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Revealing Tacit Knowledge Embodiment and Explication

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How does tacit knowledge inscribe itself into cultural and social practices?

As the established distinction between tacit and explicit or discursive forms of knowledge does not explain this question, the contributions in this volume reconstruct, describe, and analyze the manifold processes by which the tacit reveals itself: They focus, for example, on metaphors, feelings, and visualizations as explications of the tacit as well as on processes of embodiment. Taken together, they demonstrate that the tacit does not constitute a single or unified knowledge complex, but has to be understood in its differentiated and fragmented forms. In addition to scholarly essays, the volume features interviews with Mark Johnson, Theodore Schatzki, and Loïc Wacquant.

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Locations, Translations, and Presentifications of Tacit Knowledge

An Introduction

Frank Adloff, Katharina Gerund, and David Kaldewey

The concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ points to a set of theoretical and methodological questions in a wide range of academic disciplines (including philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, business administration, linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, and cultural studies). In addition, it refers to diverse practical problems (for example knowledge management in organizations, creative practices in the arts, religious rituals, intercultural communication, or racism). It is not easy to give a precise definition of tacit knowledge: The term may denote the skills we need for bodily performances such as bicycling, playing a musical instrument, or conducting experiments in the laboratory, but it may also point to culture-specific intuitions and pre-reflexive assumptions that determine the way we interact with the world and with society. Any approach to tacit knowledge is characterized by a basic paradox: If this kind of embodied and pre-reflexive knowledge underlies all of our actions and all knowledge production, then how is it possible for us to access it – let alone describe it in the propositional language of scholarly discourse? If this knowledge is in fact tacit, then how (and to which degree) can we transform it into explicit knowledge? One could argue that as soon as tacit knowledge is explicated, it no longer is ‘tacit,’ and has thus been lost in the act of translation. Following this reasoning, academic discourse may run the risk of viewing tacit knowledge as both ubiquitous and elusive, and surrounding the realm of the tacit with an aura of obscurity.

But is tacit knowledge really that mysterious? If one claims that it is everywhere, that it underlies all explicit knowledge and informs all of our actions, then tacit knowledge actually seems to be neither mystical nor exceptional but rather quite ordinary and maybe even trivial. As Harry Collins (2010: 7-8) puts it:

What the individual human body and human brain do is not so different from what cats, dogs, and, for that matter, trees and clouds have always done. While humans encounter

bodily abilities as strange and difficult because we continually fail in our attempts to explicate them, there is nothing mysterious about the knowledge itself.

Yet, if it is in fact everywhere, then it must at least be possible in one way or another to reconstruct, describe, and analyze the manifold processes by which the tacit reveals itself (or is revealed). The contributions to the present volume demonstrate the wide range of current research on tacit knowledge but also probe the limits of accessing and explicating the tacit dimension by employing diverse analytical strategies from different disciplines. Basically, we distinguish three such analytical strategies, which correspond to the three sections of this volume and serve as its organizing principle: The first approach aims at locating tacit knowledge in different sociological and philosophical frameworks (I); the second strategy revolves around the methodological problems of translating tacit knowledge (II); the third approach builds on the concepts of presence and presentification, and is based on the premise that tacit knowledge reveals itself and becomes tangible in manifold forms, for example, in metaphors, feelings, visualizations, or creative practices such as musical improvisation (III).

A survey of the research on tacit knowledge shows that it has long been dominated by philosophical and epistemological studies. Here, the main interest has been to define tacit knowledge in contrast to explicit, discursive, or propositional forms of knowledge and to explain how the two are interrelated. Although the term ‘tacit knowledge’ was introduced and popularized only in the mid-twentieth century by Michael Polanyi (cf. 1958, 1966), the idea that we have to distinguish systematically between different forms of knowledge is much older: Greek philosophers such as Plato and the Neoplatonists already held that propositional knowledge was complemented by practical skills, experience, and intuitive vision (cf. Wieland 1982: 224ff.), and Aristotle’s distinction between theoretical (*epistêmê*, *nous*, *sophia*), practical (*phronêsis*), and productive (*technê*) virtues can be understood as a first systematic classification of tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. Nevertheless, in the history of Western philosophy knowledge has mostly been conceived of as propositional knowledge, not least because only this form of knowledge can be methodologically secured and codified in truth-apt sentences. This bias toward propositional knowledge led to a preoccupation with validity claims: Is tacit knowledge ‘real’ knowledge, although it cannot be verified? Apparently, it becomes ‘true’ not through valid propositions but through practical success (cf. Renn’s contribution to this volume).

