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### Knowledge and organisations

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Published: 06/09/2018

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kwiatkowski, W. M. (2018). *Knowledge and organisations: review of three challenges to the conventional logic and a philosophical agenda for future research*. Paper presented at British Academy of Management Annual Conference 2018 , Bristol, United Kingdom.

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# **Knowledge and organisations: Review of three challenges to the conventional logic and a philosophical agenda for future research**

## **Summary**

In this paper, I bring together three modes of understanding knowledge in the organisational context that challenge the conventional view promulgated by strategic management literature (e.g. Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992, 2003; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997). Drawing on their core concepts I label them ‘tacit-explicit continuum’ (e.g. Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Spender, 1996a, 1996b), ‘communities of practice’ (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and ‘nexus of practices’ (e.g. Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), respectively. Rather than perpetuating the factionalism that dominated discourse across these traditions in extant literature (e.g. Gherardi, 2000; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Tsoukas, 1996), which undermines the challenge to contemporary logic from within, I argue that their critiques are complementary and set out a philosophical research agenda intending to work their respective limits to further the overall effort to undermine the orthodox view.

## **Track**

Knowledge and learning

## **Word count**

1980

## **Introduction and purpose**

In this paper, I bring together three modes of understanding knowledge in the organisational context. Drawing on their core concepts I label them ‘tacit-explicit continuum’ (e.g. Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Spender, 1996a, 1996b), ‘communities of practice’ (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and ‘nexus of practices’ (e.g. Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), respectively. Although they all criticise the dominant conceptualisation of knowledge promulgated by strategic management literature (e.g. Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992, 2003; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997) for disregarding the social aspects of knowledge and its embeddedness in power relationships in favour of a philosophically functionalist, anthropomorphic conceptualisation of organisations as entities capable of knowing independently of their members (e.g. Gherardi, 2000: p. 213; Pentland, 1995: pp. 2-3; Spender: 1996a: p. 51; 1996b: p. 66; Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos, 2004: pp. S1-S4), they do not offer a unanimous alternative explanation of knowledge and its organising in the organisational context. Instead, due differences in underlying assumptions about knowledge, its relationship with practice and nature of agency, each one contributes a unique perspective.

Discourse across these traditions in extant literature (e.g. Cook & Brown, 1999; Gherardi, 2000; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) has suffered from two major limitations. Firstly, extensive scrutiny of theoretical constructs and their philosophical foundations throughout most of these publications has effectively put ‘tacit-explicit continuum’ as much at odds with the two practice-based approaches as it was with the conventional view of knowledge in organisations (Gherardi, 2000: pp. 211-213; 2016: p. 681; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: pp. 341-342; Tsoukas, 1996: pp. 13-15). Secondly and relatedly, consideration of the latter two approaches under a single umbrella term of practice-based theorising as part of this effort has obscured theoretical diversity between them (Gherardi, 2000: pp. 212, 217-218; Nicolini, 2011: pp. 603-604) and within them.

Rather than perpetuating the factionalism that dominated discourse across these traditions in extant literature, which undermines the challenge to contemporary logic from within, throughout this review I argue that each approach has been effective in informing our understanding of knowledge and its organising in relative terms by revealing and concealing their different aspects. Although the three approaches are conceptually incongruent and their synthesis is impossible, I suggest that the relationship between them is not necessarily that of irreconcilable conflict (Gherardi, 2000: pp. 211-213; 2016: p. 681; Nicolini, 2011: pp. 602-604; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: pp. 341-342; Tsoukas, 1996: pp. 13-15). Instead, I propose we work their respective limits to further the critique of the orthodox view of knowledge in organisations by reading them through one another (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013: p. 261) and outline a philosophical agenda that will facilitate this.

