

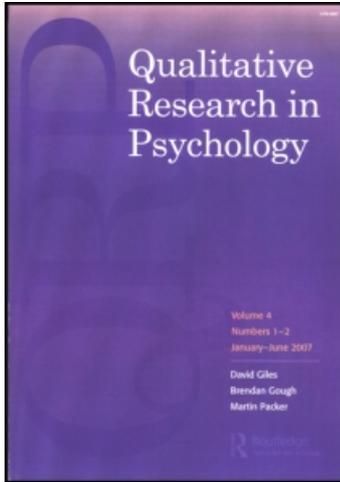
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### Taking the Analysis One Step Further

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## Taking the Analysis One Step Further

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*This article reflects on a small study of the competence of secretaries as a case of how to explore tacit knowledge in areas where competence is not even acknowledged. The author demonstrates the analytic process of oscillating between different theories, methodical moves, data collection, and data to conceptualize the secretaries' competence and constitute it as a field of research. The methodology suggested combines the creation of space for the secretaries to speak their competence into words with analysis of the work process and attention to how they talk about their work, using different theoretical perspectives. Experience from repeatedly taking the results back to secretaries is part of the analysis. The research process conceptualizes central competencies of secretaries usually taken for granted, e.g. availability work, it-depends-knowledge, mediation between different logics, knowledge of familiarity, and identifies their situated identity in a dominant help discourse. The article outlines the relevance of the methodology to other studies of tacit knowledge.*

**Keywords:** competence of secretaries; Life Mode interview; qualitative methods; sociocultural theories; tacit knowledge

Qualitative research, with its weaker position in the social sciences, is often subject to the influence of quantitative thinking (Widerberg 2001), which focuses on the use of highly specific and formulaic techniques and methods. Even though experienced qualitative researchers agree that analysis and interpretation constitute crucial points in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Maxwell 2005; Widerberg 2001), too many researchers still appear to labor under the misconception that the mere use of a qualitative technique, such as observing or interviewing, makes a study qualitative (Janesick 2000). The prevalence of this misconception makes it critical for researchers to understand how what Wadel (1991) called the “round dance” between theory, method, and data can be done both creatively and successfully within qualitative research. Learning to create such a process, combining systematic strategies with improvisation step by step, is not only the responsibility of but also a challenge for every qualitative researcher working in the psychological tradition.

This article discusses how the use of different methods and theories, in iterative dialogue with data and informants, can be fruitful for exploring, understanding, and conceptualizing tacit knowing in a professional field. To do so, the article reflects on the research process in a small study of secretaries in Child and Adolescent Mental Health

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Service (CAMHS) in Norway (Jensen 2006; Jensen 2008a). My initial intention was to investigate possibilities for the more effective use of secretarial competencies to improve everyday practice in outpatient clinics. However, although the secretaries had quite a number of competencies (some were even experts in their fields), they lacked a vocabulary for defining, describing, or even conceptualizing what those competencies were. I was therefore forced to follow different theories and use different methods to learn what the competencies were and then to define and name them. These two efforts were closely related.

The article focuses not only on the challenges and possibilities in taking the analysis of interviewees' answers one step further but also on the continuous oscillations among various methods of data collection, data, analysis, and theory. These oscillations make it possible to constitute and reconstitute the phenomenon being researched. Following Haavind (2001), who proposed that methods could not be developed or justified outside the empirical field, I developed my approach both with and from the material, finding appropriate methodological and analytical moves along the way.

The emphasis here is on the fruitfulness of not stopping the analysis too early. This means not being satisfied with categorizing the informants' data unless one has also explored the tensions in the material and the process, has reflected on how one can understand the answers, and has asked what other questions the answers really raise. New methodical moves led to higher levels of understanding, giving rise to new methods or analytical perspectives for pursuing the answers further.

Each move in the process painted a different picture of the phenomenon studied or created a different nuance (in this case, the knowledge and competence of secretaries). These pictures contributed to making sense of the informants' experiences, even though some pictures seemed to contradict others. The challenge was to transcend the discrepancies and to incorporate the different perceptions into a whole that the informants could recognize. This process entailed its own tensions, constantly leading to new questions, which in turn made new theories relevant. In this way, the field of study was constituted and reconstituted during the process.

Presenting a process like this entails its own dilemmas. Insight develops during the course of the study as different theoretical perspectives become relevant; the question is where to begin? I have chosen the understanding of tacit knowledge as a framework for the study, finding this theoretical field well suited to convey my experience, reflect on it, and take the work further. I could have chosen otherwise.

My exploring of tacit knowledge builds on Polyanyi (1983), who claimed that "one knows more than one can tell" and that tacit knowing is an active part of all human knowledge. Johannessen shares this position and has developed a further analysis of tacit knowledge as practical knowledge of three different kinds: *skills, knowledge of familiarity, and knowledge expressed by the exercise of judgmental powers* (1999, 2006). He defines tacit knowledge as "knowledge that for logical reasons cannot be fully articulated by linguistic means" (1999, p. 20, author translation), in opposition to *propositional* knowledge. He emphasizes, however, that tacit knowledge may be articulated in other ways.

