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Research Commentary

Comments on the Weber commentary and Lyytinen/King response

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I found Ron Weber's dissent and Lyytinen and King's response extremely interesting. These papers address an important issue – academic legitimacy versus theoretical core in IS – and provide readers with food for thought by raising the debate to a fairly high level of intellectual exchange. The authors are to be congratulated for focusing the field's attention on this eternal issue.

That being said, ENOUGH! It is time to set concerns about the logic of the connection between AL and TC aside and begin working on what both mean in the world we face today. Let's take the remarkable brain power represented by these authors and apply it to developing new or analyzing old theories that might eventually become a "core," and to taking the steps necessary to enhance the legitimacy of the work of IS researchers and educators in the academy. The ultimate Jamesian "cash value" of their work will come from how the field is perceived by outsiders who count rather than by the intrinsic precision of their arguments. Certainly by now the arguments are refined enough to proceed. That is, we have enough grasp to reach further.

The two manuscripts arrived at my office as I returned from an extended sabbatical. Among the sundry things strewn across my desk were an old file from a university promotion and tenure committee and a recently received copy of *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*. The lateral thinker in me said there must be a connection.

The last year I served on the university P & T committee faculty from the classics, accounting, and history, as well as from the sciences and fine arts were up for review. (No German literature.) That year, or the previous year at least, one IS faculty member was reviewed. It occurs to me now that never, to my recollection, was the "legitimacy" of any of these fields questioned. That question had been institutionally and politically answered when departments were established and faculty hired and assigned. What was fiercely discussed was "What are the standards by which faculty in this field are evaluated?" It was, of course, easier to address this question when a field purported to

have a core theory. Or, two! In one case the sociology department chairman reported that the vast majority of his members voted in favor of the candidate receiving tenure but stated that he must strongly side with the minority because the small band of which he was a member adhered to more enlighten theory than the others. The candidate was eventually awarded tenure but not, directly at least, because of the theory he espoused. Rather, he had written a fair number of articles in highly respected journals. External reviewers said they benefited from his insights. One of his studies contained data that several found quite valuable in their own work. People trusted his reviews of articles and the intellectual rigor he brought to all of his work. This person was not anti-theoretical, but he was not noted as a theoretician either. His department chairman had clustered him with "other." Nevertheless, our committee decided that what he did was indeed academically legitimate. He helped intellectual inquiry progress in the domain in which he worked. From a pragmatic standpoint he was "legitimate" whether or not he fixed in on a theoretical core or how much agreement existed as to the acceptability of the theories he employed. I think this is a common case. To sum: It's really good to have a core theory, let's aspire to developing one or more and propagating it or them; but, a lot of good work can be done without such a core, and we should keep encouraging such good works as well.

Richard Dawkins is an interesting and informative case. His metaphor – the selfish gene (if there was a core theory it stemmed from Darwin's natural selection) – became deeply influential in biology and associated disciplines and it greatly influenced the wider intellectual debate. Yet, many argued it was wrong. Dawkins himself offered so many caveats about its underlying assumptions as to make its application questionable. Nevertheless, anyone working on anything related to genetics had to address his work and many plowed the field he outlined quite deeply. All of this led Michigan Psychiatrist Randolph Nesse to observe:

"As I ruminated about the contradiction between theory and observation, it gradually became clear that the core of *The Selfish Gene* is not a theory, a prediction, or even an observation but a logical sequence that must be true, given what we know about how selection works." Nesse has hit the nub of the issue here: a discipline or a point of view gains legitimacy by its claims to truth, not necessarily because it has a theory. A fully developed theory can help, but metaphors and paradigms may be even more useful.

Weber has done the field, dare I call it a "discipline"?, a great service by clarifying the elements of Lyytinen and King's argument and bringing more rigor to it, as they acknowledge. It probably says something about the utility of reference disciplines that each of these papers have drawn on comments from logician colleagues to support their views. That's good too.

In closing, I have one specific thought associated with Weber's Figure 1 which contains four logical possibilities. Two positions of necessity and sufficiency that Lyytinen and King state they can not accept: the Northwest corner – *A theoretical core is necessary and sufficient for academic legitimacy* and the Northeast corner – *A theoretical core is necessary but not sufficient for academic legitimacy*. In a footnote Lyytinen and King dismiss the Southeast corner – *A theoretical core and academic legitimacy are mutually exclusive*. So they fall into the Southwest corner. TC and AL are correlated. Weber claims that no conclusions can be drawn here, but I think that is too cavalier. A great many phenomena in the world are best described by this Southwest corner. Our task now is to understand better the three domains circumscribed by this application of Venn

analysis. Under what conditions is AL obtained without TC? Under what conditions is TC obtained without AL. And, the corker question, under what conditions do AL and TC coincide? If the overlap is valuable, how is such a desirable state obtained? Pragmatically, what can we do about it as members of this incipient discipline? So, enough. Let's get on to working on these second order questions. Our hands will always be empty if we fail to reach. Who knows we may just grasp something valuable and fun.

Keep up the good work.

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