



# Reprint of “Sensitive translations: Sensitive dimension and knowledge within two craftsmen’s workplaces”<sup>☆</sup>



Laura Lucia Parolin<sup>a</sup>, Alvise Mattozzi<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy

## KEYWORDS

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Body;  
Corporal knowledge;  
Craftsman;  
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Tactile knowledge.

**Abstract** In our paper we address the issue of the relations between knowledge and the sensitive dimension by taking into account and comparing the contribution to the production of a chair deployed by two craftsmen working within the Italian design furniture industry sector.

Relying on an ethnographic account of their work, we have been able to describe in detail the way in which the interaction among the bodies of the two craftsmen and those of the artifacts they contribute to develop takes place and gives way to innovation.

By taking into account the role of bodies and the sensitive dimension we outline a contribution to Actor-Network Theory and its theory of knowledge.

Indeed, in this article we propose a model of working knowledge in order to account for corporal interaction on the workplace. In our model there are two axes to describe the interactions among bodies. In the first one interaction moves from detail to the whole. In the second, interaction moves from an engaged position to a disengaged one. In so doing, we are able to draw a space of corporal knowledge. The craftsman’s skill lies in his/her capacity to move within this space and to let knowledge grow while moving within it.

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(...) the life we live is also a fleshy affair. A matter of chairs and tables, food and air, machines and blood. Of bodies.

(Mol, 2002: p. 27)

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 0471015227;  
fax: +39 0471015009.

E-mail addresses: [lauralucia.parolin@unimib.it](mailto:lauralucia.parolin@unimib.it) (L.L. Parolin),  
[amattozzi@unibz.it](mailto:amattozzi@unibz.it) (A. Mattozzi).

## Introduction

“We need it soft but supporting.”

This request was addressed to a contractor supplier for the seat of a new model of a chair. It was made by the person in charge of the putting-out for a famous Italian furniture brand.

The statement came after the transfer of a few artifacts – a prototype of the chair, some CAD blueprints, several CAD files.

How did the supplier succeed in satisfying this request? What tools and competences are needed to comply with it?

How did he manage in putting together the verbal request with the artifacts at hand? What kind of knowledge was involved?

In order to carry out the task, the supplier had to put into play his senses in full contact with the artifacts, by mobilizing his body in an interaction with the body of the future chair.

And how can we account for these interactions?

Our article will answer these questions by taking into account the work two craftsmen carried out to develop a chair. We will address the issue of “bodies, senses, and knowing” through the analysis of these two cases.

In order to answer the previous questions, we adopted an Actor-Network Theory framework which allows us to assess the mutual mediations among different bodies. Thanks to such framework we will explore a way to consider the body which differs from most of the approaches developed within social and human sciences that dwelling on Merleau-Ponty’s work, focus on the human body as the main – if not the only – source of experience in the world. We succeeded in introducing a different approach by considering the mediating role of artifacts through which the sensitive dimension is distributed.

By taking into account these mediations, we will show how innovation can surface through them.

## Bodies at work

### Rediscovering the body in organization

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the body in organization and management studies. Such attention is the outcome of a more general shift toward materiality within organizational studies (Berg, 1997; Bruni, 2005; Clegg & Kornberger, 2006; Fox, 2000; Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Orlikowski, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2010). Previously, as Orlikowski (2007: p. 1435) has underlined, they “overlooked the ways in which organizing is interrelated with the material forms and spaces through which humans act and interact”.

Besides the issue of corporeality, the shift has given rise to a different perspective on artifacts. The latter are no longer seen as mere bearers of symbolic meanings (Gagliardi, 1990). As for bodies, there has been an increasing awareness of embodiment in organizing; it places the dimension of corporeality and sensoriality at the forefront of organizational analysis (Gagliardi, 1996; Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000; Martin, 2002; Strati & Guillet De Monthoux, 2002; Strati, 1992, 1999, 2007).

The mentioned shift as well as the focus on the two specific issues of artifacts and bodies are connected to the concept of socio-material practices, through which there has been an endeavor to overcome the dichotomy between the social and material worlds by concentrating on practices within organizations. Practice-based studies (Gherardi, 2000), focusing on the constituent socio-material practices which characterizes organization, have clearly contributed to the mentioned shift, addressing our attention on corporeality and sensoriality in organizational analysis (Gagliardi, 1990; Hassard et al., 2000; Strati, 1992, 1999, 2007; Yakhlef, 2010).

The body – both at work and in organizational life – is no longer perceived as the neutral agent of an instrumental action, but rather as the locus of sensorial mediations,

sensitive knowledge, and the inscription of embodied professionalism. Accordingly, feeling, seeing and perceiving are themselves ways to act in the world, and, at the same time, inscriptions of the world on the body.

The reference theory most widely used by scholars pressing for the recognition of the role of corporeality in organizational studies is phenomenology (Strati, 1999; Yakhlef, 2010), especially through the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964, 1968). According to the phenomenological philosopher, human experience depends on the possession of a body: it is by means of our body that we experience and learn about our world. Our corporeal dimensions are a common feature which enable human beings to share the experience of experiencing. As Yakhlef (2010: pp. 410–411) writes:

The human body (including the mind) is regarded as the medium for experiencing and having access to (the practical and social) world. The concept of “body” is understood in the sense used by Grosz (1994 [...]) in which one can say that there is “no body as such; there are only bodies – male or female, black, white, brown, white, large or small – and the graduation in between”, stressing the specificity of various bodies, which gives rise to different forms of embodiment. Furthermore, the concept of body refers neither to an idealized platonic reality, nor to a merely physical or biological entity. It is rather, an active producer of culture, at the same time being a product thereof. Characteristic ways of sitting, gesturing, dancing, walking, showing one’s anger and moving are culturally defined. In our interaction with our environment, our body exchanges cultural and social elements, this implies that culture flows from the environment into our body, as well as from our body to the environment (Hayles, 1999).

From this viewpoint, there is no distinction among acting, thinking, and perceiving (Yakhlef, 2010), or among acting, knowing and learning (Gherardi, 2000, 2006).

We will reconsider the shift toward materiality we just outlined by taking into account the interrelatedness of artifacts and bodies within organizations, especially in relation to organizational learning, knowing and innovation.

### Knowing with our body

Interest in our body – as outlined in the previous paragraph (Section ‘Rediscovering the body in organization’) – has become quite popular in organizational literature also thanks to the success of the social perspective of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the more general debate on organizational learning (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Fox, 1997; Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995).

Within the literature about learning and the role of our body in organizations, attention is addressed to the nature of the learning process as a generative path to knowledge, inseparable from a situated practical involvement. According to the approach outlined above, experiential learning, sensorial perception, and esthetics become crucial factors for the understanding of organizational phenomena (Strati, 1999). Bodies at work are those which, as gendered, have inscribed on themselves the differences attributed by a gender symbolic system (Gherardi, 1995; Hancock &

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