confident in the fact that things hold together, we gain freedom in the way we do our analyses, we do not have to put the coherence in ourselves, and we do not have to absolutely look for it. Knowing also that things of a different nature have (partial) interconnections, and that this is solid and alive, we can therefore remain open to inconsistencies and accept not understanding everything. To conduct our analyses in this way, we can seek to “read” our interviews “from the heart,” for a little while putting aside the intellect (Vion-Dury and Mougin 2020, 2021) and attempting to resonate rather than reason with or from the data. Thirdly, the theme of openness became stronger in our meetings, becoming very prominent. One of the main ideas is that the joints between things that are incompatible can only be found in a true openness, in the openness of the heart. Only this openness creates a space where these things can truly co-exist and be interconnected with each other. Living is closely linked to this openness, as is joy. This invites us to widen our attention in the analysis of data, moving from an intention to grasp the data to an intention to be receptive to what the data have to tell us. This posture of openness means being prepared to identify things in our data that are unexpected, even unpleasant, or that challenge our initial ideas.

To give an example of the difference in data processing with and without TAE, we take the case of one of the participants in the ExCoNat study, whom we will call Tihamer. Tihamer’s experience was organised into five moments. In the first moment, Tihamer worries about the harm he is doing to the “baby trees” and feels rejected by them. This gives way to a moment of mutual respect and postural adjustment. Then the guilt returns but is quickly followed by relief and sensory openness:

“And it was as if my breathing was better, as if a pipe had been unclogged. I started to smell the environment . . . then the sounds, the rain, and then the visual and the feeling of moisture on the skin.”

This is followed by a moment of acceptance of his fragility:

I really needed to kneel on the ground, it wasn't a decision, it was because, maybe, somehow it was as if my fragility exploded . . . as if there was someone who understood my fragility, and so it was out of fragility that I let myself fall to my knees . . . it was as if nature was telling me: look, I'm offering you this.

A new space-time opens up:

I was completely lost in my memories, I felt protected, I could listen to the noises, feel the brightness, but still feel supported, it was like a shelter.

This interview could be analysed in many ways. A classic micro-phenomenology analysis would attempt to identify the dimensions of the experience (Petitmengin, Remilieux, and Valenzuela-Moguillansky 2018). A socio-anthropological approach may want to identify the main themes addressed by the interviewee or make a list of what themes are common to the 12 interviews. It might also be interesting in grouping parts of the experience into categories ("empathy," "ecological self," "memory," etc.) and consider that a description of the experience of "connection" to nature is there. But what all these approaches have in common is that they impose an external, classificatory logic on experiences that are something quite different. These methods bring together what is apparently similar, assuming that similar realities can be found when the same term is used. The more intuitive and embodied approach we have attempted could be represented by the drawing given below. The drawing (Figure 7.1) does not claim to be a representation of the experience. It is the result of our joint reflections and our attempts to enter the dynamics of Tihamer's experience and to read it "from our heart." It has enabled us to feel and see that the experience is organised like a breath between volition and undergoing, between focused and diffuse attention. The drawing also suggests the role played by sensory openness in the occurrence of a "suspended moment," the opening up of a new space-time, within which memories flow. The two analyses have nothing in common. In one case, the theme of vulnerability and childhood is identified; in the other, we acknowledge the creation of a new space-time, a protected space for memories. The two analyses also induce different causal links. In the first case, assuming that we find the theme of nostalgia and childhood memories in most of the interviews (which is the case), we might tend to think that there is a causal relationship between connexion to nature and childhood, a form of direct induction. But our approach opens up the details of the encounter, with its antagonisms and contradictions, as evoked in particular by the mixture of dark and light grey. The drawing suggests that guilt and trust are not opposites but complementary, that antagonism is necessary

