



Embodied Childhoodnature Experiences Through Sensory Tours

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Abstract

This Chapter posits sensory tours as a method for discovering children’s embodied “storied entanglements” in, with, and for the natural world (Ritchie, 2014, p. 50). Drawing from existential forms of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge, New York.

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(Original work published in 1945), 1945/2002), and recognizing the significance of somesthetic experiences (Iared et al., 2016), sensory tours provide a novel approach for understanding children's experiences of being and becoming and relating with other natural beings. During a sensory tour, a child is invited to wear a small wearable video camera; the camera goes where a child goes, sees what a child sees, hears what a child hears, shows what a child touches, and reveals what a child tastes. Informed by the tradition of walking tours, which have been used for some time in place and environmental education research (Hart, 1979), the sensory tour method is uniquely positioned to unravel embodied temporal-spatial meanings during children's exploratory movements. This method opens up possibilities for bridging the "correspondence" gap between being and thought – by capturing children's pre-reflective movement – their imaginative song and dance, self-talk, and expressive utterances, as they interact with and relate to others in the more than human living world. The Chapter will draw from research findings involving young children in an Alaskan cultural and wilderness context (including trudging through tundra, transforming sticks into weapons, and scaling up tree castles). Through these examples, I will reveal how children's first imaginary and sensory encounters inform their sense of being with the natural world.

Keywords

Child embodiment · Phenomenology · Wearable cameras · Significant life experiences · Children's agency

Extending Significant Life Experience Research

This Chapter builds upon understanding of children's (SLE), an important line of inquiry that has persisted in environmental education and psychology for over 40 years (Cobb, 1977; Tanner, 1980; Chawla, 1998; Palmer, 1993; Williams & Chawla, 2016). This thread of research has sought to understand the "formative influences" of childhood nature experiences and the way in which early experiences in nature shape an individual's feelings and attitudes as well as their interactions and actions toward their environment. Research on SLE has, however, primarily been based on autobiographical memories of adults. As Chawla (1998) explained, a "retrospective approach is a necessary preliminary that suggests the type of formative events that . . . research should monitor" (p. 361). While Chawla (1998) argued that memories of SLE offer a "lifespan perspective" on experiences that have influenced a person's feelings and behaviors toward their environment, memory-based research poses several limitations. First, memories are tainted by the past and the present and, thus, are unlikely to render complete and accurate details of specific encounters or events. As Chawla (1998) explained, oftentimes recurring encounters may be "blended together into one 'generic' representation" (p. 363). Furthermore, adult reflections on childhood nature experiences are subject to adult biases and perspectives on what is meaningful and important. In this way, SLE research, collected by way of

adult memories, lacks the firsthand viewpoint of childhoodnature encounters as perceived through the lens of a child. In other words, retrospective SLE, while informative and useful, should not be relied upon as a representation of children's lived experiences. Thus, other naturalistic observations and methods, particularly those that honor the voices and perspectives of children, should also be pursued to build upon a retrospective line of inquiry (Chawla, 1998).

Embodied Essences of Childhoodnature

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 94)

This chapter extends SLE research by considering the somaesthetics of childhoodnature experiences, that is, the “soma” or embodied and “aesthetics” or felt experience of being a part of nature (Iared et al., 2016). Children are nature living and breathing natural entities, intricately connected with everything that exists. While much of the children *and* nature literature has positioned children as nature deficient, disconnected, and somehow separated from what has been designated as nature (Louv, 2008), in this Chapter I maintain that children, and all humans, for that matter, are natural beings *always* immersed in an environment and place (Malone, 2016). Humans are indeed absorbed in the fundamental life-giving exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, between flora and fauna. Not only do humans play an integral part of basic biological interchange, interactions with other natural beings are also physically, culturally, and spiritually situated in time and place. This temporal-spatial dimension makes up the essence of *Dasein* or being in the world (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). In other words, utterances of being are informed by the past, oriented toward the future, and enacted in present time. While SLE research has primarily been concerned with reflective essences of the past (Chawla, 1998; Williams & Chawla, 2016), this Chapter is framed around pre-reflective essences of the present, namely, through the lived bodily experiences of a child.

Phenomenology is concerned with “the nature of what is,” in “turning from things to their meaning” (Schwandt, 2015). More specifically, Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) philosophy of existential phenomenology centers bodily existence at the core of conscious and subconscious understanding of the world and other living entities. Embodied essences of being, therefore, cannot be separated from a time and a place (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002), yet researchers have found it challenging to identify data collection and analysis methods that capture the pre-reflective essences of being (i.e., prior to language and thought) in a specific moment and in a particular time (Iared et al., 2016; Thrift, 2008). In this Chapter, the sensory tour method is presented as a strategy for bridging the correspondence gap between being and thought – by capturing children's pre-reflective movement – their self-talk and expressive utterances, their imaginative songs, and place activity, as they interact with and relate with others in the more than human living world.

