Where the Body Speaks

From Experiencing to Fresh Meanings in Scientific Inquiry

Heinke Deloch

An abrupt turn of thought, an inspiring glance, a refreshing idea: We respond to new insights with our whole body—and, conversely, it is through the whole body that such insights come into being. Creative thinking draws on the felt dimension of our engagement with a task, a text, or a situation. This mode of "experiential thinking" is indispensable to the production of scientific knowledge, yet it is rarely made explicit, taught, or systematically cultivated as a scholarly practice. In this text, I aim to conceptualize experiential thinking more precisely and to demonstrate how it can be systematically applied in research. I further reflect on the opportunities it offers within the university context, as well as on the challenges it poses to established academic practices. These reflections are informed by my work as a supervisor in the Research Training Group *Experiencing Gender. Constitution and Transformation of Being in the World* at the Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Research (IZG), Bielefeld University, which is dedicated to the systematic integration of lived experience into research across a variety of disciplines. My role is to support the development of a scientific practice that systematically incorporates directly felt meaning (the *Felt Sense*) into the research process. Within our Research Training Group (RTG) we have established experiential approaches in the following areas: theory development; qualitative interviewing (Jäger/König 2020) and (literary) text analysis; critique and self-reflection, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

For the theoretical grounding, I draw on the work of the psychologist and philosopher E. T. Gendlin who, with his *Process Philosophy*, developed a concept of experiential, embodied thinking. His notion of "experiential explication" extends empirical and logical justification by means of phenomenological grounding, thereby providing a basis for a "First Person Science" (Gendlin/Johnson 2004) that challenges dichotomies such as subjectivity versus objectivity and essentialism versus relativism. In what follows, I will outline the core concepts of his model of justification and provide examples of how experiential thinking can be systematically employed within the research process.

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1. Philosophical Foundations of a First Person Science

In the context of psychotherapy research, Eugene Gendlin describes personality change as a process of symbolizing implicit, bodily felt meaning (Gendlin 1964). He terms this dynamic interplay of feeling and symbolizing the "experiencing process." Based on this, he formulates essential conditions for facilitating change processes (ibid.) and gives a precise account of creative speaking and thinking as the unfolding of new meanings via the concept of "experiential explication" (see below). Elaborating his initial reflections on the interplay between language and experiencing (Gendlin 1997), Gendlin unfolds his *Process Philosophy*—a comprehensive framework rooted in the philosophy of language and phenomenology—which seeks to transcend entrenched philosophical dichotomies, including essentialism versus relativism, realism versus idealism, objectivism versus subjectivism, determinism versus indeterminism, and rationalism versus irrationalism (Gendlin 2004b, 2018c). At the core of this model is the principle "interaction first," according to which body, situation, and subject are not to be considered separate entities (ibid. 2018c). Based on these foundations, Gendlin formulates the idea of a "First Person Science" as a complement to the established scientific model (Gendlin/Johnson 2004). Accordingly, he intends "phenomenological explication"[1] to serve as a "First Person" basis of statements and to supplement the logical and empirical grounding of statements (Gendlin 2018a: 55).[2] The methods of "Focusing" and "Thinking at the Edge" (see below) offer a systematic approach to phenomenological knowledge that can be effectively conveyed in academic and educational contexts for the design of creative thinking processes, for systematic theory building, but also for processes of understanding, for example within qualitative social research or in the interpretation of literary texts (Claxton 2021; Deloch 2025; Schoeller 2023).

2. Logical-Analytic and Experiential Thinking: Two Modes of Thinking

Gendlin introduces the concept of experiential thinking in contrast to the logical-analytic "Western unit model," a mode of thought oriented toward mathematics, technology, and the natural sciences (Gendlin/Johnson 2004; Stekeler-Weithofer 2012: 42). According to Gendlin, this dominant style conceives of thought as composed of

1 Gendlin uses the term "explication" here in the sense of "making explicit," rather than in the sense of "explaining." He conceives of this kind of phenomenological clarification, articulation, or exploration as a further organization of experiencing, not as a process of representation (Gendlin 2018a: 57).

2 To do this, Gendlin draws, among others, on the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey, the pragmatism of John Dewey, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Gendlin 2004b; Schoeller 2016).

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clearly separable elements that are either identical or distinctly different and that cannot interpenetrate spatially or temporally (Gendlin 2004a: 3).[3] Logical-analytic thinking can thus be understood as a form of "deductive calculation with definitions" (Stekeler-Weithofer 2012: 55). It is oriented toward clearly defined concepts and aims to eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty (Gendlin 1996: 23). Its epistemic ideal lies in precision, accuracy, and argumentative conclusiveness—that is, in reasoning that aspires to be not only persuasive but ideally irrefutable. Knowledge is therefore regarded as well-founded when it can be logically derived from accepted propositions and theories, in line with a coherence theory of truth (Rescher 2003). In scientific practice, this orientation is accompanied by the demand of a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1989) as a guarantee of objectivity: Findings are expected to emerge from a distanced perspective, unaffected by the researcher's needs, values, feelings, or viewpoints. As Gendlin puts it, attention is conceived "along the lines of perception, as if a neutral and unexamined person over here directs a neutral beam at some already separate object over there" (Gendlin 2004b: 128).[4] Logical-analytic thinking thus brackets the researcher's reflexive involvement with the object of inquiry and tends to treat person, situation, language, and world as strictly separate (ibid.). Its epistemological aim is to represent the world as accurately as possible through language.[5] This mode of thinking is indispensable in a highly technologized world of routines and standardized procedures, generating both robust scientific knowledge and reliable practical applications. At the same time, it remains bound to specific conceptual frameworks and therefore privileges decontextualized, abstract reasoning over situated, embodied processes.