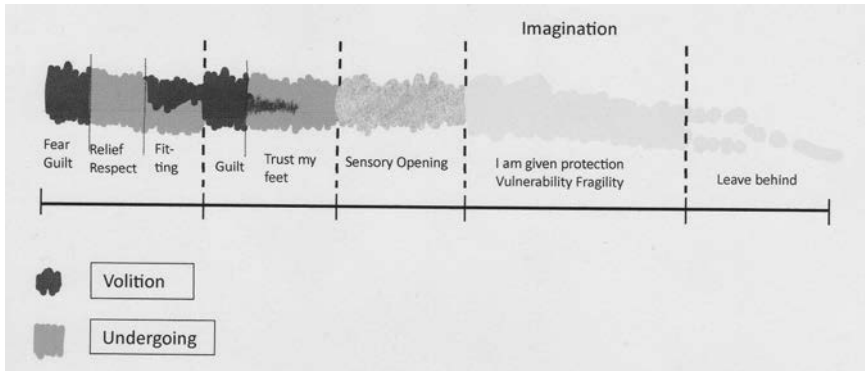


Figure 7.1 A drawing showing the dynamics of Tihamer's experience

for contact, and so on. There is no direct and causal relationship between being in a forest and remembering one's childhood. It is much more complex. Familiar (or Aristotelian) logics and classification are not necessarily our best allies when it comes to analysing these experiences and may lead to false conclusions. Drawing, on the contrary, offers an opportunity to think with the feeling of what happens and to make place for what has not been explicitly told.

2. TAE and ExCoNat and, more broadly, research

The use of TAE has had effects on our relationship with the project, beyond renewing and strengthening collaboration, and beyond refreshing our relationship with the data. Firstly, in what is described within the project, things that our minds consider incompatible are nevertheless articulated with each other. This tells us that it may be particularly interesting in our project – but also in research in general – to pay attention to these *a priori* impossible moments and to their articulations. But this can only be done if we manage to maintain this opening of the heart in trust. This is what we contact, from our bodily felt sense, during meeting 7:

“In ExCoNat, and more broadly in research, my desire is to be at the articulation between strata. These articulations are precious and it is what allows life to be fertile. It is our common fund as living beings.” (MOB, step 14);

“In our research, these precious articulations of incompatible things are to be respected; we must take care of them rather than aim to eradicate them. Not only to take care of them but to identify them, to nourish them, to make room for them. Only then can there be trust, that openness in trust which is also in the common fund of life.”

(VS, resonance with MOB step 12)

Secondly, the theme of response and accountability commits us to considering research as a response to a call (from the field, from the living), which again calls for openness and vulnerability. We are asking ourselves what the conditions are for being available to hear this call and respond to it, that is the *raison d'être* of research: what does research respond to? For whom are we doing research? This is expressed in these verbatim extracts:

“To maintain a relationship is to hold and be held, which makes writing accountable and responsive” (VS, step 11);

“A responsive writing is one that is capable of producing a new sensitivity and of remaining open, of deviating from the path, in order to trace a path that holds on to the living beings who make it salient, a writing which is held by them.”
(VS, step 12)

Thirdly, we have the vulnerability and the acceptance of being disturbed, of deviating from one's path – as an investigator in this study – which has manifested itself. One could say, in the end: to become the “fruit” of the investigation oneself. This was evident in meeting 5:

“How to respond to the call of the field, how to hear it? The question is not theoretical. It's a practical question, the answer to which lies partly in how to articulate one's thoughts and emotions (. . .) You have to work with what you are and not just with what you are as a researcher” (VS, stage 9);

“I need to work – in ExCoNat but not only there – with who I am entirely, sincerely, with my emotions and everything that sets me in motion. That's how I can answer the call, by being available, fragile, alive. It is very concrete. In this way, I am part of the great cycle of giving and receiving”
(MOB, resonance with VS step 9).

This renews our relationship to the project, and more broadly to research, because there is the idea that in this way we can produce new sensibilities, that is, open up paths for other researchers, but also perhaps contribute to a cultural change in sensibilities in the academic world. This is also illustrated by these excerpts from meeting 7:

“In the case of ExCoNat, this would mean that our next step is a resonance step with the actors, the people we interviewed, and Pietro. It could be a collective work with them, based on the salient points we have discovered and which we would share with them. Let them have a say in our research and in the developments it will take” (VS, step 14);

“Finally, what matters most is to know for whom we are doing all this, the research and the writing. Well, it's to do it in dialogue, in a living relationship.”