But how can children's varied states of being in the more than human living world be authentically represented and described? Indeed, researchers pursuing studies within the new childhoodnature framework might be confronted with the nonrepresentational problem, that is, the challenge of "interpreting and explaining the primordial and, often, pre-conscious and pre-rational/linguistic experiences of selves and ecological others" (Iared et al., 2016, p. 191). Additionally, we must also acknowledge the correspondence problem: the gap between being and thought (Iared et al., 2016). In other words, the authentic state of being in nature may be quite distinguished from a reflection on the state of being. Both, therefore, should be considered in researching childhoodnature experiences. So how can childhoodnature scholars capture children's firsthand sensory encounters? Particularly, what methods can be used to explore children's utterances and nonverbal forms of communication expressed during their play and exploratory activities in nature? To answer these questions, and to extend understanding of children's lived SLE, researchers need to consider methods for promoting children's agency in research, specifically those approaches that highlight and honor children's views and perspectives.

Children's Agency

Honoring children's agency in research has been discussed extensively among scholars of the sociology of childhood (James, 2009; Corsaro, 2015) and those interested in environmental and nature-based research with young children (Barratt Hacking et al., 2013; Green, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) set precedence for children's citizenship and rights of participation (United Nations 1989, 2005). Specifically, Articles 12, 13, and 14 under the UNCRC established the rights of the child to form and express his or her own views, ideas, and thoughts and have been more broadly interpreted to include all areas of relevance to children's lives, including research (Barratt Hacking et al., 2013). This Chapter advocates for the importance of honoring children's agency in childhoodnature research by proposing a method for capturing the essence of children's being in the world. The method proposed naturally recognizes the unique contributions of children both in the present and in the future (James, 2009).

Additionally, research approaches involving young children must also consider the influence of adults on children's agency during all aspects of the research process. The power imbalance between an adult researcher and child participants can greatly impact *what* data are collected and *how* data are interpreted. To address this issue, some have suggested relational approaches and child-friendly data collection methods, such as book discussions, children's drawings, and interactive photography (Clark, 2005; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Parkinson, 2001). However, relational approaches still rely on the direct involvement of adults during the research process, and depending on the relationships established, the researcher involvement will inevitably influence what is shared and how children act and behave. Others have suggested the use of video as a means to "pick up different

sorts of voices” along “with a range of images” (Haw, 2008). However, issues regarding adult influences on children’s behavior have also been raised regarding the use of video with young children. Namely, Robson (2011) discussed the tension of remaining unobtrusive when filming preschool-aged children through the use of traditional video equipment (a handheld camcorder). Additionally, traditional video data are still framed through the researcher’s point of view, that is to say images are never neutral and they are literally and socially constructed (Robson 2011, p. 186). Thus, Robson (2011) experimented with inviting children to hold the camera and film, finding that this strategy was “vitaly important” in providing children a “sense of ownership in the process” (p. 183). However, having young children hold video cameras might be logistically problematic in that handheld camcorders can become heavy or difficult for young children to operate. Furthermore, because operating a camera requires the use of children’s hands, the use of traditional handheld equipment might prevent children from participating in authentic play or other day-to-day activities. In other words, handheld cameras (held by adults or by children) can be intrusive in the research process. So how can children’s authentic experiences of their world be collected in an unobtrusive manner? The sensory tour method was conceived as a novel research approach in using wearable cameras to capture the essence of being in nature through the lens of a child.

Wearable Cameras in Research with Children

Wearable cameras are extending the “ways and means” in which “we see and interpret the social world” (Chafflen, 2014, p. 299). A distinctive feature of the wearable camera is that it records what the user sees and experiences during novel events or situations that would be otherwise difficult to capture (Chafflen, 2014; Green, 2016a). While the use of wearable cameras in research with adults continues to expand (Chafflen, 2014; Dozza & Fernandez, 2014; Fung, 2015; Knight & van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Leong et al., 2014; Sanchez-García et al., 2015), the incorporation of wearable cameras in research with children has thus far been limited (Kindt, 2011, Ghekiere et al., 2014; Green, 2016b, 2017). Kindt (2011) invited high school students to wear cameras using headstraps in the classroom. The cameras provided the teacher with a “never before” view of “what students see” and experience in the classroom (Kindt, 2011, p. 182–18). Ghekiere et al. (2014) implemented a “bike along” method, inviting 9 to 10 year-old children to wear cameras to record their encounters with environmental features while cycling. The “bike along” method included engaging children in discussions about the features they encountered, suggesting a child-directed approach that emphasized the perspectives of children. Over the last few years, I have investigated the use of wearable cameras in research with young children (3–9 years of age), referred to as the “sensory tour” method (Green 2016a, b, 2017). In this chapter, I will present several examples of children’s sensory tours in Alaskan forest and tundra environments in order to consider the somaesthetics of childhoodnature interactions.

