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Accessing tacit knowledge: a street-level method

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from a research project aimed at accessing tacit aspects of the practices of social workers engaged in outreach programmes for youth at risk. The article describes key features of the methods aimed at assisting these practitioners voice what the literature variously describes as tacit knowledge and practice wisdom. Following a presentation of the research design for the project and its relation to methods developed in earlier studies of the tacit dimensions of social work, the article describes how Gestalt therapeutic understandings influenced observations of face-to-face encounters between social workers and clients as well as follow-up discussions about these observations. After presenting illustrations of how these took place and summarising key elements of the methodology, the article then briefly discusses how these methods relate to social work practice research influenced by phonetic social science. The article concludes by addressing the limitations and benefits shown by the project's methods in helping social workers research practice as well as voice the tacit dimensions influencing how they think and act.

KEYWORDS

Tacit knowledge; social work practice; Gestalt theory; psychotherapy

Introduction

Michael Polanyi's writings about tacit forms of knowing have stimulated a wealth of books, journal articles and numerous doctoral dissertations. Beginning with the simple claim that '*we know more than we can tell*' (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4), he argued that there exist only two kinds of awareness. *Focal awareness* involves knowing *what to do*: it is explicit and involves carrying out an action, such as chopping down a tree or baking bread. This explicit awareness forms the core of non-tacit knowledge often presented in books, instruction pamphlets and recipes of all kinds. *Subsidiary awareness*, on the other hand, involves knowing *how to do*: it is implicit and embodied for example in the experienced lumberjack's way of holding, aiming, and swinging the axe and the professional baker's way of mixing, kneading and placing dough in the oven. Given Polanyi's education and experiences as a practicing physician, his contention that bodily awareness formed the core of tacit knowledge was not surprising.

For beginning practitioners in social work, *knowing what to do* is a primary concern. This *focal awareness* represents a marked contrast to the *subsidiary awareness* possessed by experienced practitioners. Payne (2007) characterises this latter group as 'wise' social workers and contends that they employ their repertoires of tacit knowledge in constantly

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improvising – like accomplished jazz musicians – in working with all manner of situations and interactions with clients.

Experienced social workers often talk of gut feelings, hunches and experiential intuition in trying to put into words the tacit aspects of the knowledge they draw upon while making decisions and interacting with their clients. However, as we shall see, these tacit dimensions of social work have received little empirical attention in the literature. This paucity of studies clearly reflects the difficulties involved in accessing non-verbalised dimensions of professional knowhow. Researchers intent on exploring tacit knowledge must overcome one major methodological challenge: one requiring them to find ways of engaging and helping practitioners voice the silent ways of knowing influencing their practice.

The article describes one set of methods developed in a research project aimed at helping a group of outreach workers in Norway voice what they routinely referred to as *magefølelser* (gut feelings) influencing their decisions and actions when working with especially vulnerable clients. These social workers, employed by a city administration, work primarily at street level with young people at risk of developing and/or having substance abuse problems. One reason for studying these workers involved the unpredictable character of encounters with clients in the public spaces of the city. It was reckoned that experienced outreach workers constantly dealing with unforeseen situations and prospective clients often initially rejecting their offers of help would draw more from stores of tacit knowledge than social workers routinely meeting clients at social assistance offices and other welfare agencies. It was felt that this kind of knowledge engendered by the improvisational character of outreach work would be less influenced by the established regulations and informal norms of organisational cultures operative in the sequestered locales where social work practice in Norway is usually carried out (Ylvisaker, 2013).

This tied in to another important reason for selecting outreach workers as the focus for a study of tacit knowledge. As practitioners, they represent a highly specialised subcategory of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Prottas, 1979). Yet, unlike emergency room personnel and others working at motor vehicle registration offices, consumer protection agencies and other offices using well-established protocols in providing assistance and information to persons coming off the streets, it was believed that outreach workers, like customs agents and patrolling police officers, first needed to identify and then to engage with persons who seldom approach them for assistance. Since social work literature provides little information about recognising and engaging with initially unwilling clients, the principal assumption of the research project was that tacit knowhow represented the main source of guidance for experienced outreach workers in identifying as well as working with potential clients.

