

## New arrangements for an agroecological management of animal health. The case of French farmers learning homeopathy

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**Abstract:** *As a medicine reducing the use of antibiotics, homeopathy can be considered as a promising alternative in the perspective of agroecological transition. The medical efficiency of homeopathy remains debated and we do not intend here to contribute to this aspect of the debate. In this study we rather focus on the social arrangements that the use of homeopathy implies. Based on the study of a group of French farmers that emerged 20 years ago, we show how the practice of homeopathy contributes to new arrangements between farmers, veterinarians and animals.*

*Since homeopathy focuses on the individual and not so much on the disease, the homeopathic veterinarian needs the farmer to know the animals and to treat them. Consequently, homeopathic care is based on strong partnerships, first between the farmers and their animals, and also between the veterinarian and the farmer. Farmers have to be very attentive and engaged in a close relationship with their animals, while developing a collaborative relation with their veterinarian. Then, as the farmers are the ones who know their animals the better and as there is no need of prescription to buy homeopathy, farmers become more autonomous concerning the management of animal health, that is to say less dependent of the veterinarians.*

*To improve their autonomy, some farmers, a veterinarian and an extension agent worked together for many years. They initiated several collective activities in order to develop their competences in homeopathy: a training course organized by the extension agent, a collective publication about the use of homeopathy by the farmers and veterinarian, evening-meetings between farmers. This collective dynamic also manifest through a mutual support network that functions when farmers face problems with their flock. Through oral exchanges and written notes about their experiments and experience, they produce a panel of reference, which help the members of the group to create its own experience of homeopathy. Thus, homeopathy medicine and knowledge becomes not only reserved for the veterinarian it is also accessible to farmers.*

*This study shows how the practice and learning of homeopathy reshapes classical social arrangements by giving an important place to the farmers in the management of animal health and balancing the habitual power-based relationships between veterinarians, farmers and animals.*

**Keywords:** *collective learning, experiment, experience, human-animal relationship.*

## Introduction

As a medicine reducing the use of antibiotics, homeopathy can be considered as a promising alternative in the perspective of agroecological transition. The medical efficiency of homeopathic medicaments remains debated and we do not intend here to contribute to this aspect of the debate. In this study, we rather focus on the social arrangements between a diversity of actors using homeopathy. We show how learning and practicing homeopathy go together with new arrangements between farmers, veterinarians and animals.

Our research is based on a case study of an informal group of French livestock farmers that emerged 20 years ago in the Diois, a southeast mountain valley of France. Farmers meet during training courses organized since 1995 by an extension agent and a veterinarian, and some of them gathered in 2006 with the same veterinarian for the writing of a collective publication about their use of homeopathy. Since 2016, farmers also organize evening-meetings in spring, in order to treat together their cases of diseased animals.

Our material is composed of (i) 16 interviews with the extension agent, the veterinarian and 12 farmers<sup>1</sup>; (ii) ethnographic observations of three evening-meetings, and of five days spent with different farmers on their farms. Interviews had been carried out in a comprehensive perspective (Kaufman, 2003); meaning in the twofold purpose to study both the farmers' practices and the significations they may cover. The systematic transcription of the recorded interviews enabled us to realize a qualitative analysis to identify the recurrences as well as the singularities of each farmer's experience. The observation part of our fieldwork relies mainly on written notes, pictures and videos, and enabled us to document the details of their collective practice of homeopathy (Piette, 1996).

Our theoretical framework is based on a pragmatist approach, which focuses on the practical effects of actors' actions and interactions, and takes seriously their own interpretations of it. Through our observations and the descriptions actors gave us, we aim at reporting on relationships between farmers, veterinarian and animals as they can be understood *in the making* (Latour, 1989). In doing so, we try to be as close as possible to the actors' experience and the evaluation they make of it.

On the basis of these analyses, we will show how the relationships established between the actors taking part to a collective dynamic around homeopathy are not only an interesting arrangement to learn a new practice (homeopathy), but how they also contribute to renew the way farmers give sense to their profession, by reshaping the conventional relationships between a veterinarian, an extension agent, some farmers and their animals.

Therefore, we will dedicate the first part of this article to the description of what we call "the Diois' dynamic". That is to say to the several activities that gather farmers, veterinarian and animals around homeopathy; to their history; and to the details of what the homeopathic diagnosis consist of. In the second part of the article, we will successively present how farmers value the relationships they experience through homeopathy with their animals, the veterinarian, and between each other.

