Workshop Report

Tacit Knowledge and Intercultural Cooperation

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Workshop organised by:
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Tacit knowledge is in many ways a concept which presents challenges to both scholars and stakeholders in global cooperation. Based on Michael Polanyi’s claim that “we can know more than we can tell”, tacit knowledge seeks to conceptualize bodily performances such as learning how to ride a bike. Furthermore, and more pertinently to the research concerns of the Centre, it also refers to culturally-specific performances which are fundamental implicit aspects of interaction between individuals. Intercultural communication therefore provides fertile analytical ground for identifying the effects of tacit knowledge on cooperation between culturally distinct groups. This often intangible concept nevertheless poses a paradox to scholars seeking to define and understand its construct: How can tacit knowledge remain implicit if it becomes explicit through analysis? How can scholars create a working analytical vocabulary of such an elusive concept? How is intercultural cooperation attainable if implicit sociocultural understandings on various matters are so profoundly different?

The workshop, which took place in March 2014, sought to address these concerns by exploring various aspects of tacit knowledge and intercultural cooperation. It was primarily organized using a roundtable format in which all present individuals were invited to participate by posing questions and comments to the three invited guests. This proved to be a very fruitful exercise which particularly shone light on three major issues surrounding social science research on tacit knowledge in conjunction with intercultural cooperation: theoretical concepts, ways of research methodology, theory, and usage of the main concept in empirical research. The workshop was guided by four research questions:

- Which kind of social theories do we need to grasp tacit knowledge?
- How can we observe tacit knowledge?
- What could intercultural competence mean?
- How does tacit knowledge relate to problems of global cooperation?

The workshop began with opening remarks by workshop organisers Frank Gadinger and Frank Adloff. Gadinger emphasized how research on concepts on the ‘soft-side’ of politics such as tacit knowledge have led to an innovative deviation in political science away from positivist approaches and toward more sociological and cultural understandings of global cooperation. Adloff then went on to provide a brief outline of tacit knowledge by covering its philosophical foundations and presenting its most pertinent analytical insights. He highlighted the differences between explicit and implicit knowledge as boiling down to a dichotomy of ‘know that’ for the former and ‘know how’ for the latter. In order to address matters of international cooperation, Adloff drew attention to
the potential roadblocks culturally-specific tacit knowledge could pose in the international arena. He emphasized that interruptions during these processes show difficulties among different interacting sociocultural forms of knowledge. However, there are still issues in terms of analysing these effects. He therefore thought it was imperative to decide which social theories and methods could best conceptualize and analyse this phenomenon. The floor was then given to the three invited guests.

Presentations

Jens Loenhoff first contrasted tacit knowledge from propositional knowledge, which is rooted in generalizing rationalist approaches. He stressed that tacit knowledge is conversely insightful in the social sciences thanks to its context-bound nature. It is particularly instrumental during coordination because, Loenhoff asserted, opacity in these moments is a result of a lack of tacit and not explicit knowledge. It is only through the recognition of tacit knowledge that coordination can go beyond helpless stereotyping. However, empirical research still needs to address various issues such as its origins, methodology, and how different culturally-specific groups cope internationally. Gregor Bongaerts then turned attention to Bourdieu through the use of three kinds of tacit knowledge: habitus, hexis, and repression. Bongaerts claimed that most essentially it is the conditions of the environment which will lead to successful or failed cooperation. Accordingly, conditions must be standardized for all actors involved in order to create successful coordination. Christian Meyer ended this introductory part of the workshop by highlighting that communication of any kind is fundamentally cooperative, necessitates willingness and normally features significant sociocultural differences. These differences are normally indicative of tacit knowledge and could lead to challenges in cooperation. Meyer suggested that researchers take a look at participatory interview methods as a way to tackle methodological issues facing research on tacit knowledge.

Roundtable Discussion

The workshop then proceeded to the roundtable discussion. Jaroslava Gajdošová started by drawing attention to both theoretical and methodological issues regarding social actors. She showed concern for the dominance of positivist and quantitative approaches which decontextualize and dehumanize actors. Tobias Debiel shared two important concerns to better understand tacit knowledge. It is first of all important to know which kind of knowledge one is talking about since routine behaviour such as riding a bike leaves no room for interpretation. Second of all, it is important for researchers to analyse how tacit knowledge becomes explicit and how we can explicate this process. Noemi Gal-Or responded to Christian Meyer’s comments on the instrumental role of willingness in cooperation by mentioning that
willingness can indeed occasionally be forced. She also questioned if tacit knowledge is really so different from social norms. Finally, she underlined that tacit knowledge could potentially be used a weapon in moments of apparent cooperation to realize an end. Frank Gadinger sought to find the most appropriate social theory to operationalize the concept of tacit knowledge. He shared methodological concerns and asked if it is only appropriate to observe tacit knowledge with directly observable actors in the spirit of Boltanski and not through an external perspective as provided by Bourdieu. Marlies Ahlert enquired if they is any possible relationship between cognitive psychological and cooperation and tacit knowledge.

The third part of the meeting turned to matters of international cooperation and the general usefulness of using the concept of tacit knowledge. Markus Böckenförde began this section by mentioning if legal conventionalism as seen in Commonwealth states could also be considered a form of tacit knowledge. Holger Niemann noted that tacit knowledge and international cooperation are actually doing quite well. He therefore called the importance of these cultural differences exhibited in tacit knowledge into question. He concluded that this is primarily an academic debate and is not very applicable to actual political practice. Nicole Renvert added to this scepticism by wondering how practical it is to use tacit knowledge to improve international cooperation. She suggested taking a look at situations of successful international cooperation in which she finds that successes often feature different sociocultural groups coming together and leaving their cultural context behind in order to achieve one set goal. Jaroslava Gajdošová advocated caution in how we define both success and cooperation as these are actions not devoid of power.

Conclusion

As a result, three main dimensions of the concept “tacit knowledge” were identified for further research on global cooperation issues: First, to recognize tacit knowledge as the most important form of knowledge in coordinating action between culturally different actors (and to downplay the impact of truth-seeking oriented understandings of knowledge); second, to think of new forms of coordination when cooperation fails due to standardized routines of behaviour, e.g. it can make sense to create new situative arrangements to remobilize the cultural resources of actors in negotiations; and finally to explore ethnographic methods and participant observation for empirical research on global cooperation.