Yet social change and technical or scientific developments cannot be explained solely as the outcome of logical reasoning (Gendlin 2009: 361). They presuppose the capacity to transcend established systems of thought and fixed linguistic distinctions—to think, in Gendlin's terms, "more than logical[ly]" (Gendlin 2004a: 13). Creativity, in this sense, requires "a deliberate way to think and speak with what is more than categories (concepts, theories, assumptions, distinctions, and so on)" (Gendlin 2004b: 127). It entails a creative "leap into the void" (Schneider 1992: 28; author's

3 "What we call 'thinking' seems to require already-cut units which must be either cleanly identical or cleanly separate, which can be next to each other but cannot interpenetrate, let alone have some more complex pattern. If, for example, two things seem to be both two and one in some intricate way, rather than try to lay out such a pattern, thinking tends to stop right there." (Gendlin 2004a: 3)

4 "But only the third person is a perspective, a view (the 'view from nowhere', the observed without the observer)." (Gendlin 2009: 348)

5 In its ideal-typical form, such a representational theory of language is formulated by Bertrand Russell. According to him, an "ideal language" consists of logical atoms that stand for objects which genuinely exist in the world. On this view, the more complex concepts of a scientific language must be analyzable into such logical atoms (Deloch 1997: 10).

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translation)—a step that cannot be logically derived from previous acts of thinking or speaking.[6] Accordingly, Gendlin situates experiential thinking alongside the logical mode (Gendlin 2009: 334f).

In his psychotherapy research, Gendlin notes that a creative leap becomes possible when a "border zone" comes into awareness—an area where established linguistic distinctions and conceptual categories no longer hold (Gendlin 1996: 245; Gendlin 2004b: 127f): "In genuinely fresh thinking one pursues a new edge that is only vaguely sensed. At the edge of a scientific discovery, at the furthest end of a logical progression, there is something troubling, new, and exciting not yet articulate or organized." (Gendlin 1996: 245) Such an "unclear edge" often announces itself through a diffuse feeling, a subtle disquiet, or a sense of uncertainty, expressed as a bodily resonance that shadows the process of thought.

Table 1: Logical-Analytical and Experiential Thinking

Logical-Analytical Thinking	**Experiential Thinking**
"View from nowhere": researchers remain objectively detached from the phenomena they study (*Third Person Science*).	Self-reflective: incorporating the implicit bodily experiencing (*Felt Sense*) of the thinking, feeling, living researcher (*First Person Science*).
Privileges *generalizations* over the nuanced, individual experiencing of meaning.	Grounds the nuanced differentiation of meaning in the *individual's personal, bodily felt experiencing*.
Analytical: complex content is split into smaller units and considered independently of the thinking person.	*Experiential*: attends to experiential content in its complexity and in relation to the thinking person.
Concepts are assumed to have *fixed, rigidly defined, invariable meanings.*	Meanings are assumed to *emerge afresh* as previous uses of concepts "cross" with new situations of application.

6 Thomas Kuhn speaks of "revolutions" when scientific paradigms are replaced by others, without the new theory being logically derived from the preceding one (Kuhn 1967). Drawing on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Hans Julius Schneider demonstrates that such "creative leaps" are already an inherent part of everyday language acquisition: while certain grammatical rules may support the learning process, "there are no predetermined tracks one is set on when acquiring language independently" (Schneider 1992: 32; author's translation). Gendlin emphasizes that every use of language occurs within a new situation and thus carries with it novel nuances: "All language use is metaphoric in this respect. What after Wittgenstein we call a 'use-family'—our felt sense of the many situations in which we can use the word—crosses freshly with the topic area or situation in which we speak […]. In crossing they open each other and generate more than could possibly follow logically from either." (Gendlin 2018c: 51)

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Logical-Analytical Thinking	**Experiential Thinking**
Logical reasoning: development of knowledge through conclusions drawn from accepted premises.	*Experiential/phenomenological explication*: unfolding new meanings in reference to present experiencing.
Logical contradictions are avoided, and excluded through restrictive definitions if necessary.	Contradictory or *unusual formulations* serve as starting point for further differentiations.
Logical precision: logically necessary relations between fixed concepts; exclusion of vagueness: *logical order.*	*Experiential precision*: experiencing responds with a finer order than any set of categories: *responsive order.*
Directed toward the *explicit and well known*, explaining the unknown by reference to established knowledge.	Directed *toward what is still unclear*, where established categories, modes of thought, and terminologies fail.
Goal of discourse: clarity, sharpness of argument, logical consistency.	*Goal of discourse*: allowing space for the emergence of new meanings, beyond established concepts.

3. The Felt Body as a "Source of New Meanings"[7]

Gendlin understands "experiential thinking" as a process in which we deliberately attend to this border zone (Gendlin 1996: 240): We allow the border to come to our attention in concrete situations as a tangible felt meaning (*Felt Sense*). This implicit felt meaning should not be confused with explicit emotions such as fear or anger; rather, it is a holistic bodily sense of a situation that can "hover around" or "underlie" a specific emotion (Gendlin 1996: 27). Gendlin uses the metaphor of a felt inner "place" (ibid.: 25) as the source from which we speak and think—a place that encompasses the linguistic, cultural, and biographical contours of a situation and guides our attempts at articulation with remarkable precision. Our bodily, situated felt sensing is neither detached from linguistic structures nor strictly determined by them.[8] Instead, within experiencing, linguistic distinctions and situational specificity interact in ways more subtle than established categories can capture: "[…] the human body is never without language. But it can generate a bodily implying that goes beyond what the already-shared common meanings could imply" (Gendlin 2004b: 132).

7 Gendlin 1962: 55; see also König 2024.

8 "It is true that human bodies are never without implicit language. But 'never without' has been confused with 'determined only by' language. Language profoundly changes and develops the human animal all way through, but the body's implying is and remains more than what language determines." (Gendlin 2016: 62)

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Gendlin refers to this still unclear, felt boundary, which continuously emerges during the articulation process, as the "excess" (ibid.). We draw upon this excess in acts of creativity: for Gendlin, the bodily felt sense arising in the border zone between conscious and unconscious processes serves as a source of creative thought and expression as well as a driver of social change more broadly (Gendlin 1996: 27).

