

# Experiential Knowledge and the Cognitive Act

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## 1. Introduction

In their paper *Experiential knowledge in mental health care: A coherent concept?*, Roy Dings and Derek Strijbos (2025) explore the concept of experiential knowledge (EK). EK refers to the unique knowledge that experts-by-experience (ExpEx) are taken to have. ExpEx are people who experienced first hand the relevant phenomena treated in mental health care and who are now, especially in the Netherlands, becoming more involved in the field. However, EK, as a concept, has not yet been properly investigated from an epistemological perspective: it is vague, suffers from conceptual tension and it is not clear what type of knowledge it actually is.

In this essay I want to explore if Maria van der Schaar's account on knowledge can offer some tools for an epistemological clarification of EK. She argues that we should not overlook the first-personal perspective, because all knowledge is created there. She introduces a new concept, the cognitive act (CA), which refers to an active form of knowledge that happens within the first-personal perspective and which she distinguishes from other types of (passive) knowledge forms that are predominately discussed within epistemology nowadays.

My research question is as follows: whether and to what extent can van der Schaar's account on the cognitive act inform a new understanding of experiential knowledge? In the next section I will first introduce the conceptual messiness of EK as described by Dings and Strijbos. In section three, I will introduce van der Schaar's account on the cognitive act and the distinctions she makes between *knowledge state* and *knowledge product*, which both result from CA's. Finally, in section four, I will argue that van der Schaar's distinctions can help define EK more precisely as a knowledge product, possessed and created by the person who is taken to have experience with a certain phenomenon, and who performs the cognitive act.

## 2. The problem with Experiential Knowledge

The term 'experiential knowledge' was coined by anthropologist Thomasina Borkman in her 1976 paper *Experiential Knowledge: A New Concept for the Analysis of Self-Help Groups*. There she describes EK as "truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather

than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others” (p. 446). An important distinction to which she points here, and which defines EK, is the difference between an *insider* kind of knowledge, gained through direct personal experience with a phenomenon and an *outsider* kind of knowledge, where the information about the phenomenon is gained in an indirect or second-hand way.

This simple distinction, which most people intuitively grasp, is one of the drivers that is changing the field of mental health care in the Netherlands. The idea is that people who have experienced the symptoms of mental disorders for themselves, not only gained knowledge about these phenomena in a more direct way than people who studied these topics professionally, but also that this knowledge is altogether of a different type. It is thus assumed that experts-by-experience in mental health care possess a unique kind of knowledge that complements that of professionals (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 5). The implication is that ExpEx are involved in a variety of operations within the field, from providing clients with practical advice, to giving training to other health care professionals and even being involved in research (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 6-7).

Many people seem, thus, to agree that there is something like EK, but it remains vague what it exactly is. A classic distinction within epistemology is that between know-that and know-how. Know-that is propositional knowledge: you know for example *that* WW2 ended in 1945. Know-how is often linked to ability: you know how to cycle for example. EK is often contrasted with professional knowledge, that it might be know-how instead of know-that. A professional knows *that* disruptions of sleep patterns are associated with depression, but someone who is depressed themselves knows *what it is like* to struggle with sleep disruption, for example. EK is thus often construed as something learned not intellectually but “through the reactions and habituations of the body” (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 19).

However, besides being embodied know-how, EK is supposedly also sharable and generalizable. EK should go beyond the individual and be applicable to others (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 11). It is not enough for ExpEx to have internal knowledge, they need to bring something usable to the table as well. This internal tension of EK supposedly being on the one hand embodied or grounded in experience and on the other hand sharable, is what Dings and Strijbos point out as a possible conceptual problem (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 8). As we will see later, I think these two properties of EK do not have to contradict each other and might actually serve as criteria to identify EK.

Another problem Dings and Strijbos raise is that it is also unclear how EK is gained in the first place. They write that on the one hand “some people may hold that simply having lived experience constitutes experiential knowledge”, however, even though these people may know something about those phenomena that others do not, the “vast majority of researchers, professionals, policy makers and experts-by-experience” converge on the position that experience by itself is not enough and that something needs to be done with that lived experience to transform it to EK (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 10).