## 1. The collective dynamic of the Diois

### a. History and activities of the Diois' dynamic.

The experience we studied connects about 20 farmers and their animals, an extension agent, and one homeopathic veterinarian in particular. To qualify this experience, the

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<sup>1</sup> Two farmers had been interviewed twice. Among them, six are sheep farmers, four are goat farmers, one is a horse breeder and practitioner, and one is a shepherd.

extension agent talks about a “collective dynamic” rather than a “group” or a “collective”. According to her, several reasons justify the use of this term. First because of the informal aspect of this dynamic which has never been defined into an explicit project; secondly because of its evolutive and multi-situated aspect. Indeed, the Diois’ dynamic includes several groups with different stories. These groups have in common to gather farmers from the same region through activities touching upon homeopathy, and their compositions are partially overlapping. Over the years, some actors like the extension agent, the veterinarian and few farmers have played a fundamental role in the constitution of different groups. More exactly, we observed that training courses organized by the extension agent historically gave its impulse to the Diois’ dynamic and still contribute to sustain it.

#### *A first training group:*

An historic approach shows that the early stage of these training courses can be traced back to the 1980s. At that time, informal meetings were already organized during the weekend by a homeopathic veterinarian, Alain Boutonnet, at his house in Nyons (which is located about an hour of car from the Diois). These meetings were gathering shepherds and farmers, coming from many parts of the Alps, including two of them coming from the Diois. Among different technics, the veterinarian use to teach some principles of homeopathy, and some session were even dedicated to the practice of homeopathy. Nonetheless, these meetings were not regular and had no special links with any dynamic ongoing in the Diois. It is actually from the 1990s that the veterinarian had progressively met other farmers coming from the Diois.

In 1998, an extension agent in charge of organic conversion at the local Chamber of Agriculture arrived in the Diois. Through the acquaintance of some farmers, she met the homeopathic veterinarian from Nyons. In 1999, they organized together a first session of training courses, supported by the financing fund Vivea<sup>2</sup>. This first session aimed at initiating farmers to alternative approach to animal health, including preventive approaches of grazing and feeding management and a variety of curative methods such as homeopathy, as well as plant medicine.

The first sessions of training that were specifically dedicated to homeopathy started in 2001, at farmers’ request. During the period that goes from 2001 until 2009, a group of farmers, often called “the training group” emerged. *“We discovered that veterinary homeopathy could be practiced in a group, and that it was very instructive this way (...) and since then, we did the demonstration of it many times”* relate the veterinarian remembering this period. But in 2009, training courses had to stop for a variety of reasons, mainly because the extension agent leaved the region for few years.

#### *A group working to the publication of a book about homeopathy*

In 2006, Alain Boutonnet, the homeopathic veterinarian, initiated a book publication about farmer’s experience of homeopathy. He worked with the extension agent and ten farmers who used to practice homeopathy for more than 30 years. Only a few of them were part of the Diois’ training group, and more than half of them were not living in the Diois valley. The book, finally published in 2011 and entitled *“Homeopathy on the farm, some farmers talk about it”*, is however an important piece of the Diois’ dynamic, and most of the farmers we met own it and refer to it in their interviews.

#### *The current training group*

After a three-year break in the training courses, the extension agent managed to restart new sessions in 2012. A new group emerged, composed of four farmers from the previous

<sup>2</sup> The Vivea’s fund finances most of the French trainings in the domain of agriculture.

sessions, but also renewed by the arrival of twelve farmers coming from a new generation. Half of these new participants settled less than five years ago, and two third of them are certified organic. During the last five years, this group, organized around regular classes, constitutes the most stable dimension of the Diois' dynamic. Nevertheless, this stability faces some limits: first, the financial support of the training course has to be renewed every year, secondly, Alain Boutonnet is nearly the only veterinarian taking part in the training course, and as he is now 80 years old, he wishes to progressively reduce his implication. This last point specifies an important feature of the Diois' dynamic: the fact it is intrinsically linked to the "commitment" of one veterinarian in particular, "who has built a relation of trust with the farmers" over the years<sup>3</sup>.

Training courses take place on farms, six times a year during half a day, between autumn and winter. During the first part of the afternoon the veterinarian presents one or two homeopathic medicament and describes their most characteristic symptoms. Farmers get summarized sheets for each medicament. The veterinarian illustrates his presentation with concrete cases he encountered and that farmers are invited to discuss on the basis of their own experience. The second part of the afternoon is dedicated to a more practical time. Farmers present their own current cases of diseased animals on which they need a collective support. Together with the veterinarian and the counselor, the group works on each diagnosis. This way, farmers can exchange on their problems and capitalize on their successes and failures.