4. Experiential Explication: The Unfolding of New Meanings in Speaking and Thinking

Based on observations from psychotherapy research, where clients often struggle to find words to articulate the meaning that a specific situation in their life holds for them, Gendlin describes the unfolding of new meanings as a bodily process of allowing and discarding verbal formulations. When speaking about a meaningful life experience, we can immediately refer to an all-embracing, bodily felt meaning that is not yet clearly categorized conceptually (Gendlin 2004b: 128). Such situations are marked by a noticeable sense of confusion, which Gendlin calls "philosophical discomfort" (Gendlin 1991: 52). When we begin to think or speak from this felt place, we feel "naked," since no word initially seems to capture exactly what we mean. We search for words, hesitate, and pause. In everyday life, this hesitant moment is usually obscured by impatient attempts at formulation—by "naked sayings" (Gendlin 1991: 52). Yet it is precisely in this pause that the possibility of saying and thinking something new arises. To seize it, we must endure the uncertainty and at times the sense of inadequacy that accompanies the pause, while staying attuned to the felt meaning we are experiencing in the moment. If the words we find do not fit, the felt meaning may fade or be lost. This is a familiar experience from unsatisfying conversations that remain superficial (Gendlin 2004b: 136). If, however, we take our time, and the right words come, they can have an immediate, opening effect on our experiencing—sometimes expressed bodily through a deep breath, a smile, a sigh, or even tears ("felt shift," Gendlin 1996: 247).

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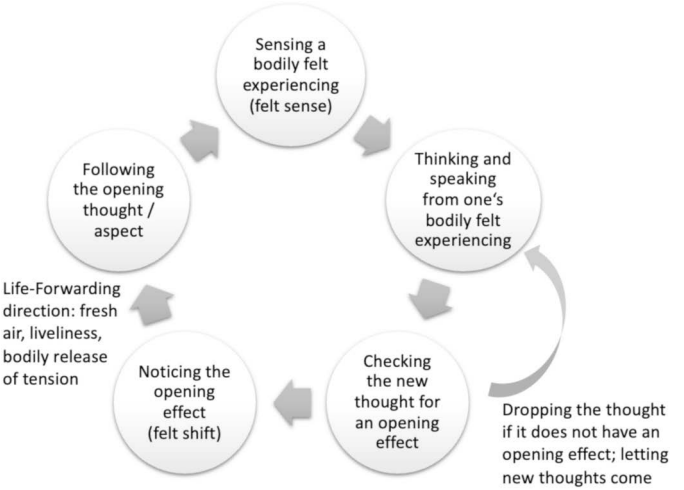
Figure 1: Experiential Explication



Experiential thinking is characterized by this "wandering back and forth" between situational bodily experiencing and possible symbolizations. Gendlin calls this tentative process of unfolding new meanings in reference to implicit bodily experiencing "experiential explication" (Gendlin 2018a). The new expressions that emerge may appear disturbing, surprising, or illogical, since they are used in unfamiliar (non-)linguistic contexts. To preserve the implicit felt meaning, we must be willing to work with such "odd sentences" (Gendlin 2018c: 36). Expressing them is always a risk, as it is uncertain whether and how they will be understood. Thus, neither the spontaneous creation of new uses in everyday speech acts nor their understanding can be justified by rules (Wittgenstein 1984: §39).[9] Rather, understanding these "odd phrases," requires that the imagination of the listener keep

9 At this juncture, Campbell Purton introduces his critique of Gendlin's concept of the *felt sense*: The concept presupposes bodily sensations where, following Purton, it is merely a matter of figures of speech. In everyday language, we often refer to a feeling when we are unable to provide a reason for a particular assertion (Purton 2021: 193). For instance, we might say, "I feel like it's already past four o'clock," without experiencing any concrete sensation (ibid.). According to Wittgenstein, such expressions serve to articulate our own thoughts to ourselves (ibid.). Consequently, Purton proposes that the concept of the felt sense be understood as a characterization of a situation in which, during the process of articulation, we intuit something that is of decisive significance to us (ibid.). In my view, Purton is working here with an overly narrow understanding of the felt sense. While Gendlin maintains that, as long as we are in some way oriented, we speak from within an implicit, bodily understanding of the situation, this does not mean that in every such case there must also be a reference to a felt sense (Gendlin 2009: 336).

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pace with that of the speaker (Schneider 1992: 31). In the best case, such phrases directly open a new understanding of the situation for both sides. Consider, for example, what happens when you read Bachmann's poem:

> **In the Storm of Roses**
> Wherever we turn in the storm of roses,
> thorns illuminate the night. And the thunder
> of a thousand leaves, once so quiet on the bushes,
> is right at our heels.
> (Bachmann/Anderson 1986: 67)

As you read the poem and let Bachmann's imagery take hold, what responses do they stir within you? Does a new horizon of meaning unfold as you read—subtly felt, perhaps through a shift in mood, yet still elusive and difficult to grasp? Or do these lines inspire you less, perhaps provoking irritation or even anger?[10] By attending to one's bodily felt experiencing of concrete life situations and letting words emerge, it becomes possible to transcend cultural routines and unfold new, life-enhancing steps (Gendlin 2004b: 136). Another example is the transformation of societal role models: "Instead of having only the predictable, expected emotions the roles call for, we often have unclear feelings. They are unclear because 'clear' feelings are those that are already patterned. We must make new phrases to express these unclear feelings, and new forms of action to carry the feelings into daily life." (Gendlin 1981: 185) Creative processes of "experiential explication"—or, in the case of role models, "experiential emancipation"—are far from arbitrary. They concern the search for new life patterns and a consistency in action that must also prove itself in interaction. The "Focusing Steps" entail ideal-typical stages that help deliberately initiate this articulation process (see below).

5. The Responsive Relationship of Body, Language, and Environment

From the perspective of an analytical model of thinking, which brackets out the lived dimension of meaning (Gendlin 2004b: 136), the *creative leap* in speaking and think-

10 Christine Abbt describes this type of experiential reading of literature—"intimate reading" (Abbt 2025)—as part of a methodology of a "literature-philosophy" (Benne/Abbt 2021). It implies that the "thick descriptions" of texts are unfolded rather than having their complexity restricted by conceptual definitions (ibid.: 29). To this end, texts must be grasped in their textual and conceptual relations, and "all possible opinions, intentions, beliefs, and emotional states" must be taken into account (ibid.). According to Abbt, a reading of philosophical texts practiced in this way has a potentially life-changing effect, while the reading of literary texts can, conversely, transform truth-oriented philosophical thinking (ibid.: 27).

