Phenomenology of embodied implicit and narrative knowing

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Abstract

Purpose – Seeks to argue for a phenomenology of embodied implicit and narrative knowing in organizations and to show the significance of experiential dimensions of implicit and narrative knowing and their mutual interrelations in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – For this the advanced phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty will be used as a framework for clarifying the relational status of tacit, implicit and narrative knowing and their embedment.

Findings – Implicit and narrative processes of knowing are inherently linked. Moreover, both forms of knowing in organizations and its implications can be integrated in a Con-Text.

Practical implications – Some limitations and practical implications will be discussed critically. In conclusion some perspectives of further phenomenological research on embodied implicit and narrative knowing in organizations are presented.

Originality/value – This approach contributes to a processual, non-reductionist and relational understanding of knowing and offers critical and practical perspectives for creative and transformative processes in organizations, bridging the gap between theory and practice. It provides innovative perspectives with regard to the interrelation of embodied and narrative knowing in organizations.

Keywords Narratives, Phenomenology

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

There is widespread agreement in the discourses on and practices of knowledge management that implicit and narrative knowledge are important phenomena. Implicit knowledge is seen as fundamental to all human knowing (Polanyi, 1958) and for knowledge management in particular (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Baumard, 1999). It has been argued that a large portion of the knowledge required for executing organizational activities and processes is implicit (Lubit, 2001; Spender, 1996). Correspondingly also narratives and storytelling have been considered as an essential part of organizational life and its everyday communication (Boje, 1995; Gabriel, 1995; Czarniawska, 1998). Accordingly the narrative side of organizations has emerged as a prominent topic in the knowledge discourse and more practically in knowledge management (Patriotta, 2003, 2004; Snowden, 2000). In particular stories have been investigated in the knowledge management literature as one of the ways in which knowledge might be transferred, shared and processed in organizational settings (Wensley, 1998; Denning, 2000; Ball and Ragsdell, 2003).

However the understanding and interpretation of both processes vary, in terms of how they are constituted, levels at which they manifest, as well as status of explication and possibilities of usage. Moreover, the relation between both forms of knowledge is disputed and somewhat under-researched. Conventionally tacit and narrative knowing seem incompatible and categorically different. This is due to paradigmatic and praxeological reasons of understanding, approaching and operationalizing knowledge. Accordingly, the
discourse on and practice application of knowledge management uses a specific set of meanings and interpretation of knowledge. In most studies on knowledge management, knowledge is seen as being a stable and somewhat fixed entity “contained” within individuals or an organizational knowledge base. This understanding is based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that are highly problematic but rarely explicitly addressed in the knowledge management discourse. Resource-based views and functionalist, representativistic and reifying approaches are missing or distorting the process of tacit, implicit and narrative knowing itself. By applying ill-conceived categories, insufficient entitative modelling one-sided codifying and resource or universalizing orientation the influence of life-worldly practices and contexts are underestimated. What is needed instead of such reductionistic approaches and molecular forms and linear succession of data or information is a processual, non-reductionist and relational understanding of knowledge (Styhre, 2003, 2004) or better knowing (Choo, 1998), which make the knowledge management theory and practice better equipped when examining and managing organizations.

The following is an attempt at discussing the possibilities of extending such an understanding of knowing and a corresponding knowledge management by offering a phenomenologically based processual perspective on implicit and narrative knowing. Phenomenology, in particular the advanced phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty offers a framework for clarifying the relational status of tacit, implicit and narrative knowing and their embodiment. Phenomenologically, all knowing is realized through embodied acting and experiential processes of enactment. Even more, being embodied is already a way of knowing tacitly and the very base for narrative knowing. However, the body and embodiment has been marginalized as media for organizational practices (Hassard et al., 2000; Casey, 2000, p. 55) and knowledge management. Considering the “absent presence” of the body (Shilling, 1993, p. 19; Leder, 1990), there is a need for a “re-membering” between body, embodiment and knowing in organizations. The very incarnate status of knowing opens the way to a phenomenological investigation and integration of embodied and narrative knowing.

The structure of the paper will be as follows. First a phenomenological approach will be introduced and used for considering the embodied dimensions of implicit knowing as an interrelational event. Next the relevance and role of narrative knowing in organizations will be discussed briefly and phenomenologically interpreted. Afterwards, an integrative exploration of both forms of knowing will be offered. For this a hermeneutic interpretation of what will be called “Con- + -Text” tries to understand how members of organizations are entangled in implicit and narrative knowing. Finally the article outlines critically some limitations as well as practical and methodological implications. By concluding some perspectives of further phenomenological research on embodied implicit and narrative knowing in organizations are presented.