The research study

The main aim of the study was to develop a set of methods aimed at accessing the stores of tacit knowledge shared by veteran outreach workers. It was hoped that the findings of this research could eventually contribute to the training of social workers beginning their practice in the outreach field. Research funding came from the municipal agency mandated to deal with drug and alcohol problems. The Institute of Social Sciences at Oslo Metropolitan University had the formal responsibility for carrying out the research

and a cultural anthropologist on its social work faculty headed the project. The anthropologist leading the project gave several reasons for recruiting me to the project. Prominent among these was my professional identity as a social worker with 17 years of experience in the field including 8 years as a staff member and later head of the family unit at one of Norway's few therapeutic communities established for the rehabilitation of drug addicts. Drawing upon his experiences from an earlier project involving a social worker returning to study her former field of practice (Ranger, 1986, 1993) and similar studies (DeMontigny, 1995; Pithouse, 1987; White, 1997), the anthropologist felt there was much to be gained by my participation as researcher returning to the practice field. The anthropologist also felt that my participation had the potential for showing the influence of gender on observations since he had already recruited an experienced male social worker as part of the research team. Additionally, the anthropologist also stressed that my background as a practicing Gestalt therapist was potentially valuable since the literature made clear that Polanyi's work drew heavily from ideas and conceptual frameworks developed in Gestalt psychology (Grimen, 1991; Polanyi, 1959, 1962b, 1966, 1967; Ray, 2009; Zhenhua, 2003–2004). As Polanyi forcefully put it in describing the development of his thoughts about tacit ways of knowing, the main goal was to 'transpose the findings of Gestalt psychology into a theory of knowledge' (1959, p. 28). Since the male social worker did not share my Gestalt training and, therapeutic experience, the anthropologist believed that this contrast together with gender might provide some indication of how such differences influenced processes aimed at helping outreach workers access and voice their stores of silent knowledge.

As a therapist trained in the Gestalt tradition, my role as a researcher in the study was heavily influenced by a number of the principles of Gestalt theory. Though too numerous to describe in the space afforded by journal format, the key influences on my role include the following. First and foremost was attention to the here and now of the situation. Closely related to this was constant awareness that what I perceived and sensed in every situation was subject to the whole comprised of the parts represented by all my previous experiences. Finally, an equally important Gestalt principle guiding my research was that of emphasising the need to attend to what my body was telling me.

A central element in the project's research design drew from an understanding social work as the behaviour of social workers in their encounters with clients. This perspective had earlier informed a range of studies focused on social worker and client encounters at various agencies in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway (Seltzer, Kullberg, Olesen, & Rostila, 2001). By prioritising observations of face-to-face interactions as the basis for research on tacit knowledge, the study aimed to correct an imbalance found in earlier investigations of tacit knowledge among social workers. These studies drew almost exclusively from interviews and exercises where social workers talked about and reflected upon what they had done in actual or hypothetical encounters with clients. One study made use of focus groups and in-depth interviews in exploring tacit knowledge (Darlington, Osmond, & Peile, 2002). Several other projects combined exercises in critical reflection with in-depth interviews (Osmond & Darlington, 2005; Osmond & O'Connor, 2004). One research project aimed at drawing practice wisdom in the form of clinical hypotheses from case records produced by a relatively large number of social workers who had undergone training in a practice programmes (Zeira & Rosen, 2000). Several investigations employed a combination of strategies involving structured and

unstructured interviews, thinking aloud exercises and various forms of reflection (Osmond, 2006; Schon, 1983; Scott, 1990). While a number of peer-reviewed articles contained discussions of tacit knowledge in social work using such terms as *practice wisdom* (DeRoos, 1990; Klein & Bloom 1995; Scott, 1990; Sheppard, 1995), *subjugated knowledge* (Hartman, 1992) and *silenced knowledge* (Molander, 1992), none of these works were, strictly speaking, empirical studies of tacit knowledge.

The data gathering process

During the four-month duration of the project, the male social worker and I, accompanied the outreach workers, always in pairs, as they conducted their night and day patrols of the city streets. Whenever the workers engaged with clients, we would stand within listening distance and take notes of what we observed. The workers always explained our presence and note-taking activity as part of a project focused on them and their professional work, not on the clients themselves. Our notes aimed at capturing not only what was heard but also non-verbal features of the encounters between the outreach workers and their clients. After these meetings had been concluded, the outreach workers would be invited to have coffee at nearby cafés where the observational notes were read and discussed. At other times, the notes would be presented and discussed when the outreach workers returned to their office.

In both office and café meetings, the male social worker and I alternated between two roles: while one presented the observational notes to the workers, the other took notes of the ensuing discussions about the observations. Notes from the observations and discussions provided data for later analyses regarding how outreach workers voice their tacit knowledge.

