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Abstract

The Information Systems discipline is concerned with the identification, planning, development, implementation and management of information systems in organisations. Thus, it is in organisations that the events, happenings and stories of information systems are played out. Given this, the perspective that Information Systems researchers have of organisational reality is most important. This viewpoint affects and impacts upon researchers' practice, from the identification and choice of the research question, right through the analysis of data to the writing up of the research. This paper explores a particular theoretical perspective on organisational reality. Social constructionism augmented by pragmatism, is described and explored in the paper, and the implications for research Information Systems are considered. It is argued in the paper that this theoretical orientation is particularly helpful in planning, conceptualising and executing relevant and practical research in the Information Systems discipline.

Key Words

social constructionism, pragmatism, research philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Information Systems research is dominated by the positivist paradigm (Mingers, 2004; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 2002). The positivists or logical empiricists regard reality as a "given": existing "out there" and independent of our cognition or interpersonal processes. Reality, therefore, is waiting to be discovered and a good theory or model is considered valid or true if it corresponds to or mirrors this given reality. Good or valid models represent reality accurately.

In what follows, the authors of this paper proceed on the basis that a powerful case has been made against positivism or logical empiricism, at least in the social or human sciences (Cohen et al., 2004; Eden et al., 1981; Mir & Watson, 2000). We will not, therefore, repeat the well-known criticisms. Instead we will outline an alternative view of social constructionism and consider its implications for information systems.

Information Systems as a discipline has yet to seriously engage with the postmodern turn in the human and social sciences. Thus, for example, few Information Systems studies show a keen sense of the need for reflexivity in the presentation of ideas and findings, few present multiple perspectives on given organisational realities related to Information Systems, and few engage with the moral and ethical dimensions of the practices they examine and discuss. Despite the social and political nature of Information Systems in organisations, and despite the fact that contemporary organisations are permeated with continual and rapid change, many papers in Information Systems journals and conferences continue to unreflectively present models as a universal, timeless, objective set of truths (Chen and Hirschheim 2004). This persists in the face of an outpouring of postmodern ideas and analysis relevant to Information Systems in related disciplines such as philosophy (Baudrillard, 1983; Derrida, 1982; Foucault, 1977; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1999), social psychology (Butt, 2000; Coulter, 1999; Neimeyer, 1998; Raskin, 2002) , sociology (Baert, 2003; Maines, 2000; Raskin, 2002; Turner, 1991), organisational studies (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997;

Wicks & Freeman, 1998) and management (Blosch, 2001; Clegg & Kornberger, 2003; Cohen et al., 2004; Mir & Watson, 2000; Powell, 2001; Young & Collin, 2004). There are also significant Postmodern meta-analyses of qualitative research, such as (Charmaz, 2000; Cox & Hassard, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Schwandt, 1996, 2003).

This paper argues that two particular postmodernist developments, namely social constructionism and a newly reworked pragmatism, have significant and serious implications for Information Systems research. For example, Robert A. Neimeyer wrote in Counselling Psychology Quarterly, "Social constructionism, with its redefinition of social realities as constituted through discourse, and its challenges to traditional notions of a stable and essentialized self, carries sweeping implications for applied psychology" (Neimeyer, 1998, 135). If we extend the focus from "traditional notions of a stable and essentialized self" to traditional notions of a stable and essentialised organisational reality, Neimeyer's assertion holds equally true and the implications for Information Systems research are equally sweeping.

Critics of the postmodern turn (and of our particular interest, social constructionism) in the human or social sciences have been as trenchant as the advocates have been enthusiastic. One of the significant criticisms has been that the postmodern critique of positivism and logical empiricism leads to a relativist nihilism where "anything goes". For example Ratner (2004) and others (Schwandt, 1996, 2003; Young & Collin, 2004) point out that social constructionism can be ineffectual in resolving differences, enabling learning from mistakes and dealing with pernicious, fictitious belief. Against this criticism, Zielke (2005) argues that the very acts of dialogue and debate, and the revelations of broader and alternate view-points ensuing from such activity, provide opportunity and mechanism for effective problem-solving. Also sceptical, Schmidt (2001) discusses the problems of social overdetermination, triumphalism and unfounded relativism in his critique of social constructionism and its conceptualisation of knowledge, particularly authoritative knowledge. To counter that charge this paper will seek to blend social constructionism with the essentials of pragmatism, a philosophy that we argue is entirely consistent with social constructionism. Indeed, there are threads of pragmatism embodied in a number of the writings of social constructionists (Eden et al., 1981; Heracleous & Marshak, 2004).

