Marta Jurczyk
Uniwersytet Gdański
ORCID 0000-0001-5161-3972

Katarzyna Słaby
Uniwersytet Jagielloński
ORCID 0000-0001-8934-2565

Tacit *un-knowledge* among professionals dealing with sexual abuse of children and adults with intellectual disabilities

Ukryta nie-wiedza profesjonalistów dotycząca zjawiska nadużycia seksualnego wobec dzieci i dorosłych z niepełnosprawnościami intelektualnymi

Abstract: In this paper, we are discussing the question of particular attitudes expressed by the professionals (teachers and therapists) in the context of sexual abuse of people (including children) with intellectual disabilities (ID) which we identify as *tacit un-knowledge*. Drawing from the concept of tacit knowledge introduced by Michael Polanyi we are looking closely into some sort of professional passivity and indulgence in reacting to the sexual abuse of people with ID and lack of adequate professional education and training on the other hand. These observations led us to formulate a Polanyi-inspired notion of *un-knowledge* expressed as a culture-based response to directly or indirectly reported incidents of sexual abuse of people with ID.

Data discussed in this paper is a part of a broader research project on sexual abuse of people with disabilities in the narratives of teachers and therapists conducted by one of the authors.

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Keywords: intellectual disability (ID), tacit knowledge, sexual abuse, discourse on the sexuality of people with ID .

Introduction

The sexuality of people with ID is constructed most strongly in the perspective of procreative categories determining possible misunderstandings, anxiety, fear, or even panic and falling into the category of non-normative sexuality. In this paper, we present a perspective of the discourse on the sexuality of people with an ID that is represented in the narratives of professionals who work with and provide support to children and adults with ID. We analyze their responses using the concept of Michael Polanyi's *tacit knowledge*, which we reintroduce later as a specific kind of practiced and embodied *un-knowledge* resulting in professional passivity in reacting to the sexual abuse of people with ID. The most important questions we ask here are what teachers and therapists *know* about the problem and how this knowledge may affect their reactions to cases of sexual abuse of people with ID. The professionals' responses tend to point to the need of developing and implementing specific rules of conduct in their institutions, however, they do nothing to help design such rules or to initiate change.

Methodology

Discussed research is a part of a broader project concerning the sexual abuse of people with disabilities in the narratives of teachers and therapists, implemented under the call for proposals for „Miniatura 2" of the Polish National Science Centre.

Research participants were recruited in 2019 and 2020 both through convenience and snowball sampling. Those who responded to advertisements via social media were later asked to assist the researcher in identifying other potential participants. A total of 15 teachers and therapists working with people with ID in institutions in northern Poland were interviewed using computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI) or in person[1]. The analysis of the gathered data was supported by MAXQDA software to identify and

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[1]   It is difficult to assess at this stage whether, and to what extent the online technique influenced the responses, but the lack of face-to-face contact makes it impossible to examine

gain insights into patterns emerging from the interviews. The interviewees were professionals working with people with ID who declared that they had been confronted with cases of sexual abuse or maltreatment of people with ID in their work. Thus, the invitation to participate in the survey contained a filtering question concerning potential participants' direct or indirect experience with cases of sexual abuse of people with ID. The work experience of the respondents ranged from 3 to 20 years – yet, based on their responses it didn't significantly shape their attitude[2].

Tacit and explicit knowledge

Although it originated in epistemology and philosophy of science, the concept of tacit knowledge has been successfully adopted for several years in the social sciences and humanities (Adloff i in., 2015). The concept was introduced in the mid-20th century by Michael Polanyi, who took inspiration from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ludwick Fleck, and Thomas Kuhn.

Polanyi's (1966) concept is based on the assumption that „we know more than we can tell" (s. 41), which means that we are *know-how* (to do/understand certain phenomena), based on our previous experiences and certain socialization (professional as well) or habits, but we cannot sufficiently (or at all) verbalize or explain that knowledge (*knowing that*). Polanyi maintained that a person has two kinds of knowledge (or that a person's knowledge consists of two types) – an intersubjectively communicated propositional knowledge (*knowing-that*) and knowledge that remains implicit, but is the basis for practical action.