Phenomenology of embodied implicit knowing in organizations

From a phenomenological perspective, all those involved in their “life-world” (Husserl, 1970; Schütz and Luckmann, 1989) are first and foremost embodied beings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Being embodied is already a way of knowing through “lived situations” and its encounters. Within this situatedness, the “living body” mediates between “internal” and “external” or “subjective” and “objective” experience and meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xii). As embodied beings, we are both a part of the world and coextensive with it, constituting but also constituted (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 453). This implies that we can never experience and know about things or encounters independent of our lived experiences as bodily-engaged beings. We find the life-world meaningful primarily with respect to the ways in which we act within it and which acts upon us. Thus, “embodiment” does not simply mean “physical manifestation.” Rather, it means being grounded in everyday, mundane experience and being inherently connected to our environment in an ongoing interrelation. Through their perceptual selves the “subjects” of the organizing processes are situated in their environment in a tactile, visual, olfactory or auditory way. Whatever they think, feel or do, they are exposed to a synchronised field of inter-related
senses (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 207), in the midst of a world of touch, sight, smell, and sound. It is through the body that the agents of the organizational process directly reach their perceived and handled “objects” and relations at work. Moreover, members of organizations “know” while being situated spontaneously and pre-reflectively, in accordance with their bodies. Therefore the very embodiment is the relational base for any knowing and meaning processes. Without the bodily perceived sense of the situation we would not know where we are or what we are learning nor to communicate about it. In this way, our bodies “are” our situation, they “do” our living (Gendlin, 1992) and organize our knowing. A phenomenological understanding takes these body- and sense-related contacts and embodied correlations into consideration as the constitutive base for knowing and also narrative processes as medium of expressing and sharing tacit knowing.

In order to approach knowing processes, they can be understood as “embodied intentions” and responsive practices. Both intentionality and responsiveness are important “living forms” of practice as an inter-play of cognitive, emotional and voluntional processes. All those involved in the organization process always encounter perceived realities through some intentional perspective. With an intentionality of the bodily consciousness the agent within the sphere of knowing does not feels only “I think”, but also “I can” or “I relate to” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 84; MacMurray, 1957). In other words the atmosphere within knowing takes places is not only what people think about it, but primarily what they “live through” with their “operative intentionality” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xviii). The operative or primordial intentionality refers to a pre-predicative experience as basis for all human behavior. It represents a “spontaneous organization” of experience that precedes the subject’s active synthesis. This implies that the “I can” precedes and conditions the possibility of the “I know” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 137). With this understanding of embodied practical action, there is a close link between what is aimed and what is given, between intention and knowing situations. As living bodies of knowing these respond to meaningful questions, problems or claims posed to someone through embodied and situational conditions and contexts, in which s/he as embodied being itself takes part. Therefore, multiple knowing processes and it contents are always realized in embodied every-day practices, with its different local patterns of possibilities and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) in ongoing relations and situated demands, which may cross all levels, e.g. individual, collective, organizational. The practical intentionality of our embodied actions and the perceptions involved, are largely habitual; learnt through enculturation, imitation, and responsiveness within a specific environment and to a community. This implies that to participate in a practice is to learn the “logic” of that practice, kept within a habitus, which produces historical anchors and ensures the correctness of practices and their constancy over time more reliably than formal and explicit rules ever can. The embodied habitual act of knowing is a practice consisting of skill acquisition and skilful performance (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980) that makes up much of our everyday activities (Dreyfus, 1996). Embodied habitual knowledge and learning are like a non-conceptual, pre-linguistic “silent practice” that is implicit in actions. However, this habituality is far from being merely a mechanistic or behavioral propensity to pursue a certain line of action. Habitual modes of being are constantly being altered. They are far more akin to a competence or a “flexible skill, a power of action and reaction (Crossley, 1994, p. 12), which can be mobilized under different conditions to achieve different effects (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 143). With the possibility to modify modes of the embodied knowing practice it allows that the hardened understandings of the practical field become free for revision. With this opening for a re-evaluation, possibly new “strategies” of engagement can be realized. Such kind of re-created practice relates to an enfolding life-world constituted and shared within “inter-relations” with the co-present others. In this way practice is a social creation and negotiation of meaning in which knowing is an emergent, responsive and emotion-related process (Calzada, 1993; Mazis, 1993).

Knowing as an inter-relational process

The outlined phenomenological framework of embodiment can be used for a deeper understanding of knowing in organizations to capture a sense of “phenomenological presence”. That is, the way that implicit knowing arise from a direct and engaged
participation in the embodied perceived world. Understanding embodiment as constitutive and experiential medium for any form of tacit and implicit knowing explains its characteristics much discussed in knowledge management studies. Tacit and implicit knowledge has been characterised as highly personal (Polanyi, 1969; Stenmark, 2001; Meso and Smith, 2000; Vincenti, 1990; Raghuram, 1996; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Gore and Gore, 1999; Wagner and Sternberg, 1985; Nonaka and Konno, 1998) and obtained by experience (Polanyi, 1958; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Augier and Vendelo, 1999; Wagner and Sternberg, 1985). Tacit and implicit knowledge indicates a personal skill or capability, something individuals can rely on in everyday life without being aware of it, let alone understanding it. As tacit knowledge is a bodily competence; already Polanyi calls it “embodied knowledge” (Polanyi, 1966, 1969). But not only do we “know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4) with respect to our pre-comprehension of phenomena, but also we are immersed in an embodied world of experience in which the lived is always greater than the known (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). That is, life both precedes and exceeds our very effort to grasp it. Accordingly, all pre-positional and tacit knowledge of reality is based on daily dealings e.g. within a “in-corporate” environment of organizing. Therefore tacit knowledge and implicit knowing is not a “resource” but always a process of knowing and acting. It is an embodied knowledge-in-use, a capacity to act, as an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted in everyday practice (Orlikowski, 2002, p. 252).