Janik (1996) emphasizes the collective character of professional competencies embedded in history and tradition and that the tacit knowing is shared by (paradigmatic) examples (e.g., cases). Both Janik and Johannessen use tacit knowing and tacit knowledge as interchangeable concepts, even though both authors are definitely concerned with knowing as an active process (Janik 1996; Johannessen 2006). This article will do the same. The two theoreticians are both part of a Swedish tradition that has developed its own methodology: the Dialogue Seminar. Here the professionals are encouraged by researchers to share their

experience, both by way of written texts and through reflexive discussions, with not only the assistance of philosophy but also the expressions of art (Göranzon & Hammarén 2006; Ratkic 2006).

Stressing the role of individual learning, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1988, 1999) have created their own model of skill learning, with steps from novice to expert. They claim that all expertise is based on intuition grounded in a great repertoire of experienced situations, and that experts are experts in solving problems not in explaining/expressing the principles behind their solutions. The intuition is a kind of tacit knowing, combining skill, familiarity, and judgment.

From a sociocultural and anthropological perspective, Lave and Wenger (2003) have analyzed the *nonpropositional* knowledge that people learn through *legitimate, peripheral participation in communities of practice*. They are critical of an emphasis on individual learning, indirectly criticizing the Dreyfus model as well. Researchers have used their framework in case studies of practical learning in different fields (Nielsen & Kvale 1999), for example, exploring the learning processes in traditional apprenticeship (Elmholt & Winsløv 1999).

However, the Dialogue Seminar, the skill model, and the case studies on practical learning focus mainly on established professions or skilled work where competence is acknowledged even though not expressed in language. This was not the case with the field of my study. The secretaries did not belong to an established profession; indeed, they are often described as the nonprofessionals of the clinics. Consequently, the challenge both to the informants and to the researcher to explore the tacit knowledge and develop a vocabulary was even greater. I have used elements from the thinking and methodology of the previously mentioned theoreticians, but the experiences of my study led me to move in several directions. The study became a case study on two levels: not only a case study of the competence of secretaries but also a methodological case study of how to explore tacit knowledge that is neither conceptualized nor acknowledged.

The article demonstrates and discusses a methodology that goes back and forth between data, different methods, and theoretical perspectives to explore and conceptualize the tacit knowledge and constitute the competence of secretaries as a professional field and a field of research. First, I briefly present the study and its background, design, and analytical approach. Second, I show how reflecting and acting on concerns about data from the first interviews led not only to supplementary methods of data collection, but also to the use of theories, resulting in a reframing of the study. Third, the article describes methodological moves to pursue the informants' answers further, and the use of different theoretical perspectives to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (the competence of secretaries). Fourth, a following section treats protests from the informants as a source of new knowledge and discusses how this strategy has the potential to transcend disagreement between researcher and informants. Fifth, I go on to show how the use of discourse theories could uncover dilemmas in the informants' position and reflects on the focus and level of the study. Finally, the article discusses the kind of knowledge claims, or suggestions, which is possible to make in a qualitative study such as this.

### **The Study—Background, Design, and Analytical Approach**

The CAMHS in Norway is organized mainly as outpatient clinics, with mandatory staffing with psychiatrists, psychologists, and social and educational workers. Although all clinics employ secretaries, smaller clinics may have only one. Larger clinics usually have a head

secretary who is in charge of the other secretaries and may take part in the day-to-day management of the clinic. Secretaries may therefore occupy different places in the hierarchy of the clinic and may have different titles that do not always mirror their real position. I have chosen to use the term “secretary” to cover them all. The secretaries’ tasks include answering the phone, receiving families, taking part in the administration of patients and their journals, and making quantitative reports to higher authorities. Their main tool is a patient-administration computer program named BUP-data; BUP is the abbreviation for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

BUP-data functions as a kind of flow chart, registering central dates in the progress of patients through the clinic: referral, acceptance, start and completion of treatment, and the submission of the case summary; some time limits in this process are laid down by law. Furthermore, BUP-data contains treatment plans and plans for cooperation with external institutions. The secretaries are responsible for registering some of these items themselves; in other cases, they supervise the clinicians. Furthermore, they go over the patients’ medical records for formal mistakes. The secretaries also produce statistics as the basis for reimbursement to the clinic from the authorities and for the control of the fulfillment of official objectives on productivity and quality.

The secretaries in CAMHS have their own special program for further education. Being involved in this program aroused my interest in their competence, and I gained opportunities to meet and talk with secretaries during the study.

### *Design—Sample and Interview Method*

I interviewed eight experienced female secretaries in outpatient clinics at CAMHS, selected from participants in the educational program. The idea was to get informants with extensive experience who took an active interest in their work and might give “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973)—a kind of strategic sampling. The interviewees were between the ages of 30 and 52 and came from different secretarial position levels and from clinics of different sizes.

While a sample of eight is not large enough to draw general conclusions about secretaries in CAMHS, the study could nevertheless reveal issues important both to the informants and to the organizations. Furthermore, generalizability in qualitative research often relies on the development of theoretical points that can be relevant to similar cases (Maxwell 2005).

Literature on secretarial work indicated that much of the work was invisible and might be difficult for them to talk about in general terms (Lie 1998; Lie & Rasmussen 1983). In planning the study, I was inspired by Andenæs (1991, 2005), who interviewed children with an adaptation of the Life Mode interview (Haavind 1987), asking them to describe their previous day in detail. This approach seemed valuable in focusing informants on talking about their daily work in a tangible way.