This paper will first outline the central tenets of social constructionism. Then, as an answer to the dilemma of relativism in social constructionism, a pragmatism that is consistent with and complementary to social constructionism will be outlined. The implications for Information Systems research will then be discussed.

BASIC TENETS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

There is today a substantial literature on both social constructionism, and a closely related theoretical orientation called constructivism. Constructivism tends to focus on the individual and is concerned with how individuals construct and make sense of their world (Burr, 2003). Social constructionism, as the name implies, has a social rather than an individual focus, looking not only at how individuals construct their reality, but looking at how groups of individuals communicate and negotiate their views and perspectives regarding individual and shared or intersubjective reality (Young & Collin, 2004). This paper will focus on social constructionism, but as mentioned above, the two philosophic viewpoints are very similar.

Thomas H. Schwandt (1994, 125) describes the constructionist's view of reality, knowledge and truth, commenting, "Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind. [Constructionists] emphasise the pluralistic and plastic character of reality -pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems; plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents. They endorse the claim that, contrary to common sense, there is no unique real world that preexists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language".

Social constructionists have slightly differing views on the underlying nature of reality. Basically, however, the view of constructionists is that whatever the nature of reality, there is no access to its true or basic nature. With respect to the notion of physical reality, some constructionists believe that this is also socially constructed, while others are silent on this matter. Others seem to tend to the view that physical reality is more determined, analysable and predictable than social reality while still being essentially socially constructed (Burr, 2003). However, these distinctions are an unnecessary extension and refinement of the ideas for Information Systems academics and this paper. In this paper, when discussing the social construction of reality we will be restricting ourselves to the case for the social construction of *social*

reality, and hence will focus on the social constructionism discourses.

Given that we construct social reality socially, through investigation, deliberation and discourse, it follows that multiple views of a particular reality can emerge. Social constructionists, unlike logical empiricists or positivists, do not privilege a particular view of reality. Thus, if the Chief Information Officer (CIO) of an organisation convinces three of his or her senior managers that a "problem" of a certain nature exists in an organisation, then a certain picture of current reality in that organisation will have been socially constructed or created and the managers will act upon their diagnosis to create a different reality that they believe would be more congenial. However, if this CIO then fails to convince another two senior managers in the top management team, and they therefore believe that no such problem exists, then a second, parallel picture of reality exists or has been constructed. In this way, social constructionism allows or admits multiple views of reality, and basically argues that there is no way to determine which of these is privileged or "true". In fact, social constructionism dispenses with the notion of one fixed, context-independent truth. Different models, social constructionists argue, give different understandings or viewpoints on situations.

In the social construction of reality, social constructionists give special emphasis and significance to the role of language. Social constructionism sees language as much more than a medium to transport an accurate and straightforward description of a given reality. Language is seen as a set of social practices that perform part of the process of constructing reality. In this context, writing on social constructionism, knowledge and language, Madill et al (2000, 12) aver "The radical constructionist position is characterised by a profound distrust of the idea that language can represent reality. Rather than consider objects to be the foundation of representations, representations are understood to construct the objects which then come to populate our world".

In a similar vein, Cohen et al (2004, 41) write, "In essence we see social constructionism as concerned with how the world comes to be endowed with meaning, and how those meanings are reproduced, negotiated and transformed through social practice. Language lies at the core of such processes. By this we do not mean that language is simply a mirror, a mere messenger from the kingdom of reality. Instead, it both creates and reflects social realities -and thus is essential to what makes us human".

Given that social constructionists believe that we construct reality out of our given situations, it follows that our knowledge and understanding of reality is highly contextual and situation dependent. All knowledge claims, then, are a product of and contingent on a particular cultural and historical situation. They are thus local, provisional and fleeting; and contrast strongly with the atemporal and universal knowledge claims and models of the positivists and logical empiricists (Cohen et al., 2004; Madill et al., 2000).

