

# **Learning and knowing in organisations – a phenomenological view**

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# **Learning and knowing in organisations – a phenomenological view**

Marco Zimmer

The discussion about organisational knowledge and organisational capabilities in organisation theory and strategic management rests largely on an economic background. Teece and Pisano (1994) trace its theoretical foundations back to the writings of Schumpeter (1934), Penrose (1959) and Williamson (1975). Maybe it is because of these roots that especially the knowledge management approach sometimes seems to neglect one of its central claims – not to invent the wheel twice. The huge bodies of thought about knowledge developed, for example, in philosophy and sociology seem to be ignored. Not long ago a German organisation theorist gave his opinion on this discussion: “It seems that all questions concerning knowledge have to be basically answered again with respect to organisational knowledge” (Schreyögg 2001, 4). One of the questions to be tackled is the process of learning and developing knowledge in organisations.

The following paper does not claim to take into account all bodies of thought mentioned above, but it will demonstrate that a certain part of these bodies, the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz and his successors, especially Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), can fertilise the discussion about learning and knowing in organisations.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section a brief sketch is given of the phenomenological understanding of knowledge and learning and its interdependence in everyday life. After that these theoretical tools are applied to the analysis of organisational knowledge and organisational learning.

## **1 Knowing and learning – a phenomenological view**

In his phenomenological approach Schütz distinguishes between the daily conduct of actors and their wilful planned, rational actions (1973a, 20). In the former the actor is guided by “operating instructions” (“Gebrauchsanweisungen”) (Schütz/Luckmann 1979, 37), recipes and rules of thumb. Also all kinds of so-called automatic activities – habitual, traditional, affectual ones – fall under this class as long as they are subjectively meaningful and not simply caused by biological reasons such as reflexes (Schütz 1973b, 211). If the conduct is based on a preconceived project Schütz designates it action. Both, conduct and action can be covert or overt. They may happen covertly within the head of the actor or overtly gearing into the outer

world. Although conduct happens often without conscious reflecting on the possible and desired outcomes it is based on the knowledge of the actor. Both, conduct and action are knowledgeable, to borrow a term from Giddens' structuration theory (1984, 21) who in turn has used many concepts developed by Schütz within his theory. In the following it is examined how actors use their knowledge in conduct and actions and some conclusions are drawn regarding the nature of knowledge. It will turn out that the phenomenological account of knowledge has much in common not only with structuration theory but also with the concept of knowledge developed by Polanyi (1966; 1975) (see also: Tsoukas/Vladimirou 2001).

## **1.1 What is knowledge?**

### 1.1.1 Everyday knowledge and conduct

Following Schütz (1973b) actors experience many different realities. The way they use their knowledge depends heavily on the kind of reality they are interacting with and their attitude towards this reality. To the "world of daily life" (ibid. 208) the actor has a largely pragmatic attitude. His interest in the world is primarily of practical nature and he uses his knowledge at hand which is based on his own experiences and those handed down to him by parents, teachers and fellow-men. Because he is familiar with this world he knows what has to be done in most social situations. His familiarity and his knowledge about the world rest on the conviction that the world is given and that its relevant aspects will not change – an idea for which Husserl coined the catchphrases "I-can-do-it-again" ("Ich kann immer wieder") and "and so on and so on" ("und so weiter"). This view allows the development of schemata and 'typifications'.

By typification Schütz designates the fact, that the experience based knowledge of the actor never refers to the concrete situation he faces but has a typical character "carrying open horizons of anticipated similar experiences" (Schütz 1973a, 7). Schütz illustrates the way typifications work by our ability to recognise a dog as a dog even if we do not know its breed. Seeing it, we will know that it is an animal and in particular a dog because it has the familiar features and the behaviour of a dog. More generally speaking typifications form a set of anticipations which can be confirmed or challenged by the actual experiences. If the anticipations are confirmed the content of the anticipated type will be enlarged and maybe split up into sub-types. If, for example, the dog I am facing is an Irish setter, I will know on one hand that dogs may look like an Irish setter and on the other hand I will know how Irish setters as a breed look like.