This rationalist tradition was prominently challenged by pragmatism, which points to the habitual practices and routines that enable and guide human action. William James for example distinguished between “knowledge of acquaintance” and “knowledge about” (1950 [1890]: 221ff.), anticipating Gilbert Ryle’s famous distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing that”

(1945/46). John Dewey also dealt with the relationship between these forms of knowledge and stressed that our experience of the world must not be reduced to its cognitive aspects. For Dewey, our interaction with the world is grounded in pre-reflexive forms of “primary experiences” that underlie the “secondary experiences,” such as thinking, knowing, or reflective imagination (cf. Antony’s paper in this volume). The idea that non-explicit forms of knowledge are actually the privileged mode of our being-in-the-world can also be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and in Martin Heidegger’s fundamental ontology (cf. Loenhoff 2012a). Thus, several important philosophical currents of the 20th century have dealt systematically with the problem of tacit knowledge. However, this does not mean that they have developed a common understanding or even a commonly accepted definition of tacit knowledge.¹

In the last decades, research on tacit knowledge has taken different trajectories and developed along diverse lines of inquiry. One development that can be reconstructed moved from the philosophical discourse on tacit knowledge that had dominated discussions up into the 1960s to a more complex and varied debate which started to take off in the 1970s when other disciplines entered the discursive arena. For example, in the emerging field of science studies, the ideas of authors such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michael Polanyi, and Thomas Kuhn were used to challenge the traditional claim that scientific knowledge is rational and objective by showing that it is embedded in social contexts and thus also depends on the tacit knowledge of social actors (cf. Barnes 1974; Bloor 1973, 1976; Collins 1974). This approach integrated philosophical accounts of tacit knowledge into the sociology of knowledge. An important rediscovery in this context had been the work of Karl Mannheim, whose contribution to the problem of tacit knowledge seems to have been neglected until today. Following Mannheim, knowledge is always rooted in a certain “conjunctive experiential space” (*konjunktiver Erfahrungsraum*). The knowledge acquired in such a social space is “a-theoretical” and has to be distinguished from “theoretical” or “communicative” forms of knowledge (cf. Mannheim 1964, 1980; Bohnsack 2006).

One of the most influential sociological perspectives on tacit knowledge has been inspired by Pierre Bourdieu. With the notion of habitus Bourdieu aimed at an empirical reconstruction of the embodiment of tacit knowledge and thereby stressed that social structures are implicitly present in the bodies of individuals, which at the same time unconsciously reproduce these very structures through their practical behavior. Against the background of Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” (1977) on the one hand and the philosophical conceptualizations of tacit knowledge on the other, the sociological perspective gained momentum in the 1990s in the form of the so-called “practice turn”

1 | For an overview of the current debate on tacit knowledge see Gascoigne/Thornton (2013) and the edited volume by Loenhoff (2012b).

(cf. Turner 1994; Schatzki 1996; Schatzki/Knorr Cetina/von Savigny 2001; cf. also the interview with Schatzki in this volume). By focusing on the relevance of tacit knowledge as a resource for the creative handling of all kinds of situations, practice theory can be understood as drawing on pragmatism while at the same time integrating insights from contemporary social theories (cf. Hubrich's paper in this volume). Building, among others, on Bourdieu's theory of practice, Loïc Wacquant proposes a "sociology of flesh and blood" that acknowledges the entanglement of "body, mind, activity, and world" (cf. his contribution to the present volume).

