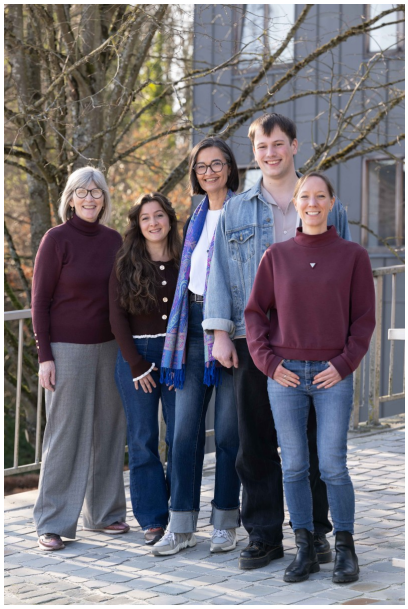
With their richly diverse and complementary backgrounds in health psychology and voice speech therapy, Profs Anne-Marie Étienne and Dominique Morsomme came together around a common project: community research.

Prof. Étienne's scientific and professional career has developed gradually, in three major stages. The first stage focused on quality of life as a guiding principle. It all began with her doctoral thesis entitled "The impact of cardiac rehabilitation on the quality of life of patients who have undergone coronary artery bypass grafting". This research aimed to promote a better quality of life for patients. This multidimensional and complex concept guided her work for more than a decade.

Second stage: prevention and accessibility of knowledge. An international conference marked a turning point: Prof. Étienne realised that prevention could be considered on a large scale by making scientific advances accessible through awareness-raising initiatives and conferences for the general public. This reflection coincided with the rise of digital technology. Thanks to institutional support and the backing of the then First Vice-Rector, Prof. Éric Haubruge, she was able to develop the MOOC 'Agir pour sa santé' (Taking action for your health). This programme offers users tools to adopt healthy behaviours by incorporating a major innovation: virtual reality. This tool offers essential benefits – safety, gradual exposure, reinforcement of self-efficacy and preservation of quality of life – that are perfectly aligned with her objectives.



Prof. Anne-Marie Étienne, Yasemin Ayhan (doctoral researcher), Prof. Dominique Morsomme, Antoine Henrotin (doctoral researcher), and Dr Angélique Remacle. © Sandrine Seyen

An integrative and participatory vision of health

The third step for Prof. Étienne was to integrate community research. The project was enriched by international collaborations, notably with Prof. Marie Préau: ‘She made me aware of social inequalities in health from the very first MOOC capsules,’ she emphasises. These exchanges, fuelled by conferences, brought one thing to light: in order to promote ‘health for and with users’, it was essential to integrate a module dedicated to community research into the MOOC. This integration has been in place for two years.

Favouring an approach centred on patients’ needs, Prof. Étienne now wants to develop personalised interventions based on patients’ needs. The arrival of researcher Yasemin Ayhan in her research unit illustrates this dynamic: she proposes to explore quality of life, health behaviors, healthy living and the use of virtual reality based on the needs expressed by schizophrenic patients. ‘We’ve come full circle: the project continues to roll out, driven by an integrative and participatory vision of health,’ she concludes.