But, depending on the circumstances, the actor can get to know the thing or the person he is confronted with not only as an exemplar of the general type but also as something particular, which has individual characteristics. If he faces a dog during a walk in the park in most cases he will only be concerned with it as an example for a general type. But if it is the actor's dog he will probably more concerned with its individual characteristics than with the fact that it is a mammal and an animal, although he knows that. Thus, one specific object or a person can be typified in different ways. These typifications can also be very different in stressing certain aspects of the object and ignoring other ones. A person who is afraid of big animals may identify the Irish setter as a dangerous animal whereas he would regard a small terrier as a not-dangerous animal. How something in the outer world is typified depends on the interest of the actor and the relevance structures he uses (Schütz 1973a, 9). The biographical situation of the actor and the experiences he has made form the basis not only for the actor's stock of knowledge at hand but also for his way seeing things, which Schütz (ibid.) calls "purpose at hand". This purpose at hand defines which elements of a specific situation are relevant. Beside the typifications which are general in nature an actor may also be concerned with the particular characteristics of a specific thing or a person, which make the thing or the person unique.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in a phenomenological account an actor is always concerned with only some of the aspects of any particular typified object. Which aspects of an object or a situation are considered to be relevant depends on the actor's definition of the situation which in turn is dependent on the prior knowledge of the actor resulting from his own experiences and principles "taken over uncritically from parents and teachers" (Schütz 1971a, 73).

Typifications are not only used with respect to objects but also in social encounters. The reality of the actor is populated with individuals he is interacting with. Some of these people he knows very well, others hardly. But in most cases he knows to which type a person belongs (at least in the given situation) and can act according to this typification. The social evaluation of actors often depends on their ability to use the 'right' typifications in social encounters, that is their ability to act knowledgeable (Giddens 1984, 4, 26).

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<sup>1</sup> This difference between the general properties of an object and its peculiarities reminds of the difference between subsidiary and focal awareness made by Polanyi (1974, 55-65): focal awareness focuses a specific object whereas subsidiary awareness concentrates on the embeddedness of the object in a broader context. For Polanyi (1974, 56) both types of awareness are mutually exclusive: "If a pianist shifts his attention from the piece he is playing to the observation of what he is doing with his fingers while playing it, he gets confused and may have to stop."

Schütz stresses that in daily life actors are not interested in aspects like the certainty, the logical coherence of means-end relations or the origins of their knowledge. Instead they refer to a stock of knowledge which is often in a very incoherent and confused state (1971a, 72-73):

*“Clear and distinct experiences are intermingled with vague conjectures; suppositions and prejudices cross well-proven evidences; motives, means and ends, as well as causes and effects, are strung together without clear understanding of their real connections. There are everywhere gaps, intermissions, discontinuities.”*

The only important fact is, that this knowledge enables the actor to master his life and to have a good grip on the social situations he gets in. Schütz (1971a, 73) calls this kind of knowledge “cook-book knowledge” because as a cook-book provides the reader with all the knowledge he needs to make an apple pie, it provides the actor with all he needs to deal with the routine matters of daily life. The application of this knowledge often also happens routinely on a level of practical consciousness (Giddens 1984, 6-8, 26).

This kind of knowledge applied in the daily life is primarily concerned with action, enabling the actor to interact with the outer world, regardless whether it is social or not. That implies that it is dependent on the context and the way the actor defines it. Furthermore it is dynamic because it provides not only a framework which enables the actor to make sense of the situation he faces, the information he gets and the experiences he makes, but it influences if and how these impressions are incorporated in the existing stock of knowledge. Thus, it is both, an outcome and a process which is able to change itself. Blackler (1995, 1039) argues that knowledge should be seen as an activity (knowing) and as enactment and Orlikowski (2002, 253) describes it as an “active and recurrent accomplishment”. The prominent feature of daily conduct is that the knowledgeable activities take place in a routinely way: the actor assessing the situation and deciding what to do does so without having to think much about it. The daily life is a *durée* of activity, a continuous flow of conduct which is based on the conviction of reversible time (Giddens 1984, 35). It can be segmented by a reflexive moment of attention on part of the actor. This happens when the actor is asked to supply a reason for his conduct or to explicate certain features for his activity (*ibid.*, 73). But also an interruption or an unexpected incident may lead to a breakdown of the daily routine and force the actor to reflect and plan his activities.

### 1.1.2 Knowledge and planned action

Schütz (1973c, 67) uses the term “action” to designate human conduct which is devised by the actor in advance. Actions do only happen if the actor steps out of the daily flow of conduct

and starts to think about the future, his plans and aims and the possibilities to reach them. As conduct action “may be covert – for example the attempt to solve a scientific problem mentally – or overt, gearing into the outer world” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> At least overt action always aims at a certain state of affairs to be reached at the end of the action.

