
What's So Great About the Explicit? On Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

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In *Knowing Otherwise*, Alexis Shotwell elaborates her account of “implicit understanding”—ways of comprehending the world that are not explicit. Shotwell identifies four such ways of implicitly understanding the world: “foundationally nonpropositional knowledge, embodied understanding, potentially propositional knowledge currently held as tacit or distal, and affective or emotional knowledge” (48). On Shotwell’s account these are not mutually exclusive categories. They are threads that variously run through our understanding, threads that are often (always?) woven together in one way or another.

One of the wonderful things about Shotwell’s work, and about her fourfold approach to implicit understanding, is that way that it problematizes the only propositional/non-propositional divide. When, as an MA student, I was thinking about the implicit in hermeneutics of science, Michael Polanyi’s discussion of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 69-260) was still all the rage. For Polanyi, while some skill-based tacit knowledge is possible without explicit knowledge, all explicit knowledge is rooted in tacit knowledge. He applies this in particular to expertise and to scientific ways of knowing. On Polanyi’s account, we make a mistake if we regard scientists, doctors, etc., as guided solely by explicit—and hence, in principle, *public*—formulae and maxims. Their judgment as experts is inevitably guided by tacit knowledge that is not open to

public scrutiny. Writes Polanyi, “A scientist can accept... the most inadequate and misleading formulation of his own scientific principles without ever realizing what is being said, because he automatically supplements it by his tacit knowledge of what science really is, and thus makes the formulation ring true” (Polanyi, 179). Following Polanyi, late-twentieth century Science and Technology Studies scholars came to worry that the apparent objectivity of publicly-available propositional knowledge served a purpose more polemical than epistemic. The worry was that, if scientists were guided solely by propositional knowledge, this would be all to the good since this would mean that their reasoning is always available for public scrutiny. However, since scientists are, on Polanyi’s account, actually guided by non-propositional, tacit knowledge, then their reasons remain more or less private, and worse, most members of the public don’t realize that they are private in this way, owing to the false objectivity of propositional knowledge.

Lately, this dialectic has been—perhaps inadvertently—taken up, typically by analytic feminist philosophers who have imported from social psychology the language of *implicit bias*. Using mechanisms such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), social psychologists and philosophers purport to show that the vast majority of people—even those who explicitly identify as feminist, queer-positive, and anti-racist—are actually implicitly biased against women, queers, disabled people, and people of colour. To be clear, I say “purport” here not because I deny that such biases are ubiquitous, but because I think there are some reasons to worry about the methodology of the IAT. These worries, however, are beyond the scope of this discussion.¹ The Internet-based test reveals that people overwhelmingly experience cognitive delays in associating women and members of various minorities with positive ideas, but no such delays when associating straight, white, able-bodied men with positive ideas. This cognitive delay is interpreted as evidence that we do not in fact associate members of equity-seeking

groups with positive concepts as strongly as we do white men. The worry is a familiar one: we explicitly assent to reassuring propositions about people's fundamental equality, while being tacitly guided in our actual comportment by biases that are not only unavailable for public scrutiny, but opaque to those who possess them—that is, unavailable even for private reflection. Thus, it is owing to non-propositional “knowledge” that even feminists read women's CVs as less impressive than identical CVs with men's names on them. And, just as in the STS case, the confidence inspired in us by our explicit feminism, anti-racism, etc., makes us *more* vulnerable to the biases we don't even know we hold.

While feminist work on implicit bias is exceptionally useful—I myself cite and deploy this work several times a week—it is also problematically binaristic. 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. While this broad approach is ultimately meant to problematize the naiveté of the so-called ideal language project of the last century, it actually serves to reinforce and reify that approach by presenting implicit knowledge as a threat to the explicit knowledge that would otherwise be unimpeachable. Just as, for Plato and Descartes, the bodily and sensory was a kind of prison and corrupting influence for the soul, discussions of implicit bias often set implicit knowledge up as a source of corruption, one that we would ideally rid ourselves of, if only we could find a way to do so.

While she does not explicitly take up the dialectic of implicit bias, Shotwell's work serves as a useful corrective to it. Instead of following the usual propositional/non-propositional divide, Shotwell regards implicit understanding as, on the one hand, fundamentally unsusceptible to propositional expression, and on the other, potentially propositional, even though not yet

expressed propositionally. Thus, her account escapes the Platonic-Cartesian dualism that analytic feminism inadvertently reproduces in many discussions of implicit bias.

