Anti–Foundational Knowledge Management

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INTRODUCTION

Under the influence of Enlightenment epistemological thought, the social sciences have exhibited a distinct tendency to prefer deterministic[1] explanations of social phenomena. In the sociology of knowledge, for example, "foundational" researchers seek to arrive at objective knowledge of social phenomena through the application of "social scientific methodolog[ies] based on the eternal truths of human nature, purged of historical and cultural prejudices" and which also ignore the subjective *intrusions* of social actors (Hekman, 1986, p. 5). This article argues that "foundationalist" perspectives heavily influence theory and praxis in knowledge management. "Foundationalist" thinking is particularly evident in the posited role of IT in creating, capturing, and diffusing knowledge in social and organisational contexts. In order to address what many would consider to be a deficiency in such thinking, a constructivist "antifoundationalist" perspective is presented that considers socially constructed knowledge as being simultaneously "situated" and "distributed" and which recognizes its role in shaping social action within "communities-of-practice." In ontological terms, the constructivist "antifoundational" paradigm posits that realities are constructed from multiple, intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and which are dependent on their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bruner, 1990). One of the central assumptions of this paradigm is that there exist multiple realities with differences among them that cannot be resolved through rational processes or increased data. Insights drawn from this short article are addressed to academics and practitioners in order to illustrate the considerable difficulties inherent in representing individual knowledge and of the viability of isolating, capturing, and managing knowledge in organisational contexts with or without the use of IT.

BACKGROUND: WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT?

The point of departure for the present treatise on the concept of "knowledge" is a definition that is in good standing within the IS field and which is congruent with extant perspectives across the social sciences (e.g., Grant, 1996). In their book *Working Knowledge,* Davenport and Prusak (1998) posit that:

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents and repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms. (p. 3)

While this definition is, on the surface, all-embracing and without contradiction it does, however, possess certain weaknesses that can only be illustrated by a consideration of taken-for-granted issues of ontology. This involves a description of the relationships that exist between the individual and his social world; that is between the knowing social actor and the social groupings and contexts in which he or she participates and exists, and in which knowledge is socially constructed. In terms of the present analysis, this task begins with a brief consideration of the constructivist, "antifoundational" philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer in order to sketch out the ontological basis of knowledge. This undertaking is particularly timely given the recent emphasis on knowledge management, which is described "[as] an integrated, systematic approach to identifying, managing, and sharing all of an enterprise's information assets, including databases, documents, policies, and procedures, as well as previously unarticulated expertise and experience held by individual workers."[2] Whereas the

ability of organisations to identify, manage, and share, databases, documents, and codified procedures using IT is not in question, identifying, managing, and sharing tacit knowledge using IT is questionable, as the following treatise on knowledge illustrates.

An Anti-Foundational Perspective on Knowledge

In response to the question "What is knowledge and what is it not?" we argue that knowledge cannot ever become "embedded…in documents and repositories [and] also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms." Why? Precisely because it is impossible to isolate and represent objectively "a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight." Certainly, as Bruner (1990) points out, a social actor's knowledge resides not only in his head, but also in the notes, underlined book passages, manuals, and guides he consults, and in the computer-based data he has access to. This is, in many respects, a shorthand description by Bruner. Social actors use such sources because of their inability to recall every source of data they have interpreted and laid down in memory (see Goleman, 1996)—hence they are considered sources of personal information only for the actor who has painstakingly sought out, collated, and put into context the data contained in each personal artefact. Accordingly, contextual, temporally based data makes the transition to knowledge only when an actor interprets (or subsequently reinterprets) them in order to inform his or her understanding of some phenomenon or other. This is a fairly straightforward task for the individual who has, over time, constructed a personal database of the type described. However, others who access the personal "notes, underlined passages, manuals, etc." that constitute such databases may interpret their content differently and not come to the same understanding, as they may not have the same pre-existing ground of understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon in question as the original author[3]. All this is indicative of the "situated" and "distributed" and "temporal" nature of knowledge[4] (hence the origins of Hermeneutics in biblical studies and philosophy): But how does it relate to the social context and ground of knowledge?

As part of the interpretive process that characterizes all understanding, meaning is attributed to data within the context of the actor's constantly evolving "lived experience" and under the sway of a "tradition" (Gadamer, 1975). Heidegger (1976) and Gadamer (1975) illustrate that the "lived experience" of social actors arises out of the web of encounters and dialogues that characterize individual existence or "Being-in-the-world." The concept of "lived experience" describes the relationship between social actors and other beings that populate the tradition or culture in which they are embedded (in a Heideggerian sense, the term "beings" refers not only to other humans but all social phenomena). In delineating the constitution of "lived experience," Heidegger (1976) points out that social actors are "thrown" into a "life-world" where their existence has, from the outset, been "tuned" or "situated" to be a specific existence with other beings, within a specific "tradition," and with a specific history. However, in order to cope with their "throwness" social actors come ready equipped with a "fore-knowledge" or, in Gadamerian terms, a "prejudice"-laden "effective-historical consciousness," that enables them to interpret, make sense of, and partake in their social world. "Fore-knowledge" is, in many ways, knowledge of the "ready-to-hand" (Zuhanden) that constitutes an actor's "life world." Thus, the "ready-to-hand" possess a degree of familiarity that effectively sees them dissolved into the unreflective background of the actor's daily existence. If, however, something happens that results in a "breakdown" in understanding, social phenomena become the object of "theoretical" reasoning and acquire the ontological status of being "present-at-hand" (i.e., a Vorhanden) until the "breakdown" has been repaired. As Gadamer illustrates, social actors must give recognition to the influence that "effective-historical consciousness" exerts if they are to work out their "prejudices."

The process of "working out" prejudices and of repairing breakdowns in understanding is governed by what Gadamer called the hermeneutic "circle of understanding." Here, the "whole" that constitutes a phenomenon is apprehended by the cyclical interpretation of its constituent "parts" as they relate to each other and to the "whole." In so doing, an actor interprets relevant data as "present-at-hand" using a form of question and answer called the dialectic (Socratic, Hegelian, and Analytic-Reductionist—see Butler, 1998). Thus, the actor's understanding of constituent "parts" will be consolidated, and in so doing the horizons or perspectives of interpreter and interpreted will gradually fuse. Thus, in repairing breakdowns, a "fusion of horizons" (of understanding) takes place between interpreter and interpreted.

The pivotal role of language in the interpretive process of understanding has been noted by Gadamer (1975). Accordingly, Bruner (1990) argues that institutional contexts are socially constructed through the narratives of constituent actors. Thus, over time and through highly complex and ill-defined social processes constituted by a polyphonic dialectic, there evolves a shared understanding that constitutes a culture and tradition. In addition, it is clear from Gadamer (1975) that the authorita-