

---

# REACHING OUT FOR SKILFUL PERFORMANCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF TACIT KNOWING IN THE HANDLING OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

*Sietske Dijkstra*

## **Abstract**

This article aims to contribute to skilful performance by reflecting on the importance of tacit knowing for practitioners who handle domestic violence in the field. Polanyi's insights on tacit knowing, skills and learning are applied to domestic violence cases and to reflections on approaches and developments in the field in which tacit knowing is embodied and expressed. Furthermore, it relates to the work that practitioners engage in directly with clients, to Sennett's sociological themes on craftsmanship and good work, on front-line work in child protection the handling of domestic violence, and on learning from complex, sometimes fatal, cases. This leads to the conclusion that formal and informal knowing and intense learning need to be intertwined in a balanced way.

## **Keywords**

domestic violence, tacit knowing, good work, social professionals, learning of and from complex cases, skilful performance

## **1. Introduction: social professionals and domestic violence<sup>1</sup>**

In their daily work social professionals are often guided by experience and practice-based knowledge. Skilled professionals express their craftsmanship in refined approaches—usually relying upon or assuming more than they actually put into words. Social professionals who specialise in domestic violence have a difficult job to do. They need a mix of different, sometimes seemingly contradictory competences: they must be open-minded, unbiased and alert, firm yet co-operative, considerate yet strict. In their professional attitude they need to balance trust with probing and critical questions. Professionals need to be highly skilled in dealing with difficult cases: open-minded, flexible and receptive as well as decisive and accurate who have to act in a crisis need to think fast with an and to be constantly alert. At the same time, they must be able to think slowly and analytically with an in depth mind about the case in question as well as reflect on it and other cases (Kahneman, 2011).

In our study *Hidden Treasures* we did not provide a definition of a good professional<sup>2</sup> or good work beforehand, as we wanted to leave space for the conceptualisation of good work and the required

qualities. In this article I define good work as being the skilful performance shown by experienced practitioners in their daily activities: good work which can to some extent be shown and learned, although it might not always have an extensive vocabulary. Doing and knowing are closely related and mutually reinforce the good work of these practitioners. As Polanyi explains (1958), committed practitioners learn in an apprenticeship from experienced colleagues and from clients and make sense of experience as a skilful act. The quality of the work in the handling of domestic violence is crucially important. Good work is essential because it can reduce risks, break destructive patterns of violence, create safety and even save lives. Failures and avoidance behaviour can prove costly for individuals and society alike and discredit professional practice (Dijkstra, 2008; Cooper, 2005; Dijkstra, 2005). With hindsight, the inevitability of fatal cases may seem clear. At the time, however, the course of events is far less predictable. Most cases are incomplete, fragmented and complicated puzzles rather than well-ordered self-explanatory configurations.

Professionals in the field of child abuse and partner violence have to deal with complex, sometimes dangerous situations. More often than not, they have to make decisions on child protection or partner violence in critical situations under pressure of time and with a high caseload (Munro, 2002). Information may be limited during a crisis or comprehension might be lacking. Despite the best efforts by professionals, positive outcomes are never guaranteed. Uncertainty and urgency are characteristics of street-level and front-line work in the field of domestic violence and child protection. Elementary resources and highly trained experienced staff are usually in short supply (Lipsky, 1980; Schon, 1983; Munro, 2002, Dijkstra, 2013). Worldwide, the efforts to deal with domestic violence in shelter agencies are entwined with this uncertainty, inequality, marginalisation and lack of resources. Domestic violence cannot be easily erased and it has inter-generational consequences: those involved usually face multiple and often chronic problems relating to income, housing, parenting, education and work. The urgency of serious and fundamental problems in the intimate lives of people and families underlines the need for

new approaches and good, sustainable work. One way forward is to focus on the immediate and direct experience of good work that is rooted in tacit knowing and combine it with more formal learning.

### 1.1 Structure

This article<sup>3</sup> is made up of three sections. The next section (Conceptualising) addresses the importance of tacit knowing, explaining how it is built up through experience, a passionate desire to know and the intention to create good work. This particular quality will be illustrated by a *dharma* lesson by Zen master *Shunryu Suzuki*. Then I elaborate on Polanyi's development of the concept of work informed by the tacit dimension, referring particularly to his theory on perception, combining outside and inside perspectives into new pathways and even making new discoveries, particularly his chapter on Skills in his book *Personal Knowledge* (PK). In more detail I discuss the important and interactive role the body plays in expressing immediate experience through gestures, facial expressions, physical posture and attitude.

