



Implicit Knowledge: How it is Understood and Used in Feminist Theory

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Abstract

Feminist theorists have crafted diverse accounts of implicit knowing that exceed the purview of epistemology conventionally understood. I characterize this field as through examining thematic clusters of feminist work on implicit knowledge: phenomenological and foucauldian theories of embodiment; theories of affect and emotion; other forms of implicit knowledge. Within these areas, the umbrella concept of implicit knowledge (or understanding, depending on how it's framed) names either contingently unspoken or fundamentally nonpropositional but epistemically salient content in our experience. I make a case for distinguishing implicit knowledge from lively conversations about 'implicit bias', as well as from the 'know-how/know-that' debates, and I explore key ways the notion of implicit knowledge is currently formulated in feminist philosophy.

Feminist theorists have crafted diverse accounts of implicit knowing that exceed the purview of epistemology conventionally understood (Rooney). The umbrella concept of implicit knowledge names inarticulable or contingently unspoken but epistemically salient content of our experience. Some theorists characterize this form of knowing as currently not in words or used in claim-making but potentially propositional. For others, 'implicit' names fundamentally nonpropositional but epistemically relevant understanding. This essay explores feminist theories of implicit knowledge. It begins by describing closely related areas of philosophy that are not directly pertinent to this topic. It then moves into a description of phenomenological and foucauldian accounts of implicit knowledge as embodied, continues by looking at work on emotion and feeling as epistemically salient and concludes with some suggestions for future directions and possibilities for feminist theories of implicit knowledge.

As a group, the philosophers I bring into conversation here share some characteristics that make them difficult to stably typify. These theorists tend to discuss implicit knowledge on the way toward some other point – they orient their work toward a purpose, often a feminist political purpose. This means that they formulate conceptions of implicit knowing as tools for other work; they do not generally pursue theory for theory's sake. General theories are not aimed toward, though resources for multi-use critical accounts are seen as desirable. As well, these philosophers tend to bridge discursive communities, drawing resources from many conversations with a certain irreverence toward established lines of disciplinary formation. Given this diversity and multiplicity, please take the conceptual schema I offer here as one portrayal of a dynamic landscape that could be understood from other orientations with equal accuracy.

Feminist epistemology (much of it from analytic approaches) is an important background to the texts I describe below. Early standpoint theorists argued that bodily experience could be an important source of knowledge and, at least implicitly, suggested that there was some implicit content grounding situated knowledge claims (Hartsock; Hill Collins; Harding, 1986, 1991). Lorraine Code's groundbreaking work on subjectivity made the argument that

being in knowing relation with others – knowing people – was a necessary precursor to propositional knowledge (Code, 1991, 1995). And feminist empiricists have engaged this work, especially in the study of the practices of science, showing that knowledge is both ‘theory laden,’ in Lynn Hankinson Nelson’s words (Nelson and Nelson; Nelson) and ‘value laden,’ on Helen Longino’s view (Longino). In general, however, feminist epistemologists in their epistemic work have not focused on articulating accounts of implicit knowledge.

1. What this Article Does Not Discuss and Why

There are two areas of work in current philosophy that my topic may call to your mind but which it will not substantively discuss. Recently, there has been an increase in discussions about what is often called the ‘know how/know that’ debate. Sparked in particular by Jason Stanley’s re-interrogation of Ryle’s work on the question of whether ‘knowing how’ is different than ‘knowing that’ – with concomitant effects for both our understandings of propositional knowledge and conceptions of skill – these conversations are ongoing in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. Alongside these discussions, recent years have seen remarkable increases in attention to ‘implicit bias’ – that phenomenon in which, although we may have avowedly egalitarian explicit commitments, we manifest racism, sexism, and other forms of personal prejudice in measurable ways. This article will offer a guide to discussions of implicit knowledge in feminist philosophy situated in other areas than the know how/know that distinction or work on implicit bias. Given that both these areas are vibrant engagements with what might be called implicit knowledge, why not include them?

The know how/know that conversations, although they have import for many things, have not included any substantial feminist content, nor have they had a sustained effect on feminist theory. The conversations arising from Stanley’s work have been generative of much smoke but little heat, at least for feminist philosophy. Conversations about implicit bias, on the other hand, have been substantively motivated and carried by feminist philosophers. This work has been very useful for feminist theory, with many researchers identifying patterns of implicitly-informed behavior that demonstrably harm people already subject to social relations of oppression. It has also led to exciting collaborations across disciplinary lines, shown for example in Jennifer Saul’s impressive *Implicit Bias & Philosophy International Research Project*, which brought to the University of Sheffield researchers delimiting the state of the field of work on implicit bias between 2012 and 2013 in exciting ways. It’s safe to say that work on implicit bias also has given us practical traction in the practice of feminist interventions in the discipline of philosophy, allowing people to point out core problems in the assessment and uptake of diverse philosophical subjects using data and concepts carved out through thinking about implicit bias.