Theoretical and therapeutic issues influencing the research methods

My research role was heavily influenced by familiarity with Gestalt theories as well as by my experience as a practicing psychotherapist. In approaching the task of finding ways to help the workers articulate their stores of silent knowledge, I took the view that effective therapy in perhaps its most basic form could be understood as a set of practices providing clients with safe and comfortable spaces for voicing what has been variously described as *silent stories* (Seltzer, 1985, p. 2003), the *not-yet-said* (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988), the *not-yet-told* (Rober 2002), and the *unsaid, unsayable, and unspeakable* (Rogers et al. 1999). Given this understanding, my experiences, I tried to make use of the skills and insights learned in the therapy room to help outreach workers access the silent dimensions of their own practices. An additional factor contributing to achieving this kind of voicing was the absence among outreach workers of the heavy emotional baggage often accompanying silenced themes and stories brought by clients to the therapy room.

As noted, Polanyi made use of a key tenet of Gestalt theory in arguing that bodily awareness is central to tacit knowing (1962a, pp. 58–62). In the course of the research, this and related theoretical understandings manifested themselves in many ways. First and foremost, this led to a constant sharpened awareness of my own bodily feelings and perceptions while observing, making notes and discussing with the workers. Was I anxious? Did the behaviours of the clients as well as the workers scare or disgust me

or tie into my views of good professional social work? In addition to recording my own feelings and perceptions while observing, my attention focused on the bodies of the workers themselves: their facial tenseness and relaxation, gestures, breathing, eye movements, posture as well as the metalinguistic aspects of their utterances. The commentaries I recorded about these and related feelings and perceptions then served as springboards during the discussions for workers to look back at, reflect upon and set words about their bodily feelings and perceptions and how these impacted on their decisions and actions.

One illustration of how this played out in the discussions was initiated by my presentation of observational notes about an outreach workers making contact with a teenage boy in a large open public space where a number of youths were gathered. Before presenting the worker with the notes, I tuned in to my own feeling state. Was I tired or worried about other matters? How did I feel about that particular worker? Did I admire her work or find it not fitting my own ideas and values about social work practice? After carrying out this self-inventory, the next step was to use my body (eye contact, facial expressions, posture, voice) to help create a comfortable atmosphere as well as opening space for her to respond to my notes of the encounter and to reflect upon what factors influenced what she had done with that client.

The main frame guiding this approach was central to the Gestalt tradition, that of the field or the individual's experiences of their specificity with the social world. As newly pointed out in a work focused on issues in research methodology (Neumann & Neumann, 2019, p. 55), the interviewer guided by Gestalt theory becomes part of the interviewee's field since

She, through her presence, body, clothes, tone voice, etc. may trigger reactions and memories in the other in the same way as when this person is recognizing an object, or is reminded of a memory or an interaction with another person. Moreover, in the interaction between the researcher and the interlocutor, both persons' fields will be modified, and a 'new' field will be created.

Central in the field created during post-observation sessions were attempts through gaze, facial expression, posture, and tone of voice to make clear to the outreach workers my naïve curiosity. I quite truthfully announced bodily and verbally my 'not knowing' position emphasising to the workers that they were experts in working at street level. By flying this flag of what one psychotherapist has described as 'anthropological naiveté' (Seltzer, 1985), this allowed me to ask 'dumb' questions aimed at opening space for the workers to reflect upon the practices recorded in the observational notes.

Often, I began by exploring where the worker herself was by using her/his name and then asking: 'Can you tell me how it was for you today?'. In responding, workers often took up issues about their states of mind, feelings and other factors influencing their decisions and actions. During these post-observation sessions, I often told of my own feelings and perceptions triggered by what had been observed. During the course of reading aloud, I would stop and ask for help when the worker's words, facial expression, posture and other signs indicated that she was puzzled or wished to add something or to correct me. I always made a conscious effort to do what I thought of as double listening, that is by listening to what the workers said but also listening to what Rober (2002) describes as 'the inner conversation' of the psychotherapist reacting and responding to what was being told by the client. My primary goal in every post-observation session was

to use my body as a tool to create both comfort and space by conveying to the worker, verbally and non-verbally, my understanding of her experiences as well as my own perceptions and feelings about what we were discussing. In this particular case, while reading and talking about the observational notes, I told that worker that one thing puzzling me was why she had initiated contact with just that one youth when many others were present. She responded that there was 'something' giving her a 'gut feeling' about him that prompted her to approach him. When I asked her to reflect about that feeling, she told of first noticing the way the youth was walking alone among all these other youngsters. This set him apart from the others either walking as couples or clustered in groups. She added that one thing drawing her to the boy was his way of walking very slowly and constantly looking around for someone or something. His unkempt clothes and hair, too, drew her attention to him. Of particular worry for her, she said, was what seemed to be the frightened look in his eyes. Her unease was further reinforced by the way the boy initially evaded her attempt to establish eye contact with him.