In my study, the informants were asked to describe their most recent working day and the tasks done, in detail, chronologically, with the interviewer asking them to elaborate on how and why they did what they did, who was involved, and what they needed to know to perform the actual tasks. I combined my adaptation of the Life Mode interview with some thematic questions at the end, if the informant had not already covered them: about tasks not done that day, the division of labor between the secretaries, the different meetings where secretaries participated. I also asked how they thought the clinicians and leaders would describe the secretaries’ work. To avoid general descriptions, the questions focused on descriptions of actual recent events.

The choice of an adaptation of the Life Mode interview was not without theoretical implications. The interview was developed as a part of a critical approach to dominant views of children's development (Haavind 1987). The researchers wanted a way of getting a detailed account of what happened in the daily lives of families with small children and how the family members understood their lives. The emphasis was on the daily events that were so ordinary that they were hardly worth mentioning and, at the same time, the core content of the families' lives (Haavind 1987). The assumption was that the Life Mode interview had the potential to yield material that would make it possible to challenge what had previously been taken for granted.

The Life Mode interview is set within the tradition of researchers who put premium value on studying people's specific contextualized experience, on exploring how they handle and give meaning to their daily lives, and on the cultural and social conditions and understandings that are simultaneously shaping them and shaped by them. Sociocultural theories (Lave 2003; Lave & Wenger 1991; Säljö 2005; Wertsch 1998) and their understanding of cultural tools as "mediating means" further enhanced this perspective, with additional inspiration from the poststructuralist view that individual subjects both actively position themselves and are positioned by others (Davies 1993; Søndergaard 1999).

### ***Analytic Approach***

My analytic approach was inspired by grounded theory methods, in the way this methodology has been developed by constructivist theorists (Charmaz 2004), focusing on meaning, action, and process. One of the most relevant features of grounded theory, as a set of analytical guidelines, is the emphasis on the dialectical relationship between data collection and analysis: Following empirical leads may inform further data collection and result in shifts in the direction of a study (Charmaz 2004). Another important feature of grounded theory is the emphasis on being close to the material and developing categories and concepts from the data.

However, my active search for theory and earlier empirical studies to find ways of understanding the data differs from grounded theory; the use of theory in grounded theory is contested and contradictory (Dey 2007). In its original form, grounded theory has been criticized for the idea that the researcher objectively discovers theory in the data, without theoretical preconceptions. In contrast, the concept of "theoretical sensitivity" (Dey 2007; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987) pointed to the importance of drawing on extensive literature from different fields in the process of developing categories for coding the data. This concept is more in line with a constructivist approach, seeing meaning as created, not discovered (Dey 2007), and with my own approach. The next section will show how a strategy that combined the following of early leads with the use of theory and other studies gave rise to extended data collection and, eventually, a reframing of the study.

### **Following Early Leads—Identifying the Problem of the Nonexistent Vocabulary**

During the first interviews, the informants described their workday as tasks done one after another, apparently without any interruptions: Clinicians did not even appear in the picture. The interview data were in line with an earlier study of secretaries that concluded secretaries no longer worked to serve other staff members or make their day more effective, but rather had their own independent tasks (Eilertsen 2003). While knowledge about

my students and experience with their work life made me suspicious of such “interruption-free” workdays, previous sociotechnical studies of office workers (Lie & Rasmussen 1983) clarified this discrepancy. Evidently, much of the work done by secretaries (as mentioned previously) is invisible, even to them. I needed a data collection method that could make this work visible.

I therefore created a simple form on which my informants could mark every contact they had with other people, including clinicians, supervisors, and colleagues, during the day, with additional space for writing down the content of some of the contacts. Interviewees filled in the form the day before we met.

This methodological move changed the content of the interviews. The form helped the informants not only to remember their working day more clearly but also to acknowledge the contacts as work. Consequently, the numerous in-between requests for different kinds of help became a subject of discussion that opened a whole range of activities and interactions with the clinicians. The interviewees were happy about the form, stating that it made them see what they had actually been doing that particular day. Some even wanted to use the form locally. The form did more than allow the informants to reconstruct their daily activities more fully and speak about them consciously. It also allowed me to take the analysis beyond that of Eilertsen’s study, while understanding why his study probably yielded such different results. Clearly, the form created openings for the informants to speak about their continuous problem solving, revealing the importance of secretaries’ availability as an active work process. Thus, I coined the concept “availability work” to cover both their efforts to make themselves available and the problem solving (Jensen 2008a). The conceptualization constituted this time-consuming activity as regular work, with competence to be shared and studied.

Although my adaptation of the Life Mode interview was supposed to obtain a detailed and comprehensive description of the working day, including everyday actions that were not usually spoken of, important parts of the work of my informants did not seem to fit the format of the interview. This may partly be an effect of the ambiguity of the interviewer’s questions, asking both for events and for tasks. Nevertheless, the experience points to a possible limitation that neither my interview nor a stricter Life Mode interview will escape; that is, the interview and the interviewers facilitate some answers and make others difficult; raising the question of what has been omitted. This point makes a case for observation or video recording as primary or supplementary methods (Potter & Hepburn 2005). The work that disappeared in my interviews testifies to the potency of the taken-for-granted, as not even this kind of interview enabled the secretaries to speak about their continuous problem solving as work without the researcher applying additional methods.