#### *Since 2016: evening-meetings organized by the farmers*

For the last two years, farmers instigated a new occasion to gather through evening-meetings. The specificity of these meetings is due to the absence of the veterinarian and of the extension agent. They are self-organized by the farmers in order to create a "sustainable dynamic" which would not depend on funded trainings neither on Alain Boutonnet's availability. Evening-meetings occurring in the spring, they are also an occasion to practice collectively homeopathy during a season where trainings are not taking place. Furthermore, these meetings are an opportunity to create links between the different groups and the different generations of farmers: retired farmers, because of their experience, play a key role in organizing these evening-meetings.

Most of the evening-meetings take place at the same farm, the one of a retired couple of dairy sheep farmers that is located quite central in the Diois valley. Farmers come with their "cases", in order to treat them collectively. Twelve farmers participated at least one time in 2017, and the average participation is seven people per meeting. Contrary to what happens in the trainings where the cases of some 15 farmers have to be treated, evening-meetings allow taking the time to treat each case and detailing the different steps of the homeopathic diagnosis. The most experienced farmers help the beginners in their diagnosis, and teach them how to use the *Repertory* and the *Materia Medica*, the key tools of the homeopathic diagnosis. Another goal of these meetings is to improve the observation capacities of the farmers, since homeopathic symptoms are often very accurate and hard to be detected.

#### **b. The farmer's practical experience of homeopathy**

Beyond the story of this collective dynamic and its group activities, what farmers experience in the Diois deals with the practice of homeopathy as a specific method for healing animals. Thus, our investigation accorded importance to document homeopathy *in the making* and especially to the diagnosis activity, which constitutes the core of homeopathy's practice.

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<sup>3</sup> These are the words of Delphine, a goat farmer from the new generation.

*In the making: what the homeopathic diagnosis is about*

“Facing a case” as farmers say, one has to find “the proper remedy” in order to heal their animal. Homeopathy functions under the principle of similarity. Which means the diseased individual expresses the symptoms he would have got after taking a non-diluted dose of the very same medicament that would heal him. But homeopathy is also a medicine of the details: each diseased expresses a medicament, and there are hundreds of them. From the animal's observation to the discovery of the appropriate medicament, there is a several steps process:

*“Homeopaths often say you need three signs well-established for an observation to be complete (...). It is what we call the tripod (...). If possible these signs have to be of various nature (...). Signs can be locally observed on the animals but they can also emanate from its general aspect. An important point is to get psychological signs from the beast, which expresses its state of mind. (...) When observations are rich, farmers often end up with more than three signs. Consequently, some of them might be prioritized (...). This ranking step depends on the ‘value’ of the signs observed: do they seem to be important, do they seem to be typical according to what is enduring the animals?” (Jean-Louis, retired sheep farmer).*

Once the tripod's signs are established, the farmer has to search the links between them and the homeopathic symptoms indexed by the *Repertory*. Indeed, what the animals give to perceive or what the farmer interprets doesn't always fit with the details of the *Repertory's* sections. Most of the time, the farmer has to go back to his animals in order to refine his observations. Once the farmer has finally found three symptoms in his repertory fitting with the animals signs, comes the moment to list the medicaments (or “*remedies*”) that the *Repertory* indicates for each symptom. To make the choice of the right medicament, the farmer looks into the *Materia Medica*, a book that gives a fine description of each medicament. Then, the medicament can finally be given to the animals.

Although it doesn't mean the diagnosis is finished: the farmer has to observe the effects of the medicament he chose, and possibly go back to his research if the animal's state isn't getting better. As underlined by a farmer, “*to choose and to give a medicament is always a test (...) a question that you address to your animal*” (Elodie, horse breeder and trainer). “*The proper remedy*” is the one that makes the animal recovers its health and makes its symptoms disappear. The recovery can happen progressively, or “*quickly*” and “*miraculously*”, as farmers often describe it, underlining the convincing aspect of this last type of case. But, depending on farmers' skills, homeopathic pills do not always produce such clear effects. In theory, “*the proper remedy always exists*”... but one has to find it. Thus, a consequent number of cases we observed in the Diois lead to a succession of several diagnoses, because the results of the first ones were not conclusive. We also observed that most of the farmers don't hesitate to abandon homeopathy and switch to other medicine, wether it is plant medicine or antibiotics. Especially in front of mastitis, which need a quick reaction and do not allow spending too much time searching for the right homeopathic medicament. Therefore, some farmers are well known for having a lot of successes with homeopathy, whereas others often face difficulties and need to call the first ones or the veterinarian in order to get some help.