THE DILEMMA OF RELATIVISM AND THE ROLE OF PRAGMATISM

Social constructionism gives us a way of viewing organisational reality and hence can guide our approach to Information Systems research. However social constructionism is thoroughly relativist. That is, it does not privilege any particular picture of reality. That is, one particular picture is not foundational and essential just because it was constructed in a particular way, such as by the scientific method. If we construct multiple pictures of reality, then there is no basis for distinguishing between views: all are equally acceptable or valid. This is a consequence of the fundamental tenet that we do not discover a fundamental underlying reality, but we socially construct reality.

However, this situation leaves a dilemma for the researcher. Are all pictures of reality and all understandings of reality truly equal in terms of providing understanding about the target area of our research? Are all research approaches and processes equally helpful in a given situation? Is all research evidence including all interviewees' transcripts equally important or valid? Is the CIO's transcript no more useful than the inventory clerks'; or vice versa depending on the research question? Clearly the situation is problematic. The authors' position is that some pictures of reality, some research approaches, and some research data may be more valuable in given research situations than others.

The relativism in social constructionism is not merely relativism with respect to "facts", but is also relativism with respect to values. Hence, social constructionism does not distinguish between the moral and ethical values of various courses of action. This is also problematic and disturbing. Surely, one might think, research in Information Systems should have a moral and ethical perspective. Otherwise, a manager who

covertly hires assassins to get rid of problematic employees may be regarded to be as effective as one who practices participation and empowerment, depending only on the business costs and benefits of these practices. Or, as another example, should we simply accept practices of bribing business partners to indulge in uncompetitive behaviour as reasonable simply because this may be an effective way to achieve higher profits?

Moral and ethical issues are not often dealt with directly in Information Systems research, but there is an indirect assumption that unethical behaviours are not acceptable solutions to business problems. In addition, Wicks and Freeman (1998, 124) point to research that indicates that capitalism depends on moral foundations and societal-level moral agreements, and that the moral dimension is "critically relevant" to business and market success (and the success of academic studies). However, such issues have no way of being addressed under the philosophic framework of social constructionism as outlined above. A social constructionism that embraces the central tenets of pragmatism, however, has a capacity to incorporate ethics as a relevant concern in Organisation and Information Systems studies.

Pragmatism gives us a way of approaching the dilemma or problem of relativism. Pragmatism was developed in the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by such writers as James, Pierce and Dewey (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). The central tenet is that the worth of a proposition or theory is to be judged by the consequences of accepting the proposition or theory. Thus, whereas the positivists would search for the truth as judged by how closely the proposition, model or theory corresponds to or represents reality, the pragmatist makes purposeful use of propositions, models or theories and questioning whether they are useful in practice "in the sense of helping people to better cope with the world or to create better organizations" (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, 129). The pragmatist approach has embedded the assumption that practical relevance and usefulness is a view developed in dialogue with all stakeholders. This usefulness cannot be asserted by simple claims to experience, but must be established by dialogue and argument. Accordingly, Wicks and Freeman (1998) highlight stakeholder theory as a way to get to shared understanding and agreement. Pragmatism is more than simple utilitarianism. A case for a proposition must be publicly made with a persuasive and convincing evaluation of the long-term consequences, where the coherence of the proposition with other theories and held beliefs, and the moral and ethical implications of the proposition are all important elements of that case.

Basically then, a theory for a pragmatist is true if and only if it is useful. The pragmatist position then is non-foundational. Pragmatists are not looking for the essential and timeless truths of the positivists and logical empiricists. Like the social constructionists, they believe that knowledge is provisional and situated historically and culturally. Indeed, any traces of foundationalism have been swept away by the new American pragmatists or neopragmatists such as Rorty, Bernstein and Putnam (Hildebrand, 2003; Kloppenberg, 1996). Thus the new pragmatism is consistent and coherent with a social constructionist position.

In addition, a theory for a pragmatist is true for the period of time and in the context that it is agreed to be useful, and opens a space for continual inquiry and ongoing reflection that opens possibilities and choices for incremental, ongoing changes in practice (Doane & Varcoe, 2005).