### *Changing the Concept of the Phenomenon Under Study*

Another problem that became evident during the first interviews was that the informants found it difficult to answer the questions about what kind of knowledge and competence they needed to complete a specific task or handle a specific situation. They not only told me so explicitly; I also found their responses vague or general, and they often responded with what they held to be necessary personal characteristics. This was troubling because the competence and knowledge of the secretaries and their use in the clinics were to be the focus of my study. Furthermore, I had to admit to myself that the questions of competence had been difficult not only for the interviewees to answer but also for me to pose.

Seeing these types of answers as an early finding of the study, I turned this trouble into a strategy of asking how to understand these responses and how to get specific answers. Here was the point where a search for relevant theoretical perspectives led me to the concept of *tacit knowledge*. I found this concept useful for understanding the competence of secretaries. Indeed, the more expert they were, the more they would “just do it” rather than talk about it (Dreyfus 1988). The concept of tacit knowledge also fitted my own experience as an interviewer of there being nothing to ask about, as the tasks would speak for themselves. Furthermore, the literature pointed to tacit knowledge being possible to describe and talk about, even if the description is not identical to the knowledge itself; as a kind of practical knowledge, it is shared by examples (Janik 1996; Ratkic 2006). Theories of tacit knowledge threw light on what I had already done and what I was going to do, and I chose it as the comprehensive perspective of the study.

The understanding of the knowledge and competence of secretaries as tacit knowledge had two important implications for the study. First, when my subjects described in detail what they had done the previous day, they were sharing their practical knowledge as well: The interviews had implicitly given me many examples of competence that I had not recognized. Consequently, I needed a strategy to analyze the work itself, and I will develop that point in the next section.

Second, if I wanted the competence put into words, I had to create opportunities for sharing experiences. I not only asked people in different contexts about the competence of secretaries to collect the words used, but I also invited the secretaries in my own workplace to a discussion about what they were good at. This move yielded additional material, and I got an opportunity to try out different ways of facilitating the verbal exchange of practical experience.

The experience improved the interview guide. To pose the questions of competence properly and make them easier to answer, I changed the wording and added a special introduction to these questions for the later interviews. The introduction suggested that office work might resemble housework in that it is taken for granted, without anyone consciously considering that it requires both knowledge and experience. I added the expressions “have experience with/from” and “what is learned?” to avoid personality-focused answers and to give informants access to different ways of talking about knowledge and competence. These changes produced richer answers, with more competence being put into words, even if these questions were still considered difficult. The new way of framing the questions opened up the possibility for new phenomena to be introduced.

Seeing the competence as tacit knowledge led not only to developing new methodological moves but also to a reframing of the whole study. The focus shifted from how secretaries’ knowledge could be used in the clinics to *how the competence could be conceptualized and put into words in a way that made it possible to talk about and to become a subject for further study*. I started to see the analytic process as a “pursuit of the competence of secretaries.” The informants’ lack of a vocabulary to describe their competence forced me to find strategies for using qualitative methods to pursue the answers beyond a common sense level, recognizing that the informants shared much of their competence by describing their work. The next section will examine these strategies.

### “The Pursuit of the Competence of Secretaries”

Although most of my informants were explicit about the necessity of mastering the program BUP-data, I could easily have let the matter drop without further reflection. The real question was what it meant to be “good at” doing this particular task. “Being good at

BUP-data” covered such a wide but unspecified range of activities that extrapolation was very difficult. The next step, therefore, was to turn to grounded theory, which recommends strategic sampling (Glaser 1978; Strauss & Corbin 1994). Inspired by this theory, I chose the strategy of pulling in ideas from other sources; I used a work opportunity to put the question to 80 secretaries in a group discussion, asking them to focus on their competence in relation to that of the clinicians and to avoid giving answers in the form of personality traits. This move created an additional possibility for putting the competence into words. Together, we took the analysis a step further, creating the language as we spoke.

This initiative yielded important additional material. When analyzed, the competence in handling the patient-administering program turned out to cover a whole range of different competencies that interacted with each other. Some of the competencies identified were, in the secretaries’ own words, “knowing the applicability of the program,” “understanding the numbers” (i.e., being able to read and explain the statistics), and “instructing the clinicians” both through regular training sessions and the continuous answering of all kinds of questions. Not only had the secretaries collectively put knowledge and skills into words, describing their competence as a wider and more elaborate field, but also the material included answers that raised new questions. The participants in the group discussions suggested that to be good at BUP-data implied “seeing relationships,” “understanding the whole,” “having a total overview,” and having “knowledge of the system in BUP.” The next step was to explore these answers using different theoretical perspectives.

### *Pursuing the Answers One Step Further Through the Active Use of Theory*

The challenge was to understand why, and in what way, comprehensive understanding and overview of the clinic were part of being good at BUP-data. I chose a strategy that combined rereading the interviewees’ descriptions of their use of BUP-data with seeking out relevant theoretical perspectives. Knowing that the informants shared their competence mainly by practical examples from their workday, I looked for theories that took an interest in the analysis of practical work. Three perspectives seemed fruitful in giving meaning to the secretaries’ answers.

First, theories of practical knowledge claim that people learn the meaning of concepts and rules in practice (Janik 1996). Consequently, when secretaries answer questions from the clinicians about routines and registrations, they are contributing to the learning of these rules. Furthermore, secretaries not only have to adapt the rules to the actual circumstances in their interaction with the clinicians, but they also have to find solutions in accordance with the values and priorities of the clinic; they are teaching the rules and developing them at the same time. Accordingly, I coined the concept “it-depends knowledge” to label their competence in doing the rules in practice, in this way conceptualizing the secretaries’ role in the *knowledge creation* of the clinics and include it in the field of research.