*“Facing a case”: the Diois' mutual support network*

Beyond the technical understanding of the homeopathic diagnosis, our pragmatic approach highlights the role of a mutual support network of farmers. In other words, we discovered that the Diois' collective dynamic could manifest itself beyond the activities we described previously.

Several examples of collectively resolved cases show how this mutual support network works. The diagnosis of Pampille, a dairy goat from the farm of La Tournelle involved three

farmers (besides her owners), during more than ten days. In the beginning of her disease, farmers were communicating through phone call. Then two of them came until the farm of *La Tournelle* in order to observe her with their own eyes. This collective mobilisation occurred between two evening-meetings and has been reported to the rest of the group. It implied long exchanges and description of Pampille's state, collective research in the *Repertory*, comparison between the potential medicament found by each farmer, observations and interpretations of their effects through regular phone calls. At the highest point of Pampille's disease, her owner had three phone calls a day from other farmers in order to follow the evolution of her case.

Another interesting case is the one of the dairy goat Mélusine. Mélusine has been diagnosed by Delphine, her owner, with the help of her neighbour Isabelle, a lamb farmer from the training group. But the veterinarian also played a key role in her healing. Indeed, Delphine has called him before giving each of three different medicines she found for her. Several farmers from the Diois are used to call him when they face complex cases. As a retired veterinarian Alain is available every weekday during the morning to support farmers that need his experience.

One last case that might draw our attention is the one of "Resuscitate", a lamb that has been followed by three farmers plus the veterinarian during more than two weeks. As for Pampille, Resuscitate' disease occurred between two evening-meetings. Interesting point: it was the first time Chantal and Robert (her owners) called up other people to help them in their research. Indeed, Chantal is a farmer from the training group and participated to the evening-meetings for the first time in 2017. There she got to know with experienced farmers from the previous generation.

*"Before, I wouldn't dare to call them, because I didn't really know them (...) I'd have been afraid to bother", she said. "Jean-Louis and Victor helped us to find a first medicament (...), and the day after they came here to have a look at the beast (...). This one gave us difficulties!"* (Chantal, sheep farmer).

After Resuscitate was healed, Jean-Louis and Victor decided to call Alain (the veterinarian) in order to get some advice for a preventive medicine.

With the description of the different activities around the learning and the practice of homeopathy in the Diois region, we showed how homeopathy results from a collective practice. In the next part, we would like to go further in the analysis of the relations between the actors taking part in this collective dynamic around homeopathy.

## 2. Relations between farmers, animals and veterinarian

Trainings, evening-meetings mutual help in front of a case, observation and diagnostic of animals: these are all activities where the practice of homeopathy takes a collective form, where farmers interact with each other, with the veterinarian or with their animals. In the interviews, the farmers and the veterinarian give a lot of importance to this collective experience, and more exactly to the specific kind of relationships they developed through the practice of homeopathy.

### a. Relationships between the Diois farmers and their veterinarian

The first aspect of this relational experience concerns the relationships between the farmers and their veterinarian.

*A collaborative relationship giving autonomy to farmers*

Along with Alain Boutonnet, farmers experiment a new way of working with their veterinarian. In his perspective, farmers' ability to observe animals is of the utmost importance:

*« By meeting farmers and practicing homeopathy together, I got to realise that the presence and the support of a wise farmer was very valuable (...). Even more I'd say that it pushes me forward ».* (Alain, homeopathic veterinarian)

Farmers provide to the veterinarian indications based on the observation of original signs linked to the personality of the animals they know well for the diagnosis. These indications are “*essential*” for the veterinarian, who would not be necessarily able to get them because of its external view.

Thus, a collaborative relation is at stake, as farmers' observations put the veterinarian in a better position to find the right medicament. On this point, the relationships between Diois' livestock farmers and their veterinarian has some similitude with those observed by Florence Hellec in her research on a French group of “atypical vet” called “GIE Zone Verte” (Hellec, 2016), who defends an alternative vision of veterinary medicine, in which farmers' autonomy is aimed. Concretely, Hellec observe that the GIE ZV's vision does not imply the end of the veterinarians' expertise, but leads to less intervention, and more advisement and trainings<sup>4</sup>.

However, regarding to the cases we described previously, one must notice an interesting and singular point: for the last few years, training courses and evening-meetings has become places where farmers *also* learn to use the *Repertory*. And most of the time, they are now able to find and choose medicament by themselves. This frequent use of self-medication is also possible because there is no need of prescription to get homeopathic medicament. But the point is interesting because it results from a significant evolution in the Diois' experience. Indeed, “giving the *Repertory* to the farmers” is something quite new in the history we described earlier. Alain began to advise farmers to buy a *Repertory* and to learn how to use it only since few years. Before that, farmers were only relying on his summarized sheets, and only a few of them were actually able to make diagnosis with the *Repertory*. Moreover, encouraging farmers to use the *Repertory* seems to be something quite atypical in the community of homeopathic veterinarian. As Alain told us, few veterinarians he recently discussed with in a meeting asked him this question: “what will remain to us if we give them the *Repertory*?”