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ing remains elusive. Experiential explication, by contrast, conceives this leap as intrinsic to natural language itself: "A concept in actual thought is not only the logical pattern and implications that it has at a given moment. It also involves a felt experiencing of meaning, which can lead—in the next moment—to radically different concepts, new differentiations of meaning, contradictions in logic yet 'predictable' as human behaviors." (Gendlin 1997: 6) The finding of new words is thus redefined as a body-environment interaction and, therefore, as a bodily process (Gendlin 2009: 361). A prerequisite for this is Gendlin's assumption of an inherent connection between language, body, and environment. In experiential speaking and thinking, our bodily felt experiencing of meaning changes itself. Hence, the new aspect expressed by the words found adds new dimensions of meaning to our bodily felt experiencing, thus "carrying it forward" (Gendlin 2016: 55; Gendlin 2018a: 65): "Experiencing is the organism's interaction with all the environment, therefore it is implicitly very rich […] To say what one feels is not a mere telling about it, but is itself a further experiencing. When one articulates it rightly, one feels an experiential movement." (Gendlin 1974: 227)

When speaking *from* experiencing, a new implicit understanding of the situation arises, from which further meanings can unfold. Bodily felt experiencing and articulation are thus intrinsically connected: They form a single process of "implying" and "occurring" (Gendlin 2004b: 136). By finding new words, speaking and thinking simultaneously transform both our bodily experiencing *and* the situation itself (Gendlin 2018a: 64).[11] This marks the difference from logical deduction: "Thus explication differs from mere deduction. One deals with not only the words and statements but also the experience and situation, and what is or is not revealed in them." (Ibid.)

Gendlin conceives bodily felt experiencing as a "responsive order": It responds directly to the symbolizations we find, and in ways more precise and richer than logic alone could provide (Gendlin 2004b: 128): "It is a more organic order, a more precise and more demanding kind of order, a very finely determined order, very different from logic, yet responsive to logic." (Ibid.: 130) By analogy with the precision of logical relationships, Gendlin speaks of "experiential precision" (Gendlin 2018b: 111). The process of experiential explication is, in principle, open-ended: each articulation generates a new implicit understanding from which further articulations become possible. Its aim is therefore not to achieve a "definitively correct articulation," but to reach formulations that accomplish certain intellectual or practical tasks (Gendlin

11 Learning a language involves more than simply acquiring names for things; it entails learning how to take part in a particular form of life (Moi 2022: 28). As Moi puts it: "It's because world and word meet in us, the users of language" (ibid.: 30).

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2018a: 66):[12] In psychotherapy, articulating new personal meanings may enable fresh steps in life; in gender studies, an experiential approach to interview material can give voice to unique ways of experiencing gender, thereby making visible potential transformations in social relations (König/Erhart 2023).

The image of a responsive order thus replaces correspondence or representational theories of knowledge, according to which cognition depends on a passive perception of objects and their adequate designation. Instead, the unfolding of new meanings is grounded in a bodily felt experiencing that is not conceptually fixed but remains "open"—a conceptual "surplus" that continually shifts and reshapes itself within the explication process. As knowing subjects, we must, as Gendlin suggests in his *Process Model*, understand ourselves as part of the very environment we seek to know ("interaction first," Gendlin 2018c; 2018a: 82): "I say rather that the body is environmental interaction first, before it forms also as a structure, and before units are divided and defined". (Gendlin 2016: 61, emphasis in original)

Accordingly, bodily felt experiencing should not be interpreted in a mentalistic sense as merely "internal" or "private," but rather as an interaction of body and environment: "Phenomenology has no problem going beyond a single person's private experiencing, because experiencing is inherently an interaction process in a situation with other people and things. What appears is neither internal nor external, neither just private nor just interactional." (Gendlin 2004b: 147f) Instead of conceiving experiencing in terms of "inside" and "outside," Gendlin thus proposes investigating body-environment processes or specific processes of situated experiencing (Gendlin 2018c).

6. A First Person Science: Bodily Felt Experiencing as Basis of Knowledge

With experiential explication, a new mode of scientific justification becomes possible—one that integrates first person experience into theory formation. Alongside logical and empirical forms of justification, this can be understood as a *phenomenological justification* of knowledge (Gendlin 2018a: 52).[13] It is characterized by processes

12 This does not imply relativism: "Ultimate formulations are not possible because what exists implicitly is never equivalent to a formulation. Therefore it never grounds just one. That doesn't make formulations relativistic, just relative to something implicit which they explicate. Formulations are explications." (Gendlin 2016: 86) According to Gendlin, postmodern thinkers overlook this possibility: they remain stuck in the dichotomy that, without the possibility of ultimate justification, only chaos and arbitrariness remain: "Postmodernism was still the unit model, but used against itself." (Ibid.)

13 Within his method, *Thinking at the Edge* outlines steps for theory building that start from phenomenologically grounded statements and lead to a coherent logical construct. In outlining

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such as the retroactive attribution of meaning (*"retroactive past"*) and the development of meanings that carry a situation forward (ibid.: 65). A phenomenologically grounded statement is true insofar as it succeeds in articulating the felt meaning of a bodily experience: "Thus a sentence might be called true or false either because it stated or failed to state a definite empirical observation, or because it followed or failed to follow logically from other statements, or because it explicated or failed to explicate a directly felt experience." (Ibid.: 54) The validity of such justification does not depend primarily on logical consistency, but on criteria such as the continuity of experienced change (ibid.: 77). The task of a first person science is therefore to derive intersubjectively usable variables from first person processes and to develop corresponding instruments of measurement (ibid.).[14] "Once recognizably defined, a first person variable can give rise to an operational (third-person) version. But these objective variables can be derived only if experiencing is first studied." (Gendlin/Johnson 2004: s.p.)