To do the rules in a competent way, the secretaries need a profound “knowledge of the system.” My informants’ use of this expression to explain what it is to be good at BUP-data corresponds to the concept *knowledge of familiarity* (Gøranzon 2006; Johannessen 1999, 2006), that is, the kind of practical knowledge, both mental and physical, gained by taking part in a practice and getting access to the examples of its tradition. Thus theories of practical knowledge not only gave meaning to the interviewees’ answers but also gave a better understanding of, and a concept to, the competence secretaries both need and develop in interactions with the clinicians. This competence transcends what is usually considered relevant for secretaries.

Second, the earlier work on women and computers points to secretaries “interpreting” and “translating” between the computer and the information to be processed (Lie 1998; Lie & Rasmussen 1983). These two concepts put a complex competence into words. However, my informants seemed to do the translation between the computer and the information at different levels: They not only answered specific questions about *how* to use the registering program, but they also emphasized the necessity of explaining *why* the registering had to be done. Wertsch’s (1991) concept of *social languages* opened new possibilities for understanding and exploring the explanatory work. Wertsch defined social languages as ‘discourses particular to special strata in society (occupations, age groups, etc.) within a given social system at a given time’ (Wertsch 1991, p. 57). These languages develop in communities of practice and offer certain ways of thinking and working that appear natural. The reasons the secretaries gave the clinicians for registering were related not only to the local use of the program in service to the patients, but also to demands for quantitative reports by the authorities. These reasons belong to different worlds. The secretaries can therefore be seen as *mediating between different logics*—the logic of the clinical work, the logic of BUP-data and the logic of administrative control—expressed in three different social languages. The mediation demands familiarity with all these languages, acquired by a broad range of contacts and by taking part in a variety of settings where these languages are used. In this way, introducing concepts from different theoretical perspectives not only gave further meaning to the informants’ answers about the necessity of seeing relationships and knowing the system but also led to vocabulary conceptualizing important aspects of the secretaries’ complex competence.

Third, sociocultural theories assume that humans have access to, and act on, the world only through the use of, and interplay with, physical and mental tools as mediating means (Säljö 2005; Wertsch, Rio & Alvarez 1995). The tools cannot act by themselves; human beings have to take them up. Nevertheless, the tools actively shape human action; to keep the two apart is difficult. According to this perspective, BUP-data is a tool with its own ‘agens’ (Wertsch 1998), structuring the work of the clinic and placing the secretary who administers the program as an active part inside the core activity of the workplace. While learning the program gives the secretaries access to the history of practice in CAMHS, daily use both demands and fosters a comprehensive understanding of how the different parts of the clinical work are put together (i.e., knowledge of familiarity). Seeing relationships, understanding the whole, having a total overview and knowledge of the system in BUP are therefore adequate descriptions of necessary competence. A sociocultural perspective not only gives meaning to the informants’ answers but also invites further exploration of the secretary-with-her-PC, both the unity and the ‘irreducible tension’ (Wertsch 1995) between the secretary and her computer, to grasp the specific contributions of each part.

The three theoretical perspectives in dialogue with the “thick descriptions” in the material gave richer meaning to the secretaries’ answers and led to concepts for putting into words competence that had no name and therefore were not spoken of (i.e., it-depends-knowledge, knowledge of familiarity, and mediating between different logics.) The emerging understanding of secretaries’ work challenges the picture of clerical staff as set clearly apart from the “core activity” of the workplace, includes a broad spectrum of competent activities, and reconstitutes the phenomenon under study (the knowledge and competence of secretaries) as a more complex field. Furthermore, part of the analytic process had taken place cooperatively, with the informants and other secretaries playing an active part, changing our respective understanding as we went along, and in this way, also confirming the emerging analyses. The next section will discuss the strategies used when the informants and the researcher differed in understanding.

### Treating Objections from the Informants as a Source of New Understanding

When I asked my informants about the competence they needed to do their work, they not only found the questions difficult, but they also came up with descriptions of personality traits. All the informants gave statements such as ‘It is just that I *am* like that’ at least once. These answers attracted my attention. Even though the same kind of responses figured in a study of secretaries in a Norwegian hospital (Innherred 1999), the researchers made no further analysis; the answers were taken at face value. I wanted to explore how they could be understood, thereby pushing beyond the informants’ voices.

Adopting a feminist perspective, I saw these personality answers mainly as an expression of a longstanding tradition of not acknowledging women’s work as qualified work and seeing competencies such as dexterity, service, flexibility, and adaptability as natural qualities in women. Researchers have found the division between skilled and nonskilled work not a function of the work itself but rather, to a large degree, a function of the gender performing it (Hagemann 1994; Steinberg 1990). In my study, the recognition of secretaries by superiors and clinicians seemed to confirm thinking in terms of personality at the expense of competence: The secretaries most often got feedback as general personal praise, as in ‘how could we do without you’?