Accordingly, tacit knowledge is one that, though not always conscious, has an impact on our practical conduct and skills in a specific cultural background, not excluding scientific and professional activity. Even the title of the book in which Polanyi introduced the concept of tacit knowledge – *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* – suggests that knowledge is localized in specific individuals, in their ways of acquiring and reproducing knowledge, which is a criticism of the positivist concept of knowledge and science. This means that even scientific knowledge, which, in the informal

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non-verbal communication, which can be valuable and informative when discussing difficult issues.

[2]   Gathered data do not permit us to elaborate on the question of why, how, and to what extent work experience changes (or does not change) the attitude towards sexual abuse, but it is certainly worth further investigating.

(or positivist) understanding appears as *objective*, is strongly contextualized and inevitably embodied.

According to Polanyi, tacit knowledge is constructive and conditional for embodied cognition, which cannot be explained but must be experienced. One of Polanyi's commentators emphasized that „*knowing-how* remains an important factor of professional efficiency as it enables problems to be solved, especially in new or equivocal situations" (Chmielewska-Banaszak, 2010, s. 45). This is possible thanks to a specific *interpretative framework* that serves as a „filter" in confrontation with new cognitive situations, enabling the cognizing subject to „capture" familiar components and accelerate the process of perception and cognitive reaction. As such, the *interpretative framework* serves as a working or unarticulated „theory" that explains the nature of events, objects, or situations (Chmielewska-Banaszak, 2010, s. 47).

In our analysis, we ask whether it is possible to embody „tacit un--knowledge" in the same way as „tacit knowledge." According to Polanyi (1966), tacit knowledge is unconscious and bodily mediated in the course of specific actions and reactions and to solve problems. Thus, assuming that an individual having certain tacit knowledge simultaneously has the resources to perform a specific action, therefore a person who has not managed to acquire such resources and who embodies – in a way that is implicit to them – a certain kind of un-knowledge is unable to perform or engage in a specific task. Tacit knowledge is to a large extent dependent on experience.

Without a doubt, special needs educators should be taught knowledge and competencies related to the sexuality of people with ID which may serve as an experience-based interpretative framework that the educators could use when confronted with cases of sexual abuse. Such knowledge would be the theoretical „knowing-that" learned in the course of studies and discussed at workshops or tutorials that would prepare educators to start their job and learn practical experience. However, some respondents claimed that they were not equipped with such competence. This means that they are unable to generate a cognitive or procedural reaction at any of the possible levels – neither explicitly nor implicitly. Accordingly, the respondents embody a state of shared un-knowledge and incompetence, both on the conscious (explicit) level and in reaction to specific situations that constitute the foundation of the embodied and inexplicable knowledge:

> Unfortunately, nobody ever discussed sexuality, abuse, or prevention with us at university. This issue was completely omitted from the bachelor's degree program. [W8_K]

At that time, the biggest problem for me was what to do with the participants, how to talk to them, what to talk about, what not to talk about, what language to use, and what topics to avoid. I had no idea whatsoever and was pretty scared. [W8_K]

Aeffective embodiment

The above responses contain an evident affective component. They manifest such emotions as fear and anxiety. As popular as the concept is, many of Polanyi's commentators stress the ambiguity of tacit knowledge (Sanders, 1988). Such ambiguity gives way to multiple interpretations and elaborations of the term in the various contexts in which it is applied. This is the underlying idea of the book *Revealing Tacit Knowledge: Embodiment and Explication* (Adloff i in., 2015). Its authors, representing several disciplines and sub-disciplines, present different modalities of the concept of tacit knowledge.