This state of affairs to be reached has to be fantasised by the actor before he can start to think over the phases of action necessary to reach it. Schütz (ibid., 68) uses the metaphor: “I have to have some idea of the structure to be erected before I can draft the blueprints”. Starting from this outcome he reconstructs the steps which will have resulted in this state of affairs. The consequences of this kind of planning are (Schütz 1973a, 20-23):

1. All drafts of future acts are based on the knowledge the actor has at the time of projecting. This knowledge belongs to prior experiences of the actor and/or is passed to him by its social environment (ibid., 13-15). The knowledge at hand at the time of projecting must be different from that which the actor will have when the now merely fantasised state of affairs will have been materialised (Schütz 1973c, 69)
2. Planning rests on the conviction of repeatability mentioned above. Recipes and causal textures (Weick 1979, 53) (a term not used by Schütz) which were successful before will work again. Thus, planning requires the use of ‘typifications’. After all every act is unique. Generally the circumstances are different and at the very least the actor has become older and has acquired more experience. To find out or, perhaps better, to construct a similarity between the actual act and acts which were successfully carried out in the past, it is necessary to suppress the irrelevant aspects of the situation as it is proposed and to concentrate on the typical ones. This knowledge about relevant aspects of the desired state of affairs and the way to reach it can also necessarily only be the present knowledge of the actor.
3. Schütz (1973a, 21-22) argues that the particular time perspective of planning shows that it is important to distinguish two kinds of motivation of action: On the one hand action is motivated by the state of affairs which is to be brought about by it. This kind of motive, which from the point of view of the actor refers to the future, Schütz designates the “in-order-to-motive”. On the other hand there is the class of motives for choosing the project of action itself. The roots for this motives can be traced back in the past, to the life history

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<sup>2</sup> Schütz (1973c, 67) stresses that covert action although projected needs not to be purposeful. Without the intention to carry out the project it stays mere fancying.

of the actor and the experiences he made. This kind of motive is called “because-motives”. “Because-motives” are not only the causes for the selection of a project. They determine on the one hand the range of alternatives taken into consideration by the actor and influence on the other hand which steps or phases of action the planning actor regards to be necessary in order to reach the desired state of affairs. Because the actor can only refer to his present knowledge when he has to decide which alternatives he has and which ways of acting seem to be feasible, “*at least as to their types*” (Schütz 1973c, 73, Emphasis in the original).

4. If other persons are involved in the projects fantasised by the actor they are always involved not as individuals but as typifications. Even if the actor knows the respective person well, he cannot know what the person will do in the future. He has to anticipate his or her actions and reactions. He might be able to do so more exactly because of his familiarity with the person, but nevertheless he has to refer to typical actions and reactions.

This rough and abbreviated sketch of the phenomenological concept of planned action shows that the knowledge applied does not differ much from that used in the daily conduct. Indeed, the actor reflects upon what is going to do. He even may start to question and doubt parts of his knowledge at hand which he has taken for granted so far. But he can do so only on the base of other parts of his knowledge which remain unquestioned and which may be seen on a higher order (Schütz 1973c, 93). If the actor questioned all his knowledge at hand he would get into a situation where he would have no idea of what to do. The parts of knowledge the actor uses to question other parts of his knowledge are the blind spot of this observation (Luhmann 1992, 85). The relation between these two parts of knowledge is similar to the relation between “because-motives” and “in-order-to-motives”. The former can only be observed and reflected by the actor, if he stops reconstructing the steps necessary in order to reach a certain aim (Schütz 1973c, 71).

The knowledge applied in (planned) action is mostly composed of typifications. These sediments of previous experiences can be more or less specific depending on the actor’s familiarity with the typified object or person. In the interaction with a person which the actor hardly knows, for example a policemen, the actor will refer to very general ideas how to treat a stranger and especially a policeman. If the actor is quite familiar with the person, he might be able to anticipate better how the person will react to certain circumstances, but he still has to rely on his anticipations if he involves the person in his plans.

