On interactional expertise: Pragmatic and ontological considerations
Response to H. M. Collins

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Abstract. This paper is a critical examination of Harry Collins’s investigation into a third form of knowledge, “interactional expertise.” We argue that although Collins makes a genuine contribution to the phenomenological literature on expertise, his account requires further critical evaluation and response due to pragmatic and ontological considerations. We contend that by refining (in some questionable ways) the category of interactional expertise so as to create epistemological equivalence between activists, sociologists, critics, journalists, and some science administrators, Collins potentially undermines the value that a more rigorously construed concept of interactional expertise might have. We further show that Collins misunderstands the nature of embodiment in a way that is exacerbated by the sociological perspective that he adopts.

Key words: embodiment, expertise, science and technology studies

Introduction

Clearly, experts matter to us. Many routine decisions, technical and non-technical in nature, are executed only after consultation with, and perhaps deference to, experts. By contrast, not every theory of expertise is significant, and some are riddled with insurmountable difficulties. The topic of review here is the conceptual and pragmatic import of Harry Collins’s latest investigation into a third form of knowledge, “interactional expertise.”

On one level, Collins is beyond critique. Contrary to what some scholars in the science and technology studies community might espouse, his concept of the interactional expert designates a real group of knowledgeable and skillful people. Moreover, as a corrective to Hubert Dreyfus’s untenable portrayal of commentators, Collins makes a genuine contribution to the phenomenological discussion of expertise. And yet, there is a sense in which these compliments conceal the limitations of Collins’s account. Based on his critical evaluation of current sociological practice as limited because it is not normative, it appears that Collins does not wish to advance a purely conceptual argument. Rather, he invites us to approach the subject matter from a pragmatic vantage point.

If it is legitimate to take a pragmatic stance, then we are bound to inquire into whether the concept of interactional expertise can be applied in practice
to produce useful consequences. For the pragmatist, it is ineffectual to only appeal to a category in the abstract. As is well-known, John Dewey advocated that social scientists should not limit themselves to a descriptive enterprise; they should, instead, implement their findings so as to develop new ways to cope successfully with the world in which we live. A pragmatist of this kind would thus want to know if the outcome of the debate between formalists and informalists, as structured by Collins, is directly relevant to worldly concerns, as, perhaps, a strategic counterpoint to some aspect of institutional dogma. In order to discern if the concept of interactional expertise has useful cognitive potential, a pragmatist would ask if acknowledging the existence of a thoroughly demarcated notion of interactional expertise could make a noteworthy difference in our decision-making processes, e.g., when we try to make the best judgment concerning whom to turn to for advice and in what situation.

With the pragmatist’s concerns in mind, we proceed as follows. First, we inquire into whether Collins’s views enrich the phenomenological literature on expertise. Second, we critically assess how Collins differentiates interactional from contributory expertise. Third, we evaluate Collins’s analysis of the embodied dimensions of interactional expertise. We conclude by appraising the epistemological status of Collins’s account of interactional expertise in light of the pragmatic and ontological objections that are considered here.

Linguistic socialization: Expanding the scope of a shared practice

Collins wants to close what he calls “the practice gap.” This entails differentiating between three ways of trying to learn to pass a Turing test where the medium is ordinary conversation: (a) being fully physically immersed in a form-of-life, (b) being linguistically socialized, without sharing physical activity, and (c) acquiring discrete propositional knowledge. For Collins, the import of differentiating between these three approaches to the acquisition of conversational ability is that it enables him to distinguish between two types of expertise: interactional expertise and contributory expertise. A contributory expert is a practitioner in a field who learns to make contributions to that field via (a). By contrast, an interactional expert is someone who can talk competently about aspects of a field (e.g. pass on information, assume a devil’s advocate position, and make judgments on a peer review committee), but only learns about the field from talking with people who have acquired contributory expertise. In other words, while the interactional expert has quite a bit of tacit (non-propositional) knowledge, he is not a direct practitioner in a field; interactional expertise only requires (b), but not (a). What this means for Collins is that someone who lacks full physical immersion in a field can, through linguistic socialization, become so conversant about that field that, under the conditions of a Turing test, it would be hard for authorities in that field to differentiate between an interactional expert and a contributory expert.