(MOB, resonance with VS step 14)

Our posture as researchers is thus questioned here, as well as the way we look at our data and analyse our results: taking care of incompatible things in ourselves and in the data, which are probably related. At the end of meeting 7, we recognise that this is where the fertility of scientific work lies, as well as the need for us to be researchers with all that makes us who we are (each of us is at the same time a scientist, a teacher, a decision-maker, but also a mother, a friend, etc.), a realisation connected with the notion of strata that we presented earlier in this text.

3. TAE and micro-phenomenological interviews

Certain properties of the micro-phenomenological interview have been amplified by the use of TAE. Firstly, the evidence that in lived experience, seemingly incompatible facets of experience, even paradoxes (from conventional logical points of view), can co-occur from a first-person perspective. For example, in meeting 5, “*True openness is about trusting in the life that animates everything. It allows for the creation of articulations between seemingly incompatible things, such as joy and suffering*” (MOB, step 9) and “*Articulating incompatible things is done in openness and trust. It takes this moment of creativity for the ends to hang together. Articulations are not ‘total’ but partial, provisional, they are the paths we create, explorations, possible narratives, and this gives joy*” (VS, resonance with MOB step 9) illustrate this property of lived experience that micro-phenomenology frequently reveals in the interviews: the pre-reflective part of lived experience integrates apparently incompatible aspects, beyond the concept of paradox. Secondly, access to the pre-reflective dimension of lived experience is supported by the passage through bodily sensations that TAE allows. The path through this bodily dimension often provokes surprise in micro-phenomenological interviews, which this extract from meeting 7 points to: “*The precious articulations between apparently incompatible things are the life that animates everything. The impression that this is it, yes, this is exactly it! Life pulsates there, in the articulations between incompatible things. They are only incompatible for our logical mind. It gives me great pleasure to discover this*” (VS, resonance to MOB step 10). More broadly, TAE increases the researchers’ sensitivity to their bodily sensations in this way, via deepening their level of experiencing (Klein et al. 1970). The interviewee being in a micro-phenomenological evocation state is a reliable indicator that he or she is in the process of creating fresh meaning. Finally, we have observed that TAE potentiates the transmodal dimension of experience, that is its quality of manifesting itself in a unified way beyond separate sensory modalities, access to this dimension being one of the strengths of micro-phenomenological interviews. This is shown in the excerpts above evoking unity and coherence as well as the beauty pointed to in this excerpt from meeting 3:

“There are several strata in the ExCoNat project, with different qualities and movements in the beauty of the living, in the simplicity of openness, a joyful and singular dance”

(MOB, step 5).

Discussion

We would now like to broaden the discussion to the following question: what does it mean for the research process to make room for embodied thoughts?

The first element of response concerns the possibility of giving voice to something that has not yet been said, something that is still unspoken. Could a process such as TAE enable us, in the interpretation and analysis of our interviews, not to be content with repeating or reproducing what we have already read, heard, and understood in the scientific literature? In other words, could it help us to frame new questions or think differently? We think that the answer is yes, for several reasons.

In our ExCoNat project, there are three levels of attentional disposition which can give voice to the still unspoken:

1. in the experiences being studied, and explored with the micro-phenomenological interviews, Pietro's instruction to "take care not to disturb" allows for particular attention to what is mostly unnoticed;
2. within the interviews, the guidance consists in accompanying the interviewee to help them be in contact with the pre-reflective dimension of her/his past experience which, without particular guidance, remains unspoken; and
3. within the use of the TAE, we listened to our own "inner unspoken," via the bodily felt sense.

These three registers intertwine, weave together, and constitute the complex fabric (in the etymological sense of *complexus*: which is woven together) of our research. We also believe that there is a relation between this fabric and our observation that it is sometimes difficult to evoke what is sensed and felt in academic research. Indeed, our experience with the TAE shows that these dimensions *can* be evoked in a collective academic work. This strengthens the project, and, we believe, improves its scientific quality – because it allows the researchers to stay closer to the experience itself and to find words to articulate what has not, until now, been articulated. To do so, he/she needs to be connected to his/her own body, as the subjects were connected to their embodied and situated knowledge when they experienced the forest. Language cannot faithfully describe the experience if it is disembodied. As Donata Schoeller has said (personal communication), "TAE is a way to sensitize the researcher for the sensitive material of the Microphenomenology."

