

Collectivities and Tacit Knowledge
Harry Collins, Cardiff University

I think the best I can do is just start with the final contribution (Moodey 2016) and use its themes to provide the framework for an explanation of where I stand. I would certainly like everyone to know whether they agree or disagree with me as I think striving for clarity is fundamental value of the scientific form of life and I consider my work to be informed by scientific values. That is, I intend my work to be repeatable by anyone who puts themselves in the same position even though my empirical sociology uses what are generally referred to as ‘subjective’ methods: I hang around and interact with the people I am trying to understand until I understand them.

This method, incidentally, is integrally related to what I think about the nature of collectivities. I think collectivities are our major source of knowledge. Now, Moodey says ‘no one has been able to persuade me that Collins does not *really* mean that collectivities perform acts of knowing.’ I think Moodey is going in the right direction in terms of the strength of the views he imputes to me but to say that collectivities ‘perform actions’ seems wrong. In so far as I understand the term ‘action’—and I have co-authored a book about it with a very serious philosopher (Collins and Kusch, 1998, *The Shape of Actions*)—an action is intimately related to an intention and to assign an intention to a collectivity also seems wrong.

Actions are usually said to be performed by individuals. In the same way, it would be strange to suggest that collectivities can fall in love. But, when I am doing my empirical sociological work what I am investigating is the set of plausible intentions that collectivities *make available* individuals; falling in love is one of them. Thus, though collectivities cannot fall in love, the locus of the idea of love is the collectivity—that is where love comes from.

Understanding Collectivity

In the spring of 2017, *Gravity’s Kiss*, my book on the September 14th 2015 detection of gravitational waves, should be published; it will be based on my embedding in the community of gravitational wave scientists from the very first hours of the discovery. What it will describe is a change in the nature of the collectivity we inhabit from one where reports of the terrestrial detection of gravitational waves are largely to be disbelieved to one where they are largely to be believed. It’s quite a change. You, dear reader, know almost nothing about gravitational waves yet your ‘taken for granted reality’—your tacit knowledge—has changed or will shortly have changed. The locus of this change is the rapidly reforming collectivity of scientists and their wider public.

Here is a passage from the unpublished manuscript of the new book explaining both the point and the methodology a little further—it refers back to a much earlier events in the half-century history of gravitational wave detection which I have been analysing almost since the beginning:

at one point, under Robbie Vogt's regime, Ron Drever was locked out of his office (Collins 2004, 575); Drever and many others thought it was an act intended to demean him while another group thought that the locks were changed as a matter of routine maintenance. I could have found out which it was by exploring documents in Caltech's maintenance department but I did not bother because all I needed to know was that relations were such that it was possible to believe either account—exactly which one was true didn't really matter so long as either could be believed.

Deliberately locking Ron Drever out of his office would have been an action carried out by Robbie Vogt and changing the locks as a matter of routine maintenance would also have been an action carried out by someone but the existence of a collective atmosphere in which it was reasonable to believe that Robbie could have locked Ron out of his office deliberately was not anyone's action, it was the condition for the existence of that kind of intention and action. The same applies to taking out mortgages in Western societies and divining witches using the poison oracle in certain other societies; you cannot have the corresponding intentions unless you are member of the corresponding societies. Collectivities are the locus of this kind of knowledge; they are, to repeat, the place where this kind of knowledge resides while we individual parasites draw upon it, usually in a tacit way. This does not mean collectivities perform acts of knowing.

Maybe, however, I am being inconsistent because I have argued that we might think of collectivities as extended neural nets—the neural nets inside the skulls of the individuals that belong to collectivities being linked into one extended net via speech and the other senses. If a collectivity is a super-organism of this kind, why shouldn't it have intentions of its own and why shouldn't collectivities be able to fall in love? The answer is that there are no societies made up of collectivities; there is no similar collectivity for a neural net to fall in love with. So it that is why a collectivity cannot fall in love—the concept does not exist at the collective level in a way that would allow it to be acted upon and the same will go for other human intentions. That still leaves the collectivity as the locus of those intentions. Without the ocean there would be no waves but that does not mean the ocean must be a massive wave.

Locating the Tacit

I readily concede that of the three books under consideration mine (*Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*) is the worst as an introduction to Polanyi's thought. Indeed, I am flattered that my book is even being thought of in this way since it was never intended to be an elaboration of Polanyi's work. My thinking began with Peter Winch's *Idea of a Social Science* that led on to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* with Durkheim being added to the mix along the way. It was only later that a referee of my first paper told me that I was also dealing with Polanyi and tacit knowledge but the 'personal knowledge' dimension of Polanyi is always a trouble when people think I am 'doing Polanyi'.

Individual actions are, in principle, of no interest to me. In practice they are of great interest because they are the only way we can tap into the nature of the collectivities of which individuals are the ‘symptom’. Look—the relationship is dead simple: I want to know where the collectivity of native English speakers puts the verb in the sentence; I ask a native English speaker or two to speak some sentences and I note that the verb comes in the middle. I do not say ‘English speakers have personal knowledge of verb positioning in English’; I do not say the collectivity of native English speakers knows that the verb goes in the middle of the sentence’; I say, ‘In English the verb goes in the middle’ and that is shorthand for saying ‘if you are a member of English speaking society, when you speak a sentence your intention (usually tacit) will be to put the verb in the middle of the sentence because that is the kind of verb positioning-intention that is available in that society’.

I simply do not know if Polanyi had any of this in mind but it wasn’t the kind of thinking that became widespread, certainly not in the analysis of scientific knowledge, until the early 1970s. But whether he did think about it or not, I am completely sure you cannot understand the notion of tacit knowledge without understanding that collectivities are the location of much of it, and no amount of arguing about the correct usage of the word ‘knowledge’, and ‘knower’, and ‘knowing’, and what Polanyi intended, will change that.

Contact details: CollinsHM@cardiff.ac.uk

References

- Collins, Harry. *Gravity’s Kiss: The Detection of Gravitational Waves*. (book manuscript).
- Collins, Harry. *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Collins, Harry. *Gravity’s Shadow: The Search for Gravitational Waves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004
- Collins, Harry and Martin Kusch. *The Shape of Actions: What Humans and Machines Can Do*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1998.
- Moodey, Richard W. “Response to Gulick: Complementarity, Fault Lines, Terminology, Metaphors and Assertions.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 3 (2016): 15-20.
- Winch, Peter G. *The Idea of a Social Science*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.