One such instrument is the *Experiencing Scale* which tracks processes of change in psychotherapy. Integrating experiential processes into science does not mean abandoning objectivity or precision but introducing a new form of justification—measured by *responsive objectivity* and *experiential precision*. First person science thus complements rather than replaces Third Person Science: "Logic depends on keeping the units the same. Therefore, it can never explain how new thoughts come. In contrast, explication freshly 'carries forward' at every step. Therefore it can never have the inferential power of logical formation. We can see clearly that neither system can undercut or minimize the other." (Gendlin 2009: 361)

Yet phenomenological justification is primary with regard to logical and empirical justification: "We can move between the two kinds of precision, keeping the science of logical units steady, but also considering the wider process of generating such units." (Gendlin 2018b: 111) Only by speaking from our lived experiencing can we generate new conceptual distinctions, and with them new logical structures.[15] Social and scientific transformation, in turn, become possible through the interplay of logical and experiential modes of thinking. Recognizing phenomenological justification as the primary form of justification does not imply subjectivism. On the contrary, it is precisely this natural function of language—the capacity to generate new meanings—that enables intersubjective knowledge. The production of knowledge,

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this method, Gendlin systematically demonstrates how logical reasoning and experiential insight are combined to achieve scientific understanding.

14 For first person research in midwifery, see Boukydis (2012); for experiential gender research, see König/Erhart (2023).

15 To understand the experiential unfolding of meaning as "purely private" is a misinterpretation that stems from separating situation, language, and body from one another (Gendlin 2018a: 43; Deloch 2024).

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for Gendlin, cannot be legitimated through a final grounding; rather it can be seen as an ongoing experiential process through which our implicit understanding and linguistic distinctions advance. The ideal of science as an approach to a single, ultimate truth rests on the false assumption of a strict separation between humans and world. However, there can be no "objective science" in this sense, because: "World and word, world and scientific practices are intertwined from the start." (Moi 2022: 30) Gendlin's *responsive empiricism* thus seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of naturalism/essentialism and constructivism/relativism. Within this responsive order, the unfolding of new meanings is neither predetermined nor arbitrary: It is guided by the *intricacy* of implicit experiencing, a structure at once unfinished and "finely organized" (Gendlin 2004b): "Where others see indeterminacy, we find intricacy—an always unfinished order that cannot be represented, but has to be taken along as we think. It is a much finer, more organic order that always provides implicit functions, whether we attend to them or not." (Ibid.: 128)

7. Experiential Methods and their Application in Science

Building on the concept of experiencing, a range of methods and analytical tools have been developed that can enrich scientific thinking and research processes. In the following, I present some of these methods and illustrate, using concrete examples, how we systematically apply them in our Research Training Group.

7.1 Focusing – A Method of Personal Development

Originally designed in the psychotherapeutic context, the Focusing steps provide a structured way of accessing the *Felt Sense* and the articulation processes connected to it (Gendlin 1981; Deloch 2024). The practice is grounded in specific Focusing attitudes that define a helpful stance toward one's own experiencing. Central among these are radical acceptance, friendly interest, patience, and "not-knowing" in the sense of refraining from premature closure (ibid.).[16] Focusing can be employed in theory construction (*Thinking at the Edge*/Phase 1) as a way of cultivating creative impulses in relation to a research topic. It can also be applied in qualitative social research as a form of self-reflection following a research interview, where the researcher's felt resonance may serve as a guide for reflecting upon their felt orientation toward the research process.

16 Within psychotherapy, these attitudes foreground the client's relationship to their own experiencing; at the same time, they may also be understood as attitudes that are helpful for accompanying creative processes across a range of settings.

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By way of example, a PhD student associated with our RTG experienced intense, unpleasant bodily sensations after conducting a research interview in prison and engaged in self-focusing: "The whole experience of having been in prison feels like it left its mark on me. It feels almost like with leaving him [the interviewee] behind, I'm leaving a part of myself behind in the prison." (Schulz 2025: s.p.) Staying with this feeling, they elaborate on the meaning of their feeling: "I am getting a sense of injustice that I get to leave, and he doesn't." Schulz gradually articulates a shift in their experiencing: What at first felt unpleasant gains a new, positive meaning. They realize that it relates to their relationship with the research subject, and—starting from an initially vague felt sense—are able to articulate this in more precise terms: "It feels good, and right, like I want to see, I want to empathize. My change now feels meaningful." (Ibid.: s.p.) By attending to the unclear felt sense that remained after the interview, Schulz gradually comes to recognize that their engagement with the research topic is motivated by a deeply felt commitment to making injustice visible. They see this commitment as a generative starting point for unfolding and clarifying their concerns in relation to the research topic: "Maybe it's necessary so I can do this research justice, so that I can do these people justice. I feel like this could be an interesting starting point for T[hinking] A[t the] E[dge]—what does it mean to do them justice?" (ibid.).

The Focusing method can also be applied to identify aspects within transcripts of qualitative interviews or within literary texts that are experienced as meaningful (see also Tantia 2021; Todres/Galvin 2008). In our RTG, we proceed as follows:

- The researcher introduces her research topic and guiding interest and provides brief contextual information about the interviewee (or the introduced text).
- A short, guided body scan supports participants in adopting an attitude of bodily awareness and receptivity.
- The researcher reads the transcript (text) aloud, attending to authentic intonation and allowing for pauses.
- While listening, participants attend to their own *bodily felt sense*, noticing bodily resonances as well as any images, thoughts, or shifts that are beginning to emerge internally.
- After the reading, time is given for individual note-taking.
- Participants then share their thoughts and felt resonance aloud in dyads.
- The impressions are subsequently shared in the whole group. During this process, we aim to preserve the subtle distinctions of individual experiencing and to understand them more precisely. The goal is not to produce a "shared" or consensual interpretation.
- Participants may, if they wish, make their notes available to the presenting researcher.

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This approach actively integrates the researcher's felt resonance into the process of understanding. Subtle nuances of individual experiencing are intentionally brought into awareness and articulated. Symbolization in the form of images helps to make experiential aspects that are difficult to articulate more tangible. Protecting individual experiencing and seeking to understand it more precisely avoids premature generalizations. In this way, new meanings can emerge and become articulable. If a more intensive exchange is desired, the participants can continue with "interdisciplinary crossing" (see below).