Using TAE led us into a radical form of reflexivity that is deeply connected to the ability to say the still unspoken. It is radical because it is not only a social or intellectual, or even emotional, reflexivity (which is practised in sociology and anthropology), it is also the recognition that research is done by real people who are concerned and touched by what they are doing. Doing the TAE process uncovered our deep motivations for research and helped us to better understand why it matters to us (and what matters to us in the ExCoNat

project in particular), why we are doing it and what we expect – or hope from it. We realised and acknowledged that our research responds to a concern about living things in a society that sees them mainly as a resource. The research also responds to a hope, that of revealing the ways by which people still manage to connect with living things, and of bringing these results to life in scientific publications and other research products that are accessible to all. It also brings – underlines – the realisation that science isn't an activity isolated from society and that it has effects on society. Finding words to express still unspoken ways of connecting the self to the outside world is effective outside of academic work itself. The TAE process made it clear that research is not just an academic matter for us.

During the process, the issue of accountability emerged regularly. To whom are we accountable as researchers? We feel that we are accountable to the people we interviewed in the field and to the forest that was the site of our investigation, as well as to the relationships and thinking that the interviewees told us about. Research is not only about taking data and doing what we want with it, relating it to theories or other purely scholarly works. This would equate to being only accountable to ourselves (the researchers). And that would be, precisely, not being accountable. In fact, the TAE process led to a concrete proposal to go back to the actors and establish a dialogue with them around the research. This wish had already been expressed and the possibility of this meeting had already been discussed before the TAE was undertaken. However, the TAE work gave it a new importance and significance. It was no longer just a matter of reporting our results, but of offering the people concerned the opportunity to influence the course of the research and the analysis of the interviews. This meeting took place in September 2022. Overall, it was disappointing. We did not manage to interest the actors in our research; probably we did not anticipate well enough what would have interested them (students in dramatic arts and doctoral students in anthropology) in our research. But the reflection remains open.

In the end, are we going to practise a radically different kind of research from now on, and what would be different? Of course, it is difficult to answer that question, even if Magali told Veronique that she would no longer be able to practise research otherwise. Going back to ExCoNat, we have new guidelines for the analysis of the interviews now, and we are doing it from a different position. It will certainly refashion our results and the final publication. But how different will it be from classical academic research? Well, perhaps not so much, after all. Or perhaps the difference isn't where one would expect it? Isn't it the case that being open, attentive to contradiction, and attentive to encounters between things that seem quite different, and feeling accountable and bound by the field, are the basics of science? Aren't we going back to the root of what research should be? For us, the answer is yes:

“All this is extremely exciting for me. Part of the exercise was done with a lot of emotion. I have the impression that I am touching the heart of things that have been around me for a very long time. How to respond to the call,

how to hear it? The question is not theoretical. It's a practical question whose answer lies partly in how to articulate one's thoughts and emotions" (Step 9 VS).

"I had a lot of fun doing this process, I felt like pieces of the puzzle fitting together. A solid matter of course. A game" (Step 9 MOB).

Finally, one last thing is unknown to us: the style that our writing will take. Does embodied thinking require a different kind of writing, maybe less analytical, more analogical? Should we resort to artistic forms of expression? Gendlin has made it clear that language is not the enemy of embodied thinking. The TAE process is an illustration of it. But it produces a different kind of language. More concrete, vivid, direct. In any case, we'll seek to give the most accurate account possible of what our interviewees have told us, leaving room for the singularity of their voices. But it won't necessarily be artistic or completely different writing. There will be a flavour: something different and recognisable for people who are ready to read from their own body sense.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the Laboratoire de l'Éducation – UAR 3773, École Normale Supérieure de Lyon and the Research Council of the University of Liège for their financial support for this project. Without Pietro Varasso, nothing would have been possible: we want to thank him for his invaluable inputs in the whole process of ExCoNat and for taking his students (and accepting some of ours) out in the field. Finally, we want to thank the participants in this study for welcoming us and contributing to the research by offering us their invaluable, and so rich, experiences.

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