And, of course, Shotwell represents implicit understanding as just that—understanding. Thus, for her, the implicit is a legitimate way of coming to know the world, not, like implicit bias, an invisible snare that might trap us. This becomes even clearer in her careful elaboration of bodily and affective understanding—for Shotwell as for Eli Clare, whom she draws upon in her discussion of transfolk's embodied knowing—there is a knowing that resides in one's bones (135). To relegate this kind of embodied knowing to the category of bias is to fail to understand something important about the world, and thereby to render oneself less capable of effective social and political action. Through a survey of first-person accounts by trans activists, Shotwell richly elaborates the depth and scope of embodied knowing, and decisively answers Gadamer. While Shotwell, throughout the volume, rightly acknowledges her debt to Gadamer—the humane champion of understanding over explanation, whose account of hermeneutical horizons and the possibility of their fusion is an important inspiration for Shotwell—he remains mired in the view that human beings are fundamentally linguistic. Paradoxically, the lyrical prose by Clare and others that Shotwell gathers in her volume illustrates both human beings' linguistic nature, but also the degree to which our most deeply affecting experiences and understandings of the world occur outside of language, and even outside of language-analogs. As we read Clare's account of the warm stones he used to hold in his hand, whose warmth sometimes resonated with him more deeply than did interactions with other people, we experience in the very same moment what the stones meant to Clare's body and the limits of language's ability to express this kind of bodily meaning.

Shotwell convincingly argues that we cannot hope to effect social change while marginalizing and disparaging the ineluctable embodied and affective knowing at the heart of our understanding of the world and, crucially, at the heart of women's, queers', disabled people's and people of colour's understanding of the world. That is, contra the view that social justice work requires us to rid ourselves of our implicit biases, Shotwell argues that true social transformation requires us to attend with care and respect to implicit understanding.

Now that Shotwell has completed the initial spadework for this important project, I have a wish list of two things I would love to see her do as she continues the project.

First, I would love for Shotwell to draw some closer connections between the first and second parts of her book. The first part elaborates a rich account of the varieties of implicit understanding, while the second part suggests the ways in which such understanding is and may be deployed within progressive social movements, in particular within anti-racist and trans-rights work. This is all to the good, but Shotwell's useful fourfold division of varieties of implicit understanding recedes more or less out of sight for much of the second part of the book. While I very much enjoyed the careful accounts of white shame, anti-racist solidarity, and trans-activism that Shotwell offers in the second half of the volume, as I read I yearned for more detail about how the four aspects of implicit understanding weave their way through these narratives. While some of the four are clearly more apparent and more central than others in certain contexts, one of the great strengths of Shotwell's account is the complexity offered by a fourfold division in which the four aspects are intertwined with each other in rich and complex ways. Given the plausibility of Shotwell's fourfold division and the richness of the cases she surveys in the second half of the volume, it seems clear that these cases are susceptible of fourfold analysis, but (perhaps appropriately enough under the circumstances) Shotwell only hints at this analysis and

does not make it explicit. It would be wonderful to see the kind of emancipatory movements Shotwell discusses analyzed in terms of this four-part division.

Secondly, while I am grateful for Shotwell's generosity and kindness as a scholar (especially given Philosophy's usual agonistic tendencies), I would urge that, especially in light of the current interest around implicit bias, a more critical take on *explicit* understanding is in order. Of course, this is in a way already well-traveled ground, with philosophers like Gadamer turning a critical eye to the neo-Kantian explanation-understanding distinction, and challenging the conception of truth that is assumed within the explanatory model. Still, Shotwell does so much to advance the discussion of the implicit beyond that undertaken by scholars like Gadamer, and to advance it in a feminist way, that she is well situated to turn a critical eye to the uncritical confidence in the explicit that resides at the heart of much current discussion of implicit bias. Just what is it about explicit knowledge that leads even feminist scholars to fall back into Platonic-Cartesian dualisms (as evidenced by the implicit bias literature)? Why does the explicit continue to have the broad sway that it does? And, what confidence can we have that explicit understanding is understanding at all?

Notes

¹ Shotwell usefully critiques IAT methodology in "Racism Without Words," November 18, 2011.

Works Cited

Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

Shotwell, Alexis. *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.

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