The case of planned action sheds a light on a feature of typifications which is very important for relation between learning and knowing. Grounding the projection of action on typifications means that the actor anticipates the projected action as feasible. This anticipation rests upon the experience-based conviction that the action, *at least as to its type*, would have been feasible if it had occurred in the past. Schütz (1973c, 73) stresses the importance of the restriction “as least to its type”, because without this restriction nothing novel could ever be projected. Strictly speaking, nothing could ever be projected, because any projection refers to the future and the future will always be different from the present. This implies that typifications have a kind of emptiness which on the one hand makes them applicable to a range of manifestations of a type. On the other hand this emptiness leads to the fact that no precise expectations and plans are possible (Schütz 1971b, 296-291). The consequences of this are discussed later on. Before that the reason given by Schütz are discussed why the experience-based knowledge of the actor can form an suitable base for social interactions.

## **1.2 The social character of personal knowledge**

The knowledge the actor uses in daily conduct and in planning actions is his personal knowledge but it is not his private knowledge. As Schütz (1973a, 10) stresses the actor nor lives in a private world neither applies only private knowledge. Instead “it is from the outset an intersubjective world of culture” and the knowledge about this world is also intersubjective and socialised. Nearly nothing in the outer world has a meaning by itself. The outer world – especially the cultural objects – are only understandable by referring to the human activities and intentions of which they are sediments. An actor is not able

*“[to] understand a tools without knowing the purpose for which it was designed, a sign or symbol without knowing what it stands for in the mind of the person uses it, an institution without understanding what it means for the individuals who orient their behavior with regard to its existence” (Schütz 1973, 10-11).*

Schütz (ibid., 11-15) regards three aspects of knowledge as important for the fact that it can get its social character:

- a) The reciprocity of the perspective
- b) The social origin of knowledge
- c) The social distribution of knowledge

*a) The reciprocity of the perspectives*

Schütz argues, that in his natural attitude an actor takes it for granted that intelligent fellow-men exist and that the objects of the world known by the actor are also accessible to their knowledge. Finally, the actor knows that the fellow-men have, as a matter of principle, the same knowledge. But the actor is also aware of the fact that the “same” object must mean something different to him and to any of his fellow-men. The causes for these differences can be found in the fact that, independent of all the similarities between the actor and his fellow-men, there are differences in their biographically determined situations resulting in differences in their respective systems of relevance and in differences in the typifications of cultural objects. Schütz argues that actors usually assume that the differences originating in the unique biographical situations are irrelevant for all practical purposes and that the fellow-men would use the same typifications as the actor does, if they were in his place and vice versa. This general thesis of reciprocal perspectives constitutes a range of shared knowledge which is conceived to be objective, at least for the actor and his fellow-men. Because not only the actor but all fellow-men use this general thesis, the actor can take his and his fellow-men’s private knowledge of the world as taken for granted.

*b) The social origin of knowledge*

The second aspect which contributes to this character of the private and personal knowledge is its social origin. Most of what the actor knows originates not from his personal experience but is socially derived. The actor’s friends, colleagues and teachers have taught him not only the specific knowledge how to interact with particular objects in the outer world but also they have taught him how the environment is to be defined and how typical constructs have to be formed in accordance with the system of relevance accepted from the point of view of the in-group. Because all members of the in-group are taught this in a similar way they are all provided with comparable ways of seeing and interpreting the world which in turn contributes to forming the in-group. Schütz (1973a, 14) stresses the bearing of the language for transmitting this socially derived knowledge: “any name includes a typification and generalization referring to the relevance system prevailing in the linguistic in-group which found the named thing significant enough to provide a separate term for it.”

*c) The social distribution of knowledge*

As everybody knows nobody knows everything. Even in the in-group knowledge is socially distributed and the actual knowledge of the actor is merely the potential knowledge of his fellow-men. The general thesis of reciprocal perspectives takes into account that “not only

what an individual knows differs from what his neighbor knows, but also how both know the ‘same’ facts” (ibid.). Schütz argues that every individual’s stock of knowledge at hand is at any moment of his life structured as having zones of various degrees of clarity, distinctness and precision. This structure is biographically determined and the actor is aware of it. Thus, what he knows is who knows. He constructs “types of the Other’s field of acquaintance and of the scope and texture of his knowledge” (ibid.).

The way the typifications of the other are formed depends on the social proximity of the particular other (Schütz 1973a, 15-19). The members of the in-group are grasped as individuals in a unique biographical situation (although only fragments of their personality and their biography are known by the actor). Other people can only be grasped “by forming a construct of a typical way of behavior, a typical pattern of underlying motives, of typical attitudes of a personality type, of which the Other and his conduct under scrutiny, both outside my observational reach, are just instances or exemplars” (Schütz 1973a, 17). To be sure, also in his attempts to understand people he knows personally the actor has to use typifications, but these are – at least partly – grounded on a more detailed knowledge of the other, his biographical situation and therewith his motives of acting. An increase in the anonymity of the other involves a decrease in the fullness of content of the knowledge about the other until in a state of complete anonymisation the other individual are supposed to be interchangeable.