Thus, the tacit and implicit knowing view concerns knowing, not in the sense of storage places and their contents, but as performing processes (e.g. perception, judgment, action, thought, discernment, contrivance) underlying all human dispositions and also all explicit knowledge. Deprived of their tacit coefficients, all spoken or written words would be meaningless. That is explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied to be knowledge at all. Such “act”-notion of implicit knowing lays focus on the capacity to mobilize our beliefs and values in action, cognitively, emotionally and practically. With this, a phenomenology of implicit knowledge offers a base for a post-dualistic, inter-relational understanding of knowing; that is as a relational event, breaking with logo-centric interpretation of knowledge and its management. A relational paradigm finds its theoretical underpinnings in social constructionism (Schütz, 1972; Berger and Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1994; Harré, 1986; Shotter, 1993) and advanced phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964, 1969). This combination allows, to consider not only that any understanding of reality is always mediated by historically and culturally situated, social inter-actions respectively interpretations (Gergen, 1994, p. 49), but to think about them also as embodied practices, which occur in immediate, spontaneous ways of experiential dimensions and mutual responding. Accordingly relational selves and processes are not only as discursively constructed de-differentiated and signifying “beings” or abstract “object” of power and semiotics. But they need to be integrated their “material” and sensory, fleshly bodiliness and existential immediacy. “Relating” itself is a “reality-constituting practice” (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p. 27) in which shared understandings are developed, negotiated, thus “socially constructed” but always between participants with their embodied experiences. This relational reality is characterized by ongoing, local processes (Parker, 1992) that include non-linguistic (e.g. gestures, “objects”, documents etc.), linguistic and narrative processes (e.g. conversations, stories, rumours etc) as well as contextual dimensions. A relational approach criticizes an entitative discourses with its subject-object relations, its reliance and emphasis on language as representation, and its centring of a singular, and in some degree knowable, real world (Hosking and Morley, 1991; Hosking et al., 1995). It is critical concerning a retained Cartesian duality of a separate inner and external nature, mind and world and tries to overcome a “possessive individualism” (Sampson, 1993), by which knowledge is seen as an identifiable entity sui generis based on the individual and made objectively measurable. Alternatively, with a relational intelligibility in place we can shift our attention from what is “contained” within individuals or an “organizational knowledge base” to what transpires between people (Sampson, 1993). With this, knowing becomes factually based on embodied social-relational processes that is joint or dialogically structured activities; as a kind of responsive action (Shotter, 1984, 1995; Stacey, 2000b, 2001). As an ongoing event of relating, knowing develops out of a complex set of inter-actions and
“inter-passion” by which feelings, cognitions and meanings are continually created, re-created, put in question and re-negotiated through a weaved network of individual and social inter-relations. From such a relational perspective, organizations are dynamic constellations of relationships among forces (Hosking et al., 1995; Gergen, 1994). Accordingly, organizational structures and knowing processes are not substantively fixed, but rather a shifting cluster of variable elements throughout a decentred, configured mesh (Meyer et al., 1993) within a space between (Bradbury and Lichtenstein, 2000).

Relationality provides a decentred perspective on knowledge. The constituencies of knowing are dispersed with dynamic sets of relations. Therefore knowledge is created and re-produced within powerful historical, embodied, emotional and social relations. For a relational understanding the “knower” participates (with-)in the known. She/he relates and resonates experientially to what and how s/he knows in embodied, co-presentational and practical ways in the concretized social world of every-day life (Reason, 1994). A relational approach, allows overcoming the inherent problems and limits of a mechanistic and essentialistic perspective of knowledge and its management (Stacey, 2000a, b, 2001; Stacey et al., 2001). What the relationality paradigm encourages us to do instead is to describe inter-connections and processes through which the world of organizing and knowing are experienced in a continual state of becoming (Ranson et al., 1980; Chia, 1996). Even more it is only becoming useful in a social, cont-textual and holistic setting. Thus, knowing is embedded and entangled in social practices, interactions, and is therefore distributed and disperse. This responds to various critiques that have been mounted of knowledge management approaches on the grounds that they ignore the social architecture of knowledge exchange within organizations (Hansen et al., 1999). Being lucid and emergent, knowledge originates and develops out of an in-between of embodied practices and systems of signification. The methodological advantages of such a relational constructionist perspective are that it avoids the problem of how to bridge individual, collective, and organizational levels of knowing and that it bridges theoretical constructs and practical undertakings. With recognizing the primacy of relational processes these become media, in which knowing, learning and identities are continuously created and changed in the course of being practised.

As the relational reality of knowing is characterized by ongoing, local processes (Parker, 1992) that include non-linguistic (e.g. gestures, “objects”, documents etc.) and linguistic processes, also narrative knowing has to be taken into account as well as contextual dimensions. Before showing phenomenologically how embodied implicit and narrative knowing is interrelated, first some basic ideas about the narrative sides in organizations will be outlined briefly.