Conception of the Sensory Tour

The sensory tour method draws from the tradition of walking tours, which have been successfully used with children in geographical, place, and environmental research for a number of years (Green, 2012, 2014; Hart, 1979; Kjörholt, 2003; Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 2001). Given the tendency of children to “talk while they are doing” (Parkinson, 2001, p. 145), walking tours provide an alternative format to engage children in dialogue as they interact with other living and non-living entities in their environment. Tours provide children with an opportunity to show and tell what is important to them within a particularly setting, be it indoors or outdoors (Hart, 1979; Green, 2012). In other words, “tours allow opportunities for children to show something that cannot be explained” apart from the place (Green, 2012, p. 275). Understanding of children’s experiences is thus gleaned through attending to both children’s verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. That is, tours reveal children’s “pre-linguistic experiences of selves and ecological others” by exploring children’s expressions of meaning through their interactions (Iared et al., 2016, p. 191).

Traditionally, adult researchers accompanied children on a tour with a handheld video camera asking questions of children as they pointed out and described different features and experiences of their environment (Green, 2012; Hart, 1979; Sobel, 2001). In this way, child-led tours promote children’s agency in the data collection process by providing opportunities for children to direct what they wanted to explore (Green, 2012). A noted limitation, however, is that the course of a tour is dependent on the relationship formed between a child participant and the researcher. Depending on the relationship established, children may or may not feel comfortable sharing certain aspects of their environmental experiences. Furthermore, in tours structured with adults, children may merely show and talk about what they perceive adults might like to hear rather than what they actually do in a particular setting. In other words, it can be difficult to determine if the things children show and talk about actually represent children’s authentic day-to-day life encounters of their environment. This limitation relates back to the correspondence gap between being and thought previously discussed, whereas, the state of being in a time and place is distinct from one’s thoughts about being in that place (Iared et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to further explore a “tour” approach that would alleviate the involvement of an adult researcher as well as highlight children’s authentic experiences of being in the world.

In two recent research projects, we implemented the sensory tour method, by inviting children to wear small video cameras around their forehead while they “toured” (freely explored and played) in their environment. When viewing footage captured during a sensory tour, one feels as if they are walking in the shoes of the child wearing the camera. The method literally captures a wide range of a child’s sensory perceptions, including what he or she sees, hears, says, and touches in their environment (Green, 2016a). In this sense, sensory tours were conceived as a participatory research approach in that findings rendered from the video honor children’s voices and perspectives. In addition, when paired with video-stimulated recall discussions and/or other interactive activities, sensory tours can be used as a means for engaging children in developing a research focus and interpreting their own experiences (see Green 2016b, 2017).

In our projects, we simply invited children to put on the wearable camera before going out to play and explore. The children volunteered to wear the cameras and most all appeared eager to do so. Thus, children took turns in wearing the cameras for as long as they were interested. If a child decided they no longer wanted to wear a camera, they simply found an adult (researcher or teacher) and asked to have it removed. In fact, once the cameras were strapped around their foreheads they seemed to forget that they were wearing them. Additionally, an open-ended structure is ideal when utilizing sensory tours. While it is important to provide children with some perimeters (for safety) as to where they can and should not play or explore, to the extent possible sensory tours should be open ended, child initiated, and child led.

The Somaesthetics of Childhoodnature

In this Chapter, we will consider the somaesthetics of childhoodnature, that is, the “felt” bodily experiences captured by way of sensory tours. The term “soma,” according to Shusterman (2009), designates the “living, sensing, dynamic, perspective body” (p. 133). “Bodily consciousness. . . is not merely the consciousness that mind may have of the body as an object, but includes the embodied consciousness that a living sentient body directs at the world and also experiences in itself” (Shusterman, 2009, p. 133). Drawing from the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), the body is recognized as a medium in which one establishes a consciousness toward the world: “I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body” (p. 95). Phenomenological meanings are derived from “perception (hearing, seeing, etc.), believing, remembering, deciding, feeling, judging, evaluating and *all experiences of bodily action* [italics added]” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 234). Reality is thus subject to a time and a place, and through the body, which “anchors the subject to a certain ‘environment’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 90).

In this chapter, the “soma” bodily experiences of childhoodnature will be explored through the presentation of descriptive transcripts of young children’s sensory tours. Various aspects of childhoodnature embodiment will be presented to demonstrate the unique approach of using wearable cameras in research with young children. First, we will begin by exploring the physiology of childhood, particularly in considering how the physical body of a child is distinguished from that of an adult. This physical state of being and the assumptions associated with size directly inform the essences of children’s experiences. In this way, we will consider the positionality of children within distinct social and cultural contexts. Second, we will consider the imagined essences of childhoodnature experiences. Through the viewpoint of a sensory tour, we will consider how children enact scripts through play and make-believe which shape their state of being. Along this line, we will consider children’s sensory perceptions of the more than human living world, that is, those expressed by nonverbal utterances, experienced through movement, exploration, and imaginary play. Finally, we will consider interpretation of childhoodnature experiences; specifically, we will examine the benefit of pairing video-stimulated recall discussions

with sensory tours to consider both reflective and pre-reflective childhood nature experiences.