The short overview of the history of the concept demonstrates that tacit knowledge is not only an epistemological problem but also points to basic aspects of social reality. It is therefore not surprising that starting in the 1980s and 1990s the issue has – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – been taken up by ever more disciplines: In anthropology, Clifford Geertz (cf. 1983, 1992) introduced the concept of "local knowledge" to criticize the search for a universal and generalizable knowledge about "all societies" (1992: 131);² in performance studies, Diana Taylor has introduced the terms "archive" and "repertoire" to differentiate between "supposedly enduring materials" and "embodied practice/knowledge," and has argued for taking the latter seriously as a form of valid knowledge (2003: 16); in cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson developed a theory of metaphor that reveals the tacit dimension of language and communication (cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 1999; Johnson 1987; cf. also the interview with Johnson and the contributions by Ernst and Koetzing in this volume); in psychology, Arthur S. Reber (cf. 1989, 1993) proposed a theory of "implicit learning" that takes into account the problem of unconscious cognition and explains how learning processes produce tacit knowledge; furthermore, the relevance of tacit knowledge for learning processes is also of interest for pedagogy (cf. Neuweg 1999) as well as organizational behavior and management studies (cf. Sternberg/Horvath 1999).

Actually it is the latter field that has drawn most attention in the discourse on tacit knowledge for quite some time now. In the 1990s, the organizational theorist Ikujiro Nonaka presented a "dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation" (1994), and, together with the business administration scholar Hirotaka Takeuchi, published a book about the "knowledge-creating company" (1995) which explained the global success of Japanese companies basically by their ability to transform certain forms of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. The theoretical core of these studies is the so-called SECI-Model, which identifies four modes of "knowledge conversion:"¹ 1. Socialization (tacit to tacit),

2 | The idea that all knowledge is local also points to the problem of intercultural communication, an issue that is systematically related to the problem of tacit knowledge (cf. Loenhoff 2011).

2. Externalization (tacit to explicit), 3. Combination (explicit to explicit), and 4. Internalization (explicit to tacit). This model – even if it does not adequately reflect the complexities of tacit knowledge as laid out by Polanyi and others – triggered a whole field of academic research (cf. Argyris 1999; von Krogh/Ichijo/Nonaka 2000; Lam 2000; Nonaka/von Krogh 2009) as well as applications in organizational practice, which shows that the study of tacit knowledge can also be quite application oriented.

The intuition that tacit knowledge is not only of theoretical but also of practical relevance is not restricted to the fields of education, professionalization, business, and knowledge management. In her recent book *Knowing Otherwise* (2011), Alexis Shotwell also conceives of “implicit understanding,” as she calls it, as a political and emancipatory resource:

I argue that the implicit is central to the project of creating political consciousness in a transformative mode. Without being able to think and talk, to feel and move through various forms of implicit understanding, we are not able to work explicitly with and on our implicit, affective, tacit, and embodied experience of the world. If such work is central to the political transformations individuals experience, it is equally central to broader political change. (xxi)

Drawing attention to the political dimension of the tacit, Shotwell reminds us not only that tacit knowledge can stabilize oppressive forces and normative orders (including stereotypes, prejudices, etc.) but that it also has the potential to further emancipatory agendas and social change. She points us to the political dimension of the (academic) discourse on tacit knowledge – what is at stake in labeling some forms of knowledge explicit and others tacit or implicit? How are the boundaries negotiated between those forms of knowledge that are considered to be ‘scholarly’ and those that are delegitimized, excluded, or dismissed? Her contribution to this volume zooms in on Implicit Association Tests to discuss issues of race, racism, racial formation, and implicit understanding. In a recent article titled “‘Race,’ Racism, and Tacit Knowing,” Heike Paul (2014) argues that several recent publications in African American studies and critical race studies have dealt with the effects of tacit knowledge and attempted to move beyond the representational logic of race/racism without explicitly using the term/concept of tacit knowledge. She not only proposes to connect these fields of inquiry but also points toward the cultural specificity of tacit knowledge. Her essay in this volume further links the research on tacit knowledge with the recent scholarship on ‘public feeling’ and examines US-American discourses on (un-)happiness.