The second section is more empirically grounded. Based on the study of *Hidden Treasures* (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011), it consists of a literature study and in-depth interviews with 25 lead practitioners and three clients about their learning experiences involving domestic violence. The research material is considered as a case study of tacit knowing and good work within a context of domestic violence (Dijkstra, 2012). I will show the pressure to which good work is subjected by applying some thoughts on front-line work to the theme of domestic violence, based on Lipsky's (1980) 'street-level' bureaucracy, Schön's ideas on reflective practitioners, thoughts on the logic of economics and bureaucracy, and Sennett's ideas on craftsmanship (2008) and working together (2012). These more theoretical insights will be used to examine the hands-on approach to domestic violence more closely and linked to our analysis of excerpts from interviews.

In the third section I look at these practices from a more distant perspective and from different sides, drawing upon the experience of clients and social professionals who work with clients and their families on the one hand, and giving a more theoretical perspective on perception and good work in neo-liberal settings with the dominant logics of economics and management on the other—which can put pressure on the daily work with families. This paves the way for guidelines for practice-based work and learning and a plea to learn and discover more from experience and mix the tacit with more formal and research-based knowledge by using the characteristics of context, professional behaviour and

interaction (Tops, 2013) as a frame for skilful performance.

## 2. Conceptualizing

### 2.1 'Bird is here'

Soto Zen master Shunryu Suzuki was in his fifties when he left Japan in 1959 and founded a flourishing school of Zen practice in San Francisco. He became well-known for his book *Zen Mind, Beginners' Mind*, which has become a classic. His heartfelt and mild discourses, or *dharma* lessons, were highly appreciated. I apply his *dharma* teaching on Sound and Noise, branches of the *Sandokai*, to the work on domestic violence. Sound, according to Suzuki, emerges as more real and comes from practice, Noise is more objective and bothersome. Through this theme and the example of the bird Suzuki shows the importance of bringing together the objective and the subjective, thereby creating space for letting in reality in such a way that we can be enlightened by the bird. We can say 'The bird is there' in many ways. Suzuki says:

You may say the bird is singing there - over there. But we think, you know, bird, when we hear the bird, bird is 'me', you know, already. I—actually I am not listening to bird. Bird is here, you know, in my mind already, and I am singing with the bird. Peep, peep, peep.<sup>4</sup>

The song of the bird may be a disturbing noise or a sound. If we take the bird and make it into a part of ourselves, we can say we are the bird, we have become the bird. Experience, including professional experience, is similarly immediate and direct.

### 2.2 Tacit knowing and indwelling

The principle highlighted by Suzuki can be compared with Polanyi's concept of *indwelling*. To express knowing, we need to take the fullness of the direct experience into ourselves, make it our own and make it unique. Polanyi (1966; 1969) developed a theory on awareness or perception comprising of two different and mutually exclusive ways of seeing—the focal and the subsidiary—which we apply one at the time. The focal refers to the hammer hitting the nail; the subsidiary refers to the feel of the shaft of the hammer in the palm of my hand. Through indwelling they lead in combination to active comprehension and skilful knowing and doing. This can draw out a new and joint quality not previously present. Integration of this kind creates a pathway for learning, discovery and continuous investment in values.

Following on from the Polanyian line of thought, tacit knowing is an embedded experience, rooted in practice, usually hidden, sometimes unconscious or emerging as self-evident, almost without words. It is

also an embodied, intimate and reflexive expression of experience in which thinking, doing and being are intertwined. It is the result of a joint meaning which opens new horizons as it combines the external and detached view with the internal, or personal, experience. The outside view goes hand in hand with the inside knowing. Polanyi (1966), upon making the enigmatic and somewhat cryptic statement that 'we can know more than we can tell', was the first scientist to point to the crucial role of the tacit in all knowing. According to Polanyi (1966), all explicit and articulate knowing in science is based on 'indefinable powers of thought'.

Polanyi (1958) states in *Personal Knowledge* (PK) that all knowledge thus described is personal knowledge. Understanding implies personal participation, which is not subjective but claims universal validity. In this process, clues and tools are crucially important for establishing contact with a hidden reality and the unknown (PK, vii/viii). When applied to the ways in which professionals handle domestic violence it denotes the magic, the joy, and the invigorating power of experience and good work. Sennett (2012) describes good work as the feeling and pleasure that professionals derive from wanting to do the job well, whatever the effort or the cost.