7.2 Thinking at the Edge (TAE) – A Method of Experiential Theory Construction

With the TAE method, which is grounded in the philosophy of language and phenomenology, Gendlin and his colleagues Mary Hendricks and Kye Nelson formulated a total of 14 thinking steps, divided into 3 phases, that make experiential thinking applicable and communicable in various contexts (Gendlin 2004a; Gendlin/Hendricks 2004; Deloch 2010; Schoeller 2023). TAE unfolds in three phases:

- TAE Phase 1: Attending to a felt creative impulse and speaking or writing from it;
- TAE Phase 2: Developing new patterns of thought, grounded in lived experiencing;
- TAE Phase 3: Building a logically coherent concept or theory.

As a method of theory construction, TAE involves precise steps for generating new linguistic meanings and conceptual connections. It offers tools to articulate novel lines of thought by formulating contradictions, unfolding metaphors, and exploring conceptual relationships, ultimately integrating newly differentiated meanings into a coherent logical framework. Because it assigns roles clearly in *listening tandems* and follows precisely formulated instructions, the method is particularly well-suited to transferring the prerequisites for psychological safety and freedom into everyday practice without requiring psychotherapeutic or counselling expertise (Deloch 2017). Focusing elements can be integrated as well, to cultivate an open and receptive stance toward one's own research topic (ibid.).

Within our RTG, the methodology of *Thinking at the Edge* is introduced to support the development of research ideas. For example, a PhD sociology student, while analyzing their interview material, articulated the following problem: "When I look at my data, all the themes appear simultaneously. Yet for my analysis I am required to arrange them in a linear structure. That feels inadequate and overly reductionist." While following the instructions of TAE Step 2, they found a paradoxical sentence: "I am trying to impose a linear framework on something that is inherently multilayered and constantly evolving." When invited to let a creative impulse come

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and to express it in an image (according to TAE Step 1), they reported: "I see the solar system: It is in motion, and the planets are moving as well. At the center is not the sun, but three core aspects that appear in my data. They interact and revolve around each other over time." This image produced a tangible shift in their methodological approach: They were able to symbolize their difficulty in a new way. Based on the image, they articulated a new methodological requirement: to develop process-oriented categories that would allow them to structure the material in a non-linear way. At that point, they did not yet know how they would implement this in detail, but the image itself became an important representation of what they were aiming at.[17]

Beyond its application for individual theory construction, *Thinking at the Edge* can be used for interdisciplinary exchange. When conversations among researchers are conducted primarily in a logical-analytical mode, it can be difficult to remain in contact with implicit *felt meanings*. Discussions often proceed too quickly on the basis of established concepts and existing knowledge. To address this, we introduce an experiential dialog format called "*interdisciplinary crossing*" (see footnote 6; Deloch 2017; Deloch 2018). Within this slowed-down reflective process, which encourages embodied sensing, participants advance their own thinking while remaining open to being touched, guided, and inspired by the emerging thoughts of others. This form of interdisciplinary exchange extends the TAE step called *crossing* (TAE Step 8) into an interactive setting (Gendlin/Hendricks 2004). The notion of crossing is grounded in a principle central to Gendlin's philosophy of language: a concept *generates new meanings* when it is brought into and encountered in a different cognitive and experiential context (Gendlin 2018c: 51; see footnote 6). Accordingly, the instruction for crossing is to attend carefully to the new meanings that arise when reflections from another discipline are brought into one's own field and allowed to inform one's ongoing thought process. Interdisciplinary crossing can be understood as a form of guided inspiration. The challenge lies in resisting the urge to immediately judge or organize what is heard according to logical structures, and instead maintaining open, receptive attention to what newly unfolds in the process of listening. The underlying attitude may be described in terms of *holding*—sustaining attention alongside one's ongoing thought process—and *letting*—allowing new words and meanings to emerge without imposing logical connections (Gendlin 1981: 117f). Interdisciplinary crossing can be combined with other TAE steps for collaborative theory building.

17 Further examples of applications in research practice can be found in Deloch (2025) and Schoeller (2023).

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Guidelines for Experiential Crossing:

- Listen attentively to the ideas and reflections of your colleague.
- While listening, attend to your own felt resonance: What bodily, emotional, or mental responses arise in you as you hear what is said?
- Notice what new nuance, insight, or differentiation emerges when you connect the other person's reflections (or part of them) with your own thinking. What arises need not make logical sense; it carries a felt relevance that may be difficult to put into words.
- Stay with whatever emerges and try to find and image or a word to capture it.
- Feel free to share with others whatever arises for you.

7.3 Experiential Interviewing

Experiential, Focusing-oriented interviewing applies techniques that actively support participants' experiencing processes in qualitative research (Jäger/König 2020; Todres 1999; Cornell/McGavin 2021). In interviews, moments of lived, present experiencing often become observable through tone of voice, gestures, pauses, tentative formulations (see below: "Experiencing Scale"). By inviting interviewees to take their time and tune into their bodily sensations, using open, non-committal expressions such as "something," "something like," or "a kind of" to point to what is implicit, and by reflecting these back, interviewers can foster processes of articulation through which implicit meanings can emerge and be articulated (Deloch 2024). In the example below, the interviewer applies several of these techniques.