One of them elaborates on the concept of implicit understanding, which denotes „affective, embodied, presuppositional, and socially-situated forms of understanding" (Shotwell, 2015, s. 169). Here, as in classic interpretations, *tacit* means something that is not explicitly expressed in words, while *understanding* has a lower cognitive load, meaning that it does not need to have the status of traditional „knowledge" or to fulfill its classic criteria. Meanwhile, such understanding remains „cognitively salient", in particular concerning our ability to recognize its *components*, such as implicit bias. Alexis Shotwell claims that „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" (Shotwell 2016, s. 172). In the context of the subject matter of this paper, such morality of tacit knowledge seems particularly plausible.

Since our research area appears to be particularly permeable to various forms of oppression and stereotypes, it seems vital to specify the respective dimensions that comprise the concept of tacit understanding in the context of the sexual abuse of people with ID, in this case – embodiment and emotions.

Shotwell introduced the concept of *affective understanding* which relates to the accepted emotions triggered in the context of a relationship with a tacitly understood object or phenomenon, as well as beliefs and prejudices that remain tacit but can be put into words (*implicit bias*) that de facto are a kind of tacit un-knowledge. By embodying a certain type of opinion, habit, or knowledge (or lack thereof), we reach for a certain set of emotions when

we are confronted with a person or situation to which this set of beliefs or un-knowledge applies.

Many of our interviewees, when recounting cases of abuse, more or less consciously adopted a specifically remote attitude. They detached themselves, deciding that – „luckily" – the case did not concern them personally, that they did not have to engage in it; they were relieved not to be directly involved.

B: Have you ever been involved in a difficult situation related to sexual abuse – what was it like?

R: No, luckily, I have never been involved in a situation like that. By directly I mean that I have personally never suspected anything like that. I heard many such stories when I was thinking of writing my master's thesis on the sexual abuse of children with intellectual disabilities. I thought, you know, that it would be very hard to compile a survey group, that I could not do this dissertation because I would not have enough interviews. As it turned out, wherever I went, everyone had had some experience with this, some even more than once. I've heard many such stories, also from my colleagues. [W6_K]

Everything that the interviewee *knows* was narrated to her by other people, mainly when she was collecting the material for her Master's thesis. She was surprised to hear so many such stories, not expecting the problem to be so common and she admitted that she continued hearing the same stories when she started working in the facility. This situation, however, did not develop a sense of professional agency in her – she was relieved („luckily") that „the problem" did not affect her „directly nor did require her to react in any way. Nevertheless, the interviewee was *positively* surprised by the number of cases that made it possible to complete her research. Thus, in this context, the number of cases proved to be helpful. This tension between the experience of others, described and analyzed by the interviewee (her *knowing-that),* and her wish to keep her distance manifests ambivalence towards the problem of the sexual abuse of people with ID – which is frequent enough for the interviewee to build her scientific dissertation on, but at the same time, the interviewee would rather not have to personally engage in and react to the problem (*un-knowing-how*).

The interviewee shifted responsibility to someone else who would have specific procedural knowledge; she felt „happy" that someone else, rather than her, had done some work in reaction to disclosed cases of abuse:

At that time, having worked for only a year or two, I had no idea what to do. *I was happy that someone else had taken care of it.* [W8_K]

Another interviewee also mentioned a sense of relief, which she called „comfort," that she was not confronted with abuse:

It may seem awful but *my comfort was that so far, all the cases were already closed*; nothing needed to be done because they were already in court or, as I said, the mother was dead. The legal work was *not my responsibility*, I did not have to start any procedures or notify anyone. All I had to do was to take care of a person and his or her needs. [W2_K]

The interviewee used the words „awful" and „comfort" in one sentence when regarding cases that she knew about and about which „nothing needed to be done" either because they were already in court or the person involved was dead. Interestingly, the motif of *dying*, in the context of possible closure was also mentioned by the therapist referring to a situation that was not solved to the victim's advantage. She said it was

A painful case, but it *died a natural death.* [W7_M]

Another interviewee used a similar reference:

I remember that she told me that because the mother was dead, there was nothing to be done, there was no legal procedure that could be taken. The case just went away. [W2_K]

Yet another interviewee mentioned a case that „blew over" or „faded away":

The pupil's family very quickly withdrew their accusations against the school and the case *just blew* over; in the end, it *faded away* and the perpetrator was never found. [W4_K]

Stories of sexual abuse recounted by others trigger certain feelings and emotions associated with bodily reactions – comfort, relief, pain, that such cases do not affect one personally. At the same time, the interviewees associated „cases" with some sort of corporeality that allowed the cases to be „close down," „to die", or „fade away," making it difficult to identify those who are responsible for such outcome.