On behalf of the actor this constructing of the other has a corollary in a process of self-typification which takes place if the actor enters into interaction with the typified other. In constructing his type the actor typifies himself and develops a role which he regards as appropriate to the type of the other. Schütz (1973a, 19) sees this self-typification as the base for Mead’s (1934) distinction between the “I” and the “Me” in the social self. Bearing in mind that the typifications used in these interactions are socially derived and approved to a considerable extent it becomes clear that they can become institutionalised because there are good reasons for the actors to take them for granted.

## **2 Learning and understanding**

For Schütz the experiences of the actor, his biographical situation and his systems of relevance are the key to understand his conduct and the way he plans action. The actor uses schemes to typify object, situations and persons and he also can only anticipate future events and results of his own acts by referring to these schemes (Schütz 1971c, 233-238; 1974, 105-111). These schemes are the core of his knowledge which is like a collection of recipes. The

touchstone of this knowledge is its pragmatic value, not its logical consistency or theoretical clearness.

Regarding this theoretical background learning can occur in different ways. Some present learning as a kind of by-product of knowledgeable conduct and action whereas others show learning as a particular activity. But what is learned always depends on the typifications the actor already has.

In the daily conduct the actor mostly learns, so to say, by the way, because every time he applies his typifications in a way that the anticipated results are achieved not only the pragmatic value of the typifications is proven but also is its scope or content enlarged and sometimes split up into sub-types, as we have seen. The actor may experience something new but what he experiences can easily be integrated within the existing typifications because of their “open horizons” (Schütz 1973a, 7). This kind of learning has much in common with concepts used by the gestalt psychology to which Schütz (1973d) sometimes refers. The relations between knowledge, action, cognition and learning can be described in a perceptual circle. In the perceptual circle the schema of the present environment directs movements and exploratory activities. This makes more information available thus modifying the schema further (Neisser 1976, 54). In this way of learning every experience and cognition are interpreted in the light of the existing typifications. An object is not seen “as it is” but as it appears to the actor referring to his knowledge at hand (Schütz 1973d, 108). Thus, learning which happens this way will be in most cases affirmative.

The is true as well for the learning processes which take place the projecting of an action and the accomplishment of this action (Schütz 1971b, 288-291). As long as the actor succeed in accomplishing his project as anticipated, he will make only new experiences which can be easily integrated within the pre-existing ones. And again he will inevitably but not consciously try to integrate his experiences within the schemes which remain unquestioned during the phases of projecting and accomplishment.

If the typifications of the actor are challenged because surprisingly something unexpected happens the actor experiences a “shock” (Schütz 1973b, 232; 1973e, 343), a radical modification in the tension of his consciousness. He finds himself in the situation of a stranger who cannot longer trust in his knowledge at hand because it has proven to be faulty at least in parts. Such a crisis can arise because one or more of the following assumptions have turned out to be misleading (Schütz 1971d, 96):

- (Social) life will continue to be the same as it has been so far.

- It is sufficient to rely on the socially derived knowledge, without the necessity to understand its origin or its real meaning.
- In the ordinary course of affairs it is sufficient to know something about the general type and style of events, the actor may encounter, in order to manage and control them.
- Neither the schemes and typifications used by the actor nor the underlying assumptions are his private knowledge, but they are accepted and shared by his fellow-men.

The difference between an actor being confronted with a sudden breakdown of this system of assumptions and a stranger approaching a new ‘culture’, for example an employee joining a company, is that the stranger is aware of the fact that he may have to call into question everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of this group.

The history of the group may be accessible to the stranger and he may know that culture of the group is a result of its history but the group’s history is not an integral part of his biography as it is the history of his home group. Thus, inevitably the stranger will start to “interpret his new social environment in terms of his thinking as usual [...] – an idea which necessarily will soon prove inadequate” (Schütz 1971d, 97).

