

EASE – an embodied approach to the study of experience

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Introducing the special section

During the last decades, lived experience has been (re-)positioned as a central theme in different fields of knowledge. In cognitive sciences, in particular, several research groups have reached the consensus that it is difficult to advance in the understanding of cognitive phenomena without the rigorous study of how these phenomena are experienced from the first-person point of view. At the same time, the advent of the embodied approach to cognition (e.g., [1]) produced a paradigm shift that gave bodily experience a primary place in the understanding of cognitive processes. This paradigm shift converges with recent findings that position embodiment as a central therapeutic factor across all creative arts therapies [2], [3], and new insights from phenomenological approaches in psychology and psychiatry that attribute a central role for the understanding of cognition and mental health to bodily experience (e.g., [4]).

These theoretical movements generated a need for developing methodologies for a systematic study of experience (see e.g. [5], [6], [7], [8]). While the so-called first- and second-person methods have recently become increasingly accepted into the toolbox of cognitive science, their use raises a series of theoretical, epistemological, and methodological challenges – challenges that cannot be solved by forcing the study of experience into the existing objectivist frameworks of mainstream cognitive science, but require a consideration in their own right [9], [10].

In the context of our endeavors to articulate and address these challenges, we carried out a three-year project called “An Embodied Approach to the Study of Experi-

ence” (EASE Project, REDI 170181, 2017–2020; PI: Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky), whose aim was to generate an international and interdisciplinary network of researchers to facilitate the development of an embodied approach to the study of experience. Composed of researchers from France, Germany, Slovenia, USA and Chile, the EASE network worked towards addressing specific challenges posed by the study of experience such as

1. the challenge of memory, referring to the questions of how to understand the process of recalling and relating to past experience, and what implication this understanding has for the understanding of epistemology and validity of first-person research;
2. the challenge of expressing experience, referring to the questions of how to understand the relationship between experience and language, and what this understanding implies for the process of describing experience; and
3. the challenge of intersubjectivity, referring to the question of how to understand the relational and participatory dimension of first-person research, and take it into account in the understanding of research results (for a more detailed outline of these challenges, see [11]).

During the EASE project, we identified, discussed and practiced new methods for becoming aware of experience, describing it, and using investigation of experience as a source of scientific knowledge gain and/or a tool for therapeutic change [12], [13], [14], [15].

In November 2018, EASE researchers Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Maria Isabel Gaete Celis visited Ger-

many (SRH University and the Research Institute of Creative Arts Therapies at Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences) to teach an action-oriented workshop in the context of a colloquium on art-based research, where phenomenology was identified as a major element of arts-based research methods. They also led a workshop in France at the École Normale Supérieure and at the Husserl Archives in Paris, in which the network members used the micro-phenomenological interview method to investigate nonverbal levels of experience. These in-person workshops were paired with regular online meetings, taking place throughout the duration of the project, in which the network members jointly explored ideas and embodied practices relating to the three above-mentioned challenges. The project ended in October 2020 with an online conference that presented the major outcomes and results (the talks are available at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/CxebOwln9xf2MuheGZSdrXA/videos>). This *special section* of the *GMS Journal of Arts Therapies* on the study of experiencing presents the main outcomes of the EASE project as the second of two major publications (see “Notes” for details about the first publication). The contributions of the special section present theoretical and empirical research related to experiencing, art, movement, and language, with relation to clinical work. We wish you an inspiring reading!

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Notes

The first publication output was published as a special issue of the journal *Constructivist Foundations* on the “The Enactive Scientific Study of Experience” (<https://constructivist.info/16/2>), including articles by Michel Bitbol, Claire Petitmengin, and Sebastián Medeiros, Carla Crempien, Alejandra Vásquez-Rosati, Javiera Duarte, Catherine Andreu, Álvaro I. Langer, Miguel Ibaceta, Jaime R. Silva and Diego Cosmelli Sánchez.

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