On the one hand, these properties suggest that the „cases" or „topics" have some sort of autonomy (as if they could resolve themselves or die), but it is hard not to notice that they also mean dying, fading away, or blowing over. Disappearing. The recurrence of these terms makes them worthy of particular attention. They should be viewed as some sort of *mental images* (Lakoff, 2011) rather than mere linguistic *usus*. Associating sexual abuse with dwindling or fading away is a tacit way of (not) seeing the phenomenon.

„It goes without saying"

Polanyi (wrote that the „body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge of the world" (1966, p. 15). Thus, embodied knowledge should be considered *pre-reflexive tacit knowledge*, that is, the body's competence to act and ability to perceive. Tacit knowledge, after all, is rooted in the body. If the body „tells us" that it is best for us to un-act, to keep a comfortable distance from events, this says a lot about our perception of them.

As we have already mentioned, the embodiment does not exist separately from the other categories, remaining the place of reproduction of specific mental habits and presuppositions associated with how ones is perceiving reality.

The third type of *implicit understanding* identified by Alexis Shotwell and relevant to our analysis is that „could be formulated in certain circumstances" (Shotwell, 2015) – these are all kinds of presuppositions, prejudices, or *commonsense* categories of thinking about certain people or phenomena that implicitly design the perception of a specific section of reality. A. Shotwell explains that „beliefs that are not consciously asserted, *go without saying*, or have been internalized but could be verbally expressed fall into this category of implicit understanding" (Shotwell, 2015, s.173s).

As we have already mentioned, reluctance to react to cases of sexual abuse reveals a fear of one's lack of knowledge and experience. The essence of that fear is the inability to identify abuse – especially if the abuse should *prove to be real*:

> I don't know and I'm not competent, and *I am anxious* because I don't know *how to tell whether this is real abuse or not*. On the other hand, although I read a lot and do have some knowledge, I am aware that my knowledge is purely theoretical. [W6_K]

The first thing to note about this response is the partly concealed doubt about the speaker's ability to identify abuse (having declarative, theoretical knowledge) and a fear that it could be real. This brings to mind the

mechanisms of *questioning the truthfulness* of victims caused by the stereo-typical perception of not only the cognitive and communication skills of people with ID but their sexuality in general.

The interviewee also admitted that her knowledge is mostly theoretical and does not provide her with any helpful *interpretative framework*. This is further proof of the above-mentioned foundations of *tacit knowledge*, namely, the embodiment of certain knowledge through contact with an authority figure or through relevant practices. The respondent, representing a specific professional group that should be expected to resist reproducing certain stereotypes, expresses an implicit bias.

Importantly, she is not isolated in her opinion. Many interviewees admitted that they were afraid of misdiagnosing a situation based on only their knowledge and statements given by the people with ID. The problem is not only the lack of knowledge. The source is deeper – it is a *general assumption* that a person with ID confabulates and that what they say is not automatically considered to be „true." Usually, such confrontations are a major challenge because of the need to „prove" and judge whether something is true or not:

> I didn't agree to talk to the woman who reported the abuse because she'd already been interviewed by other specialists (a psychologist and an educator from the institution). Also, I was not able to satisfy their expectation and determine whether what she reported was true or not. [W13_M]

> I don't know *how* to prove it. I'm afraid it will be a "word against word" situation, especially in the case of children with disabilities – *you know what it's like.*[W6_K]

The presumption of the untruthfulness of people with ID (Pillay, 2012), especially when it comes to their testimony of sexuality, is an implicit yet common consensus. „You know what it's like" – as one of the interviewees has expressed a collective understanding that proving sexual abuse of a person with ID is difficult because such a person is confused and deprived of its rights of intimacy or „that is the way things are" as admitted one of the intervie-wees referring to the inconclusiveness of such situation, meaning standard „victim's word against perpetuator's word", as one of the interviewees put it.