Although this work is significant and useful, I worry that it reproduces a limiting explicit/implicit binarism. I agree with Shannon Dea, who argues that in much of the literature on implicit bias ‘explicit, propositional knowledge is good, except when it is undercut (as it always is) by tacit, implicit knowledge, which is characterized as an epistemic and political danger’ (Dea 2013). I think that much work on implicit knowledge (not bias) attempts to avoid the binarism, Dea identifies, instead theorizing forms of knowing and understanding complexly interpenetrating with conceptual and propositional knowledge. Alongside a wish to resist the ‘implicit bad, explicit good’ binarism, it is useful to have an expanded conception of implicit knowledge (or understanding) rather than the more specific concept of implicit bias. The epistemically and politically salient contents of our consciousness are not only in words, and they do not only involve claims about the world; implicit association tests help

us see this. But not all of this content takes the form of bias (in the sense of politically harmful orientations to the social world). So, having a more expansive conception of implicit knowledge helps us also to conceive of politically and epistemically salient content to our knowing that may not be in the form of knowing facts about the world.

Embodiment is a frequent touchstone for thinkers interested in forms of knowledge other than declarative or claim-making propositional knowing. Feminist thinkers have focused on embodiment for the perhaps contingent reason that in the history of western philosophy bodies have often been functionally understood as that which is threatening or irrelevant to reason, and indeed to knowledge correctly understood (Antony; Haslanger; Lloyd). There is also a substantial and exciting body of work coming from Spinozan and Deleuzian archives, much of it centering around the frame of 'new materialisms' in feminist thought (Braidotti, 1994, 2006; Grosz; Sharp). This work holds promise for theorists of implicit knowledge, though such knowledge is not yet a core concern for materialist feminists (but see Van der Tuin). Much feminist thinking about embodiment as a feature in knowing has clustered around phenomenological and foucauldian approaches.

2. *Phenomenological Approaches to Implicit Knowledge as Embodied*

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work has been a fraught and productive site of engagement for feminist theorists. Many have said that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the anonymous or phenomenal body is de-gendered and therefore not a good resource for feminist thinking (for a review of key critiques, see (Stoller)). Precisely, this potential problem has opened lines of theoretical engagement in feminist theories of embodiment that draw on, even when resisting, this form of phenomenology.

Consider Iris Marion Young's engagement with the question of the bodily being of gender, later taken up by a number of other thinkers. Perhaps the most-productive site of conversation from her work remains the essay 'Throwing Like a Girl', though Young addressed herself to many areas of bodily experience, not just throwing (menstruation, breasted being, and pregnancy). Young furthers her own suggestion that it may be most 'fruitful to draw on a theory of the lived body like that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty but connect it more explicitly than he does to how the body lives out its positions in social structures of the division of labor, hierarchies of power, and norms of sexuality' (Young 26). Young does not expound a theory of knowledge per se in her discussion of embodiment, nor does she see embodiment as a transparent and obvious situation. She does, however, articulate our experience of our bodies as a socially-situated, experiential resource for understanding the social world we engage. Through attending to bodily experience, we might notice differences in our understandings arising out of specific embodiments. For Young, attending to the lived body is an epistemic resource – through it, we see the implicit orientations of various ways of being embodied. Bodily understanding, in Young's work as in Merleau-Ponty's, also expresses a fundamentally tacit anchor to knowledge claims. Other theorists have productively engaged Young's work on embodiment as a form of experiential understanding, leveraging her insights into how the social world affects and shapes our embodiment. Notable in this realm are Barbara Chisholm's engagement in 'Climbing Like a Girl' (Chisholm), which crisply reconfigures some of Young's central insights, and also engagements highlighting epistemic issues from Sandra Lee Bartky, Bonnie Mann, and Michael Ferguson in a volume on Young's work (Ferguson and Nagel).

There is also a substantial body of work returning directly to Merleau-Ponty's own theory, exemplified by Maurice Hamington, who has argued that Merleau-Ponty's conception of touching as an intercorporeal experience is useful for seeing implicit knowing as important

to caring work (Hamington, 2008b). Hamington has productively extended an account of this kind of knowledge into an engagement with care ethics in both business and health settings (Hamington, 2008a, 2004). Gail Weiss's important work on intercorporeality has become a vital reference point for thinking about not only the implicit schemas animating our experience of embodiment but also how we might craft imaginative resources for transforming them (Weiss).