Such interventions serve as a reminder that intellectual traditions that do not explicitly refer to tacit knowledge may nevertheless examine corresponding phenomena and that, furthermore, we have to pay close attention to the het-

erogeneous forms of individual and collective tacit knowledge, which of course are not mutually exclusive. To locate the ‘tacit’ in human subjects and their bodies does not mean to deny its social and cultural character: Tacit knowledge can be “embodied” and “socially shared” at the same time (cf. Loenhoff in this volume). Furthermore, we can assume that the tacit plays a crucial role in the affective dimension of the social. Moods and atmospheres affectively ground personal as well as social approaches to the world (cf. Schützeichel in this volume). Finally, since most authors agree upon the fact that tacit knowledge is ‘collective’ and thus at least co-determined by social structures, the question arises of how to deal with tacit knowledge in a differentiated society (cf. Kaldewey in this volume). In a complex society, tacit knowledge does not simply mirror a diffuse ultimate category of ‘culture’ or of ‘knowledge-power’ but rather is itself differentiated, that is, unequally distributed among cultural milieus in regard to class, race, gender, age, etc., as well as among its functional subsystems like politics, the economy, science, religion, or the arts.

To summarize: In the last decades, the discourse on tacit knowledge has become more interdisciplinary, more heterogeneous, and more practical. The wealth of concepts and analytical approaches that have been proposed no longer allow using the same definition of tacit knowledge in each and every context. This need not be a problem; however, it is important to keep in mind that the ‘tacit’ points to a wide semantic field of meanings rather than to a concept with a widely agreed-upon, unequivocal definition. Today, tacit knowledge does not function primarily as an analytical term but rather as a boundary object, that is, “an analytic object of those scientific objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds [...] and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” (Star/Griesemer 1989: 393). Such boundary objects “are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites;” although they have “different meanings in different social worlds,” their structure remains “recognizable,” and they may serve as “a means of translation” (ibid.). In other words, if we renounce the philosophical ideal of exact and universalist definitions, we are able to conceive of tacit knowledge as something that transgresses disciplinary boundaries as well as the boundaries between the academe and everyday life.

Even as the contributions in this volume acknowledge and build on the long tradition of philosophical and epistemological approaches to tacit knowledge, they are more concerned with recent and new developments in the research on the ‘tacit’ in different disciplines. Consequently they do not rely on a unifying definition of ‘tacit knowledge’ but instead showcase a range of possible understandings that can help explore a diverse spectrum of topics. They reflect theoretical debates (Part I: Loenhoff, Hubrich, Schützeichel, Kaldewey) and methodological challenges (Part II: Renn, Antony, Shotwell), but also demon-

strate how ‘tacit knowledge’ can be used in fields such as cultural studies, literary studies, media studies, or theology in order to open up new venues of inquiry in these disciplines (Part III: Paul, Koetzing, Ernst, Schoberth). Each part moreover is complemented by an interview with a well-known expert in the respective field (Part I: Theodore Schatzki, Part II: Loïc Wacquant, Part III: Mark Johnson).

Instead of a neat working definition of ‘tacit knowledge’ we would like to offer at this point some basic premises which inform most of the essays collected here, as well as additional information on the institutional context of this publication which might be useful for the reader to navigate through the individual chapters.

Tacit knowledge or implicit understanding can very generally be differentiated into ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms, depending on the degree of accessibility and explicability. Whereas weak forms of tacit knowledge can, at least principally, be articulated explicitly, strong versions of tacit knowledge cannot. However, strong tacit knowledge becomes visible and thus explicates itself in bodily acts. But even a weak notion of tacit knowledge rests on a paradox: If we translate a ‘knowing how’ into a propositional ‘knowing that,’ the ‘knowing how’ is no longer what it used to be: a practical ability or a doing, operating in the background. By being translated into explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge is transformed; a one-to-one representation of tacit knowledge is never possible. To put it differently: There is a difference between knowing how it is to have know-how and giving a description of know-how. This is the reason why many authors assume that there cannot be any explicit knowledge without tacit knowledge. A related problem is discussed by Polanyi (1966): To analyze perception (e.g., recognizing a face), he argues, we have to distinguish between focal awareness (the face) and subsidiary awareness (the nose, the eyes, the chin, etc.). Without subsidiary awareness focal awareness is impossible, and vice versa. Ultimately, every perception and action relies on this ‘From-To’ structure of knowledge. However, the distinction between focal and subsidiary elements of perception does not correspond to the distinction between strong and weak forms of tacit knowledge. The subsidiary may or may not be articulated – in either case, it is always present. Charles Taylor (1995: 170) put it this way: “Rather than representations being the primary locus of understanding, they are only islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp of the world.”