If we are to be open to new experience, and if we want this to be a lived experience, we need to actualise it mindfully, with our full attention again and again through integration and re-integration. Then it becomes a vivid and adventurous pursuit which creates new tools for better learning and understanding. To create links and bridge gaps we need to be keen to develop helpful ways or (practice-based) tools. A group discussion, leading questions, a short film or a drawing with keywords can serve as a tool which helps to clarify, visualise and summarise complexity. In 2012, during a master class of nine months on the handling of domestic violence, we experimented with a mind map, using it as a tool to visualise what was needed to create good, more sustainable practice. A flower, complete with stalk and roots, was drawn to help professionals see the depth and consistency of the learning. They were invited to integrate the innovation of the flower with the nourishment carried by the stalk which is rooted in the tacit of the soil, in order to make change sustainable (Dijkstra & Verhoeven, 2013, presented at the conference that concluded the master class.<sup>5</sup> Polanyi explains in his essay on Skills (PK) that tools can create and destroy meaning:

If we discredit the usefulness of a tool, its meaning as a tool is gone. All particulars become meaningless if we lose sight of the pattern which they jointly constitute. (PK 57)

Without re-integration, knowledge can become frozen, separated from its (tacit) roots and lose the nourishment of the lived experience.

The importance of tacit knowing, highlighted in Polanyi's enigmatic statement that 'We can know more than we can tell' (TD 4), is an allusion to the mystery that there are often no words or refined languages to articulate or explain the acquisition of in-depth and rooted knowing. How do we explain to another how to ride a bicycle? How do we explain how to recognise a face? How do we know how to approach a client in a helpful manner?

All knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable (KB, 144).

Polanyi discovered that if the two significant principles of awareness or perception, the focal and the subsidiary, work together they can be viewed in terms of parts and a whole, where the whole refers to meaning.<sup>6</sup> Polanyi (1958) remarks in his chapter on Skills in PK:

When focusing on a whole we are subsidiarily aware of its parts, while there is no difference in the intensity of the two kind of awareness. (PK 57).

The meaning creates a pathway for learning, discovery and transfer. Polanyi identifies three types of learning in PK: trick learning, sign learning and latent learning. Trick learning is an addition to knowing: it is motoric, heuristic and leads to invention and skilful actions; sign learning operates within the existing framework, relying on routines, perception and observation; latent learning focuses on understanding and interpretation and is used for solving routine problems. An innovation, once achieved, is irreversible. The operation of a fixed framework of knowledge is reversible. The latent learning of skilled workers may be particularly important in this area. Polanyi states that latent learning:

reduces exploration to a minimum and shifts the task altogether to the subsequent process of inference. Learning then becomes an act of insight, preceded by a period of quiet deliberation (PK 74).

A pause, Polanyi states, can also take the form of puzzled contemplation which, in a case of domestic violence, can manifest itself as a compelling confrontation where answers or pathways to answers are vitally important and may even be a matter of life and death (Van der Pas, 2011; Dijkstra, 2005).

Subsidiary awareness of comparable cases, conjoined with subsidiary awareness of what is unique in one case and the goals we seek, may be integrated into thoughtful explicit actions and

recommendations that constitute indwelt feelings of accomplished good work. Or, as Schön puts it: skilled practitioners see the familiar in a new case as the unique and the unfamiliar; in other words they build on the familiar from the example as an opportunity for learning more about the unfamiliar (1983, 138).

### 2.3 The tacit and the body

As the tacit is embodied, there is a strong non-verbal side to its expression. Social work professionals learn how to use their body to practise and convey their profession.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the quality of professional behaviour is also enacted in non-verbal ways—through, for example, gestures, posture, facial expressions, body language, eye contact or movements. Professionals can make skilled use of the body for the benefit of the interaction. Police officers for instance instil a sense of safety, teachers create an atmosphere of learning in a group, waiters can make you feel at home and social work professionals create trustworthiness and understanding and enhance feelings of self-esteem. Sennett (2012) in his study on co-operation draws attention to the feelings of accomplishment and pleasure in the rhythm of the movements of professionals.

Sometimes bodily involvement is needed to acquire knowledge of certain phenomena; take, for example, the specific practice-based and dynamic knowledge the grouters had in the case of the destroyed dam (Schmidt, 1993). Another example can be found in the process of learning to read and write: you can feel the letters, draw them, see them, use movements of the fingers to learn their shape. The letters form a word, the words form a sentence, the sentences form a text which can be compared with other texts.

The body and its sensations are important messengers and warning systems in the handling of domestic and partner violence. What do you experience if you feel safe or unsafe? What is transferred or counter-transferred? Where in the body can arousal or fear be felt? Is your heart beating faster, are you sweating, feeling cold, are your ears ringing, do you feel a pain rising in your neck or a knot in your stomach? These physical signals can be important indicators of danger and can even prevent violence by freeing up space and awareness for another option and creating, for instance, a time-out. The body as a vehicle of expression and meaning can also be used in therapy with couples. My Dutch colleague and therapist Justine van Lawick (2012) uses body sculpting as a means of expressing the relational dynamics that unfold during partner violence. Furthermore, drama, theatre scenes and dialogical work can help to unveil

what is going on and expose circumstances that can lead to potentially devastating effects.