The Embodied Child

The embodied experience of a child is distinguished from that of an adult. For one, the period of childhood is marked by progressive, yet at times sporadic, physiological growth and change. James (2000) explained:

Children themselves have to live with their changing biology, a biology that both shapes what they are and what they can do and one that, at the same time, invites particular perceptions of what, as children, they should be and should do. (p. 26).

Not only does a child's changing physical body shape their self-consciousness, these changes are informed by the "situated agency," of being within a childhood culture in a particular place and time. It is, as James (2000) argued, the "everyday actions and interactions with each other that children develop a consciousness of self" (p. 27).

Size and Perspective

Wearable cameras provide deep insight into how physical stature influences the way in which children perceive and interact with other living beings in the natural world. Size not only influences perceptions but also accounts for what children do. Because of size, certain activities might be more challenging than others. As an adult, I scarcely considered the challenge of wild rosebushes prior to taking preschool children outside for open-ended play and exploration in an Alaskan forest. However, during 4-year-old Kenneth's sensory tour, the camera revealed Kenneth's encounter with the prevalent rosebushes when wandering down a new trail on his own:

Halfway down the trail Kenneth stopped dead in his tracks when he confronted a large bush. "*A LOT OF BIG STICKER BUSH!*" he exclaimed.

He continued pointing to all of the bushes around him, "*Big sticker bush, there is a sticker bush right there. AWH!*"

Kenneth turned and ran back to his teacher. "*There's big sticker bushes everywhere!*" From the vantage point of a four-year-old, the large bushes were perceived as a threat. After encountering the large bushes on his own, Kenneth sought refuge with his teacher.

Sensory Tours provided a firsthand view of a child's encounter with the rosebushes, some of which towered over the children. Indeed, children exist in an adult world, both physically (James, 2000) and socially (Corsaro, 2015). Beyond mere physical size, children are subordinately positioned in a world primarily driven by

adults. In many instances, children have little, or no control, over the environments in which they are exposed to or the spaces or places in which they grow up (Corsaro, 2015). Access to certain environments is also constrained by adult permissions and restrictions. And depending upon the amount of freedom provided, children's experiences of nature are either largely influenced or scarcely shaped by adults. Natural settings, as opposed to human-built indoor settings, provide a setting for children to exercise a great deal of autonomy in constructing and creating their own sense of place (Green, 2013). Yet size and what is perceived as safe and what is perceived as scary shapes a child's perceptions and interactions with the more than human living world (as indicated in the rosebush example).

Becoming Bigger

Additionally, "children are deeply concerned with physical size," and as a result, they often climb to the top level of any available structure to make themselves bigger (Corsaro, 2015, p. 153). In the following example, Oliver's sensory tour revealed how Oliver and Ryan made themselves "bigger" through their physical actions:

The two boys successfully cascaded up a fallen tree stump in the forest.

"Look at us! Look at us! Teacher! Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!" Oliver called to his teacher who stood nearby in the distance. The video footage showed Oliver's vantage point of being high above his peers and teacher. His feet were positioned on a lower branch and his arms clasped the limbs of an upper branch. Oliver looked down at his and Ryan's feet positioned on a skinny limb above the ground.

"Whoa!" Oliver exclaimed, revealing his feeling of unstableness.

Sensory tours allowed for the embodied vantage point of experiencing this heightened view through the lens of a child. While the feat of climbing to the top of a tree might appear simple from an adult's perspective on the ground, Oliver's muttered expressions, his physical movements, and adjustments revealed an inner conflict between apprehension and accomplishment.

Anticipating Growth

In considering a child's embodied physiology, Corsaro (2015) also explained that children "come to value growing up and getting bigger" (p. 153). For example, during a sensory tour, 4 year olds Keenan and Spruce conversed about their desire to "get older" so that they could reach up higher to peel the bark off a large birch tree:

"No, I'm gonna get it. I can-I ca-I'm gonna try," Keenan persisted.

"Um after you're done trying if you can't get it then I'll uh re-try it," David said.

Keenan stretched up to reach a piece of loose bark with difficulty. David also tried.

“You can get it. You can get it!” Keenan encouraged him.

“See look! There is a little stand up here. Whoa!” David stated uneasily standing on a small tree stump.

“Let me try it. I’m super tall. I can reach it,” Keenan explained.

“Yeah you can.” David encouraged.

“I can climb everything.” Keenan replied.

“And I’m even four.” David said, holding up four fingers.

“I’m four too.” Keenan replied

“We’re the same height,” said David.

“Can’t reach it,” Keenan said, taking a step back.

“Well I can’t reach it either,” David agreed, *“So, you get a little older maybe we can reach it.”*

“Yeah, I need to get a little older,” Keenan said.