It is this spectrum that we want to draw attention to in the subtitle of our volume: The contributions not only locate tacit knowledge somewhere between explication and embodiment but also critically interrogate this spectrum and inquire into the specific forms that the explication and/or embodiment of knowledge take. In addition to this general differentiation, two typologies in particular inform many of the essays collected here and have proven to be helpful to systematize the ‘tacit.’ Both take recourse to Polanyi’s work and both ac-

count for strong as well as weak forms of tacit knowledge. Harry Collins (2010) proposes a distinction between three types:

1. “relational tacit knowledge,” i.e. a weak form of tacit knowledge which “is tacit because of the contingencies of human relationships, history, tradition and logistics” (98),
2. “somatic tacit knowledge,” i.e. an intermediate form of tacit knowledge which is embodied and tacit due to our “bodily limits” (101), and
3. “collective tacit knowledge,” i.e. a strong form of tacit knowledge which is “located in society” (138).

While Collins claims that in order to approach tacit knowledge and the reasons for its ‘tacitness’ systematically, we first have to develop an understanding of the ‘explicit’ (cf. 2010: 1), Alexis Shotwell, in contrast, tries to shift the focus away from the “inadequate” dichotomies between explicit and tacit or propositional and non-propositional knowledge (2011: xi). Instead, she differentiates between four types of “implicit understanding” (ibid. xi-xii), which are nonetheless intricately intertwined (cf. also her contribution to this volume):

1. “practical, skill-based knowledge,” i.e. “‘know-how’ developed through practice [...] like [...] being able to swim,”
2. “somatic or bodily knowing,” i.e. “knowledge people have at the intersection of their bodily and conceptual systems,” which is “bodily and social, and thus [...] always political,”
3. “potentially propositional but currently implicit knowledge,” i.e. knowledge that can be made explicit and “put into words but is not, now, in that form,” and
4. “affective or emotional understanding” that refers to a kind of knowledge which is “not fully or generally propositional or considered a kind of knowledge,” i.e. “non-propositional but energetic and moving feelings that texture and tone our experience.”

What all these examples have in common is that tacit knowledge, be it explicated or not, makes something else possible: an immediate presence. The program of the Erlangen research group “Presence and Tacit Knowledge” follows the assumption that there is an intrinsic connection between tacit knowledge and phenomena of presence, i.e. situations of spatial and temporal conspicuousness which are perceived non-reflexively (cf. Ernst/Paul 2013). Presence can either be perceived as extra-ordinary (e.g., in the realm of the arts, media events, festivals, performances, etc.) or remain largely unnoticed due to its ordinary and everyday character. In both cases, presence is not based on propositions or explicit knowledge, and thus necessarily has an implicit dimension. Presence presupposes tacit knowledge, and tacit knowledge shows itself through presence/phe-

nomena of presence. Polanyi's argument that tacit knowledge is embedded in a 'From-To' structure is of help here: presence comes into our focal perception from subsidiary tacit knowledge that, in most cases, remains unnoticed and unobserved. Thus, tacit knowledge explicates itself in situations of presence. This explication is normally non-propositional and based on performances and translations rather than on representations. Most dimensions of tacit knowledge are socially acquired and shared and hence are culturally specific. This is the reason why this volume assembles a range of analyses of culturally specific practices where tacit knowledge constitutes phenomena of presence: in Christian faith (Schoberth), in film metaphors (Ernst), in literature's use of figurative speech (Koetzing), or in public feelings (Paul).

Taken together, the essays in this volume cover a range of crucial aspects of the 'tacit' and shed new light on the presentifications of tacit knowledge, the processes and methods by which it is translated into explicit knowledge, and its various appearances in theories, cultural practices, and social interactions.

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