## 3. Theoretically situated and empirically grounded

### 3.1 Good work under pressure

Recently, Sennett (2012) stated in *Together* that three major trends—acceleration, deskilling and growing uncertainty in flexible work—are putting enormous pressure on good work and co-operation in western society. He pleads for new efforts in the craft of co-operation where dialogue, empathy and a subjunctive voice are crucial. Skilful performance needs regular practice, it is related to exercise and apprenticeship. Further slow questions on vulnerability and long-term consequences are therefore required to create time, space and depth to reflect upon key issues and commitment to the ethics of craftsmanship (Kunneman, 2012). We need to create stories and reflect on their meaning because they help us to engage and to expand our world (Hummel, 1991). However, in our work we all too easily drift away from and miss the essence of the matter we are dealing with. In complex situations, nobody can claim ownership of the one true solution. We need to learn together if we are able to progress. There might be a hierarchy of knowing, but a monopoly can spell danger. As Schmidt concluded from her careful analysis of what went wrong between the understanding of professionals when the dam collapsed:

Because of our different perspectives and limited abilities, we need each other. In working together we enrich our view of the world and increase the possibilities of solving problems. (1993, 530)

When work values move to the background and institutional logic moves to the foreground, we are at risk of backing away from key issues instead of meeting them. These different and confronting logics can be particularly harmful in complex and sensitive work, such as the handling of domestic violence. A collusion between avoidance and defeated workers may be a spin-off from organising work in systems. This undermining effect can be compared to what Sennett (2012) describes as withdrawal at work coming to the surface in the *unco-operative self* and the isolation resulting from deep acting, pretending to work together. Interagency work to handle difficult cases of partner violence and/or child abuse can be a danger in itself if it leads to fragmentation and circuitous processes that discourage and demotivate clients and professionals alike (Cooper, 2005; Dijkstra, 2005). Isolation of knowing can do untold harm to complex cases. One

condition for the preparedness to work together, however, is a degree of equality between the collaborating partners.

Lipsky (1980) goes even further in his analysis when he shows how street-level workers from the field logic experience chronic constraints on resources as their requests far exceed the limited budgets and confront institutional logic. This rekindles memories of a frightening experience I had as a youngster in Forum Romanum when feral cats started fighting over my sandwich. There simply was not enough to go around. (See Table 1: *Values and logics in work*)

### 3.2 Examples from Hidden Treasures

How can these more theoretical thoughts be linked to the way skilful professionals act in domestic violence cases and the value that clients attach to the help? The six examples below come from in-depth interviews with four lead professionals who participated in our *Hidden Treasures* study on skilled work on domestic violence. Two interviewees work in shelters, one in practice-based research in education and one with the police (one male and three females). There are also short quotations from two clients (one female, one male).

#### 3.2.1 New logics on bureaucracy and power

A director of the biggest shelter group in the Netherlands with more than thirty years of work experience believes that the opportunities for pioneering and innovation are diminishing. She is concerned about the professional autonomy and creativity that is required to do good work in addressing the needs of the clients.

It is good that society and the politicians are recognising domestic violence. The police are taking it seriously, unlike twenty years ago. But interest has resulted in a spread of too many different agencies and all sorts of questions are being raised about task allocation and power sharing. The scope for new ideas, for pioneering, is dwindling. Mounting bureaucracy and tighter guidelines are inhibiting movement, also for professional workers in the field. It's all pinned down, fixed, predefined (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 39/40).

#### 3.2.2 Fragmented services

The abused male interviewee considered it paradoxical that the youth care and child protection services monitored his children but overlooked his needs as a person, an ex-partner and parent, failing to reach out to him and provide support and assistance.

After my ex was arrested, the professionals from youth care told me that the children would not be removed. They were in no immediate danger anymore. They did not think about me being violated by my

ex-wife. Then, and still now, I needed good support and assistance but have not received that either. I felt neither seen nor heard (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 96)

#### 3.2.3 Reflection and action intertwined

Learning organisations are dynamic. New insights lead to new or revised approaches and methods. These insights are generated by experiments, systemic exchange and reflection. It is not only relevant to know what works but also to get a deeper and clearer understanding of how it works and who works. Schön, (1983) with his reflection in and on action, made this theme central in his work, offering an approach to epistemology of practice, based on a close examination of what reflective practitioners do. Science can help in the search, but it cannot have the final say. Professionals have to learn from each other within and across organisations and from their clients and actions. In the words of another lead professional in shelter work: *We need to go from thinking to doing*. And one could add, the other way around, from 'doing to thinking' (reflecting).