**Narrative knowing in organizations**

Despite that narratives are ubiquitous symbol-systems that are prevalent and in use in all organizations (Martin, 1982), the significance of narrative knowing has long been a neglected aspect in organizational studies (Orr, 1987, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1991, 1996; Phillips, 1995; Boyce, 1996). More recently, the narrative side of organizations has emerged as a prominent topic in the in organization studies (Gabriel, 1995, 2000,; 2004; Czarniawska, 1998; Wilkins, 1984) and knowledge discourse as well in knowledge management (Patriotta, 2003; Snowden, 2000). They have been investigated as the basic
organizing principle of how perspective making and perspective taking occurs within a community of knowing (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995). Narration is seen as a central feature of the modus operandi of informal communities-of-practice, reflecting the complex social web within which work takes place (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

Various influences, functions and the relevance of narrations in developing, distributing and enhancing organizational knowledge and knowing have been investigated. Narrative knowing influence for example the behaviors, thoughts and emotions and communication of embodied members of organizations by creating mental or imagined pictures and identities that shapes the orientation of everyday-life. As “social maps” (Wilkins, 1978, 1984), they chart the way and give direction and meaning to what goes on, mediating a sense of history and future but also current identities. In this way, narratives that members create are one symbolic means through which they negotiate, share and contest their perceptions of their own and the organization’s identity. Through narratives, members convey what an organization was, is and wants to become as well as how it conducts its activities. The ways in which members engage and enact narratives on the job influences both the enabling and constraining of innovation, solving problems and taking coordinated action (Bartel and Garud, 2003). As cultural storehouses for organizational intelligence (Kreps, 1989), narratives contract complexity by providing organization members with pertinent information and common explanations and interpretations for individual and collective sense making (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, narratives functions besides to “embody” new members (Brown and Duguid, 1991) and facilitating member bonding also to solve problems (Mitroff and Kimlmann, 1976) by giving common symbolic frames of reference. By generating a revived belief they can support change processes and encourage behavioral and attitudinal mind shifts (Brown, 1995). Living Narratives (Ochs and Capps, 2001) focus on ordinary social exchanges – like face-to-face, everyday, conversations – in which interlocutors build accounts of life events, rather than on polished narrative performances. In addition to being a communicative practice, a narrative is a medium that one lives in, through, or by means of. Therefore it is a constant and ineliminable factor in the process by which humans establish and maintain their individual and social life manifested in an organizational culture (Martin et al., 1983), providing informal networking and connection among organization members.

Narrative knowing is enacted in the moment of being told, its existence is virtual its status provisional (Orlikoswki, 2002, pp. 252-3). Therefore, narratives are dynamic in character, and are unconsciously and consciously reshaped in the telling process. Stories are imprinted by the background of the storytellers, their cognitions, values, and emotions (Dyer, 1983; Van Buskirk and McGrath, 1992) and evoke those to listeners. Accordingly stories are basically interactive; they are actualized and adapted in the context of telling and listening. During “sharing” of narrative a story might invite the listener to re-tell it, and listening to a story might prompt the listener to tell a story of his/her own, either as an embellishment of the original story, or as a result of being prompted by an aspect of the original story acting as a trigger to the new story; in this way, “new” knowledge might be created, as well as being transferred.

Linking embodied implicit and narrative knowing

For preparing the bridge between implicit and narrative knowing, the inherent relationship between these two modes needs to be clarified. On the one hand, the embodied self finds herself always already situated in a world of signs, symbols, and communication. That is bodily knowing is always already participating in a linguistic world and a cultural world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 197). Embodied practices of knowing are enmeshed through the mediation of artefacts – objects and symbols, including language – through which knowers extend themselves in the world and which, in turn, re-form their bodily movements and perceptions. On the other hand, phenomenologically, language is already fundamentally an embodied medium and event of expression, a signified social enactment. As speaking, expressing and communicating are realized in the living present, the use of language is a kind of “embodied language” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 184.; 1964, p. 91). As the spoken word is a performance of thought and a gesture, language can be interpreted as an elaboration of an embodied sign system. This implies that the gesture is the most basic form
of communication, from which linguistic communication is a development. Embodied, creative linguistic gesticulations expressed in narratives are living from what has already been experienced and said, what is, as yet unarticulated and what will be possibly expressed as meaning, proceeding continually in transformation and metamorphosis (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 78). The ways in which the “thinking bodies” (Burkitt, 1999) interact with their environment defines the parameters by which thought and language can function: Speaking inherently presupposes certain embodied and shared perceptual and cognitive facilities.

Based on the outlined phenomenological and relational understanding, it is possible to link up implicit and narrative knowing. Taking speech and narratives as embodied symbolic modes, narrative knowing can be interpreted as expressive media for transferring implicit knowledge, indirectly. Conventionally tacit and narrative knowing seem incompatible and categorically different. Due to substantial methodological differences they can not be equated. Tacit and implicit knowing refers to all those aspects of individual proficiency which are non-verbal in nature and therefore not explicable or expressible. Due to its “unformalisable” character the limitations of explication of this kind of knowledge have been discussed widely. As it cannot be expressed in written or verbal form it is by definition non-verbal, inarticulable, unconscious, or ineffable (Patel et al., 1999, p. 76; Collins, 2001a, p. 72; 2001b, p. 108; Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001, pp. 812-3; Herbig and Büssing, 2003, p. 167; Tsoukas, 2003). Thus it is difficult or even impossible to be expressed (Polanyi, 1958, 1966; Boisot, 1995; Lubit, 2001; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Wagner, 1987; Cowan et al., 2000) or to diffuse and share (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Bennett and Gabriel, 1999; Leonard and Sensiper, 1998; Zack, 1999; Holtschouste, 1998). It can only be actualized within actions and can never be removed in any way from an actor’s context (Cook and Brown, 1999, p. 387), which is the way it is always related to practicality (Wagner and Sternberg, 1986; Cruise O’Brien, 1995; Noteboom et al., 1992).