During the course of that single interview, it became clear that much of what the worker called her "gut feeling" leading to establishing contact with this youngster drew from the worker's concrete observations and feelings linked to her own bodily senses and perceptions. Years of street-level experience triggered her alertness to this one youth out of many. The worker 'knew' what signs she should be looking for even though this was not conscious. Towards the end of the interview situation, the worker recalled experiencing an "aha" moment. In questioning her further, she described it as her realisation that the way this boy walked and carried himself together with his wandering gaze had triggered her concern for him and led her singling him out for an intervention.

Another illustration of the interviewing process drew from observations made along the pathway bordering the river dividing the city. This is a lovely green thoroughfare frequented by ordinary citizens enjoying the river and the surrounding nature but also by drug dealers and those seeking to buy drugs from them (Kuvoame, 2015). For the outreach workers, this area represented a well-travelled part of their patrols. During one post-patrol session, while reading aloud the observational notes, I asked the outreach worker why she had contacted one youth after walking past a number of other youths who looked to me much like that particular boy. The worker told that she first noticed him because he was sitting by himself on one of the many park benches lining the riverbank. She reported also that his appearance also made her interested since he was well groomed and dressed in nice clothes. This she said struck her as out of place given the appearance of the other youths the patrol had passed by on the footpath. The way he looked as well as his sitting by himself suggested to her that either he was unaware of the drug dealing going on in that area or that he was going out of his way not to be recognised as a drug buyer or dealer. After walking further and talking with her patrol partner about that boy, they decided to return to engage with him and to see if he wished to have closer contact with the outreach agency.

During our discussion of the observations, I asked her if she had any special feelings as she approached the youth. She did not immediately answer but sat for what seemed to me to be a long time before speaking. She then told of being surprised when she thought back on that episode that it was her feelings of sadness drawing her attention to him. She added that she had not thought about those feelings until I asked my question. I then

revealed that the main reason I had asked about her feelings stemmed from my own sadness when I first saw that boy. Up until then, I was in a good mood – something that I had checked when taking an inventory of where I was affectively and mentally before the start of every patrol.

This episode underscored a significant feature of experiences gleaned while trying to assist workers access and voice tacit aspects of their practice. None of them shared my background in Gestalt theory and therapeutic practice, but as the project progressed and more became revealed about the perceptual and affective cues prompting their engagement with clients, we often discovered during the discussions that our bodies seemed to be registering many of the same feelings and sensations. According to the anthropologist leading the project, these instances of shared bodily awareness may have played a key role in the marked contrasts he found when comparing my notes with those produced by my co-investigator.

In line with the work of Ryle (1971, p. 480–496) and Geertz (1973), he felt that my notes of observations and discussions supplemented with commentaries and interpretations provided ‘thicker’ descriptions of contextual features of what outreach workers did and explained than the notes recorded by my non- Gestalt trained co-investigator. The anthropologist characterised those notes as more broad-brushed and ‘thinner’ accounts lacking many of the meaning-bearing details found in my notes. My thicker descriptions, the anthropologist added, made clear to him that tacit knowledge for outreach workers had much to do their own bodily awareness in ‘seeing’ and ‘interpreting’ signals emanating from the bodies of clients. In so doing, outreach workers seemed to be acting like medical diagnosticians whose experiences in using their own bodily senses in probing, listening, and feeling formed the core of tacit knowing they employed to assess the bodily conditions of their patients. This comment was not surprising since Polanyi drew on his experience as a physician in exemplifying tacit knowledge with references to how medical students learn over time to ‘see’ with their senses as they acquire clinical skills (1962a, p. 101)

As earlier noted, Polanyi argued that Gestalt psychology provided the key to understanding tacit knowledge. Central to his thinking was the somatic focus of Gestalt theory or as one medical scholar (Henry, 2006, p. 189) put it:

Polanyi’s archetype of tacit knowledge is people’s awareness of their own bodies . . . This epistemological structure is inescapable because humans can only inhabit and understand the world through their bodies.

Recognition of somatic awareness – especially in instances where researcher and outreach worker shared bodily feelings, perceptions and sensations – appeared to have played an important role in helping workers identify elements of their silent knowledge. While Gestalt training aided me in facilitating their articulating processes, experiences gained through years of therapeutic work with silent and silenced themes also helped by creating a comfortable atmosphere and by opening space for talk in post-observation discussions with the outreach workers. Several of them remarked that they felt more comfortable about being observed by a fellow social worker rather than researchers lacking our shared professional identity.