The few examples mentioned before were good illustrations of the autonomy farmers have acquired over their learning of homeopathic diagnosis. Even with the case of the goat Mélusine, whereas Delphine gave a phone call to Alain before giving her a first medicament. Indeed, Delphine did not call Alain in order to ask him to find a medicine on the basis of the signs she observed on Mélusine, but rather to present him the one she had already found by herself:

*“Usually when I call him for a problem, I already have some ideas of what would be the right medicine. And the good thing is that even if I totally missed my research, he's going to listen to the reasons that lead me until this choice, the observations I did with my beast, what makes me think it's the good choice, and all.”* (Delphine, goat farmer)

Thus, Delphine had previously found on her own the three medicines she gave to Mélusine.

### *A veterinarian who share his expertise*

<sup>4</sup> Once again, our approach of the Diois' experience remains a rather situated one. On this point, the work of Florence Hellec gives a complementary view, by contextualizing the GIE Zone Verte' experience in regard to the veterinarian profession.

Once we've figured this increasing autonomy, a question remains: what is then the role of the veterinarian as farmers keep on calling him quite frequently? The fact is we observed that Alain Boutonnet is still considered as an expert by most of the farmers:

*“For sure we manage to get some success with homeopathy and we're able to find solution on our own, but Alain still remains the veterinarian, you know... he's got more knowledge than we do, concerning the animals physiology for example (...) and even in terms of homeopathy, he's got a better hindsight”* (Danielle, sheep farmer)

According to Alain, himself, the veterinarian's competences are the one of a “therapist by profession”: unlike the farmer, the veterinarian is full-time healing animals and thus, builds himself a strong experience he can share with them:

*“ The therapist is precious because of his experience (...). He's full-time facing healing situations whereas farmers can involve themselves in homeopathy only part-time. They have to milk and make cheese, to sell it, to manage their farm, to do the bookkeeping, to harvest the hay etc. They have thousands of things to do. Whereas me, I'm specialised into health (...) and I can go from farm to farm crossing cases and context (...). That's the thing I can share with them”* (Alain, veterinarian)

One thing must be noticed in this vision: there is no absolute frontier between the farmer's competence and the veterinarian's one. The first one is of a local type, emerging from the farmer's daily relation with their animals; the second is of a generic type emerging from the multiples cross-referenced experiences of the veterinarian. But that second one is not inaccessible to the farmer, it is *potentially* reachable. Moreover, it's exactly what training courses and evening-meetings are about: through oral exchanges and written notes, farmers produce traces of their experiences, and build a reference panel of the same type than the veterinarian's one.

#### *A political experience*

The experience goes further. Following the actors discourse, it's dealing with a “*political dimension*”. Describing their mutual relationships, veterinarian and farmers often underline an experience of rupture with the “*classical model*”, that is to say with a model where “*each one has his predefined role*”. In this classical model, when farmers get a problem with their animals, they have to “*leave the place*” and let the veterinarian “*take the control of the situation*”. They have to “*wait*” for the veterinarian and “*execute its prescription*”. Their opinion is not taken into account. “*What is really important for me in homeopathy is that we can finally appeal to our intelligence (...) to the things that we know they're good for our livestock management*”, explains Céline, a young lamb farmer who began training courses two years ago. “*When you talk with Alain, you can tell he's interested in your animal and what you know about it*” testifies Isabelle, another lamb farmer. On the psychological level, this experience also leads to discharge them from their feelings of “*culpability*” and “*weakness*” in front of their animal's pain. Over the years, “*we now feel responsible regarding to our mission that is to take care of our animals*”, wrote the authors of Homeopathy at the farm (2011).