Although tacit and implicit knowing cannot be explicated fully, phenomenologically it can be shared indirectly through expressed ways of narratives. This connection is based on a correspondence between implicit knowing as non-verbal signing process within a pre-linguistic mode and narrative knowing as an expressed verbal activity. Accordingly, from phenomenological perspective, narratives can become media for expressing, processing and sharing contents, structures and experience of implicit “knowing-acting”. Like implicit knowing also narrative knowing evolves and develops from events, extraordinary situations, successes and failures, and further experiences. With this, tacit knowledge and implicit knowing are indirectly shared through highly interactive conversation, storytelling and shared experiences (Zack, 1999, p. 46). In this way narrations contribute to distributing effectively un-codified knowledge and non-analytic problem-solving competences (Swap, 2001; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999). Narratives offer “thick descriptions” of contexts thereby providing actors a much more adequate understanding of the complex nature of practical situations (Geertz, 1993; Orr, 1990, 1996). With this, it can build the basis for actionable knowing particularly for complex thinking and complex practice (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001).

Based on embodied knowing, narratives not only have an inherent capability to capture rich implicit knowledge, they are carriers and transmitters of implicit knowing. Using narrative patterns and narrative knowing offers a powerful approach for disclosing, “storing” and transferring explicit and implicit knowing across time and space (Snowden, 2002). In particularly story-telling is a medium for transferring of implicit knowledge. Stories access and leverage the knowledge already accumulated and implicitly available in the telling or listening agent rather than trying to construct complex cognitive structures piecemeal from the “bottom up”. Stories allow to access, stimulate and re-arrange pre-existing implicit knowledge. Thus stories, serve to give voice to the experience of embodied beings. When experts share stories with novices they realise inadvertent self-disclosures. That is they are not only narrating events that may prepare novices to cope with future similar events. Perhaps just as importantly, they are communicating tacit knowledge about their perceptions, feelings, interpretations, values, strategies etc. in rich and meaningful ways.
Each story conveys knowledge, not only about one or more “subject matters” but also knowledge about the teller, her background and the common situation. In this way stories communicate always something of and about the embodied context in which the narration is taking place. Therefore stories convey a lot of non-explicit information, emotional knowledge and “meta-knowledge”. As the listeners of stories are not passive recipients of stimuli; they are creating a multidimensional experience. All told what is explicitly presented in a story represents a very small fraction of the total number of related statements that are being activated and manipulated in the receiver and interpreter of stories. A story can communicate complex multi-dimensional ideas, not simply by transmitting information as a message, but by actively involving the listeners in co-creating that idea. Therefore, what is inferred via narratives is far greater than what is stated explicitly. The amount and quality of knowledge that is activated in the embodied mind of the listener or reader is far greater than the relatively small amount and quality of information that is explicitly stated in the story. Thus, from a few narrated statements, many inferences can be made. Although implicit knowing and learning of background information – that is not explicitly presented – occurs at a significantly slower rate than explicitly presented information, the total volume and learning of implicit material is much greater than the explicit material (Landauer and Dumais, 1997). Furthermore, as a story is told and retold, it changes, and so the knowledge embodied in it is constantly being developed and built on. In this transfer of implicit knowledge redundancy, ambiguity and vagueness can be of an advantage. They can be used as resources to help communicate implicit knowledge appropriately. That is because it allows listeners to take redundant, ambiguous and vague statements and fill in their own implicit understanding and map into what feels right for their own embodied interpretation and context. The narrative transfer of implicit knowing and interplay between both needs to be examined closely in terms of how it is incorporated into con- + -textual emplotted practices in organizations.

**Con- + -Texts of implicit and narrative knowing in organizations**

Even as lived experiences and living knowing are highly elusive, always more immediate, more enigmatic, more complex, more ambiguous than any approach can do justice, what phenomenological research can do is to evoke integrative understandings by investigating the con- + -Texts in which implicit and narrative knowing takes place. Although conceptually different, ontologically embodied implicit and narrative knowing are both processed within a con- + -textual practice. On the base of the obtained inter-relational, embodied understanding of knowing the following focuses on how organizational member are entangled in con-texts as specific emplotments. Implicit and narrative knowing in organizations refers to pragmatic activities that are always embodied in a historical and social “con- + Text” that gives structure and meaning to what is being known and done or not.

