Chapter XVII
Socio–Instrumental Pragmatism in Action

Jonas Sjöström
Uppsala University, Sweden

Göran Goldkuhl
Linköping University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of Socio-Instrumental Pragmatism (SIP) and illustrates how it has been used as an analytic instrument in the process of diagnosing a work practice and co-designing business processes and IT artefacts. A practical inquiry process has been conducted in a project group consisting of a group of Swedish municipalities, currently experiencing a number of administrative problems. SIP has informed the design process, and aided the designers in shaping the design product (a new workflow and a new IT system). Conclusions are drawn regarding SIP as an analytical tool, stating that it has guided the inquirers to focus on actors, actions and relations between actors, and supported the designers in finding design solutions to the major problems experienced in the organization.

I have come to recognize that industry faces numerous problems that are outside of the scope of the traditional analyses of design. In particular, there are management and organizational issues, business concerns, and even corporate culture.

Donald Norman (1996), Design as Practiced, p 1, in Winograd, T (Ed, 1996) Bringing Design to Software. Addison-Wesley.

INTRODUCTION

The social dimensions of information technology are obvious in certain types of IT systems, like chat, email and other groupware applications. For IT systems used for management and operations in organizations, the social dimensions may not be as apparent. We claim that *all* IT systems need to be designed as socio-technical systems, comprising features to promote social interaction. For this we need approaches to IT development which make the social dimensions visible.

This chapter deals with design as a *process* and design as a *product*, with an emphasis on how to make IT artefacts empower human and organizational communication. The focus is a stakeholder-centric design process, and the norms governing those stakeholders. IT system design (both process and product) needs to be informed by a proper understanding of both social and technical aspects of IT systems. One theoretical framework aiming at encompassing the interplay between the social and the technical domains is *socio-instrumental pragmatism* (SIP); see e.g. Goldkuhl (2005) and Goldkuhl & Ågerfalk (2005). SIP is a synthesis of different action-theoretic frameworks, including American pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, language action theories, social phenomenology, ethnomethodology, affordance theory, and activity theory. The SIP framework explains IT artefacts as instruments for human communication in some action context. SIP is however not to be seen as just a theoretical framework. As a *pragmatic* framework, it should also be put into action. It should be used as a conceptual instrument for designing and evaluating socio-technical systems. The aim of this chapter is to present one such application of the SIP framework, including its consequences both for the design process and the design product, and some theoretical reflections which were made as part of the study.

The chapter is structured as follows: We provide an outline of socio-instrumental pragmatism and some additional action theoretical concepts, and the application of these theories in an action research study. The study has been carried out in the Swedish public sector, where local governments experience administrative problems connected to providing personal assistance to persons with certain functional impairments. The SIP framework has been used as an analytic instrument both for conceptualization and diagnosis of the work practice, and for co-design of business processes and IT artefacts. We present the design product in one section, followed by a section describing the design process. The chapter is concluded with a discussion about the application of SIP, and reflections about the usefulness of the framework. We also discuss some theoretical findings regarding social transparency as a means for business process accountability, which are likely to be valid in a broader public sector context.

SOCIO-INSTRUMENTAL PRAGMATISM

In the discipline of information systems (IS), studies are often informed by the use of external theories from reference disciplines. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and actor-network theory (Latour, 1999) are two examples of this. Socio-instrumental pragmatism (SIP) is another theorizing strategy. It is an action-theoretic synthesis created and adapted to be used for IS research (Goldkuhl, 2005). It is informed by several external action oriented theories coming from different reference disciplines. The two theories mentioned above have given some inspiration, but there are other more important sources like American pragmatism (e.g. Dewey, 1938 Mead, 1938), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), pragmatic sociology (Weber, 1978), and speech act theory (Searle, 1969; Habermas, 1984). Confer Goldkuhl (2005) for more theoretical sources. As being a theoretic synthesis, socio-instrumental pragmatism does not try to make any complete integration of these diverse action theories. It picks different categories from these reference theories and integrates those into a coherent whole, tailored for IS studies (ibid).

Related Content

Social Media Bots, Trolls, and the Democratic Mandates in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the Ambivalence of Social Media and Political Homophily in Zambian Online Networks
Gregory Gondweand Evariste Some (2021). *International Journal of Social Media and Online Communities (pp. 71-83).*
www.irma-international.org/article/social-media-bots-trolls-democratic/298612

Social Network Models for Enhancing Reference-Based Search Engine Rankings
Nikolaos Korfiatis, Miguel-Ángel Sicilia, Claudia Hess, Klaus Steinand Christoph Schlieder (2008). *Social Information Retrieval Systems: Emerging Technologies and Applications for Searching the Web Effectively (pp. 109-133).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-network-models-enhancing-reference/29161

Grassroots Innovation for Human Development: Exploring the Potential of Participatory Video
Alejandra Boni, Monique Leivas, Teresa De La Fuenteand Sergio Belda-Miquel (2016). *International Journal of E-Politics (pp. 26-39).*
www.irma-international.org/article/grassroots-innovation-for-human-development/171177

Calculation of Facebook Marketing Effectiveness in Terms of ROI
Tereza Semerádováand Petr Weinlich (2021). *Research Anthology on Strategies for Using Social Media as a Service and Tool in Business (pp. 600-625).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/calculation-of-facebook-marketing-effectiveness-in-terms-of-roi/282994

Social Support for Online Learning
Claire de la Varre, Julie Keane, Matthew J. Irvinand Wallace Hannum (2009). *Handbook of Research on Socio-Technical Design and Social Networking Systems (pp. 575-588).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-support-online-learning/21434