Linda Martín Alcoff argues that the 'tacit knowledge located in the body' is significant for understanding the horizons of understanding involved in identity formation. Alcoff, focusing on socially ascribed and materially significant identity categories such as racialization, investigates 'the relationship between embodiment and perception, rationality and knowledge in order to argue that the interpretive horizon we each bring with us should be understood not simply as a set of beliefs but as a complex (meaning internally heterogeneous) set of presuppositions and perceptual orientations, some of which are manifest as a kind of tacit presence in the body' (Alcoff, 2005 113). This work becomes important to her complex discussion of implicit perceptual practices and their implications for the political organization of identity. In an earlier work, Alcoff also formulated productive conceptions of race as a background 'from which I know myself' (Alcoff, 1999 20). Alcoff's work on racialization, gender, and sexuality stands as one of the significant uses of conceptions of implicit knowledge grounded in part in theories of embodiment.

Sara Ahmed's theorization of orientation builds on this tendency and expands it. Ahmed takes up Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the ways we are necessarily oriented in the world simply by being embodied and shows that embodiment is never simple. Rather, being bodied and thus oriented places something within our reach, shapes the lines along which we can know and understand, and more. Embodiment constitutes 'a world we know implicitly' (Ahmed 2006 111), and in that constitution shapes our racial orientation and being. This form of implicit knowledge shows up as a background. Race, argues Ahmed, becomes 'a social as well as bodily given, or what we receive from others as an inheritance of this history.' Understanding whiteness, for example, as a way of being oriented benefits from this conception of implicit inheritance. Ahmed says: 'To think of this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement: at home, things are not done a certain way, but the domestic "puts things" in their place. Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things' (Ahmed 2007 155). Following Alcoff and Ahmed, we can understand formations such as race as significantly constituted through the bodily inheritances that make up the background context and the orientations we inhabit through that background. For them, and feminists who take them up, these aspects of our experience are forms of implicit knowing.

Although the people I have discussed in this section take much from phenomenology, their work is also grounded in certain critical interventions in that field. Frantz Fanon's engagement with psychoanalysis and phenomenology offers some starting points for understanding racialization as manifesting both corporeal schemas *and* historical-racial schemas. Fanon articulates these in terms of implicit knowledge. I quote him at length because his articulation of a social world that shapes our conceptual schemas is called up in the nuance of his description, and it is this mode of writing that has made his work useful for theorists after him. He writes:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain

uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit, but out of implicit knowledge (Fanon 83).

Fanon's conception of implicit knowledge as involving *third-person* consciousness names the process through which a corporeal schema, or embodied knowledge, can be shaped and torqued by broader social schemas. As George Yancy writes, 'this definitive structuring is not so much remembered or recollected as it is always present as the constitutive imaginary background' (Yancy 224). And, as Alia Al-Saji masterfully shows, the constitutive imaginary background has profound, racializing effects on our very capacity to perceive the world. She writes: 'Through sedimentation and habituation, the constitutive operations of vision remain tacit or pre-reflective; its intentionality works in us without our reflective awareness' (Al-Saji 885).

3. Foucauldian Approaches to Implicit Knowledge as Embodied

Feminists have also engaged Michel Foucault's thinking on embodiment as a form of implicit knowledge. This thinking traffics with phenomenology either with ease or uncertainty, depending on your orientation. I believe that when we read Fanon as a hinge-point in thinking about the political effects of our backgrounded understandings, we can make a tropic turn in understanding the constitution of embodiment as encoding implicit knowledge in our bodily experience. For Foucault, the body can be understood as the 'inscribed surface of events' (Foucault, 1984 83), the concatenation of history and time materialized in flesh (Foucault 1995). Judith Butler has been perhaps the most important theorist of this process as it relates to gender, charting salient ways that social relations manifest in and through our situated, fleshy being with clear connections to Foucault, though in my view she has not taken this insight in specifically epistemological directions. Consider, however, two exemplars from the ramified webbing of feminist philosophy taking this approach in ways relevant to this discussion.