When I suggested to my interviewees that they could understand what they defined as being who they *were* (e.g., ‘I’m a flexible/patient/easygoing person,’ I am a woman of action) as competencies (flexibility, patience, capability of handling people and solving problems), they protested. They insisted on the personality traits being important qualifications. These reactions were thought provoking. Although I did not want to impose my interpretation of their understanding upon the informants, I still wanted to challenge their views. As a researcher, I was in a well-known dilemma. The question of who owns the results of a qualitative study and what is to be done when researcher and interviewees disagree is a contested one (Kizinger & Wilkinson 1997; Millen 1997). These authors point in particular to conflicts between the researcher and participants on the construction of the meaning of gendered experience. Kizinger and Wilkinson argue in favor of a strategy of stating direct disagreement with the interpretation of some women, presenting the data as one particular perspective on, or account of, experience.

My approach was to see the disagreement as, once again, supplementing my data and to explore the meaning of the objecting views. Going back to the literature on practical knowledge, I found Janik (1996) presenting practical reasoning as a kind of bodily thinking, leading to our identity becoming ‘closely coupled to what we are able to do in this practical meaning’ (p. 54, author translation). In the sociocultural tradition, Lave (2003) emphasizes that the apprentices she studied in Monrovia were not only learning a trade, with skills and values, but also gradually acquiring an identity as a tailor by taking part in a community of practice. These theoretical perspectives made it possible to transcend the dilemma by viewing the secretaries’ descriptions of their personality traits as a way of expressing the fusion of identity and competence that they had acquired by taking part in a community of practice in CAMHS. They had become, for example, ‘secretaries who were flexible’ in their interaction with the job, and in objecting to my analysis, they defended this identity and their own experience. In this case, the reported personality traits did not expose an essence but rather a ‘*situated identity*’ (Säljö 2005) developed through learning in practice. This concept lifted the phenomenon studied out of the field of static personality traits and moved it to the domain of what is possible to talk about, share and study in terms of competence (e.g., how they were “doing flexibility”). In this way, the protests of the

informants not only gave rise to a new understanding of their competence, incorporating the former position of both the researcher and the informant, but also reconstituted the field of competence to include the secretaries' situated identity, learned in communities of practice.

My strategy for handling the dilemma of the conflicting views was in line with Haavind (2000), who points out that intersubjectivity does not imply that the researcher and informants have to share the same interpretation of the meaning of the reported experience. Haavind states: 'When the researcher's interpretations challenge or go against the self-understanding of some or all participants, it is the preceding efforts to establish intersubjectivity that shall guarantee that this tension is exposed and is included in the researcher's accumulated understanding' (p. 20, author translation). Understanding the personality answers as an expression of a situated identity did not invalidate my informants' opinions but incorporated them in a new understanding containing both their views and mine.

The process took the form of negotiations with the interviewees to find some common ground. Because challenging the informants' understanding might undermine their strategies for coping with the lack of acknowledgment of their competence, negotiating meaning would be even more important. Otherwise, the new understanding could disempower the informants because the researcher would not be able to give any guarantee for alternatives being effective (Millen 1997).

Understanding the secretaries' answers as an expression of situated identity was not an end point but gave rise to new questions: What do secretaries learn about gender in a community of practice in CAMHS that becomes part of their identity, and how does this learning take place? While neither Janik (1996) nor Lave and Wenger (Lave 2003; Lave & Wenger 1991) consider gender in their work, their theories are useful for exploring this question: The naturalizing of women's competence may be part of what secretaries learn and of the ensuing situated identity (Jensen 2008b). The feminist perspective and the sociocultural perspective are not mutually exclusive; a combined approach led to a new level of understanding, incorporating both the researcher's feminist analysis and the sociocultural understanding resulting from the confrontation of ideas with the informants. The analysis developed through interaction with the informants constituted the competence of secretaries as a field of research in a way that challenges the immersion of this competence in traditional conceptions of gender and invites further exploration.

While the preceding section used oscillations between questions to the material, extended data collection, and theoretical perspectives to get closer to the process of secretaries' work and to put the competence into words, this section has focused on methodological moves to explore how secretaries understand their own competence. The next section shows how the strategy of following the material invited further exploration along the road of language and meaning, and the methodological moves chosen.

### Following the Material—a Discursive Turn

During the analysis, I was struck by the informants speaking of their work as "help" to clinicians; they never used the word "collaboration." Contrasting help with collaboration as an analytical move made this way of speaking visible, lifting it out of taken-for-granted status.

I seemed to have identified a "*help discourse*." To take the understanding of the answers further, I turned to discourse theories. I prefer the following definition of discourse: 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, cited in Mills 2004, p. 15), because this definition makes it explicit that the help discourse is about language, understanding, and practice. The informants were not only speaking of their work as help; they were doing help, not collaboration.

Discourse theories made it possible to identify an important dilemma. On the one hand, the help discourse is not only “positioning” (Davies & Harré 1990) the secretaries on one side of a well-defined border between secretaries and clinicians but is also assigning the secretary a subject position as the clinician’s helper, indirectly giving meaning to the secretaries’ work in relation to the patients. Apparently, the secretaries actively take up this position, identify with the meaning, and create an even more comprehensive help discourse, enveloping the wide spectrum of tasks and competences. They see themselves as competent helpers, and they even seem to give more help to the clinicians than the official policy of the clinic. Hence, the help discourse is a resource secretaries can use not only to handle the exclusion from what is considered important work but also to create and expand their own tasks. Furthermore, this handling is a form of competence and invites further exploration.

On the other hand, the help discourse actively stands in the way of a discourse of competence. Foucault was concerned with the way discourses not only make available certain ways of seeing, being, speaking and excluding others, but also constitute what is counted as knowledge (Mills 2004; Willig 2003). The secretaries seem to have no available subject position as collaborators and little space to put their knowledge and skills into words through collective sharing of experienced competence. The knowledge is not only tacit because of its practical character but also *made silent* through the dominating discourse.