In our analysis, the problem of sexual abuse constitutes a symbolic equivalent of the existing stereotypes of the sexuality of people with ID in general. Reactions like assuming that people claiming to have been hurt are untruthful, justifying oneself by a lack of explicit „criteria" of abuse, or distancing oneself from the problem all suggest that special needs educators

represent the particular kind of knowledge that refuses-to-be-knowledge, or, simply speaking, is un-knowledge. The un-knowledge, which they acquire through education and work, transforms into collective passivity and de facto acceptance, reproducing the harmful stereotypes and marginalizing the phenomenon of sexual abuse of people with ID.

Sexual abuse of children and adults with intellectual disabilities: Actual and (un)practiced procedures

People with ID are at a higher risk of being sexually abused due to their limited ability to identify abuse from their caregivers or to report sexual abuse since they usually depend on personal (and very often intimate) care (hygienic procedures). Existing studies exploring the issue of the sexual abuse of people with ID claim that, in criminal cases, law enforcement authorities focus more on the disability of the victim and their cognitive limitations rather than on ensuring their access to justice and enabling them to pursue their claims (Sin et al., 2009). Researchers (Sequeira et al., 2003; Valenti-Hein, 2002) emphasize that it is very difficult to assess the scale of the problem of sexual abuse of adults and children with ID. Monika Parchomiuk (2019) suggested the following reasons for this difficulty - methodological (different definitions of abuse and ways of exploring them), societal (the problem is neglected and belittled on a broader societal scale) and situational (e.g., the limited ability to report abuse).

It may be said that the interviewees *embodied* all the above-mentioned factors that prevent reliable assessment of the scale of the problem of sexual abuse. As we showed, their declared un-knowledge of sexual abuse of people with ID (they believed they would not be able to identify real abuse) makes it impossible to thoroughly investigate the scale of the problem (methodological obstacles). Meanwhile, the reported indolence of law enforcement authorities or the passivity of managers of institutions contributes to inertia in reacting to and reporting cases (situational obstacles). All these factors combine into the societal obstacle to identifying the phenomenon, reproducing the area of social abuse of people with ID as socially neglected and marginalized.

When asked what, in their opinion, was needed most to react to sexual abuse, the interviewees said it was an *education* on the sexuality of people with ID, *procedures* in the event of suspected sexual abuse, and possibly *an expert* to coordinate a team of educators in crises.

The interviewees emphasized that education should be provided to people with ID, their parents or caregivers, and a team of educators. They mentioned educating people with ID about intimacy and awareness of boundaries, and providing educators with guidelines for conduct:

> I know I can't cure the world, but *the first step is education*. Teaching to understand the body and intimacy, easing the tension, and talking about which behavior is bad and which is OK.[W2_K]

The above suggestions concern the need for declarative knowledge that would provide educators with the *knowing-that*, to use Polanyi's typology.

However, such knowledge, although very important and needed by professionals, as was suggested by almost every interviewee, seems to promote competencies gained through declarative knowledge rather than through experience. None of the interviewees mentioned that they would like the training to provide them with the opportunity to work with real cases or to observe others do so.

The question is at what point theoretical knowledge is supposed to transform into practical knowledge since the interviewees were relieved to not have to engage personally in the cases of sexual abuse known to them. Let's hope this would change if they were provided with certain knowledge or felt they had it. Nonetheless, the point of having such knowledge is basically to be able to put it into practice.