What does this process of transformation from mere experience to EK look like? Dings and Strijbos explain that the commonly held view is that this process involves practices of reflection, narration and sharing:

Reflection entails evaluating one’s lived experience from a distance (...) looking back at one’s struggles and process of recovery and drawing conclusions on what went well (and what did not) (...) connecting different elements in one’s lived experience and assigning meaning. (...) When assessing one’s life and one’s struggles, it makes sense to use a narrative format, as is often done in recovery-based care. (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 16)

Not only have ExpEx directly perceived a phenomenon, but they have also thought about this experience in different ways: they have assigned meaning to it, they interpreted it within their overall story and drew conclusions from it. The problem, however, remains that it is still not completely clear how reflection and narration changes experience into knowledge. Even if we assume it does, one could still question if ExpEp have done their reflection in a correct way (Dings and Strijbos 2025, 17).

### **3. Active and Passive Knowledge**

In her paper *The cognitive act and the first-person perspective: an epistemology for constructive type theory*, van der Schaar explores the connection between *active* types of knowledge and, as I call them, *passive* types of knowledge. The focus in contemporary epistemology is often on these passive forms of knowledge (like know-that and know-how), while active forms of knowledge are overlooked (van de Schaar 2011, 395). However, this distinction between active and passive knowledge is at least as old as the history of western philosophy, dating back to Aristotle who distinguished knowledge as *actuality* from knowledge as *potentiality*.

A “knower” could be someone who is engaged in contemplation, gaining insight from thinking; this would be an act of knowing in actuality, according to Aristoteles. A “knower of Greek grammar”, in contrast, is someone who has knowledge in potentiality. This person can speak Greek when needed or understand it when spoken to; that knowledge of the Greek grammar is there, ready to be used, but is not actively created in the moment (van de Schaar 2011, 394).

An important insight van der Schaar takes from Aristoteles is that knowledge as actuality precedes knowledge as potentiality. Before being a knower of Greek grammar in potentiality, that person has learned the language actively, through experience or gaining understanding through lessons (van de Schaar 2011, 394). A similar, but more precise, insight, van der Schaar takes from John Locke, who also distinguishes “actual knowledge” from “habitual knowledge” in the same way. Locke argues that actual knowledge, being for example an act of perception or an act of insight, immediately results in habitual knowledge, being for example a proposition stored in memory, now available for later use (van de Schaar 2011, 395).

Van der Schaar adopts this distinction and at first focuses on a deeper understanding of the first, active type of knowing, the knowledge *act* that results in knowledge as potentiality or habitual knowledge. This act is what van der Schaar calls the ‘cognitive act’. It is the moment of creation of passive knowledge and it happens in the first-personal perspective.

it is an insight gaining deed, or an act of perception; it is an act, not a disposition or capacity to act. A cognitive act may be expressed by exclamations such as: ‘Now I understand it’, ‘Now I see it’, or ‘Now I know it’. (van de Schaar 2011, 392)

While reading this paper you have been engaging in a cognitive act, understanding the sentences that I have written and maybe even learning new facts you did not know before. This grasping of the meanings that I am trying to convey, and the acquisition of those facts, are both cognitive acts.

There are many different types of cognitive acts. Van der Schaar sums up “act of demonstration, an act of discovery, an act of understanding, an act of perceiving, or an act of recognizing,” as examples (van de Schaar 2011, 396). These can be roughly divided into two main categories: judgemental and non-judgemental cognitive acts. Van der Schaar illustrates the distinction between judgemental and non-judgemental as “perceiving *that* a hawk is catching

a bird”, or just “perceiving the hawk” (van de Schaar 2011, 392). It seems like a slight distinction, both are perceptual, but I will argue that this distinction becomes very relevant in the distinction between the resulting passive types of knowledge. The first act seems to create a proposition, while the second seems to stay more embodied.