“Me too!” David added.

The sensory tour captured Keenan and David’s peer-to-peer dialogue. The conversation revealed an inner tension posed by physical size. While the children put forth their best efforts to reach the upper bark of a birch tree, while even encouraging one another, they both acknowledged the limitation of their bodily stature and expressed a desire to “get a little older,” anticipating a growth in physical size.

Imagined Essences of Being and Becoming

Proposing an ecophenomenological philosophy, Payne (2013) reminds us of our own “oneness of natures” (p. 425). Natures is referred to in a plural tense, signifying varied interpretations and meanings of nature, “past, present and imagined ecological affordances” (Payne, 2013, p. 426). Presumably, this also relates to what James (2000) described as child embodiment situated and enacted in a time and place. For children, *imagined* ecological affordances are frequently expressed through play and make-believe. Indeed, a child’s imagination stretches beyond the boundaries of what might be considered adult-derived temporal and spatial constructs. That is, the sociodramatic and imaginary play of a child reaches beyond possibilities and quite conceivably beyond the realm of adult understanding. To a child, imaginary experiences in nature might be just as rich and meaningful (if not more meaningful) as those that are concrete and realistic. The imagined state of young children fluctuates

between the concrete and the abstract. Physical objects are used to represent the here and now; imagined ecologies represent the possibilities of what one can become. Research expanding the SLE literature would benefit from linking finding on what children *aspire* to become to what adults have come to be.

Play and Make-Believe

While research captured by way of adult observations has widely recognized the role of children's symbolic and make-believe play with inanimate objects in nature (Green, 2013), there is a scarcity of research that has looked at the embodied imaginations of being and becoming. Below, a portrait of an imagined ecology of childhood is presented by way of a sensory tour, keeping in mind that children's imaginary play is both culturally situated and "culture in the making" (Lindqvist, 1996, p. 15). Two 3 year old children played "Christmas" in the forest:

"It's Christmas time!" Jenny shouted and began singing a song in the forest. She twirled around some green foliage.

"Do you like my Christmas decoration?" Jenny asked before dropping the foliage on the ground.

"Christmas time..." Jenny continued singing.

Jenny's friend Cindy stomped through the forest towards Jenny. She bent down and picked up some foliage, *"Ho, Ho, Ho – Merry Christmas!"*

Cindy appeared to have taken on the role of Santa Claus; she took a few more steps and bent down again, *"Ho, Ho, Ho Merry Christmas!"*

She ran to another strand of trees and bent down, *"Ho, Ho, Merry Christmas!"* Cindy ran and paused, catching her breath in between movements, exclaiming over and over again, *"Ho, Ho, Ho Merry Christmas!"*

The sensory tour method provided a firsthand view of Jenny and Cindy's imagined states of being, revealing the act of how the world is transformed through make-believe. The camera, worn across the brow of Cindy's forehead, revealed Cindy's embodiment of Santa Claus. She deepened her voice in expressing a holiday cheer, moving from place to place through the forest with a purpose. The camera also showed how Cindy's breath quickened with movement, indicating her excitement in bending down to deliver presents as she merrily announced her arrival.

The embodied child is not only influenced by social norms; he or she is also culturally constructed. Perceptions of what children should be and what children should become vary among cultures. As Christensen (2000) explained under Minority western cultural perceptions, "children are constituted as essentially vulnerable beings who can only survive and develop successfully if intensely nurtured and protected by adults" (p. 40). To some extent, the children's make-believe play of

Christmas was informed by Minority western cultural ideals. Santa Claus can be thought to represent a nurturing adult, providing treats and presents to good little boys and girls. Additionally, the children used natural objects to represent symbolically Minority western ideals of the holiday experiences –grass for ornaments and ferns for presents. The schema itself is not necessarily a unique example of children’s make-believe play; certainly other children have enacted Christmas. What is unique, however, is the viewpoint revealed through the sensory tour. The tour provided insight into the embodied physiology of imaginary transformation and how the act of role-playing informed the ecology of childhoodnature experiences. In other words, in the role of Santa Claus, Cindy forged her own connection with the more than human world, which seemed to provide her with a sense of confidence and purpose.

Expressive Utterances

“Our initial experience of the world is always sensory, perceptual, and is affective ‘emotional’ in feeling. All precede language: affect is also and often pre-reflective” (Iared et al., 2016, p. 196). Expressive utterances represent pre-reflective consciousness, preceding language and verbal forms of communication. Expressive utterances, that is, children’s nonverbal forms of communication, tell the story of bodily movement in nature and of transformations of an imagined ecology. Peter’s sensory tour (illustrated below) revealed a child’s transformation of a stick through movement and expressive utterances:

The camera followed Peter’s gaze as he turned upward towards the blue sky, revealing the leaves of the paper birch trees and the pointed tops of the tall evergreen spruce. A brown stick, held by Peter’s hand, emerges directly in front of the camera.

