

A Review of the Use of Practice Theory in Information Systems Research

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Asin Tavakoli, University of Cologne, Germany

Daniel Schlagwein, UNSW Australia

Abstract: This paper presents intermediate results from a review of practice theory use in information systems (IS). Practice theory is considered a contemporary and promising theoretical lens and is central to the “practice turn” in social sciences. Our review shows, IS scholars have increasingly become interested in practice theory, esp. in the 2010s. Practice theory concerns the understanding of how actors and materials are embedded in and enact patterns of social practice. Practice theory is a fundamentally different type of theory compared to traditional IS theories. For example, practice theory builds on non-dualist philosophy is based on practical rationality (i.e., theory should be based on practice, not vice versa). Due to such properties, IS scholars having not actively used practice theory are sometimes confused about the nature, the philosophical roots, and general applicability of practice theory. In this paper, we discuss what practice theory is (central tenets), where practice theory comes from (intellectually, historically), in which areas (of IS research) it has been used, and where and how it’s use may benefit IS research looking ahead. This discussion is based on a review of seminal practice theory writings and a systematic review of papers in mainstream IS outlets.

Keywords: Theory, theorising, practice theory, practices, practical rationality, practice turn, IS research, social sciences, philosophy, post-humanism, holism, agency, materiality, literature review.

The full working paper is available from the authors on request.