Ladelle McWhorter and Cressida Heyes offer engagements that express well feminist theory's uptake of foucauldian insights about implicit knowledge's complex relationship with embodiment as a site of political transformation. McWhorter's work on bodies and knowledge centers on a view of the self in which mind and body are not separable. Taking a genealogical approach allows her to 'correct knowledge and to present new knowledge' (McWhorter 49), through an anti-foundationalist lens. McWhorter argues that 'holding a set of propositions is not the same as living out those propositions; asserting something is not the same as incorporating it...Every aspect of a human being, including our bodies, is implicated in the powers and knowledges we want to critique' (147–8). She thus examines a key site for the work of critique: bodies and pleasures, unpacking Foucault's dictum that we ought to attend not to sex and desire but to bodies and pleasures. As Elena Cuffari puts it, McWhorter argues that

we can move beyond a mind/body dualistic understanding of self-cultivation by undertaking activities and projects that bring accumulation of implicit knowledge in the sense of *knowing-how* without giving up the intelligence and reflection available to us as conscious and languaged creatures (Cuffari 546)

We can know something – in McWhorter's evocation 'you know this, you feel this, and you live this knowledge every moment in every movement you make' (McWhorter 146) –

as a mode of living and transformation. Cressida Heyes argues that we can understand embodiment as a ground for practices of freedom; in a range of texts, she explores the audacious claim that certain ways of living ‘although inevitably implicated in disciplinary practices, cultivate a broader repertoire of human possibilities instead of increasing docility’ (Heyes 2007 79). Heyes argues that Foucault was interested in how ‘our bodies are constituted through practices of power that can’t be reduced to language: the architecture of surveillance, the discipline of anatomy, the confession of sexual desire’ (Heyes 2010). Heyes deepens these interests through her engagement with Wittgenstein and through her feminist attention to the effects of weight loss, plastic surgery, exhaustion, and more, centering a kind of bodily knowledge through which our experience and understanding of bigger structures is manifest.

4. *Emotion, Affect, and Feeling*

Feminist work on feeling is connected to accounts of embodiment, since emotion is often experienced in the body. Still, feminist engagements with affect as a form of implicit knowledge have charted distinct fields from body theory. In literary and cultural studies, there has been an exciting proliferation of work in ‘affect studies,’ rooted at least in part in Eve Sedgwick’s work (for a collection of key figures in the field, see (Gregg and Seigworth)). Sedgwick says that her book *Touching Feeling* aims to ‘address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do, rather than submit to the apparent common sense that requires a strict separation between the two and usually implies an ontological privileging of the former’ Sedgwick continues: ‘I assume that the line between words and things or between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena is endlessly changing, permeable, and entirely unsusceptible to any definitive articulation’ (Sedgwick 6). Sedgwick’s engagement is grounded in deconstructive work, paired with Sylvan Tompkins’ innovative psychotherapeutic theory. In contrast to this psychotherapeutic tendency, Brian Massumi’s work has also been generative, grounded in Deleuzian/Spinozian commitments to understanding complex formations of affects and world (Massumi).

Earlier feminist philosophical work on emotions offers perhaps-neglected resources for understanding feeling as a form of implicit knowledge. Sue Campbell’s work makes a significant intervention. She writes: ‘The relationships between the feelings we express, their expression, and the interpretive skills and projects of others are much tighter than the history of the treatment of feelings would lead us to expect’ (Campbell 44). Campbell frames this as an epistemological matter: insofar as the epistemology of emotions has understood emotions as discrete and well-delineated entities, as a field it will not be able to attend well to what Campbell identifies as free-form or idiosyncratic feelings. Following Campbell’s account of emotion as a relationally-shaped experience, we should conceive of feeling as a collectively-shaped epistemic resource for understanding the always-social world. Alison Jaggar likewise explores the ‘epistemological and political implications of [a] social rather than individual understanding of emotion’ (Jaggar 136). She argues that ‘rather than repressing emotion in epistemology, it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct a conceptual model that demonstrates the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion’ (Jaggar 141). A particularly important piece of thinking about the epistemic salience of emotions, for both Campbell and Jaggar, is the degree to which our capacities for feeling can be torqued and delimited by oppression. As Jaggar writes, ‘People who experience conventionally unacceptable, or what I call “outlaw,” emotions often are subordinated individuals who pay a disproportionately

high price for maintaining the status quo' (Jagger 144). Maria Lugones has extended questions of justice and appropriate anger into a field-shaping argument for the importance of subjectivities that do not line up or fit within clear lines of political formation. Her work on anger deepens Jagger's account of outlaw emotions, as well as her argument for impurity and unsettledness as a liveable norm. Lugones writes that a 'curdled' logic, refusing purity narratives and strict separations, creates a consciousness experienced predominantly on the level of the implicit. Curdling realizes the impure subject's 'against-the-grain creativity, articulates their within-structure-inarticulate powers. As we come to understand curdling as resisting domination, we also need to recognize its potential to germinate a nonoppressive pattern, a mestizo consciousness, *una conciencia mestizo*' (Lugones 133).