## **Conceptual framing**

### ***‘Tacit-explicit continuum’***

This perspective complements the conventional view outlined above rather than undermines it (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009: p. 636) and has even been criticised alongside it (e.g. Gherardi, 2000: pp. 211-213, 2016: p. 681; Nicolini, 2011: p. 602; Tsoukas, 1996: pp. 13-15). It frequently utilises the distinction between tacit (i.e. subjective, experiential and context specific) and explicit (i.e. abstract and decontextualised) knowledge (e.g. Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka, von Krogh & Voelpel, 2006; Spender, 1996a, 1996b) as a dimension along which

knowledge or its elements exist and interact in the organisational context (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009: pp. 640-641). As a consequence of the adoption of a subjective conceptualisation of knowledge whereby knowledge may exist in an explicit form but originates in individuals' minds (Nonaka, 1991: p. 98; 1994: pp. 15-16; Nonaka, Toyama & Byosi ère, 2003: p. 492; Nonaka et al., 2006: p. 1181; Spender, 1996b: p. 65), human cognition is regarded as the source of meaning and agency. Thus, organisational knowledge is constructed in a social process of transcending individual boundaries resulting in the elevation of individual knowledge to the organisational level through its conversion along the tacit-explicit continuum (Nonaka, 1991: p. 97, 1994: p. 17; Nonaka & Toyama, 2005: p. 422). Creative use of language is regarded as instrumental to this process and its organising, which despite claims of equal and mutual participation (Nonaka, 1994: p. 31; Nonaka et al., 2003: p. 505; von Krogh, Roos & Slocum, 1994: pp. 61-62) is dominated by the management (Gourlay, 2006: p. 1426). The overall emphasis on human actors results in non-human entities being reduced to either partial representations or artefacts resulting from the process of conversion (e.g. Gourlay, 2006; Hargadon & Fanelli, 2002; Ribeiro & Collins, 2007; Spender, 1996b) or contextual features facilitating it (e.g. Nonaka and Toyama, 2003; Nonaka et al., 2003; Nonaka et al., 2006).

### ***'Communities of practice'***

There is disagreement as to whether 'communities of practice' attempts to build a bridge between conventional accounts of knowledge in organisations and its performative conceptions (e.g. Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998, 2000; Wesley & Buysse, 2001) or radically departs from it (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Fox, 2000; Lee & Cole, 2003), with the latter regarded to have been its original intent (Contu & Willmott, 2000: p. 270; Cox, 2005: pp. 528-530; Huzzard, 2004: p. 352). Nonetheless, there is consensus that knowledge and learning are situated not in human cognition but within communities of practice defined by mutual engagement in a joint enterprise, shared repertoire and negotiation of meaning (Carlile, 2002; Koliba & Gajda, 2010; Roberts, 2006; Swan, Scarborough and Robertson, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Recognition of communities of practice as the sources of knowledge and meaning does not deny humans of agency (Brown & Duguid, 1991: pp. 46-47; Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001: pp. 978-979). However, it undermines it to an extent that enables non-humans to be regarded as integral to practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991: pp. 43-44). On the one hand, they reify meaning (Fox, 2000: pp. 683-684; Wenger, 1998: p. 56) enabling them to affect practical performances (Wenger, 1998: pp. 60, 61, 64-65). On the other, they can facilitate potentially difficult collaboration between communities of different practitioners as boundary objects (Brown & Duguid, 2001: pp. 206, 208-209; Tsoukas, 2002: pp. 421, 423-424). With regard to organising of knowledge within and across communities, extant literature does not offer a consistent explanation (Contu & Willmott, 2000: p. 272; Cox, 2005: p. 527; Koliba & Gajda, 2010: pp. 101, 109). It is described as a radically informal but consensual process (e.g. Barley, 2015; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lee & Cole, 2003), a consensual process facilitated by the management (e.g. Roberts, 2006; Swan et al., 2002; Wenger, 2000) or a contested process involving active use of power as a productive force (e.g. Contu, 2014; Fox, 2000).

### ***'Nexus of practices'***

Analysing knowledge and its organising from this perspective entails rejecting the notion of knowledge existing prior to its utilisation in favour of the view that knowledge emerges in the moment of engaging the world in practice (Gherardi, 2016: p. 681; Nicolini, 2011: p. 604), which is defined as "the creative entanglement of knowing and doing" (Gherardi, 2000: p.