A reversal of the clinician/patient relationship

As head of the Voice Speech Therapy research unit, Prof. Dominique Morsomme has been working for more than 20 years with people undergoing gender transition, supporting them in their vocal care. Gradually, she noticed a real divide between the position of the clinician and that of the patient. Over the years, patients have become clients awaiting vocal rehabilitation, whether they choose a masculinized or feminized voice, or an alternation of the two. The era of top-down decision-making is over: collaborative, person-centered care is the new standard. Hence the interest in turning to community health research: formulated by Prof. Marie Préau and part of participatory research, this human-scale research is based on the experiences of users, integrating their life context and perspective. It is a cross-transdisciplinary approach that can be adapted to many clinical decisions. ‘Ultimately, gender transition has turned into a broader observatory of care,’ observes Prof. Morsomme. “It is up to clinicians to get in tune with transgender people.” The arrival of researcher Antoine Henrotin in her unit provides a clear illustration of the dynamic currently shaping the team’s research direction. Their collaboration focuses on examining therapeutic vocal objectives and the real-life conditions of speaking practices, drawing on participatory methodologies, gender studies, and both qualitative and mixed-method approaches. This adaptability could also be applied by engineers wishing to design a new device: by determining the needs and interests of users, they are more likely to come up with a design that is acceptable to the majority. However, community-based research is not only complex: it involves accepting a different timeframe. It means adapting to each other’s pace. It means respecting each other’s obligations in order to work towards a common goal.

Academics and non-academics on an equal footing

This goal is largely revealed in a chapter entitled “Des Voix pour Agir. La recherche communautaire à l’ULiège » (Voices for Action: Community Research at ULiège). Part of a collective book to be published by L’Harmattan, this chapter was co-written by Antoine Henrotin, a doctoral student in speech therapy, Ayhan Yasemin, a doctoral student in health psychology, and Prof. Morsomme. It recounts a collective project led by academics (Profs Étienne and Morsomme, psychiatrists Giovanni Briganti and Mathieu Taureau, philosopher Florence Caeymaex, political scientist Geoffrey Grandjean, speech therapists Christelle Maillart and Angélique Remacle) and non-academic partners (Maison Arc-en-Ciel in Liège, ASBL l’Odyssée de Julie et Pablo, Association Interrégionale de Guidance et de Santé, ASBL Forum Interdisciplinaire En Recherche, Care et Ethique, Seintinelle platform), regarded as equal partners. ‘We included our non-academic partners in formulating the research question and trained them in our research methodology,’ says Prof. Morsomme. The non-academic partners are thus involved in the entire process, from the initial idea to the dissemination of the results. This collaboration produces knowledge that is useful, actionable, and transformative.

Restoring empowerment to vulnerable users

This is the focus of the aforementioned book chapter. It highlights the UniCité project, which is based on collaboration with three communities offering their lived experience expertise: people with schizophrenia, trans and gender diverse people and those with complex communication needs (CCN), who communicate with little or no speech and require Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) strategies. UniCité’s resolutely transdisciplinary approach involves voice therapy, gender studies, clinical neuroscience, digital health, psychiatry, ethical philosophy and medical humanities, socio-anthropology of health, health psychology, political science and analysis of political institutions and forms of civic engagement, as well as speech therapy for verbal and non-verbal communication – all disciplinary tools detached from their limiting institutionalised framework. This is a unique opportunity to combine perspectives, produce collective analyses, co-create research tools and disseminate results in accessible language that can be understood by a wide audience. As part of this innovative project, meta-research has been integrated in order to identify the facilitating factors and obstacles encountered in the implementation of this Community research, to identify transferable methodological lessons, and to contribute to the continuous improvement of community research practices at ULiège.

‘Community research is a political act,’ emphasises Prof. Morsomme. By engaging in such a process, science informs the choices of patients/clients, encourages them to express themselves in an informed manner, and adapts to difference and disability. This

innovative approach serves shared goals: to guarantee equitable access to treatment and prevention, to (re)think social alternatives, and to prepare for the future by transforming the present.

Unités Pyschologie de la Santé & Logopédie de la Voix (ULV)

Université de Liège

Faculté de Psychologie, Logopédie et Sciences de l'Education
Bât. C4 Psychologie de la santé (Val Benoît-Centrale thermoélectr.)
Allée Zoé Gatti de Gamond 4 bte 11
B-4000 Liège

Tel.: +32 (0)4/366.98.63

Tel.: +32 (0)4/366.51.76

E-mail: AM.Etienne@uliege.be

E-mail: Dominique.Morsomme@uliege.be

www.vocologie.uliege.be

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