#### **b. Relationships between farmers and animals:**

The second aspect of this relational experience concerns the relationships between farmers and their animals. A relationship that is intrinsically related to the considerations we just developed. As we can understand it with the quotation below, the farmer's foreground role in the homeopathic diagnosis strengthens his relation with his animals:

*“Before doing homeopathy I already observed a lot my animals. But when there was a problem, there was this moment where... you suddenly loose the contact with them, things are freezing and escape from you (...). The veterinarian is coming, does his*



*diagnosis without considering you (...), he gives a medicine and during this moment, you're waiting (...). With homeopathy you're keeping the bond with your animal all along its disease, you're fighting with him*" (Agnès, goat farmer)

« *Keep the bond with your animal* », « *fight with him* », these expressions from Agnès, a goat farmer are very meaningful. And we could enumerate many others of the same kind: “*earning the confidence of your animals*” (Aline, sheep farmer), “*make him feel he's important*” (Delphine, goat farmer). These evocative expressions used by farmers reveal their commitment into an affective relationship with their animals. Moreover, this commitment seems to experience a form of reciprocity that we can observe through the idea of the animal's confidence or through the one of fighting *with* them. In their interview, two farmers even made the supposition that their personal involvement into their animals' care might be a reason of homeopathy's success:

*“We fight for them, and they become fighters too, they're clinging to life instead of letting themselves die”,* (Aline, lamb farmer).

*“We give so much energy, that they must feel it, and receive it, for sure (...) and it might certainly have something to do with their recovery”,* (Agnès, goat farmer).

### *Beyond homeopathy's practice*

Our analysis of farmers' interviews shows that this affective relation seems to be linked with the practice of homeopathy. But according to several of them, their relationship with animals is not the consequence of their practice of homeopathy; it is rather the practice of homeopathy that suits to their relationship with animals. Meaning: they see homeopathy as a good opportunity to manifest their attachment to their animals. For example Delphine explains that homeopathy is a method that suits to her conception of livestock farming, and makes her feel better when she is with her animals. Namely because it is a “*less violent way of taking care of your animals*” and because “*we all know stinging animals all the time isn't something they enjoy*”. Thus, she thinks she “*would have an affective relation with them whether [she] use homeopathy or not*”. Same for Céline, a lamb farmer who declares that homeopathy suits with her passion for the beast, explaining she loves “*examining them and try to understand what they may feel*”.

### *Through the diagnosis: a comprehensive experience of animals*

In fact, we observed that through the activity of diagnosis, this relationship get tightened and farmers get involved into a comprehensive experience of their animals.

In search of signs, animals are considered as individual who ought to be “*consulted*”. Farmers try to consider “*a diseased rather than a disease*”. A diseased, who gives signs by answering, and who should be listened. We are “*guided by the suffering of the animal*” writes Vincent, a farmer from the book generation. Thus, the collaborative aspect of the diagnosis extends to the animals as well as to the farmers, in the sense that animals are actors who give special signs (or not), always in a specific manner, always to signify a specific pain.

By observing farmers during the evening-meetings where they work on their cases collectively, we documented the existence of an authentic heuristic of homeopathy. Diagnosis is occurring like an *inquiry* (in the sense of John Dewey, 1927), and relies on a specific system of reference, the one of the *Repertory* and of the *Materia Medica*. These two books orient the farmers' research and provide a nearly inexhaustible amount of “*diseased profile*”. Hence, they generate complexity into the animal comprehension. And most of the time, finding “*the proper remedy*” entails the discovery of new characteristics for the animal, as it was the case for Pupille, a six years old donkey that has been recently adopted by Agnès.

The problem with Pupille is that nobody can approach her. As a result, Agnès cannot take care of her hoofs, or any problem she would have. She's "wild" and "seems to be afraid". Thus, relying on these psychological descriptions the group of the evening-meetings searched for symptoms in the *Repertory*. Farmers went to the section that treats of fear behaviour. But as the section is ten pages long and gives numerous declinations of fear, they needed more information from Agnès about Pupille. Agnès questioned herself, went back in her memory, tried to figure some hypothesis drawn from the *Repertory*... This way she considered the fact Pupille is always calling her when she comes close to her pen. What if Pupille were looking for company but kept on refusing contact because of a previous experience that has left a mark in her mind? But what kind of traumatism exactly? And so farmers pursued their reflection on Pupille's case.

With this example, we see how the diagnosis led the farmers to adopt a comprehensive vision of their animals.