### **3.1 Knowledge as state: embodied passive knowledge**

Van der Schaar also distinguishes different types of knowledge that result from these cognitive acts. The first is *knowledge as state*. Knowledge as state is a common notion in epistemology, standardly understood “as a species of the state of belief, which is taken to be a disposition or capacity to act in certain ways” (van de Schaar 2011, 391). If you ever burned your fingers on a hot oven, you most likely now possess a knowledge state, where your body automatically moves more carefully around a hot oven, or in other words, has the disposition to avoid touching a hot oven with your bare hands. Van der Schaar argues that it makes more sense to understand *knowledge as state* explained in terms of the cognitive act, rather than belief, because it is the cognitive act (a perceptual act in the case of the oven) that initiates this state of knowing, while ‘belief’ is a vague and contented notion within epistemology (van de Schaar 2011, 396-7).

I argue that this new understanding of knowledge state, explained in terms of the cognitive act rather than being a state of belief, makes this type of passive knowledge suitable to describe non-propositional, embodied and know-how types of knowledge, as it concerns the concrete state of individual knowers, rather than abstract knowledge pieces like a theorem (van de Schaar 2011, 398). This would be the kind of knowledge that people with direct experience with a phenomenon probably have. Most likely all non-judgmental cognitive acts initiate knowledge states, as there is no explicit judgement involved in non-judgmental CA’s about whether a proposition is true or false and the resulting knowledge therefore must be non-propositional.

### **3.2 Knowledge as product: propositional passive knowledge**

The second type of resulting knowledge from the cognitive act that van der Schaar identifies is *knowledge as product*:

Pieces of knowledge are, for Martin-Löf, the product of an act of knowing. One may thus apply the traditional distinction between act or process and product to

the concept of knowledge: the act of knowing or the cognitive act results in knowledge as product. (van de Schaar 2011, 397)

Again, it also results from a cognitive act, but in contrast to a knowledge state it is not contained within the individual. Van der Schaar emphasises that “knowledge as product, being an abstract entity, is not to be identified with the knowledge state of an individual knower” (van de Schaar 2011, 398).

It follows thus that knowledge as product, or “pieces of knowledge” are not bound to the person who performed the cognitive act (like knowledge as state is), and can therefore be easily shared with others. For example you can tell someone else that the hawk caught a bird, and now the other person also has that knowledge. Knowledge as product thus seems most likely propositional and know-that knowledge. And it seems therefore to me that it can only be created by judgemental CA's, which *can* involve propositions, in contrast to non-judgemental ones.

An interesting advantage of knowledge that has resulted from judgmental cognitive acts, is that it can also be repeated by others. If someone asks you how you came to a particular conclusion you can explain your reasoning and the person that questions your knowledge can check for themselves if your reasoning is sound (van de Schaar 2011, 396). For example the argument of this essay is such a knowledge product. It was created by a judgemental cognitive act within my first-personal perspective, and the resulting product is sharable by an act of demonstration through language. Now, if my reasoning is solid, you can perform a similar judgemental cognitive act within your first-personal perspective and come to, hopefully, the same conclusions.

#### **4. EK as knowledge product that is grounded in experience**

Now that we have established what the problem is with experiential knowledge as a concept, and possibly what the criteria are for identifying it (grounded in experience and sharable), and identified the different types of knowledge based on van der Schaar distinctions (cognitive act, knowledge state and knowledge product), let us see if we could define EK more precisely in epistemological terms.

Imagine you are going through an episode of depression for the first time. Every day you perceive the world in a particular way; the world appears flat, colorless and you feel exhausted, among other symptoms. Merely experiencing or perceiving this would, based on van der

Schaar's account, probably be an act of perception, a non-judgmental cognitive act, that would initiate a knowledge state in you. The experience changes you, the sensations of every moment of the experience get stored in your memory, and you start anticipating the world differently. You know what it is like to be depressed, if someone else talks about depression you grasp the meaning of the experience, but you are not necessarily able to put the experience in words and explain to others what it is like. Unless you reflect or process this experience in a certain way, that is.