“*Do...do...do...do...do...*” Peter aimed his stick at two peers in front of him on the trail.

“*WOOW!*” Peter raised the stick high.

“*GRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR*,” Peter made a rolling R sound, giving the impression that the stick was being energized. Swinging it up, and then to the left, and then to the right, the camera showed Peter hastily turn around in a circle.

“*Bam...bam...bam...*” Peter moved fast through the forest, empowered and equipped with his magic stick.

Peter’s engagement with the stick depicted through his sensory tour brought to life a pre-reflective consciousness of being and becoming (Payne, 2013). Indeed, his bodily movement and utterances of expression tell of an experience inseparable from a particular time and a particular place (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). The wearable camera revealed an essence of being that would be next to impossible to capture through any other method. Perhaps, through a reflective descriptive method (i.e., drawing or an interview), Peter might be able to tell you that his stick was a sword or

another type of weapon. However, Peter would not be likely to put into words *how* the stick became a weapon; in other words, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Peter to later vividly describe the process in which the transformation occurred. In other words, it would be challenging for a 4-year-old to recall his actions of raising a stick up toward the sky, making a sound and twisting it around to “charge” it. Extending study of children’s SLE, sensory tours allow for a distinguished measure for capturing pre-reflective consciousness and the process of being and becoming, as well as the meaning derived behind such actions.

Movement and Exploration

“Our bodies are always interacting relationally via movement in the lifeworld” (Iared et al., 2016). Indeed, movement and exploration play an important role in a child’s discovery of being in the world. Movement is intertwined and cannot be separated from knowing and describing, which also entails observation (Ingold, 2011). “Being observant,” Ingold (2011) argued, “means being alive to the world” (p. xii). Similarly, Seamon (2014) articulated the synergistic dynamism between humans and their environment, whereas people and their worlds are integrally intertwined. In the following description of Elijah’s sensory tour, movement accentuated his bodily relationship with his environment and other living beings:

Tip toe, back and forth, forward and backward, 5 year old Elijah crept through the forest in pursuit of his teacher. Softly crunching the leaves under his feet, Elijah paused, turned, and looked behind him to ensure that his friend Sally and another adult were still following him. The camera showed when Elijah turned back towards his teacher and the landscape of the forest trees, bushes, and muddy path passed quickly under Elijah’s feet. The sound of his breath quickened, and the video footage shook as Elijah moved quickly and quietly to close the gap between him and his teacher. His teacher moved at an even pace ahead of him, unaware of Elijah’s sneaky game. Elijah snickered under his breath, and the camera came in close contact with bark of a tree; Elijah hid in the shadow of the tree out of view from his teacher who had turned and looked back. Elijah waited quietly looking at his friend who was also smiling. When his teacher continued forward, Elijah resumed on the trail, closing the distance between him and his teacher, “*AHHH!*” Elijah exclaimed.

His teacher raised his hands in the air, “*AHHH!*”

The children giggled.

“*We’ve been following you!*” stated Elijah.

“*You are real sneaky!*” his teacher said.

Elijah’s propelled his body in attendance to the world around him. Aware of the crunching sound of the leaves, he tiptoed softly, and quietly, as he neared his teacher. Acknowledging the protective cover of the trees, he paused briefly looking away from his teacher, pretending that he was doing something else. His bodily

movement, however, revealed an observation that was keenly fixed and aware of both the teacher in which he followed and the adult and peer who followed him. Sensory tours, once again, revealed the process of being and becoming expressed by way of movement and interactions with other human beings and the more-than-human living world.

Sensational Perceptions

Once consciousness has been defined as sensation, every mode of consciousness will have to derive its clarity from sensation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 17)

Sensational encounters, both those in the present and remembered (consciously or subconsciously), inform how we feel and act toward our environments and the more than human world. An advantage of the sensory tour method (as indicated in its name) is that it is a means for exploring children's sensory perceptions. However, notably the term "sensory" expands beyond the Minority western notion of five separate senses (e.g., vision, smell, taste, sound, and touch) (Pink, 2011). In other words, the body should not be viewed as "a collection of adjacent organs," rather it is recognized as a "synergetic system" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 297). Sensory perceptions are inevitably linked with one another and overlap in function. "Movement forms the basis for the unity of the senses" and a stream of consciousness with and for the environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 272). The following example reveals how movement invokes a sensory experience: 3 year old Spencer discovered a stinkbug on a tree:

Spencer and Samantha shuffled toward two tall trees positioned close together. Spencer bent down to closely examine one of the trees. As Spencer's head tilted downward, the camera zoomed in on the ruffled bark of the paper birch, "*I found a stinkbug!*" he exclaimed.

"*Did you?*" his teacher asked, standing nearby and moving closer to take a look.

Spencer stepped over a log and pointed to the tree on the left, "*Yes, right there.*"

"*Is it a big one?*" his teacher asked.