> […] Interviewer: And you just said that the smoke was coming out of their ears… *(Reflecting back a metaphor)*
> Interviewee: Yeah, symbolically. Symbolically.
> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, and you kind of smiled while saying that… (*Referring to the facial expression*)
> Interviewee: Yeah, because it gave me joy. That gave me such a sense of satisfaction. …
> […] Interviewer: And how—how did that satisfaction feel? (*Pointing to bodily feelings*)
> […] Interviewee: I was smirking on the inside—I didn't show it on the outside. Just quietly smirking to myself like crazy. …
> […] Interviewer: And did that moment have any kind of meaning for you later on? Or was it more like—(*Inviting new meanings*)
> Interviewee: No, that was just—in that moment, it was a small—well, maybe you can't quite call it happiness, but maybe yes, maybe it was. (Schulz 2025; methodological terms in italics added by the author)

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In this section, the interviewer creates space for the interviewee's felt resonance. By taking up a metaphor and referring to a "kind of smile," the interviewer does not define the facial expression but allows its meaning to remain open. This enables the interviewee to further explore their lived experience of the situation and the significance of their smile. What is initially articulated as joy is subsequently identified more narrowly as satisfaction. Here, the interviewer deliberately invites the interviewee to attend to what is arising in their body, opening the way for another metaphor—"quietly smirking to myself like crazy"—to emerge. However, when asked about the meaning this moment held later for them, the interviewee appears bewildered; the relevance of the experience seems to reside entirely in "this moment." Their formulation, "you can't quite call it happiness—but maybe it was," once again highlights the richness of their experiencing and suggests that there is still more to be said and explored. The interviewer's responses show that they are attuned to a meaningful moment of personal experiencing as it unfolds. To facilitate noticing such moments in an interview, it is helpful to train interviewers using the *Experiencing Scale*.

7.4 Experiencing Scale

The Experiencing Scale is an analytical tool developed to differentiate levels of experiencing and thereby track processes of personality change, particularly in psychotherapy (Hendricks 2009; Klein et al. 1970). It distinguishes seven levels of experiencing, ranging from superficial to deeply engaged. While it is widely used in psychotherapy research, the scale can also inform qualitative social research—for instance, in gender studies, where it can help capture experiences that go beyond conventional gender categories, or in literary studies, where it can shed light on processes of self-constitution in narrative form (König/Erhart 2023; Schulz 2025).

Overview of Experiential Research Formats

The experiential methods outlined above can be applied across a wide range of scholarly activities (see Figure 2). At their core is a methodological orientation toward bodily felt sense—that is, the immediate bodily resonance arising in the concrete research situation. This multi-level experiential approach encompasses creative, experiential formats that directly support doctoral research as well as collaboration within interdisciplinary research groups.

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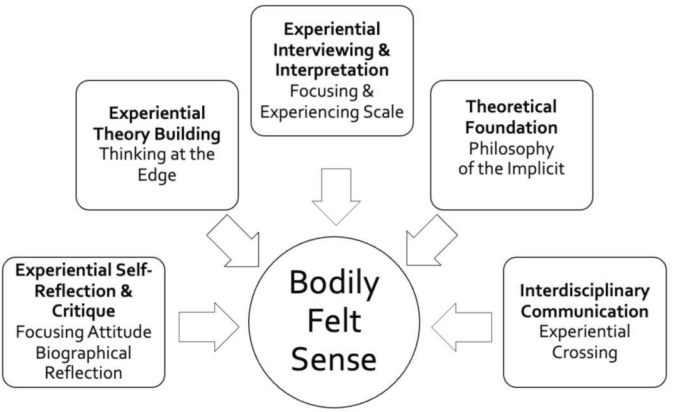
Figure 2: Experiential Research Formats



- *Experiential Self-Reflection and Critique*
  Engagement with implicit, bodily felt meaning as a way of testing, refining, and deepening a critical perspective on one's research subject (see below).
- *Experiential Theory-Building*
  Systematically unfolding implicit research impulses within individual doctoral projects through the structured movements of *Thinking at the Edge*.
- *Experiential Interviews and Interpretation*
  Applying experiential interviewing techniques in qualitative research, alongside the use of the Experiencing Scale and Focusing-based methods for transcript and text analysis, particularly within Literary Studies.
- *Interdisciplinary Communication and Collaboration*
  Implementing a structured dialogue format that fosters interdisciplinary thinking and mutual understanding—extending to collaborative theory development—by attending to and unfolding implicit experiential meaning through careful, reciprocal listening.

8. Challenges and Requirements for Experiential Thinking in Scientific Inquiry

Logical-analytical and experiential modes of thinking are characterized by contrasting qualities. To foster creative knowledge processes within universities, certain competencies must be deliberately cultivated (Gendlin/Beebe/Cassens et al. 1968: 233; Deloch 2018): (1) stepping back from established knowledge; (2) attending to a bodily felt sense of a research situation; (3) unfolding new meanings through

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playful engagement with language grounded in experiencing. This implies a shift in attention away from established knowledge toward the edges of articulation zones, where articulation is tentative and uncertain. It also entails moving from purely cognitive engagement with a topic toward a fuller, embodied involvement encompassing emotional, sensory, and bodily aspects. Carl Rogers demonstrated in his psychotherapy research that the very possibility of remaining receptive to what is indeterminate and not yet knowable presupposes a relational encounter grounded in radical acceptance and empathy (Rogers 1998: 343f). When tentative expressions are not negatively sanctioned, psychological safety and freedom emerge. External conditions of acceptance thus enable the internal conditions of creativity: An accepting stance toward one's own still unclear experiencing. In teaching, mentoring, or leadership, this means cultivating relationships that foster empathy, safety, and freedom, thereby encouraging students or colleagues to approach their own implicit experiencing with radical friendliness. Implementing this approach implies complementing an academic culture shaped by efficiency, sharp debates, critical precision, eloquence, and grading with equally valued spaces for slowing down, attending to bodily-felt awareness, remaining open to empathic resonance, welcoming unusual and metaphorical expressions, and suspending judgment. Although such spaces remain rare in universities—and even more so in schools—initiatives exist that call for more relational, exploratory, and creativity-centered approaches to education (Claxton 2021; Kadera 2021; Felten/Lambert 2020; Rasfeld 2022; Cox 2011; Ramsden 1992). For university instructors and professors, this requires consciously stepping back from the roles of advisor, knowledge-provider, and evaluator, and adopting a supportive, empathetic, and co-exploratory stance in selected teaching contexts. This stance, which contrasts with conventional academic roles, may lead to misunderstandings in everyday academic practice. Professors therefore need to carefully consider how to integrate this role of facilitating experiential processes into their teaching and communicate the resulting shift in role expectations to students. It can be helpful to assign these tasks to different people; for example a person responsible for evaluating performance would not simultaneously facilitate experiential processes in individual settings. This intimate facilitative role could instead be assumed by peers or designated coaches. Within the context of our graduate research group, this was implemented by having me take on this role as a coach and supervisor.