#### *Homeopathy's influence on farmers' daily relationship with their animals:*

These last comments resonate with Vinciane Despret's work (Despret, 2010, 2012), which showed there is a tight link between the way we question animals and what we learn from them. Indeed, through homeopathy farmers learn new things from their animals. Yet we can suppose the more a farmer knows about his animal, the more he'll be able to "put himself into its place", to take up Émilie Hache's words (Hache, 2011). Which would not mean the farmer necessarily knows what is good for his animal, but that he becomes more "attentive toward its multiple possibilities", as to the fact he doesn't know him<sup>5</sup>. Pushing further the reflection, it seems that the development of this awareness influences the whole relationship farmers have with their animals. That is to say, the way they "live and work together" (Porcher, 2002), the way they compose a common world. The following quotations illustrate this relational shift:

*"The attention you develop through homeopathy awares you of many things concerning animals, I mean out of the disease. You become conscious of a lot of things at the prevention level, at the animal's level generally speaking (...). Thus you're always looking for the best for them, you learn to question them on what they prefer (...) which is not necessarily what you would prefer!"* (Agnès, goat farmer)

Élodie, a young horse trainer from the training courses shares a similar idea in her interview:

*"To me, homeopathy is also about learning to go beyond the behaviours and personality of each animal (...) you observe him, you understand him by going behind the things, and you accept his character. Cause you can't control everything, anyway..."* (Élodie, horse trainer).

#### **c. Relationships between farmers:**

##### *The role of exchanges between farmers in the learning process of homeopathy*

Tackling with the issue of learning process, our investigation attached importance to farmers' exchanges as well as to their collective practice of homeopathy.

As mentioned previously, trainings and evening-meetings give the farmers the opportunity to share the diversity of cases they face. The summary sheets the veterinarian gives them and the notes they take allow them to conserve traces. Relying on a reference panel that

<sup>5</sup> Émilie Hache (2011), *Ce à quoi nous tenons, propositions pour une écologie pragmatique*, Paris, La Découverte, p. 49.

emerges from these crossed experiences, farmers increase their diagnosis' rapidity and efficiency. Moreover, the training meetings' regularity enables them to benefit of a collective follow-up for their cases, which also teaches them how to deal with animals' evolution throughout their disease. Over the years, this regularity has played an important role in their improvement. Indeed, *“you can't progress in homeopathy without a certain investment”* explains Agnès, an experienced farmer from the first generation. Thus, training meetings appear to be a fundamental moment of re-encouragement for many farmers:

*“Training is a long-term follow-up (...). It re-stimulates you and makes you more rigorous (...). Because sometimes you just need to get back in the swing of homeopathy you know... to get aware of what you forget, what you don't do because you're doing it too quickly. I mean careful observations etc. It gives you a line to follow.”*  
(Aline, sheep farmer)

On the other hand, evening-meetings play a key role in the development of farmer's competences to do a diagnosis. Collective researches and discussions improve their sense of observation and their ability to establish correspondence between their animal's behaviour and the symptoms indexed in the *Repertory*. *“The Repertory has kind of a specific language (...), it is functioning with its specific logic, and it implies quite a long practice to get familiar with it”*, explains Victor a shepherd recognized as one of the best homeopath among the Diois' farmers. Together with three other farmers from the book generation, they transmit their research experience, they teach *“how to move in the Repertory”* and *“how to take a step back”* in front of animal's pain. Thereby, farmers increase their ability to make diagnosis on their own and get more autonomous in front of a case.

#### *Beyond homeopathy as a curative method: the relational definition given by the farmers*

However, analysis of our interviews shows that the Diois' collective experience is going beyond the technical dimension of learning practicing together an alternative method to cure their animals. As farmers describe it, trainings and evening-meetings also represent essential moments of sociability where they experience a new way of being related with each other. We're getting here to a primordial aspect of farmers' experience which they value regarding to the difficulties of their job. Farmers often underline the stressful aspect of their daily life, especially when they face health problems with their flock. Absorbing timetable, added to the geographical remoteness of their mountain farms are also frequently mentioned as problematic for them:

*“One must say it, we are rather isolated here in the mountains (...) and because our job implies that we're often overwhelmed, each one is into its work, and there is no time to see each others. (...) The good thing with these meetings is they oblige you to take this time to share (...) to go out of your place and see some people (...). Otherwise it's easy to end up alone with your fear and your problems, you know”*  
(Isabelle, sheep farmer).

Or in the same perspective:

*“We're living away from each others, and to me these trainings also help to keep the link with other people and what's happening outside of your farm (...). It's about killing two bird with one stones: on the one hand you learn homeopathy, on the other hand you make friend with other farmers”* (Aline, sheep farmer).

