22 Communication Theory and Practical Knowledge: What Communicators Don't Know Can Help Them

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This brief commentary focuses on one particular matter: the complex relationship between what the communication researcher (or theorist or investigator) believes, knows, claims, or does, and what the social actor believes, knows, claims, or does. In one way or another, this topic is touched on in all five essays, though it is especially prominent in those of Craig and Giddens.

A disclaimer at the outset. This is a particularly complicated topic, and no pretense is made of a satisfactory comprehensive treatment; the limitations of space inevitably mean the elision of important questions and a certain simplification of claims and positions.

A useful starting point is the idea that communication research involves (*inter alia*) reconstruction of the knowledge of social actors. This is, of course, a familiar idea. In these essays, this aim is perhaps most evident in the essays by Giddens and Craig. In Giddens, this focus is expressed as the study of the "knowledgeable human agent," and specifically the study of "practical consciousness"—"all the things that we know as social actors to make social life 'happen.'" For Craig, practical theory—the theoretical facet of the practical discipline of communication—is "a somewhat idealized reconstruction of the logics-in-use of practitioners." (A reminder: neither Giddens nor Craig sees reconstruction of actors' knowledge as the sole aim of research. For Giddens, this aim omits consideration of the unintended consequences of action; for Craig, it is but one step toward the larger aim of the cultivation of communicative *praxis*.)

But a particular conception of "actors' knowledge" underlies this idea. Specifically: What actors know isn't necessarily what they consciously know. Craig (drawing on Kaplan's discussion of scientists' logics-in-use) points out that an actor's logic-in-use may well be only "tacitly understood" by the actor. As

Giddens says, "we cannot necessarily give discursive form to" practical consciousness. Hence, as Giddens emphasizes, "the discursive giving of reasons and accounts" does not exhaust "the knowledgeability of human agents." This, too, is a familiar path. Ever since Chomsky's conceptualization of linguistic knowledge as tacit knowledge (invoked here by Giddens), we have become accustomed to thinking of actors' conduct as guided by actors' tacit knowledge.

Notice, then: This conception of actors' knowledge treats it as something that may be unavailable to actors for conscious consideration and reflection. Actors may know things, without being able to reflect consciously on what is known; by contrast, of course, the (successful) researcher *can* reflect on such knowledge. This way of treating actors' knowledge can give rise to worries about some sort of unwarranted "cognitive elitism." (For expressions of such worries in the current essays, see Krippendorff's discussion of "inequality in the cognitive capacity" claimed by researchers and denied to subjects, or Rosengren's discussion of the "cognitive elitism" of both administrative and critical research.) But it is important to distinguish between unavailability-in-fact and unavailability-in-principle. A researcher may well know something about the actor's knowledge that the actor does not consciously know; but this is not the same as a researcher's knowing something about the actor's knowledge that the actor *cannot* consciously know. The sort of unavailability of interest here is unavailability-in-fact, and thus I want to distinguish two sorts of actors' knowledge: that which is, and that which is not, currently available to actors for conscious consideration and reflection.

A recognition of these two sorts of actors' knowledge ("available" and "unavailable" knowledge) suggests some emendation of Giddens's treatment of the study of practical consciousness. Broadly put, Giddens's essay suggests two general foci for social scientific work: the elucidation of "practical consciousness" (actors' tacit knowledge), or the investigation of the unintended consequences of purposive action. Giddens seems to want to treat the latter as far more illuminating and important. The study of practical consciousness will at best commonly yield "uninteresting" generalizations. After all, "actors always know what they are doing (under some description or potential description), but the consequences of what they do characteristically escape what they intend."

But surely Giddens's view is constricted by his emphasis on *convention* as what underlies behavioral regularities (and thus as what underlies "type one" generalizations). Giddens seems to treat the tacit knowledge underlying social conduct as simply being knowledge of social rules or conventions, and so takes the relevant tacit knowledge underlying behavioral regularities to be knowledge of conventions. But in fact social conduct can be influenced by other sorts of cognitive states that are equally tacit, equally unavailable. And, correspondingly, there can be behavioral regularities not associated with convention or social rules (a familiar example might be the sorts of regularities taken to be associated with particular personality characteristics). There is no reason not to treat these as involving the knowledgeability of human agents (no reason, that is, not to treat these regularities as reflecting underlying cognitive states; personality charac-

teristics, for example, might be represented as constellations of certain sorts of underlying beliefs and goals). And even if one grants the arguable claim that identification of convention-based regularities may not be especially interesting or illuminating (arguable, if one contrasts the traffic-signal example with, say, regularities from turn-taking systems), identification of non-convention-based regularities may offer substantial insight and illumination to social actors.

Here, I think, one might wonder whether Freud has not been insufficiently appreciated. I make reference not to any specific aspect of Freud's account of the mental, or even to his general theoretical framework, but rather to what is arguably Freud's most consequential contribution to our thinking about human behavior: the idea that there can be meaningful behavioral regularities of which the actor is unaware. Such behavioral regularities may not be convention-based, yet still may be explained as consequences of the actor's cognitive state (what the actor knows or believes or wants). To say that in such a case "actors always know what they are doing (under some description or potential description)" (Giddens) is to sweep the crucial point under the parenthetical rug. It is precisely the researcher's (analyst's) *redescription* of the conduct—in terms previously unavailable to the actor—that permits the identification of meaningful regularities of which the actor is unaware (and that are not convention-based).

It is in that sense that one may say that actors *don't* always know what they are doing (i.e., their conduct is always potentially open to redescription in an illuminating way). Yes, actors "know" what they are doing, in the sense that their cognitive states give rise to their conduct; and yes, actors "know" what they are doing, in the sense that they can provide *some* discursive description of their conduct and *some* account of its basis. But we already have acknowledged that the actor's account of the conduct may not be a veridical representation, and we should similarly acknowledge that the actor's discursive description of the conduct is not intrinsically privileged. Researchers may provide new vocabularies for the description of conduct, and the ability to redescribe conduct with such vocabularies makes possible the detection and description of meaningful regularities of which actors are unaware.

To be sure, researchers' vocabularies do not live in isolation from the vocabularies used by social actors. There is, as Giddens puts it, an "absorption" of researchers' concepts into the social world. But precisely because what actors are doing *isn't* always available to them—precisely because researchers can provide novel and illuminating descriptions that otherwise are unavailable to social actors—it is possible for researchers to pursue the sorts of aims that (for example) Krippendorff and Craig and Hall urge for communication studies. To think of research as resulting in "the increased competence of the community to understand itself" (Krippendorff), or to recognize the intertwined descriptive and normative aspects of communication as a practical enterprise (Craig), or to conceive of the critical enterprise as ongoing and open-ended (in the fashion Hall does)—all these are enabled by the possibility of researchers devising illuminating vocabularies that may for a time be unavailable in fact, but are decidedly not unavailable in principle, to actors.