Chapter X

Knowing in Organizations: Pheno–Practical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Based on a phenomenological understanding of knowing and knowledge in organisation, this chapter aims to contribute to an integral perspective on conceptual and methodological research development. Adopting an advanced phenomenological approach, knowing is argued to be an embodied and emotional process. Furthermore, an integral “pheno-practice” is proposed, allowing a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, analyse, and interpretation for investigating processes of knowing in organisations. Following a dynamic, processual turn, the concept of an “inter-knowing” is discussed by which knowing is understood as a relational emerging event. By concluding, some implications for theory and research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary debates concerning knowledge in organisations represent a heterogeneous discourse involving many different perspectives. The ‘nature’ of knowledge, the degree to which knowledge is separable from or related to practice, where knowledge resides, and the status and relation of explicit and implicit knowledge are investigated and interpreted in diverse ways. Basically knowledge is a necessary constituent for business activities, added-value and organisational competitiveness. Consequently, it has become operationalised in a plethora of so called “Knowledge Management” concepts and strategies with corresponding application in the business practice. This has led to various agreements or disagreements and critiques among researchers concerning the ontological, epistemological, and political dimensions involved (e.g. Choo, 1998; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003; Styhre, 2003). Such debates have stimulated an on-going search
for criteria for evaluating approaches, frameworks and methodologies with regard to various knowledge management issues (e.g. Assudani, 2005; Metaxiotis, et al., 2005) and balanced reviews (e.g. Despres & Chauvel, 2000).

However, much of the current literature about the knowledge-based economy and knowledge-management has been predicated upon reductionistic assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Reductionistically, organisational knowledge is conceptualised either as a codified and transferable asset, that is as an “object”, or as generated by an autonomous subject or inter-subjective interactions. Following either “objective” or “(inter-)subjective” orientations, different types of knowledge have been identified and examined “taxonomically” (Tsoukas, 1996, 13). What prevails in conventional discourses are various classifying distinctions and dichotomies of dualistic thinking about knowledge (e.g. Grant, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, Teece, 1998). With this, knowledge are understood either as resource or as process, as “objective” or “subjective”, as implicit or explicit, as internal or external, immanent or transcendent etc. Furthermore, with cognitive bias, bodily and emotional dimensions of knowing are misinterpreted or seen merely as pragmatic functions to get more effective means for generating, sharing, and managing knowledge in organizations.

Both underlying paradigms - the empiristic-objective tradition of “realism” and the rationalistic-subjective discourse of “idealism” and representationalism (Aadne, et al., 1996) - are eminently limited and problematic in their one-sidedness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 28). A great many of current approaches to knowledge management hold to these paradigmatic underpinnings and are primarily rational in orientation, thus neglecting or underestimating bodily and emotional aspects. What is needed instead a more inclusive and processual understanding of knowing and knowledge and integration of embodied and emotional dimensions. The challenge will be to consider the experiential constituencies of the knowing process and to see where and how the objectifying codification and entitative approaches reduce these constituencies to some simplistic “subject-object” constructs. For developing a more integral approach and practice of knowledge management and research about the underlying dynamics, we need to shift from the prevailing modes of thinking. Accordingly, the aim of the following is to contribute to a conceptual and methodological research development of knowing and knowledge in organisations.

Specifically, this chapter tries to show in particular how advanced phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1995) helps to reach a deeper understanding of organisational knowledge, by rearticulating an account of the lived body and emotions in relation to knowing. Based on a phenomenology of embodied and emotional knowing, a corresponding integral “pheno-practice” will be presented. Integral pheno-practice offers a conceptual framework and methodological map for generating a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation of knowing in organisations. Following a processual turn, perspectives on what will be called “inter-knowing” will be outlined. Finally, some implications and research perspectives will be discussed.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE KNOWING BODY AND EMBODIED “KNOWLEDGE”

In general, phenomenology represents a philosophical discipline that has been has been central to the tradition of continental European thinking throughout the 20th century and still provides a relevant contemporary purview (e.g. Hammond et al. 1995; Küpers 2008; Macann 1993). Literally, “phenomenology” is the study of “phenomena”: that is, the appearances of things as they appear in human experience. Thus, it concerns ways how humans experience phenomena and meanings...
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