For a con- + -Text there is no separation between language and the world, as it is like an intermediating “milieu”. Moreover, the somatic and semantic con- + -textual realms allow integrating the very difference of language and world itself and other very differences as well. “Con- + -Texts” comprise of embodied, emotional and socio-cultural inter-relations (“con-textere”=joining together) in all their layered complexity and dynamics. Accordingly, con- + -Textual knowing is specific to time, place, sequence and timing, positions and relationships within personal relationships and communities of trust and confidence. “Con- + -Textuality” emphasises that it is the relationship between “texts” in a broader sense that is important for implicit and narrative knowing. Such an extended understanding of “text” implies any instance of embodied, affective or communicative acts, gestured, spoken, or written. All of them carry relevance for implicit and narrative knowing and its actors and their “life-forms” (Wittgenstein) of action. With this, a “con- + -textual” understanding of practice includes both the explicit and the implicit knowing, that is what is said and what is left unsaid or is ineffable; what is represented and expressed in narratives and what is not-represent(able): the manifest, expressed and the symbolic as well as the implicit. Accordingly, it comprises also non-linguistic marks, perceived traces and indirect or non-discursive forms of meaningful expressions. Therefore a “con- + -textual” approach
also suggests that meaning is partially a pre-reflexive implicit “characteristic” of “con- + -Texts”. This kind of implicit meaning comes already before conscious intentions and interpretations of any actor, speaker or interpreter and accompanies them continually. Consequently, interpreting “con- + -Texts” is not only a process which merely deciphers textual signs or messages. The interpretative relationship is already implicit in the “con- + -Text” itself, which is being ‘written’ and ‘read’. This again leaves traces, influencing further ‘writing’ and interpretative ‘reading’. Basically, we can never accede to a lived organizational reality without some connection to its con- + -Textuality from its opening and related to its syntagmatic frames of references. With all this, con- + -Texts constitute options of meaning for experiences and are creating communication between individuals and patterns of social relationships. Thus, con- + -Texts of organizations are an all pervading differential networks of “texts” and “inter-texts” embodying the emotions, norms and values according to specific local ontologies. Like a “textile” of traces, the threats of the con- + -Text refer endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces (Derrida, 1979, p. 84). Similar to the deconstructionist’s much misunderstood assertion, one can say: “there is no-outside-con- + -Text”. This does not mean to fall into an idealistic or semiotic pan-Textuality, as con- + -Texts always relate to embodied, sensual and emotional experiential materiality and mundane time.

Although members of organizations usually remain unaware of being always situated within a “con- + -textual” orb, it is always from within such a complexly intertwined sphere that they responsively know and act. In “answer” to the “calls” the embodied situation exerts on them. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows studying and interpreting these organizational “con- + -Texts” and corresponding responsiveness, which can give rise to radically different ways of seeing and “inter-standing” (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994, pp. 1, 8). “Inter-standing” organizations as “quasi-text” or a “text analogue” the embodied implicit and narrative knowing can be made approached by means of hermeneutic interpretation.

By opening the circle of “inter-standing” into an evolving spiral, the hermeneutical process itself is a creative operation unleashing meaning latent in the polysemic storehouse of “con- + -textual” implicit and narrative patterns. In this “con- + -Text” of implicit and narrative knowing, each figuration is open for deconfiguration (“decon- + -Textualization”) and reconfiguration (“recon- + -Textualization”), reflecting the embodied narrative knowers’ and interpreters’ life-situation at a variety of levels. With this, a creation of a new semantic 'pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution becomes possible. By re-structuring and re-ordering somatic and semantic fields, emergent meanings are evoked not previously related and employed in particular “con- + -Texts”. That is, each “con- + -Text” permits a certain actualization of knowing and meaning expressed in the embodied, polysemic treasure chest of the “mantic” and “semantic playground”, sedimented in the emplotted con- + -Text. Therefore, pre-forming con- + -Texts are like open “textures” filled up with sedimentation, memories but also expectations and hopes. Similar as relational “fabrics”, they are interwoven by knitting processes of negotiation of meaning twisted by the mentioned embodied and emotional “threads” and aesthetic patterns (Boje, 1991; Küpers, 2002; O’Connor, 2000).

Limitations and ambivalence

Embodied implicit and narratives knowing and knowledge constitute filtering frames of reference for enacting and interpreting experiences of organizational practice. The power of embodied and storied knowing lies in its capacity to encompass and encircle thinking and feeling about issues and to compel and convince others. In this way implicit and narrative
knowing can also be instrumentalized as a tool for the legitimization of dominant power relationships in organizations, used as ideological forces that privilege some interest over others (Mumby, 1988). Organizations exercise a constraining control over displays of embodied feelings and knowing, e.g. by specifying norms and rules or “emotion management” through neutralizing, buffering, prescribing and normalizing the felt experience and its expression (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, p. 109, 1995). Organizational control of embodied emotional knowing can cause various negative effects, like dissonance, demotivation and alienation (Higgins et al., 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Kemper, 1990; Flam, 1990; Conrad and Witte, 1994). With this, emotional knowing can also become a micro-political instrument by energising or de-energising one-self and others (Clark, 1997; Lazega, 1992). Narrative knowing serves at the same time as premises of arguments and persuasive appeals (Weick and Browning, 1986) and as an implicit mechanism of cultural control (Clegg, 1993). While organizational stories and legends are generating commitment and make sense of the organization and shared values, they can be an expression of managerial or stake-holder influence and exert political power and social control (Salaman, 1979; Wilkins, 1978, p. 21, 1983, 1984; Boje et al., 1995). As Witten (1993, p. 100) asserts “narrative is a singularly potent discursive form through which control can be dramatized, because it compels belief while at the same time it shields truth claims from testing and debate”. With this narratives can set forth powerful and persuasive truth claims about unquestionable appropriate behavior and values and thus can become means for manipulation for gaining and retaining power (Agre, 1995; Barker, 1993). This possible misuse of narratives can also be exemplified by the political nature of organizational change and business re-engineering as techniques of social power and persuasion (Fincham, 2000, p. 175). These can be used within a “functional humanism” as staging rituals of transition by discarding old identities, going through the pains of transition, being reborn in a new “pre-formed” identity (Knights and Willmott, 2000). Therefore, attention needs to be given to the dynamics of power by dominant groups and by which lesser heard or dissonant voices and performances made peripheral “insiders” or “outsiders”. Often managers’ voices and staged performances within the organizational context are louder, more articulate and more powerful than others (Hazen, 1993). The challenging task for researchers will be to try to re-construct or tell the stories and voices and latent performances of those that management and organization text and context-Texts, kept or ruled out, ostracized, marginalized or exploited. The concern need to focus on whose culture and meaning are expressed or not in organizational stories. Furthermore, there is a need to inquire which stories in what ways are regressive following a nostalgic path of supposed good and better old days.