"*Where?*" Samantha asked, repositioning herself near Spencer.

"*Right there,*" Spencer answered, pointing to the paper birch tree.

"*Oh, yes,*" Samantha reached up and touched the stinkbug while balancing on a log, "*Ah got it.*"

"*I think I'm gonna stand right here,*" the teacher said, taking a step back.

"*Why?*" Spencer asked.

“Does he smell stinky, Spencer?” the teacher asked.

“Yeah,” said Spencer.

“Pew!” said his teacher.

“He’s gonna stink?” asked Samantha.

“When you sit on it or you touch it, it’ll stink you,” answered Spencer.

“Ohhh, well I will not touch it,” his teacher reiterated.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), it is not the external objects in the environment that stimulate our internal organs and activate our senses; on the contrary, it is the body that “rises toward the world,” propelling movement and interweaving a system of sensations (p. 87). Sight cannot be separated from touch or smell; rather these are “just different facets of the same activity” (Ingold, 2000, p. 261). Spencer’s bodily movement activated an array of interrelated sensory perceptions, which informed his experiences. He stepped nearer toward the tree and leaned in to get a closer view of the tiny creature. Likewise, Samantha stood on top of a log in order to see and touch the stinkbug. His teacher’s bodily movement, on the other hand, was directed away from the creature determined to avoid an unpleasant smell from coming close to her body. Indeed bodily knowing and relating informed each person’s sensory intake and experiences with others, human and nonhuman creatures in the environment.

Inviting Explanations

In the previous examples, we see how streams of bodily consciousness inform sensory perceptions of childhoodnature. While one’s perception is certainly interrelated with the perceptions of others, past experiences provide a strong lens in which to interpret the present. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) argued, “like a picture, a former experience, whereas this past which remains our true present does not leave us but remains constantly hidden behind our gaze” (p. 96). That is, the meaning hidden behind the gaze of one does not necessarily entail the same meaning hidden behind the gaze of another. For instance, in the above example, Spencer’s perception was distinct from his teacher’s perspective of the stinkbug. Spencer’s movement toward the tiny creature revealed a desire for an interrelationship. Spencer’s teacher, on the other hand, took a step away, drawing boundaries on such interconnectivity. Such a response was likely informed by her past experiences.

Thus far, we have discussed many of the advantages of the sensory tour method for tapping into the pre-reflective movement of children and addressing the correspondence gap between being and thought. While the sensory tour method is useful for “revealing” the “preconscious and pre-rational/linguistic experiences of selves and ecological others,” the method still falls short on interpretation, making up part

of the “nonrepresentation problem” (Iared et al., 2016). Specifically, how can the knower interpret the experiences of the known or how can the interpreter explain the perception of the interpreted? In other words, while the sensory tour invites a child to actively engage in data collection, childhoodnature researchers must also consider a means for engaging children as active agents in reflective interpretation. Sensory tours paired with video-stimulated recall discussions amplify an approach for bridging preconscious states of being with post-conscious reflective thought. In other words, it provides children with opportunities to act without thinking and to think about acting.

In recent years, video-stimulated recall discussions have gained interest among scholars interested in participatory research involving young children (Thomson, 2008). The method “involves video-recording an activity and then replaying the recording back to the participants so that they can comment on matters of interest” (Rowe, 2009, p. 427). Forman (1999) suggests that replaying videos for children can serve as a “tool of the mind,” inviting children to interpret the meaning of their actions (p. 1). Additionally, playing sensory tour videos back to children and engaging them in discussion can invoke intersubjectivity and collaborative reflection among children (Dahlberg et al., 2007). By the same means, videos might also invoke esthetic and emotional responses in the interpretation of actions (Thomson, 2008). Furthermore, Rowe (2009) suggests that engaging children in video-stimulated recall discussions can provide an “insider’s perspective” on actions, behaviors, and experiences and provide participants with opportunities to raise ideas that have not been previously thought of by a researcher (p. 434).

While I found sensory tours to be an insightful tool for gaining insight on children’s pre-reflective behaviors, analysis of such behaviors is subjective to theoretical interpretation and/or the researcher’s own epistemological and ontological beliefs. Thus, whenever possible, inviting children to interpret and explain their own behavior is ideal. Particularly, when reviewing the video footage, a researcher might make note of certain movements and expressive utterances that are inexplicable and/or prompt further questions. Rather than guessing and possibly misinterpreting meaning, a researcher might use video-stimulated recall discussions to invoke children’s reflective meaning on their own behavior. In doing so, a researcher should also be mindful of the developmental abilities of children, particularly among young children, in engaging in reflective thought. For instance when asking a young child why they like to do something, he or she might provide a simple response of “*because I like to*” (Green, 2012). Nevertheless, video-stimulated recall discussions, when used appropriately, can provide reflective insight on pre-reflective experiences. For example, video footage captured by 9 year old Daisy during her sensory tour revealed sounds of discomfort in traversing the Arctic tundra:

Daisy, moved slowly while picking tundra berries, sinking with each step. The video picked up her faint whimper, “*Ow, ow, ugh, ow!*” Each step that she took became more pronounced; the camera wobbled: “*Ugh, ah, oh!*”

While reviewing the sensory tour video footage with the third grade children, I wondered what was going on? The challenge of traversing through the tundra was unperceived by myself and other adults whose legs are longer and stronger. I paused the video to engage children in a reflective discussion. Daisy and some of her classmates revealed that it was not only difficult, but it was also somewhat painful to walk on the tundra. Some shared that they got blisters, others spoke that they were not wearing the proper shoes, and still others expressed that it was not a problem. The children also revealed that the task became easier as they got older, with gained height and physical strength. Through a video-stimulated recall discussion of Daisy's sensory tour, the third grade children engaged in a reflective intersubjective classroom discussion on bodily movement on the tundra. Had it not been for the review of the video footage, the children's perspective of the challenge of traversing on the tundra might have remained unbeknown.

Concluding Discussion

This Chapter has explored how sensory tours can be used as a participatory method for discovering the "somaesthetics" or felt bodily experiences of childhoodnature. The examples of children's sensory tours provided in this Chapter extend the viewpoint of the SLE literature from one that has been primarily retrospective (based on reflective memories) (Chawla, 1998, Williams & Chawla, 2016) to one that embraces the agency of young children through the use of wearable cameras and video-stimulated recall discussions (Green, 2016a). While the examples in this Chapter were categorized under pervasive themes related to embodied phenomenology and the somaesthetic literature (Iared et al., 2016; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Shusterman, 2009), in order to illustrate certain aspects of children's embodied experiences in nature, there is recognizable overlap in all of the various themes in the examples provided. For instance, a child's developing physiology shapes all essences of being and becoming (Christensen, 2000; James, 2000), imaginary expressions, and what a child is able and unable to become. Furthermore, propelled by inquisitive imagination, a child's sense of being and becoming is invigorated in nature through movement, exploration, and make-believe. A child's pre-reflective consciousness is always sensory in interacting with other human beings more than human living world, interweaving taste, tactile, visual, and auditory mechanisms of the body in the discovery of self and the other (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Pink, 2011).

The sensory tour approach offers a method for addressing the correspondence gap between being and thought through capturing the essences of children's pre-reflective experiences in their environment. Set on the brow of a child, footage captured by way of a wearable camera gives the impression that one is walking in the shoes of a child. In this way, the sensory tour puts size into perspective, revealing aspects of the environment that might go unnoticed by an adult but pose a particular challenge or hold significant meaning to a child. The embodied physiology of a child signifies the challenges of physical size and stature (James, 2000; Corsaro, 2015).

However, with that said children compensate for their physical limitations by making themselves bigger – scaling up trees and other environmental features to obtain a heightened view above their peers and adults. Furthermore, cultural interpretations of what a child should or should not become also informs childhoodnature engagements. Cultural influences on one’s embodied sense of being are acted out through children’s imagined essences expressed through their imagination and make-believe play. Sensory tours not only tell *what* a child transforms (e.g., a stick into a weapon) but *how* it is transformed through expressive utterances and bodily movements. Bodily movement and exploration lead and guide children’s sensory perceptions. Indeed, movement is a prominent feature in childhoodnature experiences; whether consciously or subconsciously, movement enables children to shape and acquire a sensorium of understanding, which informs their perceptions. Finally, while the video footage captured by way of sensory tours taps into children’s pre-reflective consciousness, revealing features otherwise unaccounted for by reflective thought, sensory tours are, like any other qualitative method, subjective to the interpretation of the researcher. For this reason, the use of video-stimulated recall discussions, artwork, and other reflective measures are recommended to the extent possible. Pairing pre-reflective sensory tours with strategies for engaging children in metacognition (i.e., reflection on actions and behaviors) further addresses the correspondence gap and nonrepresentation problem of qualitative phenomenology and somaesthetic research.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Childhoodnature in Motion: The Ground for Learning](#)
- ▶ [Child-Nature Interaction in a Forest Preschool](#)
- ▶ [Children Becoming Emotionally Attuned to “Nature” Through Diverse Place-Responsive Pedagogies](#)
- ▶ [The Influence of Nature on a Child’s Development: Connecting the Outcomes of Human Attachment and Place Attachment](#)
- ▶ [Nature Experience Areas: Rediscovering the Potential of Nature for Children’s Development](#)
- ▶ [Phenomenology with Children: My Salamander Brother](#)
- ▶ [Rethinking Children’s Connections with Other Animals: A Childhoodnature Perspective](#)
- ▶ [Sticky: Childhoodnature Touch Encounters](#)
- ▶ [The Nature of Childhood in Childhoodnature](#)
- ▶ [Unconscious Activisms and the Subject as Critic: A Slam Articlepoem](#)

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