In a number of respects, the project’s investigation of tacit knowledge resembles recent research on social work practice drawing on ideas from phronetic social science (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2001; Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012; Uggerhøj, 2011). Both

approaches involve investigations of social work practitioners carried out by fellow practitioners. Rather than relying on textbook definitions and discourses about social work, both approaches privilege actual social work practice and attend to concrete cases and contexts. Moreover, they share investigatory concern with collecting the minutiae necessary for 'thick' descriptions of practice. Finally, both approaches open space for dialogues between practitioners doing the observations and practitioners being observed. However, unlike phronetic practice research, the voices of outreach clients were excluded from the discussions of the observations of practice. Still another and perhaps even more important contrast is represented by the focus of the tacit knowledge project on what was said and done in encounters between the workers and their clients. While phronetic social scientists claim great interest in 'minutiae and local micro-practices' (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012, p. 234), there is relatively little evidence in their studies of practice describing how social workers and clients *actually* converse in practice arenas. This, however, is a shared weakness of much practice research. While few could dispute the claim that talk is central to the face-to-face interactions constituting social work practice, with the exceptions of work carried out by British and Finnish researchers (e.g. Hall, Juhila, Parton, & Pösö, 2003; Hall, Slembrouck, & Sarangi, 2006), there continue to exist surprisingly few studies drawing upon observations and transcriptions of the speech acts and dialogic exchanges taking place where social workers encounter their clients. On the whole, the literature remains dominated by accounts of talk in social work conforming to long established patterns where practitioners select, interpret and present what was said by themselves and their clients.

Discussion

There clearly exist a number of weaknesses in the methods for accessing tacit knowledge described in the foregoing. In the first place, a great many discussions with the outreach workers produced little more than verbiage and few insights into tacit knowledge. As evidenced by the contrast between thick and thin descriptive accounts, an even greater methodological problem involved how different theoretical training and experiences impacted on the notes recorded about the observations and the follow-up discussions. Ideally, such background differences should not play a role in the employment of methods developed for practice research. That said, it should be emphasised that one of the strengths of the tacit knowledge project's methodology drew from its use of observational data. In researching practice, observations of what social workers actually do in meetings with clients clearly provide a more accurate picture of practice than self-reported accounts of practice made by social workers themselves. And as evidenced by the thick and thin differences found in the notes, it was clear that grounding in Gestalt theory and therapeutic experience added to understanding the practice of outreach social work. This was particularly true of those episodes where outreach workers and I discovered that we shared similar fears, worries, aha instances and other states of bodily experiences.

A final weakness of the research design stemmed from its lack of a longitudinal dimension involved in the development over time of tacit knowledge among the outreach workers. There was little evidence from contact with the outreach workers that they had received any formal training in how to use their perceptions and other elements of bodily

awareness in carry out their work. In other fields, such as police and customs work, practitioners receive formal training in using such somatic skills for identifying lawbreakers (Docan-Morgan, 2007; Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Kronkvist, 2006; Kassin & Fong, 1999). As Flectcher (1992) found in her interviews with experienced police officers, formal classroom training in using bodily awareness becomes supplemented by informal training once newly graduated police and customs agents enter the field. As a rule, this takes place as experienced masters help apprentices acquire tacit knowledge by teaching them to sharpen their bodily awareness so as to 'see' and to 'feel' what is taking in their work environments. Unfortunately, all of the outreach workers involved in the tacit knowledge project shared years, and in some cases decades, of street-level experience. Had the research design included a longitudinal perspective focused on newcomers to outreach work, there is reason to believe that our understanding of tacit knowledge could have been enriched by observing how experienced team members acting as mentors showed newcomers how to use their bodily senses to 'see' and to 'feel' in their street-level working milieus.

One way of summing up what the study yielded is to think of the guidelines it provides for future research on tacit dimensions of the knowledge shared by experienced social workers. The study's findings indicate that a fruitful approach for accessing these stores of practice wisdom involve a triad of interrelated methods. The first of these involves observing social workers practicing their profession. The second involves the observing researcher's awareness of her own sensations and perceptions triggered by the situations observed. And the third involves discussions with social workers drawing upon both observational notes together with what researchers report about their own bodily reactions to what they have both seen and sensed. If these discussions can take place as soon as possible after the observations have been made, one finding of this study suggests that researchers can gain a much better vantage point for accessing tacit social work knowledge than those investigations relying primarily on interviews with social workers, their recollections as well as their responses to hypothetical situations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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