Professionals may well have knowledge, but you still can't say whether they apply it in what they do, that they actually use it. And because they use that knowledge, they enhance or enrich it. It all has to develop and that happens when you start working with knowledge and linking it to your own experience. Then it becomes a better instrument for your actions. (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 106)

#### 3.2.4 Inspiring good work

A female interviewee used her reflections on the healing skills and attitude of a therapist as a role model for her own work as a social work professional in building relationships that really count.

She was really there for me, gave me attention and confronted me if necessary. Her deep humanity was expressed in her whole attitude ... Because I fully trusted her, I was able to dive in at the deep end. (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 61-62)

This account is a powerful example of what Meek (2011), in her book, *Loving to Know*, describes as an 'interpersonal epistemology': knowing is always interpersonal and on-going, we are transformed through meeting others.

#### 3.2.5 New interventions need to be practice-based

The restraining order was incorporated in Dutch law in 2010. Under a restraining order an abuser is removed from the house by the police for a period of at least ten days (maximum 28) while an intervention team works with the family members, who remain behind. Social case work is involved and the probation services work meanwhile with the abuser.

The idea to start using the restraining order in a group of cases where violence had supposedly just started proved misguided. It emerged that the violence was often far more serious than had been first thought, had been going on for longer and was intertwined with problems relating to income, housing, alcohol and unemployment.

We all thought it was about that one slap or one incident of violence but we read in 'restraining order online' about the horrendous things that happened. (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 139)

The new intervention had a deep impact on several levels: on the couples and families and on interagency co-operation in terms of the critical time intervention, making use of the right momentum (Dijkstra, 2011), and creating a new opening. Professionals became aware that the intervention based on the restraining order had ushered in a powerful change in the way they were dealing with, above all, partner violence. The fact that the professionals shared a common goal encouraged progress and created new opportunities and insights: for example, new communities of practice were able to do more than they did before the law-based intervention started.

When you know there's a lot more going on, you undertake completely different interventions. We can do a lot more than we did at first and to do justice to the clients at long last (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 140).

But the intervention based on the restraining order also caused problems by challenging the vulnerable infrastructure and placing too much of a strain on the available capacity. Less attention was paid to domestic violence. The creation of a scientifically approved risk-assessment instrument proved another stumbling block. It took so much time and effort to fill in the form that there was almost no possibility left in the system to carry out the restraining order procedure. In addition, the new intervention involved so many professionals and so many disciplines that actual implementation was impeded by measurement and evaluation. Handling cases had become difficult and stressful. One Dutch expert said that the instrument tested as successful, but implementation was almost killed off. The need for simplicity of doing was overruled by the complexity of thinking. An imbalance had been created in the triangle of doing, thinking and being. What could public administration have meant here, or had that also caused the trouble, wanting to deliver good work? The need to account for the intervention became dominant and encroached on the time and qualities required for making contact with families and learning from cases and the good practice of

colleagues.

Various specialists started intervening, also internally with the police, and we just let that happen. I let it happen too, so I'm not pointing the finger at anyone. These people did their level best to make sure that the restraining order was properly applied. And you need these people because they work out the preconditions. Eventually there were so many of them that it became almost unworkable and that was in an organisation that's got plenty of other things to do (Dijkstra & Van Dartel, 2011, 140).

### 3.2.6 Theory and practice

As described above, the different and sometimes contradictory logics derived from theoretical resources and our study are related to the specific characteristics of theoretical and academic work on the one hand and skilled practice, professional performance and the way we learn on the other. Theory is more abstract, deductive, generalised and based on reason, while practice is embodied, active, inductive and specific in context and details. (See Table 2: *Characteristics of theory and practice.*)

## 4. The relevance: analysis and synthesis

### 4.1 Land markers in domestic violence

A helicopter view of *Hidden Treasures* would show that the domestic violence case study is experiential, hands-on, and takes a bottom-up perspective. The study reasons from the more ideal field logic but encounters constraints along the way in the form of fragmentation, an emphasis on short-term wins and superficial knowing aimed at control. (See Table 3 *Basic differences between ideal practice and constraints.*)

### 4.2 Mind and mend the gaps

Gaps are sometimes created, but as shown by the analysis of the dam disaster they can, unfortunately, simply exist (Schmidt, 1993). The gap that is often assumed to exist between theory and practice in fact consists of several tensions at different levels with different functions and meanings, as illustrated in the list below. The tensions in theory-practice, between agencies, clients and professionals and within cases fit into seven different categories: hierarchy, abstraction, competition, fragmentation, expectations and different logics. (See Table 4: *Seven gaps and their respective category*)

### 4.3 Guidelines for practice-based social work

These persistent gaps cannot be easily closed. However, by promoting practical experience through, for example internships and apprenticeship in the field, we can take a stand to mind the tensions and mend the gaps from the perspective of the practitioners and their daily interaction.