Consequently, the help discourse does contradictory work: On the one hand the discourse gives meaning to the secretaries’ work and ‘a space of agency’ (Davies 1993); on the other hand, it undermines the acknowledgment of their competence. The identification of this dilemma makes reflection possible and once again reconstitutes the knowledge and skills of secretaries as a field of research.

### *Writing and Speaking Another Way of Thinking into Existence*

Identifying the help discourse and lifting it out of the taken-for-granted status was an important result of the study, but stopping here could still confirm “doing help” as the “natural” way. To take up the challenge of qualitative methods to go beyond what is usually spoken about, I chose a strategy of trying to write and speak another way of thinking into existence.

To challenge the help discourse, I made two methodological moves. First, I set out to write about the interaction between secretaries and clinicians from the point of view of interdisciplinary cooperation/collaboration. Even though I actively tried to avoid the concept of help, I found this difficult. I experienced the strength of the help understanding as a “privileged way” of seeing and speaking (Wertsch 1991), with no alternatives on offer. Besides, as long as the work was done as help, changes in wording were not enough. My effort was to try out writing another way of thinking into existence or to destabilize the dominant discourse (Søndergaard 2000).

Second, I presented my analysis to clinicians and secretaries. Although challenging the help discourse provoked some reactions from clinicians in defense of the help relationship, I often felt as if an alternative way of understanding did not come across to my public. Indeed, the responses to the analysis of the help discourse contrasted sharply with the same public’s recognition of the proposed concepts to put the secretaries’ competence into words.

Søndergaard’s (2000) concept of the limits of deconstruction may explain my experiences. She points out that attempts to destabilize the discourse by using what she calls ‘a lens relatively alien to the discourse’ (p. 22) and a corresponding language must, to

some degree, respect the premises of the dominant discourse. This respect is necessary to obtain some kind of intersubjectivity between the researcher and those the results are aimed at. Thinking generally in terms of collaboration instead of help was, to most of my public, going too far. To take the understanding of how to challenge the help understanding further, I had to turn back to the theories.

### ***The Importance of Difference***

Discourse theories emphasize the opportunities for change that are implicit in various forms of differences or tensions, for instance, between the available discourses and the way groups or individuals take them up and shape them (Søndergaard 2000). Other possibilities lie in the many and mutually conflicting discursive practices to engage in (Davies & Harré 1990), opening a space of agency (Davies 1993). This understanding made me reflect on the focus and level of my study. I had concentrated on analyzing the dominant discourse at the collective level, showing that the helper, rather than the competent professional, is the dominant subject position available to the secretaries. Because I had not been looking at competing discourses or individual positions, the outcome had emphasized established truths and power relations, possibly picturing the identified help discourse not only as more universal than it has to be but also as more difficult to change. To further explore the possibilities of change it would be necessary to go back to the material and look for competing discourses and differences between the informants: elements of tasks done as cooperation, bits and pieces of a discourse of competence, examples of secretaries defying being a helper, or situations where different ways of understanding and doing were competing. I know such elements are in the material. The use of discourse theories once again raises new questions and makes new tools available; the analysis could be taken further.

### **Knowledge Claims — Knowledge Suggestions**

This article has shown how each step in the research process has provided relevant results concerning the competence of secretaries, at the same time leading to new levels of understanding and making theories from new fields of research relevant. Furthermore, the insights have raised more questions and given access to new tools for further exploration of the tacit knowledge of secretaries. My strategies do not represent the only way to analyze the material; other researchers might have chosen different moves, leading to other theories and making other tools available. The choices made may facilitate some ways of understanding and hide others. Like walking in the mountains, new peaks and a more comprehensive view of the landscape may come into sight while other parts disappear or stay completely hidden.

The view of the analytical process as a unique interplay between the researcher and the material has consequences for the knowledge claims that one can make. I do not present my results as “the truth” about the competence of secretaries in CAMHS; the study rather opens a new field and aims at making further exploration possible by starting to provide a vocabulary. Neither is this the only way to explore it.

However, this view of the research process does not exclude generalizations from the results neither on the methodological level nor on the level of the competence of secretaries. Yin (1994) treats the question of generalization from case studies, differentiating between statistical generalization, based on representative samples, and analytical generalizations, based on development of theoretical points. Mason (2002) outlines different ways of generalizing from qualitative studies, one of them is to claim that ‘your explanation throws

light on processes or issues which are pivotal or central to some wider body of explanation or knowledge' (Mason 2002, p. 196). For all kinds of generalizations in qualitative studies "thick descriptions" and transparency are considered necessary conditions, making it possible for the reader, both inside and outside the scientific community, to follow the choices made in the research process and judge the probability and reasonableness of the interpretations (Flick 2006; Yardley 2000).

Lincoln and Guba (1997) prefer transferability to generalization and makes a case for the concept 'the working hypothesis' (Cronbach 1975, cited in Lincoln & Guba 1997), emphasizing that the weight on local conditions in case studies makes generalization in strict meaning difficult, perhaps impossible. Instead, the conclusions are tentative, both in the study itself and when transferring to other situations. Another way of putting it can be to talk about 'knowledge suggestions' (Gulbrandsen 1998) instead of knowledge claims, expressing that conclusions are there to be tried out by others, both in practice and further studies. This understanding of generalization suits the view of the research process presented in this article. I will go on to present some methodological suggestions.

