

Practice Theory vs Practical Theory: Combining Referential and Functional Pragmatism

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Abstract

This is a paper to the panel “Conceptualizing the workpractice context of IS” at the ALOIS*2006 conference. It is a position statement concerning workpractice theory as a practical theory. Practice theory is concerned with workpractices and as such an example of “referential pragmatism”. A practical theory intends to be of value to practices and such a theory is seen as an example of “functional pragmatism”.

Keywords: Workpractice, practice theory, practical theory, pragmatism

1 Practice theory

In a series of papers, a practice theory has been described (e.g. Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 1999; 2002; 2003; 2006). Initially it was called theory of practice, later on it has been labeled workpractice theory. This theory describes and conceptualises workpractices as constellations of actors, actions and action objects (conditions/results). One important part of the theory is a generic model of workpractices, which crystallizes the main features of workpractices in a graphical model. The latest version (from Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006) is found in figure 1. In this revised model, the notions of transaction and infrastructure have been introduced.

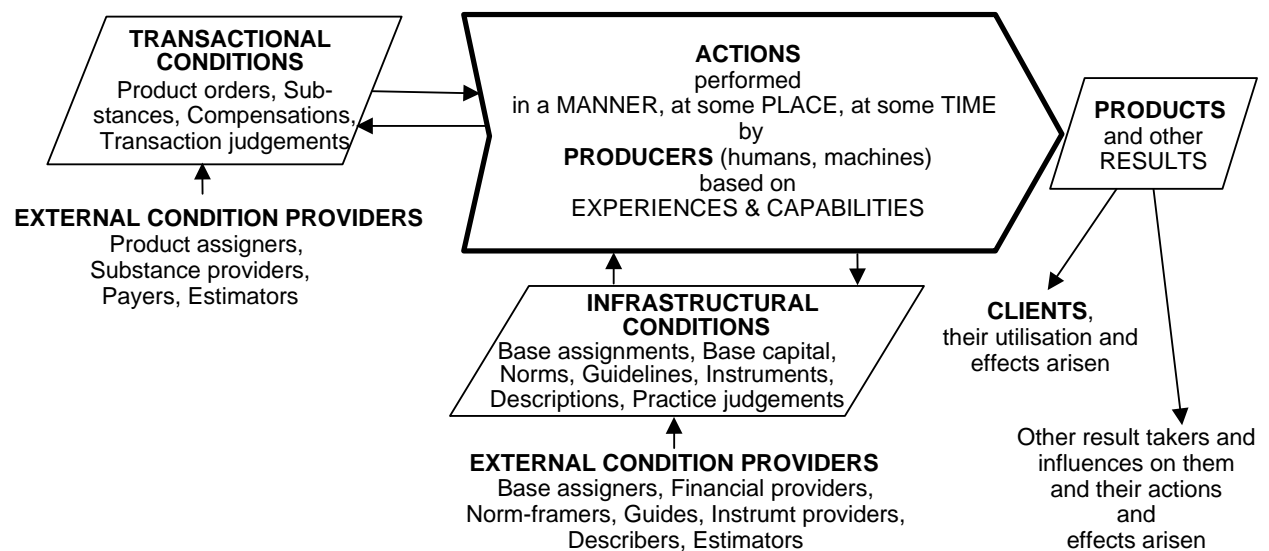


Figure 1 The generic workpractice model (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006)

As can be seen from the figure, actions are core building blocks for a practice together with different kinds of actors (producers, clients, providers) and action objects (conditions, products/results). Practice is a holistic concept built up from pragmatic parts. As a holistic concept, ‘practice’ avoids the dangers of reification. As has been argued by several scholars (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Cuff & Payne, 1979) there is a great risk that holistic macro concepts entail views of societal forces of supra-individual nature. The reified macro concepts come to “live their lives” without any acting humans. The practice notion, as

a holistic notion, is a pragmatic answer to this risk. A practice is considered to be “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001 p 2). Human actions are performed within a practice and determined by the practice which they are part of. A practice, as a whole, is constituted by human actions, which means that these phenomena are fully acknowledged and a macro reification can be avoided. Confer also Goldkuhl & Röstlinger (2002) and Goldkuhl (2004) about this pragmatic solution of the classical macro - micro conflict.