The stranger faces two difficulties in becoming a part of the new group which has to overcome (ibid., 99-100):

1. The schemes accepted and used by the group presuppose that every user has an accepted place within the group. In the beginning the stranger is placed at beyond the border of the territory covered by the schemes. Therefore, the schemes and typifications generally accepted in the group are not applicable to him.
2. The schemes and typifications used by the group represent a well matched unit only for the members of the group. The outsider has to translate every scheme and typification into the terms of his home group, provided that, interpretative equivalents exist at all. But he cannot be sure that his interpretations meet the meanings given by the members of the new group. Thus, what seems united to the members of the new group may fall into pieces for the stranger.

Schütz (1971d, 103) stresses that the stranger needs explicit knowledge of the typifications and schemes used within the group and has to inquire into the reasons for using them as they are used. This comes close to the stages of expertise described by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988) who argue that a beginner has to stick to explicit rules and knowledge whereas experts often only use vague schemes. Where the explicit rules and knowledge which underlies the schemes

used are not explained to the stranger he has to infer them from his observations of the members of the group. It is obvious that the schemes and typifications of the new group which provide a shelter for the members of the group are a lasting challenge for the stranger which is hard to master. The only way to master it lies in a continuous process of inquiry into the cultural patterns of the approached group. If the stranger succeeds these patterns will become also taken for granted to him, but there is no guarantee that he will do so. It is always possible that the stranger stays a marginal man, a cultural hybrid not able or willing to substitute the new cultural patterns for that of his home group.

Because of their not completed adaptation these actors are often able to discover small events or the rising of a crisis which remain unnoticed by the members of the group, who rely on the continuance of the customary way of life (Schütz 1971d, 104). The reasons for this ability can be found in the stranger's need to acquire full knowledge of the schemes used in the group and in his own experience "that the normal way of life is far less guaranteed than it seems" (ibid.).

### **3 Organisational learning and organisational knowledge**

#### **3.1 Organisational knowledge**

Using the phenomenological approach the question what organisational knowledge is can be answered in short by saying that it is *shared* personal knowing. The emphasis lies on both adjectives, shared and personal. On the one hand it is personal. This is in a line with Polanyi (1975, 44) who stresses that all knowing is personal knowing. There is no other entity which can know. On the other hand the prominent feature of organisational knowledge is that it is shared and accepted by the members of the organisation. The members represent a kind of in-group which takes this knowledge for granted. But before inquiring further into this question the content of the knowledge should be explained.

As phenomenology argues the knowledge in general and especially the knowledge shared in social groups consists of typifications, schemes and recipes. It is a knowing how to make sense of situations and people and how to act and react. It is more an activity and an enactment than a collection of facts. This is in line with many definitions made in the literature (Blackler 1995; Tsoukas/Vladimirov 2001; Orlikowski 2002; Boisot/Canals 2004) which also see a close connection between knowledge and action. Referring to the phenomenological approach it can be said that knowledge other than information only exists in action (and conduct) and has to prove its value in it. (Action is used here in a broad sense which includes

mental acts as well.) Being based on the sediments of individual and socially derived experiences knowledge enables the actor to draw distinctions (Tsoukas/Vladimirov 2001, 979), to decide which are the relevant and typical features of a situation or person and to behave or act in an appropriate way. That is, in a way which is accepted by his relevant social environment. Phenomenology argues that for this social acceptance the prerequisite lies in the intersubjective nature of the personal knowledge of the actor, its social origin and distribution. This intersubjective character of knowledge is also the key to a phenomenological understanding of organisational knowledge.

It is generally accepted in organisation theory that firms and industries often have their own culture: specific ways of seeing or defining themselves and their environment: Employees joining a firm have to be socialised (Schein 1971), managers entering a new industry have to learn industry recipes (Spender 1989) and successful corporations often develop a dominant logic (Prahalad/Bettis 1986; Bettis/Prahalad 1995) which highlights the aspects of the corporation and its environment which are supposed to be important for the success and often ignores the other ones. Studies have shown that the way technology is used is highly dependent on the typifications generally used in an organisation (Barley 1986; Orlikowski 1992).

From a phenomenological point of view these observations can be explained by considering an organisation as a group with its own relevance structures, typifications and cognitive schemes. The existence of these schemes is a prerequisite of collective work which needs a common understanding of the people working together. The shared organisational knowledge provides the members of the organisation with the surety they need in order to concentrate on their respective tasks. It defines the appropriate cognitive categories and action options to be used within the organisation (Weick 1979; Scott 1995, 48-49). Although personal in its nature, this knowledge can become part of the institutionalised practices of the organisation by its recurrent usage of its members. Thus, it becomes a structural property of the organisation which is instantiated in the organisational practices (Giddens 1984, 17) in "active and recurrent accomplishment[s]" (Orlikowski 2002, 253).