At the same time, the deployment of experiential thinking within the university context necessarily requires a critical engagement with its philosophical assumptions and preconceptions. Addressing critiques that this form of thinking is uncritical, solipsistic, or essentialist presupposes a nuanced and theoretically informed understanding of Gendlin's *Process Philosophy*. A precise articulation of the method of experiential explication can thus help position experiential thinking as a reflective, self-correcting mode of thought capable of freeing us from internalized social

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norms (Gendlin 1987: 25). Attending closely to even the subtlest felt discrepancies between personal experiencing and established norms or concepts can, in this sense, be understood as a form of critique (Schoeller/Thorgeirsdottir 2019). Furthermore, in teaching or research contexts, it is essential to acknowledge that accessing one's own lived experience can be profoundly challenging for individuals who have undergone trauma. In such cases, the possibility of an "unfelt sense"—i.e., an aspect of experience that is repressed, dissociated, or structurally bound—must be considered (Chalfin 2023: 68).

The implementation of experiential thinking in university teaching and research thus demands not only methodological competence but also an empathetic stance, critical engagement with its foundations in the philosophy of language and phenomenology, and careful reflection on its contexts of application and potential limitations. Practitioners must cultivate the openness to bring their thinking and feeling into research processes, while being supported in recognizing and respecting their own boundaries. Under these conditions, experiential thinking can facilitate the emergence of new meanings within the scientific process of knowledge production, intentionally fostering creative engagement, self-efficacy, and the intrinsic enjoyment of reflective thought among students and researchers.

9. Conclusion: Structural Conditions for Experiential Research

Drawing on experiences from the RTG, key considerations for designing spaces that support experiential thinking at universities can be outlined. Facilitating thinking and research in an experiential manner requires a person-centered approach, engaging with the concrete situation of individuals or groups to jointly develop appropriate methods. It is crucial to clarify the purpose of employing experiential methods: to foster creativity in thinking and writing, extend existing research methodologies, explore interdisciplinary collaboration, or address psychological, social, or institutional challenges. Once these questions are addressed, the following points guide the design of effective frameworks:

1. Creating a protected, safe space (psychological freedom and safety)
   Experiential thinking involves the whole person. Processes should occur in non-evaluative settings, with facilitators refraining from grading or judging. Students can accompany each other, and transitions between protected spaces and the wider institution should be addressed explicitly.
2. Designing appropriate spatial environments
   Spaces should allow movement and rest to support bodily awareness. Simple measures such as mats, blankets, or dedicated rooms for uninterrupted work can be effective.

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3. Respecting personal boundaries
   Participation should be voluntary, and self-determination emphasized. Not all thoughts need to be verbalized, particularly for participants new to self-experiential processes.
4. Ensuring confidentiality
   Participants must treat contributions confidentially to maintain a safe environment.
5. Protecting authorship and managing competition
   Experiential thinking can generate novel insights. Ideas should be protected, and those in direct competition may need to avoid working with each other. Interdisciplinary dyads can mitigate tensions.
6. Using flexible, incremental formats
   Gradual entry into experiential thinking—reflecting on one's thinking stance and participating in guided dyads—supports engagement. Methods can be combined with established disciplinary approaches and diverse formats (workshops, coaching, integrative exercises).
7. Attending to group dynamics
   Rigid group structures inhibit open thinking. Regularly changing dyads and small groups prevent hierarchies from solidifying, including implicit hierarchies between disciplines.
8. Acknowledging potential inner conflicts
   Academic pressures can obscure curiosity and creative impulses. Addressing tensions between authentic self-expression and goal-oriented work reconnects participants with intrinsic motivation (Shotwell 2021).
9. Enabling new experiences of thinking
   Experiential thinking must be lived, and cannot only be taught theoretically. Participants may encounter uncertainty and resistance; emphasizing self-determination and safeguarding personal boundaries while inviting engagement helps overcome such obstacles.
10. Introducing experiential thinking as a complement to logical thinking
    Both modes of thinking should be presented, with guidance on when experiential thinking is meaningful and how it connects to analytical reasoning.
11. Exploring philosophical foundations critically
    Phenomenology and Gendlin's Process Philosophy should be engaged with critically, alongside other frameworks such as (queer-)feminist theory (König/Erhart 2023) or micro-phenomenology (Schoeller/Thorgeirsdottir 2019).
12. Demystifying the felt sense
    Exercises should link the felt sense to disciplinary and everyday experience, avoiding esoteric or essentialist interpretations (Purton 2021: 187; see also Cornell 2013: 73). There are many ways of speaking from experiencing, not only on the basis of concrete bodily sensations (Purton 2021: 192). Experiential knowl-

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edge can be expressed through multiple symbolic forms: images, sketches, body movements, texts, or mind maps.

13. Linking experiential thinking and critical judgment
    Experiential thinking supports self-correcting reflection, revealing subtle discrepancies between personal experiencing and established norms (Gendlin 1987: 25; Schoeller/Thorgeirsdottir 2019). Attention to "unfelt," repressed, or structure-bound experience is essential, especially for participants affected by trauma (Chalfin 2023: 68).
14. Considerations for academic instructors
    - Authenticity: Instructors should exemplify experiential methods and open thinking processes.
    - Self-reflection: Supervision or collegial consultation supports reflection on the role of facilitating experiential thinking.
    - Networking: Collaboration with peers fosters learning and the development of standards.
    - Training: Programs should build competencies in experiential methods among academic instructors/professors.

Experiential thinking can be seen a practice of freedom and liberation (Shotwell 2009: 60). According to our practical insights, despite its challenges, introducing it in academic institutions is deeply rewarding, as it enables participants to engage in thinking with renewed aliveness, joy, self-determination, and intellectual vitality. By methodically guiding the emergence and articulation of new meanings from bodily felt situational experiencing, it also constitutes a valuable resource for intentionally supporting creative and critical thinking in the era of artificial intelligence.

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