Seeing a practice as something built up from these pragmatic elements means that we can easily move between the whole (the practice level) and the parts (the action level); confer figure 2. This kind of dialectical move between practice and action elements can be seen as an application of the classical hermeneutic circle with alternating between the whole and its parts (confer e.g. Bleicher, 1980).

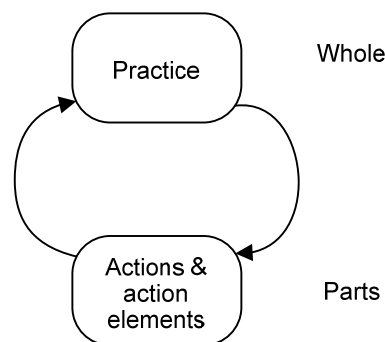


Figure 2 Switching back and forth between whole (practice) and parts (action elements)

The need to take a point of departure in clear-cut action elements can also be claimed from an epistemological perspective. We must start with clear and simple elements otherwise there is a risk that we end up with abstract and confusing macro concepts. Wittgenstein has described this in an elegant fashion: “...we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our complicated ones. We see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms.” (Wittgenstein, 1958 p 17).

The workpractice theory can be seen as an example of the emerging interest in practice theory in contemporary science. Schatzki et al (2001) talk about ‘a practice turn in contemporary theory’.

2 Practical theory

There is not only a contemporary interest in practice theory. There is also an emerging interest in *practical theory*. This kind of theory has been put forth by Cronen (1995; 2001) and Craig & Tracy (1995). What is a practical theory? Are there differences between practical theory and practice theory? If so, what are the differences? Is the workpractice theory (as a kind of practice theory) also a practical theory? Answers to these questions will be given below.

Cronen (1995 p 231) describes practical theories in the following way: “They are developed in order to make human life better. They provide ways of joining in social action so as to

promote (a) socially useful description, explanation, critique, and change in situated human action; and (b) emergence of new abilities for all parties involved.” Practical theories should help us to see things, aspects, properties and relations which otherwise would be missed (Cronen, 2001). “Its use should, to offer a few examples, make one a more sensitive observer of details of action, better at asking useful questions, more capable of seeing the ways actions are patterned, and more adept at forming systemic hypotheses and entertaining alternatives” (ibid, p 30). The concept of practical theory follows the view on theories, put forth in pragmatism, as instruments; confer e.g. Dewey (1931).

This means that a practical theory can be any theory as long it is practical and valuable for use. ‘Practical’ is an attribute we can designate to a theory. We call a theory, a practical theory, if it serves practical purposes.

This means that practice theories might be practical or not. Practice, in ‘practice theory’, says what the theory concerns. Practical, in practical theory, says something about use and value of the theory; its functions.

3 Referential pragmatism vs. functional pragmatism

Both practice theory and practical theory can be seen as embodiments of pragmatic thoughts. In Goldkuhl (2004) I have made an overview of different meanings of pragmatism. One of the core ideas in pragmatism is that research and theories should be concerned with actions. Herbert Blumer is one of the founders of symbolic interactionism; which is a dominant school of thought in sociology and social psychology well founded in pragmatism. Blumer (1969 p 71) claims that “the essence of society lies in an ongoing process of action - not in a posited structure of relations. Without action, any structure of relations between people is meaningless. To be understood, a society must be seen and grasped in terms of the action that comprises it”. This is a strong imperative for research to be focused on actions. Theories should be about actions. Confer also for example Strauss (1993) for arguments in this direction. The interest for actions is of course not restricted to pragmatic philosophy and symbolic interactionism; movements originally shaped in America. There are many kinds of action oriented theories and clear linkages between American pragmatism and European school of thoughts; confer e.g. Thayer (1981) and Arens (1994) for analysis of such linkages.