Referring to Argyris and Schön (1996, 13-15) it can be said that the theories-in-use represent the type of organisational knowledge a phenomenological account is concerned with. If from a phenomenological point of view espoused theories would be labelled organisational knowledge at all is at least questionable. The theories need to be shared by a significant part of the organisation to be labelled so. But, even if all members of an organisation use this espoused

theories they often lack the feature of being taken for granted, especially if they deviate much from the theories-in-use.

One salient feature of the usage of this knowledge is that it is mostly applied on a level of practical consciousness. The members of the organisation are not aware that they refer to it in their daily activities. If they were aware of this, the knowledge would lose, at least in part, its enabling character which rests in the fact that it is taken for granted. A second important aspect is that it is, again at least in part, inevitably used even if the actor wants or is forced to question it. This casts a light on the possibilities of organisational learning and unlearning.

### **3.2 Organisational learning and unlearning**

From a phenomenological point of view learning cannot be separated from knowing and doing. Every knowledgeable action contains an act of learning because the actor experiences something he cannot have anticipated precisely before. As we have seen two kinds of learning can be distinguished: affirmative learning and learning which is caused by a breakdown of the usual schemes.

Again similarities can be found to established theories about organisational learning, especially the theory of Agyris and Schön (1996). Affirmative learning has much in common with single-loop learning and the learning processes caused by the breakdown of schemes may lead to a kind of double-loop learning. There is also an obvious resemblance to the differentiation between exploration and exploitation in organisational learning (March 1991). But also the specific contribution of a phenomenological account becomes evident.

The first and most important insight is mentioned at the beginning of this section: Knowing, doing and learning are indivisible. Regardless if the typifications and schemes used by the actor are confirmed or not, he learns from their application. That means that organisational learning is an ongoing activity in its daily conduct and an organisation cannot avoid to learn.

The second aspect which is highlighted is that it is not possible to ignore the formerly known during a process of learning. Even in the attempt to develop something total new the actors have to refer to the knowledge they have at the time they are projecting the innovation. And if they want to question their knowledge at hand they can do so only by referring to higher order principles which itself are sediments of personal or socially derived experiences. As Schütz (1973c, 93) puts it: “any choice refers to pre-experienced decisions of a higher order, upon which the alternative at hand is founded – as any doubt refers to a pre-experienced empirical certainty which becomes questionable in the process of doubting.” And he (ibid., 78) quotes

John Dewey: “Choice is not the emergence of preference out of indifference. It is the emergence of a unified preference out of competing preferences.” Knowledge is always sticky – at least in part.

This aspect is also important for the approaches appealing to organisational forgetting (e.g. Nystrom/Starbuck 1984). Phenomenology simply answers that unlearning is only possible, if at all, if it refers to higher order knowledge which tells the actor or the organisation what should be unlearned. But for reasons lying in the very nature of organisational knowledge – being taken for granted and forming the schemes which guide conduct and action – it is hardly imaginable how organisations should be able to unlearn deliberately. These doubts are supported by empirical evidence which shows that the development of the inkjet at Hewlett Packard was only possible after the development team was totally separated from the other parts of the company which had been involved in the development of the laser printers (Leonard-Barton 1992, 122).

Last but no least the phenomenological approach can help to bridge the gap between personal and organisational knowledge and therewith the gap between individual learning and organisational learning. The bridge is build by its concept of the intersubjective character of knowledge. The general thesis of reciprocal perspectives which is a valid construct used by the actors because of the social origins of knowledge and its social distribution shows that for the most part the knowledge used by the actor in social encounters is not his private knowledge but social valid knowledge. Applied to organisations this means the following: After the actor has left the phase of the stranger, that is after he has learned the schemes and typifications used in the organisation he will use them and therewith contribute to their institutionalisation. The concepts of the social origins and the social distribution of knowledge show how knowledge is passed on within a social system and how ‘new’ knowledge is incorporated in the body of organisational knowledge: Either by handing it to the colleagues or by referring to the expertise of one or more colleagues. The stickiness of the shared knowledge provides the stability needed to assure that the organisational knowledge can stay what it is – a taken for granted orientation guiding the conduct and action of the organisation’s members.

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