

Foreword

Theoretical models, and the underlying theories, are important in research because they help us, as researchers, to “organise our thoughts, generate coherent explanations and improve our predictions” (Hambrick, 2007). Indeed, it has been suggested by many (e.g., McKay and Marshall, 2001), that theory is indispensable to research, that research without theory is an oxymoron. In similar vein, Kurt Lewin (1945, p.129), has observed that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” However, “the obverse is also true: nothing is as dangerous as a bad theory” (Ghoshal, 2005, p.86)! The extent to which a theory is good or bad, practical or impractical, safe or dangerous, is both a matter of degree and a function of a researcher’s sensitivity to the application context. Furthermore, theories do not constitute an end in themselves, but are merely means to an end. If they help us to understand and describe a phenomenon more accurately and comprehensively, if we can rely on theories as to predict behaviour more consistently, then their usefulness is demonstrated. If, however, they obfuscate that understanding, then their value would be in jeopardy.

It is widely recognised that the appropriate application of theory is desirable in IS research. However, while a number of theories and the associated theoretical models have attracted strong (even excessive) levels of interest, until recently there has been no single source of information where interested researchers, and in particular research students, could access a range of these theories and models illuminated by empirical data sourced from different contexts and interpreted according to the dictates of different epistemological persuasions. With this handbook, the situation has changed. I fully expect that the handbook will prove to be an invaluable and influential guide to theoretical models in IS research. In reading the various chapters in this edited volume, readers will encounter a range of theories and models illustrated through different contexts. These chapters are persuasive accounts of how theory can be applied and how theoretical models can be drawn up to predict relationships. In this respect, the handbook is most useful.

However, I caution researchers to pay particular care to the process of selecting a theory for a specific context and indeed to evaluate it against competing theories that may be more practical, useful or relevant for their given context. The practicality, usefulness or relevance of a theory is a key point here: theories can (and should) not only be tested and re-validated, but also extended, modified, rescoped or refuted. Researchers have an obligation to apply theories carefully, and to consider the need for a theory to be revised according to their interpretation of its application. As Karl Weick (1989, 1999) has commented, we need theories that are useful, relevant to practice and that help us to understand phenomena more effectively. Such *relevant to practice* theories will ideally help us to take action so as to cause positive consequences.

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