### **Methodological Suggestions**

The methodology used in this study proved fruitful for exploring the competence of secretaries. My claim for generalization is that the fruitfulness is not restricted to this specific case but also will be of relevance to other studies of the tacit dimensions of knowledge in professional fields as well as fields not yet recognized as professional. This especially applies to studies of knowledge that are neither conceptualized nor acknowledged. I will emphasize three points.

First, the study combines the creation of space for informants to speak their competence into words, both in interviews and group sessions, with the analysis of tacit knowing in the work process itself, focusing on the one-to-one interaction with other groups of professionals. The going back and forth between these methodical moves made it possible not only to identify emerging concepts and problematic areas from the secretaries own voices but also to get hold of elements that were not spoken of (e.g., availability work). The understanding could be taken further by the use of different theoretical perspectives to develop new concepts transcending the taken-for-granted (e.g., it-depends-knowledge, mediation between different logics) and put others to new use (e.g., knowledge of familiarity). The combined methodology is consistent with a view of tacit knowledge as not only most adequately expressed in practice but also put into words through collective sharing.

The analysis of work relied on what the interviewees said about the work process, combined with the researcher's inside knowledge about the secretarial field. Field observation and video may here have been viable alternatives. The experience with the fruitfulness of the combination of interviews and work analysis could contribute to transcending the heated discussion about qualitative interviews or natural material, at least to contextualizing it (Potter & Hepburn 2005; Smith, Hollway & Mischler 2005).

Second, the study combines an analysis of *what* the informants say and do with attention to how they talk about their work and their competence. This combination made it possible to challenge the taken for granted (e.g., the importance of personality traits, the help discourse), conceptualize tacit knowledge (e.g., competence in being flexible, situated identity), and suggest alternative ways of speaking and doing (e.g., collaboration). Furthermore, the methodology led to identifying the openings and limitations of the dominant discourses in the field and revealed an important aspect of conceptualizing tacit

knowledge: knowledge may not only be tacit by way of being practical but also by being *made silent* through tradition and discourse. Not acknowledging the competence of woman is one striking example. This *double silence* (Jensen 2008b) complicates the process of speaking competence into words, and it has been paid little attention in the literature on tacit knowledge and communities of practice.

Third, the study combines the strategy of repeatedly taking the results back to informants and relevant professionals in the field with taking the answers a step further. This combination made it possible to probe deeper into the taken-for-granted, challenge the informants' understanding and transcend the discrepancies between the researcher's and the informants' perspective. Furthermore, taking the results back to clinicians and secretaries in the field, the researcher was able to explore the limits of what is possible to change by new ways of speaking and conceptualizing (e.g., help vs. collaboration). These limits can be seen to testify to tacit knowledge being a practical and bodily knowledge, conceptualizing being secondary and different from the knowledge itself.

The methodology builds on a conception of tacit knowing as not only an individual but also a collective mode of knowing, embedded in tradition. The fruitfulness of the moves chosen seems to support this understanding of tacit knowing, which is contested in the literature on tacit knowledge in organizations (McAdam, Mason & McCrory 2007).

### *Case of Secretarial Competence*

The study constitutes the competence of secretaries in CAMHS as a professional area and a wide and elaborate field of research by starting to provide a vocabulary describing their complex knowledge. The methodological move of taking the interpretations to the informants and other secretaries and clinicians during the research process was not only a way of collecting more data and developing the analysis but also a means of testing relevance and usefulness. I have also presented my results to other groups of secretaries, mainly in hospitals but also in the field of education. Responses indicate that the analysis and concepts have relevance beyond CAMHS. Generalization to other fields must rely on an analysis of similar relevant conditions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that 'the degree of transferability is a direct function of the similarity between the two contexts, what we shall call *fittingness*' (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 124).

An important common condition linking my results to secretaries in other fields may be the division between professionals in the core activity of the work place (e.g., education, health) and the administrative personnel "being there for" or "serving" them. The concepts *availability work* and *it-depends-knowledge* in different ways relate to this division, as does the understanding of the *help discourse* and the secretary's *situated identity*. *Knowledge of familiarity* with the core activity and with the values of the institution conceptualizes the necessity for secretaries to transcend the formal division of labor to be able to do their job. Furthermore, the administration in such institutions usually is linked to higher institutional levels or authorities carrying out various kinds of controls through formal procedures and quantitative objectives. Such procedures make *mediating between different logics*, and the concept of "*the secretary with her PC*" moving into the core activity, increasingly relevant.

However, the secretarial field is not the only area where women workers or professionals are considered flexible, helpful, and service-minded, while their competences are not (fully) acknowledged. Some of the concepts may therefore be fruitful for exploring even other areas.

## Taking the Analysis One Step Further

The research process does not have to end here. The conceptualization of secretarial competencies opens new phenomena to research. Methodologically the study suggests the analysis of differences in the way secretaries are handling the dominant discourse, doing “being a secretary,” as a further move to identify the unspoken codes and facilitate new ways of speaking and doing. Taking the answers still further may reveal other aspects of the field of study and make other perspectives available. The overall picture will change. However, further insight will not necessarily contradict my results, but may incorporate them in an even more comprehensive understanding, as the spiral of knowledge develops one more step.

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