The other suggestion that the interviewees made was to introduce specific procedures. Practically all the interviewees mentioned a lack of *clear guidelines* in case of suspected sexual abuse:[3]

> Another thing is procedures, for example, in the institution. In our nursery, there is nothing like that and *I'm pretty certain that I wouldn't know how to follow a procedure, and neither would my boss*. I mean what to do step by step if I suspected sexual abuse. [W8_K]

> I think some *standard procedures* would be helpful; even if you don't remember what to do at a given moment, because you are taken by surprise, then you *have a procedure that is somehow optimal*. [W6_K]

These responses suggest that procedures are supposed to mean certain *dis-embodied knowledge* that would be universal and useful when, because

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[3]   Interestingly, the interviewees never rarely referred to sexual abuse as an „offense."

of stress or time pressure, we lose access to the knowledge we have previously gained and, as with the above-mentioned „handbook" does not require practice or consolidation. It should be „somewhere" so that we can look into it to know what to do „step by step".

What maybe remain unclear for the interviewees, there are procedures to be followed in the case of a suspected offense, governed by the Polish Law (under *Offenses against Sexual Liberty and Decency*), according to which an individual who suspects sexual abuse, especially of a person with ID, is obliged only, or as much as, to report it to the appropriate authorities. Importantly, in the context of the above-mentioned responses, this provision does not in any way oblige the notifying person to investigate or prove the nature of an event or to *demonstrate* that the act actually („truly") amounts to an offense.

Conclusion

We analyze professionals' responses using the concept of tacit knowledge, which in this case we understand as peculiar un-knowledge of the sexual abuse of people with ID, practiced and preserved by psychologists and special needs educators. This un-knowledge is linked with professional passivity in reacting to the sexual abuse of people with ID and belongs to the habitus of professionals who work with people with ID and results from a lack of adequate professional education.

Accordingly, the paper analyzes both the explicit discourse – i.e. opinions regarding the sexual abuse of people with ID and demands for more accessible procedures and education – and that which remains implicit but related to that which is explicit, namely, actual professional passivity.

The problem of sexual abuse and the sexuality of people with ID is on the one hand normalized, and on the other hand marginalized, trivialized, and stereotyped. This allows the deletion of a cultural context that includes people who, due to their profession, should actively prevent such stereotypes. The reason for the passivity and fear of reacting in any way to prevent the sexual abuse of the interviewees was the dilemma of "failing to correctly recognize true abuse" and „lack of knowledge":

> Undoubtedly, we lack *knowledge*. We lack people who can help and engage in solving the problem. [W8_K]

The interviewees' responses suggest hidden passivity – „we should be educated" and „procedures should be presented to us" – but little is said

about the actions that the educators could take themselves, as if they were implicitly unable to generate a reaction, expecting any „assistance" to be external. This reveals a tension between embodied passivity and un-knowledge and a dis-embodied remedy, which, given the circumstances, may prove completely ineffective. The above-mentioned engagement may be manifested through actions taken without any „top-down" procedures, such as informing one's boss of the need for education, discussing the issue at team meetings, or looking for solutions within the existing procedures. Of course, it is also helpful to look for „external" support and undergo relevant training, but for that to truly stimulate change and reaction to sexual abuse, it needs to be embodied. The question is whether the interviewees could be those „people" mentioned in the citation and whether they could see themselves as introducing, to some extent, the changes they suggest. Engaging in a problem, which the interviewee mentioned, is a different kind of activity than educating oneself and others.

As we have shown, this is influenced by several factors that are intrinsically linked with tacit un-knowledge– an inability to gain relevant qualifications at university (resulting in a more or less conscious reproduction of thinking patterns about sexual abuse at work) and lack of a sense of agency in a specific professional group. This sense of professional powerlessness is particularly audible when the interviewees explicitly suggest the need to complement their experience with expert knowledge external to them, which, in their opinion, would be the remedy to the problem of preventing and reacting to cases of sexual abuse of their charges. Meanwhile, their un-knowledge and lack of a sense of agency also manifest in such emotions as fear, relief, or horror, which is also an important trail in exploring the phenomenon of tacit un-knowledge.

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