The advantage for Information Systems researchers in accepting a social constructionist/pragmatist viewpoint is that the pragmatist notion of "truth" is very helpful for Management and Information Systems research in that it provides a means of evaluating propositions, models and theories in terms of their practical relevance and usefulness. Further, the pragmatist element of the philosophic approach brings attention to bear on the purpose for using a theory or adopting certain propositions, and incorporates a strong expectation of justifiable action that is ethically acceptable to the range of stakeholders in a given situation. Indeed, the pragmatists' central tenant regarding the usefulness of theories can also guide our evaluation of research approaches, since approaches that can be argued to lead, more often, to useful and helpful results would be preferred.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM/PRAGMATISM: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH

The implications of a social constructionist/pragmatist view of Information Systems research are indeed significant. If we accept that we are not seeking to discover eternal truths about a given reality, then we

will not become anxious about proving propositions and theories. Accepting that pictures of organisational reality are fleeting, local and provisional, and situated in and influenced by local history and culture, we will be evaluating how insightful and useful are the constructed pictures. We will accept that the aim of finding truths that correspond to 'reality' in some way is fanciful since we are dealing with our own constructions and interpretations of our research subjects' constructions and interpretations. Instead, we accept that some researchers may construct pictures, frameworks or metaphors that are insightful and help us to cope in the world of planning and managing information systems. These would be, in the pragmatists' sense, creative and insightful constructions that facilitate our making sense of organisational issues and challenges, and help us to improve our practice. Thus the pictures, frameworks and metaphors we would be looking for if guided by a social constructionist/pragmatist perspective would be those that are practically relevant and useful.

Suitable approaches to Information Systems research under a social constructionist/pragmatist perspective or viewpoint could include ethnography, qualitative survey by interview and in depth case study. Studies based on multiple case studies would also be highly valued. In these studies the objective would not be to prove that the constructed picture or theory corresponds with a given organisational reality, but to build an insightful and useful picture or framework that is beneficial in some sense to practicing managers (Blosch, 2001).

This picture could be presented in the form of a narrative from which one can draw lessons, or could be presented in some more formal way such as by a set of 2 x 2 matrices. The utility and power of simple but formal frameworks such as 2 x 2 matrices can be seen in some of the best and most helpful Information Systems research papers. One example is the paper by Lacity et al (1996) on selective IT sourcing. In this paper, three two-by-two matrices are evolved from a large number of case studies into a useful and helpful guide for managers. Note that these frameworks, useful as they are, were not proved, but constructed or evolved from the experience of the case studies. Indeed, many of the best papers in business and management generally do not prove their models and theories. For example, Powell (2001) shows how much of the theory of competitive advantage and superior firm performance is constructed rather than proved. This, of course, is not to say that this theory is not useful. Indeed, Powell argues powerfully that it is highly useful. The theory just does not meet the criteria set down by the positivists and logical empiricists.

Many Information Systems researchers who would call themselves "interpretivist", and hence possibly adherents of a constructionist approach, are committed to and practitioners of grounded theory as developed and portrayed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1995). Glaser and Strauss were keen to develop a method that, like the scientific method of the physical sciences, guaranteed the production of quality research independent of the creativity and experience of the researcher. Thus, grounded theory is imbued with positivist and logical empiricist overtones. "Most grounded theorists write as if their data have an objective status" (Charmaz, 2000, 258) and classical grounded theorists assert that organisational reality is in the data, presumably passively awaiting discovery and analysis.

However, Charmaz (2003) argues that the proclivities of researchers determine the foundational assumptions of research approaches and the positivist claim of being value-free is only an assertion, and demonstrably untrue. Researchers cannot see what they are rendering invisible by their research assumptions until they put on spectacles that give them vision for perspectives other than the ones they have as their own, and that the benefits of reflexivity are only available to those who acknowledge that they have assumptions and are willing to examine them in the light of other's reactions and critiques.