With all this, performed narration and storytelling entails a pervading ambivalence: On the one hand storytelling can be oppressive by subordinating employees and adapt all to one “grand narrative” or “grand story”. On the other side narrative practices in organization can be creatively liberating, by showing members that there is always a multiplicity of stories, storytellers, and story performance events (Boje, 1995).

Another limitation concerns the scope and application of implicit and narrative knowing. Both forms of knowing are not always fulfilling needs for specific relevant knowledge efficiently. They are much less predictable media, in their content and process, than other organizational knowledge sources. Often they are not intended to give a definitive, nor sometimes even accurate, account of “what happened”, nor “why it happened”. They do not allow engineering knowledge exchange of a particular sort. With this also the scope for generalizations will be limited. Furthermore not all attempts to transfer (implicit) knowledge in
the form of stories are reasonable. Additionally, well-constructed stories take considerable
time and talent to create and a fair amount of time to listen and to interpret. Narratives can be
an excellent way for communicating tacit knowledge and implicit knowing within a
community of practice or a small trusted group of colleagues (Snowden, 2002, p. 20). But,
trying to leverage the power of narrative knowing in large-scale organizations can be
considerably trickier as issues of trust, decontextualization and unwanted perseverance
come to the fore. Moreover, an effective usage depends on appropriate situation and time.
There may be opportune or unfitting times when the organization is particularly receptive or
deterred to implicit and narrative knowing practices.

Practical implications

As implicit and narrative knowing both are complex inter-relational process they cannot be
simply “organized” or “managed”. This implies that they cannot be designed directly; rather
it can only be designed for, that is facilitated or frustrated. Therefore, antecedent conditions
need to be considered, which are likely to support a culture in which implicit and narrative
knowing can be applied and flourish. The challenge will be to create circumstances and
support relationships that maintain and generate practices of integrative knowing. What is
required is shaping possibilities for developing or upgrading more fulfilling embodied and
narrative experiences and relationships in the every-day life-work. As embodied experiential
forms of implicit and narrative knowing require self-organizing leeway and need to be
intrinsically self-sustaining, it can be problematic to use reward systems as a way to
manipulate behavior. Any form of institutional reward and recognition requires to be adapted
target-specific and situationally to support relevant conditions and activities of embodied
and narrative knowing.

With the relational and phenomenological perspective in mind we can distinguish between
different levels of personal, interpersonal and structural-systemic levels. An integrative
approach requires that interventions and measurements for supporting knowing practices
consider theses spheres and their interrelation. Basically, a knowledge management for
dealing with implicit and narrative knowing requires creating adequate con- + -texts, which
facilitate the constitution, development and practice of knowing. In order to manage implicit
and narrative knowledge, we need to reflect on ways in which organizations can influence,
encourage (or perhaps inhibit) a culture facilitating implicit knowing and storytelling
practices. This concerns both formal and informal conditions. For an informal practice and
flow of implicit and narrative knowing, communities of practice offer various advantages
(Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 2001a; Shaw et al., 1998; Orr, 1990),
particularly if coordinated across communities at the wider organizational level (Brown and
Duguid, 2001a). An integrative “con-text management” accepts and supports those kinds
of practices and helps translating and transferring connections between different
communities of implicit and narrative practices. For this knowledge managers need to
take organizational roles of “translators” or “boundary-spanners” for inter-mediating
between communities and supporting a common understanding (Carlile, 2002) and
“structuring spontaneity” (Brown and Duguid, 2001b). For creating a work place
environment, which enables or is conductive to implicit and narrative knowing practice,
experience-oriented apprenticeship models and dialogical oriented conversation
management (von Krogh, 1996; von Krogh et al., 2000) might be helpful. By integration of
narrative techniques, e.g. oral history databases in advanced decision support systems,
these can be used for innovative strategy formation and implementation, branding and
change management within an ecology of knowledge (Snowden, 1999).