It seems to me that such a *knowledge state* corresponds with what Borkman describes as “isolated, unorganized bits of facts and feelings upon which a person has not reflected” and “not have integrated the information learned but, instead, have stored bits of disjointed items in their memories” (Borkman 1976, 446 and 455). She acknowledges the intuition that it *is* knowledge in one sense: “in one sense everyone “learns” something from personally experiencing a phenomenon” (Borkman 1976, 455), but not in the sense in which EK is understood. This type of knowledge, as state, is grounded in experience, however, because it is embodied only, you are not able to share this knowledge (yet) and it would therefore not qualify as EK, if we indeed take ‘grounded in experience’ and ‘sharable’ as criteria for EK. This knowledge state is, however, what probably is often referred to as ‘lived experience’.

If EK cannot be identified as knowledge state, could it maybe be identified as knowledge product? Imagine you are again going through another episode of depression. Again you (unconsciously) perform a non-judgemental cognitive act of perception and you embody the resulting knowledge state. However, this time, on top of that, you also engage in reflection, you journal about your experience, about your story, what it all means to you. You also keep track of your symptoms and the ways you cope in a systematic way. These acts of reflection and narration are judgemental cognitive acts. You put words to your experience, making choices of interpretation along the way. You also look for patterns and identify correlations and make conclusions about what works and doesn’t work. Your written story and your conclusions are knowledge products that you can share with others, if you would like. They are created by you, but they are not bound to you as an individual anymore, they are abstract enough to be passed on.

This last example, that of a knowledge product resulting from judgemental cognitive acts in the first-personal perspective of someone dealing with depression, seems to fit the criteria for EK. It is grounded in experience, because the person performing the cognitive act has the

relevant experience that was used for that cognitive act, and at the same time the resulting knowledge product is abstract enough to be shareable with others. The chain of creation of this particular knowledge product is contained within the individual: first there was experience and a non-judgmental perceptual act which initiated a knowledge state, then a judgmental act was performed, by the same person holding the knowledge state, that created the knowledge product. If this person then shares this knowledge product with others (like an ExpEx would do), those other people would possess the abstract knowledge product too. However, because those other people do not also possess the knowledge state, the chain of creation is broken and their knowledge product is not grounded in experience anymore and therefore does not qualify the criteria of EK for them.

Using van der Schaars distinctions, we now have a definition of EK which does not necessarily suffer from conceptual tension but can be identified with the seemingly contradictory properties, is less mysterious (there is a defined path of creation from experience to knowledge product) and offers the possibility to be checked for correctness. One could object, however, that such a definition does not clarify why ExpEx would be involved personally in the field of mental health care, if they could just pass their knowledge on to professionals. I admit that my argument does not explain this part, however, I think that in this case their *knowledge state* could play a role, which probably can be applied in a non-propositional way. Also the fact that they know how they got to their conclusions can be helpful. These ideas could be avenues for further research.

## 5. Conclusion

In this short essay we took a look at the concept 'experiential knowledge', which is operationalised within the field of mental health care. So-called experts-by-experience supposedly possess this special kind of knowledge, unique and complementary to professional knowledge and are therefore involved in various roles within the field. However, as Dings and Strijbos have pointed out, the notion is yet to be investigated epistemologically and seems to suffer from conceptual confusion (grounded in experience on the one hand, but at the same time needs to be abstract enough to be sharable with others).

In the hope that her insights could clarify things up, I then introduced van der Schaar's epistemological account on the cognitive act. A cognitive act is an activity that happens within the first personal perspective of an individual and is what creates or initiates knowledge in the



passive sense, as we are used to understanding the term ‘knowledge’ in our times. Her account includes a distinction between two types of passive knowledge: a concrete knowledge state that is initiated as part of the individual and an abstract knowledge product that the individual now possesses, but could also pass on to others. The first seems to correspond with types of knowledge that we call embodied or know-how, while the second seems to correspond with propositional knowledge.

In the last section we saw that someone with direct personal experience with a phenomenon, with lived experience, does indeed seem to have some type of knowledge: of the type *knowledge state*, if described using van der Schaar’s distinctions. However, this would not qualify as EK yet. Their knowledge is grounded in experience but, as state, not sharable. If ‘grounded’ and ‘sharable’ is used as a criterion for EK, what would qualify as EK is if an individual with personal experience also possesses a knowledge product, which I argued can be created by judgemental cognitive acts, as part of reflection and narration—in line with the general consensus that something needs to be done with lived experience for it to become EK.

## 6. References

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