It may be inferred from the above analysis that the clients and their families should be the focus of attention in cases of domestic violence. This, in turn, implies that the professional perspective on lived experience in practice needs to be at the forefront of our actions and attitudes and constantly in the back of our minds. The nine practice-based guidelines stimulate double and three-loop learning, focusing on insights and principles:

1. Strengthen daily practice in the handling of domestic violence by starting in the workplace with a bottom-up perspective and by closing the gap with institutional logic and other policy, theory and clients.
2. Create space for experiential work, lived experience and inductive adventures and take that as a counterbalance for being locked in a top-down system or bureaucratic logic.
3. Cherish vivid experience as this activates and invites the tacit and is in dialogue with refined perception. Do not be mistaken: experience is immediate and not the same as talking about or reflecting on experience.
4. Create case-based narratives and tell and use stories to create engagement and powerful knowing from the inside out, mixing them with good work in the outside world.
5. Validate the typical practice of professionals and promote hands-on as a necessary condition.
6. Always define the concept of quality and link this definition to the primary process. Feel the pain of the practice - the helplessness, the lack of skills, experience and resources, the avoidance, the dark side of co-operation, the transference and counter-transference, the work pressure - so that you are not swept along by general ideas or judgements.
7. Confront managers with concrete examples from everyday practice and make them allies in the good work and ambassadors for connecting the work in their network.
8. It is easy to criticise practice. If you formulate policy and judge cases, you should clarify your direct and indirect connections to the practitioners and the work floor.
9. Be aware of the balance in the triangle of doing, thinking and being. Use your senses, your brains, and actions. In the words of an activist interviewee and director for shelter work: Feelings have taught us to make use of the intellect. The opposite is also true: the intellect knows that feelings cannot be separated from the case in hand.

## **5. Conclusions and discussion**

The effects of social work are being increasingly debated and more cutbacks are expected. The neo-liberal economics of counting, cutting and effectiveness is the dominant logic nowadays. The emphasis on counting, cutting and bureaucracy can easily generate disregard for the wealth of knowledge rooted in experience, professional and otherwise, and for the development of new insights based on the direct contact made by social professionals in crisis situations every day. Underestimating the value and meaning of these social work practices—also in the field of domestic violence—can lead to greater inequality, exclusion, unnecessary circulation of money and the fragmentation of needs in which the whole becomes lost. Paradoxically, if you do for families what is needed, criteria are very complex and resources are often lacking. This invites avoidance and looking away, reminiscent of the day I ran from the feral cats.

Constraints that invite the expression of tacit knowing can be found in managerism and are characterised by control and strict ideas on blueprints and protocols which create a tension between the role played by public administration and the discretionary way we can deal with difficult cases. This can develop into a real battle on rigour and relevance, as Schön (1983) puts it. Schön even speaks of a split into two opposite management camps, each with an exclusive vision of the nature of professional knowledge. The split may be inferred from the fact that they ignore each other. One vision advocates control through the art of managing, hence avoiding uncertainty, instability and uniqueness; the other depends on everyday practice, spontaneous interaction and the exercise of an intuitive and skilled performance (240/241). For work to be meaningful, it has to be informed by experience, hands-on, interdisciplinary action and a bottom-up view, as well as a feeling for what is missing (the gaps, the unknown) and an understanding of the whole and the general issues (Schmidt, 1993). In order to understand, acknowledge and express the values of our good work and the ethics of craftsmanship (Kunneman, 2012) we need to return in professional practice to the learning power derived from indwelling and apprenticeship (Polanyi, 1958), learning from cases, and to stress the importance and reflective strength of meaningful narratives and stories through which we expand our world (Hummel, 1991). We are able, through direct experience, to build commitment for communities of learning and communities of practice, which include diversity, co-creation and dialogue. Then, ideal

practice can be a point on the horizon, expressed in the everyday drive for good work, seeing and searching for a contextual and holistic understanding of complex cases as well as their significant details. Tops (2013) analyses the front-line work of intervention and repression carried out by a municipal team of crisis workers within three alternative frameworks: sensitivity to the context (danger, crisis, overall situation) professional behaviour (quick, alert, skilful) and interaction (dialogue, team, lead professional).