Attending to unsanctioned feelings can, then, contribute to a project of epistemic justice (Fricker). Uma Narayan's early piece on emotion made a compelling case for the epistemic relevance of feeling for knowledge claims about oppression. She argued that 'a very important component of what constitutes the epistemic privilege of the oppressed has to do with knowledge that is at least partly constituted by and conferred by the emotional responses of the oppressed to their oppression' (Narayan 38). In conversation with her own work on embodiment and orientation, described above, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions should be understood as not interior, personal possessions of individuals. Instead, emotions have performative effects, delineating boundaries and repeating habitual associations; as a result, emotions are epistemically significant, particularly for projects orientated toward justice (Ahmed 2004).

Diana Tietjen Meyers investigates the connection between knowledge and justice with her focus on the question of how very deep perceptual habits can shift. Resonating with Al-Saji's work on perception, Meyers writes that 'the prejudicial structure of moral perception militates in favor of moral judgements and actions that are unfair to those individuals and that are inimical to social justice. My question is how moral perception can be configured to expose these wrongs' (Meyers 198). She argues that a key way moral perception can be shaped toward feminist ends includes thick attention to emotion. If moral repertoires are deep-seated and difficult to shift, and if such shifts are necessary for change (as Meyers argues they are), interrogating how to change them becomes important. Meyers attends to emotions such as hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness as examples of potentially rich epistemic resources for transformation which can politicize who feels these feelings, and how.

Ami Harbin brings together key threads in these conversations in exciting new work on the implications of attending to disorientation as a resource for moral agency. Most significant for thinking about implicit understanding is Harbin's attention to disorientation as corporeal, affective, and epistemological. On all of these levels, Harbin explores disorientation as a matter of implicit or nonpropositional knowledge. While disorientation may often be understood as an epistemic, moral, and bodily threat – a disruption of the putatively stable self – Harbin shows that under certain social conditions, it can be instead a beneficial unsettling force, opening us to new ways of being, feeling, and knowing (Harbin, 2012a, 2012b).

5. Future Directions in Feminist Theories of Implicit Knowledge

Although it is possible to talk about embodiment and affect/emotion as analytically separable, the theorists I have discussed so far share a conviction that these forms of knowing are connected and enmeshed. There are other forms of implicit knowledge that have garnered less theoretical attention but that could also be understood as important, and that open new directions for further work.

In my own work, I distinguish between four sorts of implicit understanding: practical or skill-based, socially-situated habitus or embodiment, tacit but propositionalizable understandings, and

affective or emotional understanding (Shotwell). I suggest the umbrella term ‘implicit understanding’ for these four forms. ‘Implicit’ here carries the meaning of something not (or not currently) expressed in propositions, in the sense of words making claims about the world. ‘Understanding’ is meant to name a state with epistemic standing that in general may not achieve the status of knowledge traditionally defined. Implicit understanding, then, may not meet the epistemic requirements we apply to propositions about the world and the belief states we expect from good knowers. However, such understanding is epistemically salient, particularly to our capacities to address what it means to attempt to make political change on personal or collective levels. It is plausible to think that there is a relationship between our explicit beliefs, our actions, and salient implicit ingredients in our political and moral orientation toward the world. It is also possible – likely! – that there are other ways to parse and frame implicit knowledge. For example, should knowing who someone is stand as a (different) kind of implicit knowledge? Are there other forms of implicit knowing that could be included in our consideration?

These questions will be important to consider in feminist philosophical conversations. And some forms of implicit knowledge not focused on in feminist theory – skilled knowledge and tacit but propositionalizable knowledge – have been taken up in other areas. Indeed, there is some work on dance as a form of knowing that draws on feminist insights (Parviainen), and more thinking on nursing practice as building on implicit knowledge (Meerabeau; Benner, 2000, 2004; MacDonald). And it may be productive to think how theories of epistemologies of ignorance, though they do not focus on implicit knowledge, might contribute to understanding potentially propositional but currently tacit knowing. This work has emerged as an elaboration of Charles Mills’s account of the production of ignorance about racialization among and for white people. Such an epistemology of ignorance is ‘*a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*’ (Mills 18). Feminists have extended and engaged this work (Sullivan and Tuana; Townley; Tuana); this work could productively extend into more explicitly epistemic contexts.

The field of thinking about implicit knowledge in feminist theory is very much in formation. I hope that the tour I’ve offered here has traced some routes through ongoing conversations – some of them begun many years ago – perhaps opening gates to further forms of explicit engagement. After all, that we are talking about knowledge which cannot be fully expressed in words does not mean that we cannot say more.

Short Biography

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