All in all, what an appropriate practice requires is allowing the patterns of individual behavior,
social relations and organizational culture, of implicit and narrative knowing to emerge. That
is creating an overall ecology in which both the patterning processes are facilitated and
managed “in the way a gardener manages a garden, not the way an engineer designs a
machine” (Snowden, 2001). This refers to offering infrastructures and con- + -texts in which
the informal organization and its members can self-organize and self-manage their knowing
in innovative networking and communication (Swan et al., 1999). As knowing can be
interpreted as a local-historical creation, responsive evaluations (Abma, 1996) require
considering the socio-historical context, focusing on what the locals think to be issues. For this storytelling can be regarded as an important way to conduct evaluation processes. In consequence, the evaluation report should include expression of emotions, dialogues, thick descriptions (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show the significance of phenomenology for approaching the experiential dimensions of implicit and narrative knowing and their interrelations in organizations. Both forms of knowing in organizations and its implications have been described as situated and integrated in context. The somatic and semantic contexts of knowing offer a relational and integrative perspective for “inter-standing” knowing as a form of practice embodying individual, emotional, social processes of implicit and narrative knowing and their dynamics. The embedment within contexts shows how knowing is only becoming useful in an inter-relational setting. Thus, knowing is embedded and entangled in complex practices, and is therefore distributed and disperse. This responds to various critiques that have been mounted of knowledge management approaches on the grounds that they ignore the social architecture of knowledge exchange within organizations (Hansen et al., 1999).

Furthermore, some limitations and implications have been discussed. What became evident is that knowing is inherent in and enables contextual living action. Even more, understanding knowing phenomenologically includes not only “bodies of knowledge” but also knowledgeable bodies; not only enacted “knowledge” but also a knowing that is already action, not only situated and contextual narrative “knowledge” but also a knowing that inheres in situations, relations, and narratives in such a way that it may not be recognized as “knowledge”. That is members of organization do not only experience their practice as “knowledge”, but even more experience practice as knowing.

The use of phenomenology could be helpful for further research on research of embodied implicit and narrative knowing. By fostering an investigative attitude of questing for relational and phenomenal ways of knowing in its contextuality, phenomenology offers innovative possibilities for interpreting and improving knowing processes in organizations. Particularly Merleau-Ponty’s advanced phenomenology, with its rejection of modernist version of referentialist-representationalism and critique of empiricist realism and intellectualist idealism (Madison, 1993, p. 113) as well his anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism and concept of reversibilities and (good) ambiguities (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 169) might be useful. With its focus on embodiment and language as living medium, it helps overcoming the cognitive bias and metaphysical logocentrism, prevailing in much knowledge-management research and practice. Such phenomenological approach valorizes experiences “unconstrained everyday talk” (Potter and Edwards, 1993, p. 398) and acting, keeping an openness for the fluidity to meaning that is all too readily reified by the categorical zeal of conventional analysis. With this phenomenology allows to let knowing as lived experiences or expressions be approached from itself in the very way in which these dimension appear. With this, researchers can develop an a-causal, non-reductionistic and non-reifying approach for “inter-standing” implicit and narrative knowing in organizations by creating descriptions of actual experience involved.

Being lucid and emergent, knowing originates and develops out of an in-between of embodied and narrative practices on various levels. The methodological advantages of such a relational perspective are that it avoids the problem of how to bridge individual, collective, and organizational levels of knowing and that it bridges theoretical constructs and

“Knowledge is created and reproduced within powerful historical, embodied, emotional and social relations.”
practical undertakings. Individual, collective and institutional knowing is mutually constituted in the course of being practiced. By recognizing the primacy of relational processes these become media, in which knowing, and also learning and identities are mutually constituted, continuously created and changed in the course of being practiced.

Offering an alternative approach for understanding these neglected, but relevant processes, the outlined phenomenological framework provides a “bedrock” for more rigorous theory building, further analysis and empirical testing. Further research issues may refer to aspects such as the ways in which competing forms of knowing can be synergetically reconciled and what role a “narrativisation of experience” (Mishler, 1995, p. 108), plays in the context of change. Additionally, the role of implicit and narrative knowing for learning (Reilly et al., 1998) and implicit learning in particular (Berry, 1997; Berry and Dienes, 1993; Reber, 1993) may be explored. Another field, to which the outlined approach could be linked, is improvisation (Hatch, 1999; Crossan, 1998; Crossan et al., 1996; Crossan and Sorreniti, 1997; Mirvis, 1998; Weick, 1998; Moormman and Miner, 1998) as embodied action and proactive, creative way for organizations and its members to use implicit and narrative knowing in spontaneous and playful ways. With this aesthetic ways of knowing (Küpers, 2002) present an open research agenda.

All in all the approach as outlined can be used to illustrate, highlight, interpret, deconstruct or re-conceive the experiential, embodied “base” of implicit and narrative knowing processes. Leaving behind the dualistic and reductionistic “flatland ontologies” (Wilber, 2000) and researching the lived experience of knowing is a challenging endeavour. But it can contribute for a more integral “inter-standing” of knowledge management that acknowledges that in practice, the implicit and narrative dimensions to knowledge are inexorably and inextricably interwoven. It is hoped that the paper put in some ideas for such a more comprehensive appreciation of these inter-relational, dimensions of the implicit and narrative knowing process within organizational con-texts.

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Further reading