When it comes to handling cases of domestic violence or crisis situations we need a slow, analytic and a quick decisive mind at one and the same time (Kahneman, 2011). Cost-cutting may seem beneficial in the short term, but it can destroy meaningful good work and undermine the existing infrastructure. This counter-productive trend must be turned around. Besides analysis we need synthesis to deal with urgent and complex issues and cases. Our society is begging for integration to help us deal with complexity in a human way. More attention needs to be paid to who works and how they work. We need more serving and shared leadership in which the pain of and responsibility for good practice are represented. We need to accord a more substantial role to practitioners and craftsmanship and cherish the enrichment of the tacit, acknowledging its significant and fundamental importance. In order to connect skilfully with a diversity of complex cases we have to tell stories and use the power of learning from cases and case studies. A balance in the three sides of the triangle of doing, thinking and being will help us to create communities of learning and communities of practice. Good work should be closely linked to the lived experience, with the intellect and skilled performance as tools. We need to be aware though that experience does not necessarily lead to skilled work. A rigid routine may be the result. We can remind ourselves of the *koan* of Suzuki's bird challenging us to shift our awareness. When it comes to handling difficult cases such as domestic violence cases social professionals need combined thought processes and a mix of skills that enables them to respond to the urgency, as well as constant training in thinking twice. In the practice-based words of Schmidt (1993): *They must constantly be alert to the back-talk of the specific situation* (526). In asking reflective, detailed and contextualised questions based on the experience of indwelt whole and fragmented cases (Van der Laan, 1995; Van der Pas, 2011) we sometimes unlock painful and hidden treasures. We can learn more than we can tell, expand and engage the world in creating significant stories (Hummel, 1991),

co-create true relationships and sustainable communities of reflective practice and dialogue. We build trust and are inspired by the drive for good work. Then, we start to reach out for skilful performance, embedding tacit knowing, paying close attention to the meaning of the whole and the significant parts.

Utrecht, Netherlands

fran.dijkstra@gmail.com

### **Bibliography**

- Cooper, A. 2005. 'Surface and Depth in the Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report'. *Child and Family Social Work*, 10, 1, 1-9.
- Dijkstra, S. 2005. Een professional komt en gaat. Zorg om de hulpverlening bij mishandeling en verwaarlozing, *Tijdschrift over Kindermishandeling*, juni, 9-13.
- Dijkstra, S. 2008. *Bring in the family. Huiselijk geweld, vrouwenopvang en (aankomende) professionals nader beschouwd*, Breda, Thieme.
- Dijkstra, S. & N. Van Dartel, 2011. *Verborgen Schatten. Wat goede professionals doen en cliënten ervaren bij de aanpak van geweld*, Amsterdam, SWP.
- Dijkstra, S. 2011. 'Begeleide terugkeer en de betekenis van tijd', *Systeemtheoretisch Bulletin*, 2, 157-173.
- Dijkstra, S. 2012. *The Power and Fragility of Tacit Knowing in Handling Domestic Violence*, presentation at the Polanyi Conference, Chicago, June 9-12.
- Dijkstra, S. 2012. Handling Domestic Violence. The Power and Fragility of Tacit Knowing. In H. Kunneman (ed.) *Good Work: the ethics of craftsmanship*, Amsterdam: SWP E-books, 157-169.
- Dijkstra, S. 2013. Ambulant, systeemgericht en integraal: de aanpak van geweld door de vrouwenopvang in de 21e eeuw. In: *Frontlijnwerkers in de veiligheidszorg*. Bervoets, E. & H. Moors (eds). Den Haag: Boom Juridische Uitgevers, 169-189.
- Dijkstra, S. & W. Verhoeven (2013). *KOSHI: Masterclass aanpak huiselijk geweld als leerwerkplaats*, Den Bosch, Avans.
- Hummel, R. P. 1991. Stories Managers Tell: why they are as valid as science, *Public Administration Review* 51, 1, 31-41.
- Kahneman, D. 2011. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. London/New York/ Toronto/Ireland/Australia/New Zealand, Penguin.
- Kunneman, H. 2012. *Good Work: the ethics of craftsmanship*(ed), Amsterdam: SWP E-books. <http://www.swpbook.com/1663>
- Laan, G. van, 1995. *Leren van gevallen*, SWP, Amsterdam.
- Lawick, J. van, 2012. Vechtscheidende ouders en hun kinderen. *Systeemtherapie*, 24, 3, 129-150.
- Lipsky, M. (2010, original 1980). *Street-Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individual in public services*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Meek, E. 2011. *Loving to Know: introducing covenant epistemology*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon.
- Munro, E. 2002. *Effective Child Protection*, Sage, London/California/New Delhi.