Thus, when they come to trainings, farmers come to improve their skills, *but* they also come “to see each other's”, “to listen” and to “entrust” to each other's. As well as an *opening on the*

outside of their farm, it deals with an *opening* to the others about what's happening in their farms<sup>6</sup>:

*“Before I use to keep everything for me (...) Most of us do that... As if there was sort of a shameful thing about having problems with your flock, meaning you're not a good farmer, and all. So you hide it, you know (...) Before this group exist, if I'd have a problem, I wouldn't say a word of it outside of the farm (...) Same for our neighbour who's raising lambs across the dell (...) for thirty years he's never told us anything. And yet he knows my husband since they're kid...”* (Chantal, sheep farmer)

Approaching the end of this paper, let's have a stop and consider these observations, which represents a recurring theme our different interviews. Indeed, one could easily conclude that trainings and meetings fill a “social function” of connecting farmers together, and that it would be so *beside* homeopathy and the healing of animals. However, we would miss the main lesson of this research stopping at this stage. In fact, it seems that this relational experience can be considered as a dimension which is part of how homeopathy makes sense for them; that is to say, as an intrinsic dimension of their experience with homeopathy. The rich quotation we would like to share below is a good illustration of a conception of homeopathy that includes farmers' relationships, as *“the most important thing about homeopathy”*. In this quotation Agnès reports on a conversation she had with Chantal on their way back from the evening-meeting of March 2017. Chantal told her about the feelings she had in the previous days, receiving help from three other farmers in front of Resuscitate' case:

*“The other day, coming back from the last evening-meeting, I discussed with Chantal who told me that homeopathy changed her life (...) because she knows she can rely on other people. Even if it's someone who's not very good at researching remedies, she will still have some people to talk to, and who are going to help her in order to find a solution. And this is very important you know. I think you should take it into account in your study. I even think it's the most important about homeopathy... Or no wait... the most important is to find the right remedy, of course! But you see, not feel alone, having someone to talk to (...) Actually you observed it (...) when we come with our problems, the simple fact of sharing, of saying for example 'I have this goat, and she's really suffering'... this is something that make us feel way better (...). I think it is just as important as the technical aspect of homeopathy. Honestly, it's an opening for us.”* (Agnès, goat farmer)

### 3. Conclusion

In the Diois, a collective dynamic emerged more than twenty years ago around farmers' common practice of homeopathy. This dynamic involves farmers and their animals through the activity of diagnosis, but also one particular veterinarian and an extension agent.

Our initial research hypotheses assume that this collective dynamic plays an important role in the process of learning and knowledge production about homeopathy. Our investigations confirmed these hypotheses and provided details on the learning process ongoing in the Diois. We first showed how the different collective activities enable farmers to share and capitalize their own experiences. Farmers produce a reference panel of homeopathic cases that increase the rapidity and the efficiency of their diagnosis. This way, learning homeopathy increases farmers' autonomy in front of animal health. We furthermore described the teaching methods of the veterinarian, which are based on participative lessons and farmers' case studies. In order to choose the proper homeopathic medicament farmers have to diagnose their animals by detecting their symptoms. Therefore, training courses and

<sup>6</sup> We took this idea of an “opening” from an interview (Agnès, goat farmer).

evening-meetings also teach them how to observe and question their animals. Finally, we reported on a mutual support network composed of the veterinarian and several farmers. This network functions through phone calls when farmers tackle with complicated cases of diseased animals in their day-to-day life.

Beyond these elementary observations, we showed that the learning process of this method occasions new arrangement between farmers, animals and veterinarian, that is to say new forms of working-together. We tried to account for the multidimensionality of this practice, following the farmers' experience of it. This way, we observe that more than an appropriate arrangement for learning homeopathy, this working-together is the core of what is experimented by the farmers through their practice of homeopathy. In other words, we understood homeopathy should not be reduced to its medical difference with antibiotics; meaning to its substantial aspect. Indeed, in the context of the Diois, the homeopathic medicine is dealing with a new way of forming a collective with their animals, with their veterinarian, and with the peers of the profession.

This way, the Diois experience of homeopathy can be considered as a *total social fact* (Marcel Mauss, 1968), in the sense that it has implications on many spheres of their daily life, as evidenced by the reference to a "*life philosophy*" several farmers made in their interview. Hence, homeopathy seems to have an incidence on their whole conception of livestock farming since being a livestock farmer implies to be in a daily relationship with animals, to take care of them when they get ill; to call on a professional veterinarian when needed; or to be in relations with the local peers of the profession.

Furthermore, following a political ecology perspective (Hache, 2011, 2013), we consider the Diois experience as an ecological and political experimentation, reshaping the classical social arrangements between farmers, veterinarian and animals. Ecological, in the sense that the Diois experience deals with a change into the way "*heterogeneous and interdependent beings are related to each other*" (Hache, 2011). Political, in the sense it deals with a change into the way actors compose a common world, where the farmers consider their animals as individuals with their own personality, where the veterinarian share his knowledge with farmers, where farmers get autonomous, learning how to diagnose their animals and to support each other.

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