In our view, narratives can be a rich and compelling resource for informing decisions on information systems design and implementation. The possibilities and characteristics of narrative in constructionist grounded theory narratives are discussed by Charmaz (2003, 280) who writes, "I try to pull my readers in so they might sense and situate the feeling of the speaker in the story". This ability to give the reader an understanding of the context of a situation of (say) another person in an organisation is potentially far more useful than the results of a statistically grounded survey or model, because a story leaves the reader free to infer multiple and implicit links between the potential decisions being made and the impact on those who will experience the consequences of those decisions.

Moreover, constructionists would argue that quality research is also produced not so much by routinely following a set of mechanical procedures, however helpful and supportive, but by insightful and intelligent

researchers who are well aware of previous successful and practical theories and models, and not those vainly trying to adopt some pre-theoretical unbiased and uninfluenced mental state -however one accomplishes that! Useful and valuable research is also likely to be produced by researchers who are keenly aware of practitioner needs, and who are experienced in creating practically relevant research outputs. Under a social constructionist/pragmatist perspective insight and creativity are seen as more important than trying to specify and follow a "perfect" set of procedures including coding methods, inter-coder reliability and the like. A constructionist grounded theory encourages sensitive, informed and intelligent engagement with rich data so that informed analysis and construction of models of problem situations in organisations can take place effectively. The data grounds a researcher in the issues, challenges and problems of the research participants, providing insights and suggesting helpful and practical models and frameworks. The researcher, however, is sensitively aware that he/she is creating and constructing theories and models from this data, possibly with the active participation of the research participants.

CONCLUSION

Information Systems research has for sometime now been dominated by theoretical orientations that are positivistic, and as such many Information Systems studies have produced research results that have failed to bridge the gap between validating theoretical models and providing practical and useful advice to practitioners. Positivistic systems research often deals with complex, dynamic sociotechnical contexts as if they were stable and measurable environments, with the researcher vainly seeking a universal theory or model to explain or predict the behaviour of people and systems in organisations. Such theoretical agendas lead to simplistic models that do little to increase practitioner wisdom.

As an alternative, however, social constructionism is a theoretical orientation that guides research in a different way. Social constructionism has gained currency in many practice-focused disciplines because it assumes that reality is constructed via a dynamic, cultural, historical and political process. It also accepts that actors construct their own pictures of reality so that multiple subjective realities are possible in every organisational situation, with shared or intersubjective reality resulting from communication and negotiation between organisational actors. Such assumptions about reality lead to research designs and research practices that encourage richer, deeper and more realistic insights into organisational practices.

When presented with several pictures of reality, social constructionism does not privilege one over the other. All are equally valid. This gives richness to the pictures of organisational reality that are constructed, but if the practical advice regarding managing these realities is required, maybe one picture of reality makes more sense and offers more guidance than another. Pragmatism privileges the picture of reality that is most useful to one's purposes. Given a particular problem or research objective, that picture of reality, that framework or sense-making categorisation that is most useful or helpful is the "true" one; or more simply, the one to apply in practice.

Pragmatism is a philosophy that emphasises, investigates and evaluates purpose and ethics. It is an approach that aligns with social constructionism in its commitment to the need to seek out and accommodate many different perspectives in any social setting where decisions are being made. It also shares the assumption that reality is complex and that agreement regarding what is and what should be in given situations is something that is best negotiated among all interested parties. Pragmatism also emphasises the surfacing and validating of the purpose of investigations. It also engages with and evaluates the ethics of decisions and actions. This is desirable in a discipline that largely operates in the context of organisations that are focussed on courses of action that help them achieve their objectives in a business climate with growing commitment to concepts such as triple bottom line and corporate responsibility.

Let us now finally turn to social constructionism and pragmatism in the Information Systems discipline. The Information Systems discipline is concerned with the identification, planning, development, implementation and management of information systems in organisations. Thus, it is in organisations that the events, happenings and stories of information systems are played out. Given this, the perspective that Information Systems researchers have of organisational reality is most important. This perspective will affect and impact upon researchers' practice; from the identification and choice of the research question, right through the analysis of data to the writing up of the research. This paper argues that Information Systems would benefit from adopting social constructionism in combination with pragmatism in favour of

positivism as its dominant research paradigm as it is an approach that provides a strong and rich theoretical framework that is in tune with the complex sociotechnical domains that Information Systems researchers investigate.

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