This means an interest for *knowledge about actions*. This is not the only line of thought emanating from pragmatic thinking. There is also a very clear orientation towards the practical value of knowledge. Dewey (1931) writes, with reference to William James, that “reason has a creative function ... which helps to make the world other than it would have been without it”. Knowledge has and should have an impact on human existence. We should produce knowledge with value for our lives. Dewey emphasizes the prospective and value dimensions in the creation of knowledge. “If we form general ideas and if we put them into action, consequences are produced which could not have been produced otherwise. Under these conditions the world will be different from what it would have been if thought had not intervened. This consideration confirms the human and moral importance of thought and of its reflective operation in experience.” (Dewey, 1931). To sum this up: This is an interest in *knowledge for action*.

These are two aspects of pragmatism. I call the first one *referential pragmatism*; i.e. *knowledge about action*. I call the second one *functional pragmatism*; i.e. *knowledge for action*.

I claim that both these dimensions are indispensable in pragmatic research¹. To express practical theories (i.e. to be functionally pragmatic), without any conceptualisation about actions and practices, implies “half pragmatism”. To theorize about actions, with no purpose of formulating knowledge for practical use, is also “half pragmatism”.

I have in Goldkuhl (2006) described and discussed different kinds of functional pragmatism. Action research has been compared with practical inquiry². The main feature of action research is to contribute to local practices besides formulation of scientific knowledge. The main feature of practical inquiry is, through scientific knowledge, to contribute to general practice. I quote: “Both practical inquiry and action research contribute to the scientific body of knowledge. Practical inquiry *may* contribute to local practice and *must* contribute to general practice. Action research *must* contribute to local practice and *may* contribute to general practice.” (ibid). We can call local practice contribution, *local functional pragmatism*. We can call general practice contribution, *general functional pragmatism*. These are hence two types of functional pragmatism.

4 Practice theory as practical theory

Practice theory (in this case the workpractice theory of Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006) is a theory about practices and their action elements. This means that this theory, per se, is an example of referential pragmatism. One of the main purposes of workpractice theory is to contribute to practical work of evaluation and design. I quote: “[Workpractice theory] can be used when investigating particular workpractices e.g. during ISD. It can also be used to guide researchers and other inquirers for other types of empirical inquiries of workpractices. The model can also be used as theoretical basis for developing specific workpractice theories, i.e. a theory for a particular domain e.g. eldercare, car manufacturing, retailing.” (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006). This shows that there are explicit claims that the theory should be conceived as a practical theory. The theory is not only about practices and actions; it is also aimed for practices and actions. Workpractice theory should be seen as an example of functional pragmatism. There are several examples where the theory actually has been used in workpractice and information systems inquiries (e.g. Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2002; 2003).

In Goldkuhl (2006) I have described different possible constituents of a practical theory:

- Conceptualisations (*what things exist*)
- Patterns (*how things may work*)
- Normative criteria (*the goodness of things*)
- Design principles (*how to create good things*)
- Models (*illustrative theory crystallizations*)

The main parts of workpractice theory (as it stands at the moment) are conceptualisations. However, one prominent part of the theory is the generic workpractice model (figure 1). This model is certain a crystallization of the theory. “A model is a graphical or a tabular description of some important aspects of the practical theory. Such a model may guide researchers or practitioners to observe, understand, analyze, evaluate and redesign phenomena within practices.” (Goldkuhl, 2006).

¹ As I understand the views in *action science*, by Argyris et al (1985), this approach is based on these two kinds of pragmatism. This is just to mention one possible example.

² The approach practical inquiry (Goldkuhl, 2006) gets its main inspiration from Dewey’s inquiry concept (Dewey, 1938). Confer also Cronen (2001).

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