- Pas, van der A. 2011. 'En soms loopt het dus mis ...- over het belang van vooraf denken', *Ouderschapskennis*, 14, 2, 118-123.
- Polanyi, M. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*, new foreword by A. Sen, 2009, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London.
- Polanyi, M. 1964. *The Structure of Tacit Knowing*, Duke University.
- Polanyi, M. 1958/1962. *Personal Knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press.
- Schmidt, M. R. 1993. Grout: Alternative Kinds of Knowledge and Why They Are Ignored, *Public Administration Review*, 53, 6, 525-530.
- Sennett, R. 2008. *De ambachtsman. De mens als maker*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam.
- Sennett, R. 2012. *Together. The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, Allen Lane, Penguin, London/New York/New Delhi/Dublin/New Zealand, South Africa.
- Schön, D. A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action*, Basic Books, USA.
- Tops, P. 2013. De dynamiek van frontlijnsturing. In: *Frontlijnwerkers in de veiligheidszorg*. Bervoets, E. & H. Moors (eds). Den Haag: Boom Juridische Uitgevers, 45-58
- the women and children. The problem was that they felt unable to describe the written work specifically and communicate it beyond their team in the outside world. When asked directly about good work professionals tended to become shy and withdrawn. It was easier to invite them to think of the work of a colleague they really admired or appreciated and to explain briefly why they were impressed. This was followed later by group discussions in teams of practitioners and interviews with skilled and experienced practitioners.
3. This article was initially prepared as a paper for the PATNET conference in San Francisco in May 2013, based on the theme of Utopia and Public Administration. Utopia, is the title of a book written by Thomas More. It means 'no place' and is situated on a remote island. The book describes the vision and practices of a society on this distant non-existing island.
  4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHNyCAJXUXE>
  5. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlKi8VO\\_cBw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlKi8VO_cBw).
  6. Polanyi explains in PK that there are two kinds of wholes and two kinds of meaning: 1. A whole in which one thing means another thing (for instance a pattern); 2. A whole which means something in itself. He refers to these wholes as denotative (or representative) and existential (58).
  7. This interesting subject will be explored in greater depth in a paper still to be written from the perspectives of those who suffer physical and mental violation. For example, Merleau-Ponty claims that the (expressive) body is the primary site of knowing the world and cannot be disentangled from consciousness; the body is a permanent condition of experience.

### Notes:

1. I wish to thank Wil Verhoeven for our inspiring conversation on the subject and my co-researcher Nicole van Dartel, Professor Walter Gulick and Professor Wally Mead for their encouraging comments on an earlier draft.  
*NB The tables are placed at the end of this article.*
2. The study started in 2008 when the director of a shelter stated that she was convinced that the professionals were doing good work in the shelter with

Table 1: Values and logics in work		
Work Values	Field Values	Institutional Logic
Slow questions	Experience: adventure, learning and renewal	Laws, codes and protocols: justification
Good Work	Indwelling	Registration
Seeing the whole and attentive to details	Articulating within a societal context	Pressure on quick wins and short-term results
Supervision and reflection in teams	Integrating and re-integrating	Production
Professional identity	Humanity and successfully closed cases	Effectiveness

Table 2: Characteristics of theory and practice	
Theory	Practice
Knowing by reasoning	Knowing by doing and reflecting
Intellect and distant/outside	Embodied and active
Deductive and top-down	Inductive, realistic and bottom-up
Learning is abstract (theoretical)	Learning from cases
Analysis (different parts)	Integration (synthesis; the whole)
General	Specific in context (details)

Table 3: Basic differences between ideal practice and constraints	
Ideal	Constraints
Good work	Fragment
Striving for quality and understanding	Superficial and controlling
Constant innovation	Repeated failures
Embedded experience	Splitting, knowing without experience
Nourishing	Demotivating
Hands-on and bottom-up; inspiration of craftsmen on shop floor	Hands-off and top-down; dominance of management and policy
Integrating the tacit dimension	Cutting off or ignoring the tacit dimension
Adding meaning and value	Destroying meaning and value
Long-term investment	Short-term wins and quick results
Client-centred	Procedure- and task-centred

Table 4: Seven gaps and their respective category	
Gaps	Category
Theory-Practice	Hierarchy
Practice-Theory	Abstraction
Between Agencies	Competition
Within Cases	Fragmentation
Clients-System(s)	Expectations
Professionals-Clients	Different logics-Prejudice
Between logics or goals	Different logics-values and goals