215; 2016: p. 691). Consequently, knowledge is neither stable nor enduring but situated and provisional (e.g. Gherardi, 2000: pp. 215-217, 220-221; 2016: pp. 686, 693; Orlikowski, 2002: pp. 252-253). This is accompanied by the recognition both human and non-human entities are actively and relationally involved in practice (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: pp. 343, 373). However, as noted by Gherardi (2016: p. 692-693), approaches differ with regard to whether they grant them equal status (e.g. Bruni, Gherardi & Parolin, 2007; Ewenstein & White, 2009; Nicolini, 2011; Nicolini, Mengis & Swan, 2012) or not (e.g. Blackler, 1993, 1995; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Tsoukas, 1996). With regard to organising of knowledge, 'nexus of practice' literature radically departs from conventional wisdom. The shift from 'knowledge' to 'knowing' is accompanied by a corresponding shift from stable and fixed 'organisation' to an open-ended process of 'organising' (Gherardi et al., 2017: p. 7). Essentially, organising stems from the provisional, situated and contested arrangement of practices in the nexus (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002: p. 433; Nicolini, 2011: pp. 615-616; also Blackler: 1995: 1039-1040) in which distant knowledge coexisting within the same performance are connected in a manner which accentuates harmonies and dissonance rather than seeks synthesis (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002: pp. 422-423, 429, 433).

## **Discussion**

In summary, 'tacit-explicit continuum' literature explicates how knowledge evolves, spreads and is utilised within organisations over time. The social dimension of knowledge work is only discussed to the extent to which it facilitates this linguistic, dialogical process (e.g. Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2003; von Krogh, et al., 1994), while the material dimension is neglected almost in its entirety. In comparison, the former features prominently in 'communities of practice' literature through the recognition of the relationship between practice, identity-formation and meaning (e.g. Brown & Digid, 1991; 2001, Wenger, 1998, 2000), which also opens up the analysis to incorporate considerations of proactive use of power in conflicts ensuing in course of multi-disciplinary collaboration (Contu, 2014; Fox, 2000). As for the latter, it is given ample consideration as part of a wider socio-material context in the 'nexus of practices' literature (e.g. Bruni et al., 2007; Ewenstein & White, 2009; Nicolini, 2011; Nicolini, et al., 2012). However, the adoption of practice as the point of departure for theorising in both of these traditions emphasises the narrow, immediate context of practical enactments (Gherardi, 2000: p. 217; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: pp. 339, 346) at the expense of the spatial-temporal dimension (i.e. evolution and circulation of knowledge over space-time). Overall, despite their philosophical and conceptual dissimilarities which render synthesis impossible, the three traditions are complementary with regard to how they challenge conventional understanding of knowledge. Drawing on this idea, I propose that instead of emphasising what sets them apart, which promotes factionalism and isolationism, we work their respective limits to further the critique of the orthodox view.

## **Philosophical agenda for future research**

Achieving the above is fundamentally a philosophical challenge. In brief, we must reject both expansion of our understanding against the backdrop of extant theory (i.e. deduction) (Bechara & Van de Ven, 2011: pp. 345-347; Brinkmann, 2014: pp. 721-722; Deetz, 1996: p. 201) and the naïve belief in data speaking for itself (i.e. induction) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009: pp. 3-5, 69, 72; Brinkmann, 2014: p. 721). Instead, we must regard theory as tentative and susceptible to constant challenge from both the empirical world and competing theoretical explanations (i.e. abduction) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009: pp. 3-6; Brinkmann, 2014: pp. 722-724; Cunliffe, 2011: pp. 663-664; Thomas, 2010: pp: 576-577). In course of this, we must dismiss the status of data as brute truths and recognise their contamination by theoretical

interpretation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: pp. 16, 31; 2013: pp. 261-262, 269; Mazzei, 2014: p. 743; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014: pp. 715-716). These are necessary steps in going beyond what the three perspectives have originally offered individually and collectively (Lenz Taguchi, 2014: p. 271).

### **Future paper development**

In the full paper, I will discuss similarities and differences between the three traditions summarised above on three dimensions – relationship between knowledge and practice, nature of agency and mode of organising. As part of this effort, I will also address tensions within each body of literature (e.g. competing views of organising in ‘communities of practice’ literature) and express my opinion on which rendition is the most consistent with the underlying assumptions of each tradition. The word limit prevented me from doing this in the current paper, which is why I instead summarised each perspective to demonstrate the overall conceptual framing.

My discussion section will outline in detail the relative strengths and weakness of each view in terms of how they address issues of temporality of knowledge, conflict and power dynamics and role played by the wider context on knowledge activities, which have only been briefly introduced above.

I will expand the discussion of the philosophical research agenda introduced above through an examination of the philosophical underpinnings of abductive qualitative data analysis (e.g. Davies, 2014; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2013; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Mazzei, 2014).

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