

KNOWLEDGE FROM EXPERIENCE OF A POLICE OFFICER: A GROUNDED STUDY



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Abstract

This research develops the theme of the knowledge gathered by police officers from their experience. Assuming that social research must be pragmatically significant and rooted in the problematic nature of the present, we choose to frame the topic in the professional context of police officers, which we consider particularly relevant to the developments that the research in this field can offer. The introduction investigates the relationship between experience and reflection and concludes with an argumentation that supports the importance of a disposition towards reflectivity, as the main cognitive tool for the construction of experiential knowledge in the practice. The empirical part, implemented with a grounded method, introduces the results of the interviews carried out with the agents of a patrolling squad. Finally, we elaborate a project to submit the outcomes of the empirical investigation to institutional educational planning.

Keywords

Experiential knowledge, Reflective practice, Informal knowledge, Grounded theory.

Aims of the study

The object of this research is to highlight the experiential knowledge of police officers serving in the patrolling squad. The study was generated by the following questions: what knowledge comes from the experience of a patroller? What are its features? How to enhance the experiential knowledge within the institution?

The everyday experience of a police officer is imbued with grey areas and with excellent, albeit concealed, knowledge. Within this experience we can spot a «tacit» (Polanyi 1958; 1967), subliminal or implicit presence of forms and elements of knowledge that operate at the same speed of the gesture that embodies them, or the gaze that carries them, or the word that speaks of them. However, all the knowledge built up by the hard work of police officers is often lacking adequate testimony and visibility (Mortari 2003: 20).

In order to single out this experience and make it the object of a rational investigation, as pointed out by other authors (Dewey 1925; Schön 1983; Jedlowski 1994; Mortari 2003) it is necessary to take the experienced present as an object of reflection: we ought to put ourselves in a thoughtful listening mode towards our cognitive and emotional lives. The knowledge from experience emerges when the ideas and the strategies that structure it underlie the form of a reflective practice around one's life experience. If life is the flow of things happening to each of us, experience exists wherever life is accompanied by thought.

Methods

With regards to the way to bring forward the knowledge that constitutes the participants' experience, the following methods have been suggested the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) and the narrative interview technique (Atkinson 1998), based on the reflective model suggested by Johns (2000). The narrative interview facilitates the access to the participant's world, through the narration of what has occurred during a specific experience. The GT promotes a distancing from it, helps the researcher to codify and conceptualize what happening in the data line-by-line, word-by-word, consequently, allowing to recognise the tacit knowledge contained in it.

Results

The analysis of data involved 31 cases and was carried out through the GTR method, by coding the data on three levels (initial, selective and axial), up to the discovery of seven categories of interpretation, which constitute the core of the answer to the research questions.

The emerging categories in hierarchical form are grouped in 625 codes that conceptualize about 2697 text quotations considered meaningful to the objects of the research.

Chart 1 - *Frequency of codes and quotations*

Type of categories	Frequency	
	Codes	Quotations
Acting in unexpected and sudden situations	28	244
Following operative procedures and acting according to institutionalised principles	191	772
Expressing common sense opinions	2	24
Keeping an open attitude towards problematic situations	274	335
Maintaining a constant observation	274	1010
Expressing metaphorical knowledge	21	23
Expressing common sense and proverbial knowledge	2	24
Need of practical training	8	97
Learning formal skills	13	66
Learning informal skills	73	288
Learning from experience and transferring to similar cases	13	149
Total	625	2697

Firstly, a background category of interpretation emerged, which detects the peculiarities of the action context, as perceived and experienced by the participants. It is the category of «Acting in unexpected and sudden situations». The context is perceived by the participants as characterised by unique interventions, different from each other, impossible to anticipate and hardly repeatable in identical forms. The outcome of their intervention is never granted.

Secondly, the analysis has shown two strong components of knowledge, which originate two emerging profiles, which are the intertwining synthesis of elements of *rigour* and *pertinence*.

The first profile is made of elements of knowledge that express the «*formal rigour*» of knowledge and is symbolized by the interpretative category «Following operative procedures and acting according to institutionalized principles». This category conceptualizes elements of knowledge of a prescriptive, technical and procedural nature and is made-up of elements of knowledge that reflect into the experience the institutional regularity, the bureaucratic ritualism and their trust in the institution. This category is most evident in situations of repression, where the operator captures the thieves, robbers or swindlers.

The second profile is characterised by a «*pertinence to the situation*» symbolized by the data in the category «Keeping an open attitude towards problematic situations». This interpretative category comprises a few sub-categories of knowledge, which are not mentioned in procedures and manuals, but are present in everyday experience. The identified sub-categories are:

- Maintaining a constant observation: the importance of seeing with the “corner of one’s eyes”
- Having decisional leeway: the value of “intentionality”
- Reaching beyond the surface: the value of “promising tracks”

- Breaking a procedural rule and abandoning one’s role: the value of “explorative experimentation”
- Creating a repertoire of situations: the value of experience as a “stock”

The quotations of some codes of this profile are more pronounced in situations of prevention, where the operators are engaged in the prevention of crime, mediation of conflicts and consolidation of disputes.

The discovery of this interpretative category allows us to assume that the codes of technical knowledge, although necessary, are not sufficient to account for the processes of creation and implementation of experiential knowledge.

During the investigation, it was widely shown that the operators must face on a daily basis open problematic situations, characterised by risk, danger and unpredictability. Every intervention, in these cases, requires the activation of a specific process of investigation, characterised by a degree of leeway and the ability to reach beyond the surface, starting from directly observable data, not necessarily applying the given rules, but relying on a repertoire of similar personal past experiences and, to an extent, on elements of contextual pertinence, as suggested by the situation, rather than by operative manuals.

Third, the results have shown how the training context and some knowledge conveyed in professional refresher courses, are apparently perceived and felt by the interviewed operators as «detached» from their context and their daily work routine. A further comparison of data between the category symbolizing the perception of formal knowledge and the category symbolizing the learning from experience, introduces the idea of a «separate training», departing from the operator’s work context, at least at refresher courses. The knowledge conveyed at this stage, as we can read in several extracts, is felt by the participants as theoretical, smothering and too often de-

tached from the need of knowledge emerging from the practice.

Conclusions

The results of this research lead us to believe that experience acts in this particular sector of public security as a true “master of life” for many participants. The discovery of a “repertoire of situations” and the rich experiential gain, which many participants relate that they rely on, can be considered the evidence of experiential knowledge in practice.

The practice of control over the territory appears to be not only a ground for the implementation of knowledge for a police officer, but also a source of knowledge where any formal or informal, common sense or metaphorical element plays an important role in their grip of reality.

In order to operationalise the viability of the research within the institution, a training project has been elaborated with the aim to enhance and document the (un)expressed legacy of experiential knowledge, for a better police practice. The training course is based on the use of the «retrospective reflection» method, used and introduced by Schön (1983). The implementation of knowledge and forms of experience is embedded in the practice of patrolling. However, some meaningful aspects, unexpected results and other qualitative aspects can escape our awareness and thus our knowledge, even if the effectiveness and outcome of the action are directly determined by them. Hence the necessity, through a moment of «radiological» (Mortari 2003: 20) reflection on practical cases, to analyse the situation, in order to stimulate the operators to question the reasons behind the events and their outcomes, digging up their cognitive and emotional implications.

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