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## Panel 2 Four Perspectives for Understanding Work Practices: Giddens, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Narrative

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## PANEL 2

### FOUR PERSPECTIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING WORK PRACTICES: GIDDENS, BOURDIEU, FOUCAULT, AND NARRATIVE

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**Panelists:** Richard J. Boland, Jr., Case Western Reserve University, U.S.A.  
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Designers' failure to understand situated work practices is one of the reasons for the high implementation failure rate of information systems (e.g., Grudin 1994; Suchman 1995). There are thus numerous calls for IS practitioners and researchers to study work practices in order to understand the fundamental patterns of behavior that will ultimately determine a technology's intended and unintended consequences (Barley 1988; Blomberg et al. 1993; Brown and Duguid 1991; Davenport, Jarvenpaa, and Beers 1996). Studying practices requires a focus on the mundane detail of everyday life so as to uncover the local habits, assumptions, and tacit knowledge that members of the social group have difficulty articulating (Turner 1994). This has theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, a practice orientation suggests that the causes for human action are situated, local, and socially constructed. Methodologically, a practice orientation relies upon the interpretation of largely observational data collected over an extended period of time. It thus calls for field-based ethnographic research.

Even though calls for a practice orientation persist, what is meant by practice remains ambiguous. The purpose of this panel is to explore the meanings of practice from four theoretical perspectives. These are Giddens' structuration theory, Bourdieu's theory of practice, Foucault's discursive and disciplinary practices, and the role of narrative in constructing coherence and a shared sense of practice in systems of distributed cognition. Examples from the panelists' empirical research will be used to illustrate each of these perspectives.

#### STUDYING WORK PRACTICES: GIDDENS' STRUCTURATION THEORY

Giddens provides two structuration theory views for empirical research. The first one focuses on institutions. It is intended to facilitate an understanding of the interwoven rules and resources that "bind" social systems. The second view, and the one that this discussion will focus on, is the analysis of strategic conduct. It highlights the temporal flow of situated practice through which social activities are generated and reproduced. The concern is on the nature of this practice and its intended and unintended consequences. Practices are built from a reflexive monitoring of conduct, making that conduct appear rational, understandable, and accountable to self and other. Individuals draw upon rules (how to go on) and resources (with what means) in their actions. Thus rules and resources generate and mediate the production of practices.

Helena Karsten has applied Giddens' analysis of strategic conduct in her research on the use of Lotus Notes in three separate projects. She will discuss her insights on studying work practices and elaborate on the ideas that her research has generated.

## **STUDYING WORK PRACTICES: BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF PRACTICE**

Much like Giddens' structuration theory, Bourdieu's theory of practice represents generative structuralism (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). However, Bourdieu introduces the notion of "field" to illustrate that actors and communities have something at stake in devising and executing their practices. Since actions translate into structural changes at the societal level, communities strive to engage in practices that will maintain or improve their position *vis-a-vis* competing players in the field. Whereas the concept of field captures such first-order structures as the division of labor, "habitus" captures the second-order structures, i.e., schemes of classification and evaluation internalized in people's minds and bodies. Habitus is a set of intersubjective understandings that predispose the individual to engage in behavior that is compliant with the practices of his/her community.

Ulrike Schultze will draw upon her experience using Bourdieu's theory of practice in an ethnographic field study to elaborate on the potential for applying this theory to information systems research.

## **STUDYING WORK PRACTICES: FOUCAULT'S DISCIPLINARY AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES**

Foucault's work on power shifts the focus from the view of power as an entity to the view of power as relations (e.g., Foucault 1977). Power is thus practiced as political discursing rather than an entity, e.g., authoritative power possessed by individuals. Foucault's theory of political practices further highlights that exercising power relations is not the prerogative of devious individuals but a necessary part of making sense of everyday life. This implies that reality is always political. Furthermore, power relations are the historical creators of practices, and these in turn restrain the potential for future practices through the discursive recreation of everyday reality. Foucault's analyses have dealt with disciplinary practices in the discursive creation (and closure) of reality. He uses the term disciplinary to mean both constraining and relating to the growth of dominance of disciplines such as the medical or legal profession. He relates discursing to policies and structures, thus linking the micro-level practices with macro-level ones.

Lynda Harvey will present her interpretation of Foucault's writings and relate them to the analysis of situated practice. She will also give some examples of how she has used Foucault's ideas to look at the management of information technology in organizations.

## **STUDYING WORK PRACTICES: NARRATIVE AS A MEANS OF CONSTRUCTING COHERENT PRACTICES**

Organizations are systems of distributed cognition in which individual members make sense of their world by reflecting upon their experiences, making plans, and taking action. Coordinated organizational outcomes are achieved when individuals think and act in ways that take others into account. Practices and narrative are key in accomplishing such coordinated outcomes. Practices are more than mere actions; they are actions that draw upon meanings created within a community. Narrative is the mode of cognition that shapes the making of meaning and the construction of coherence.

Drawing on the work of Bruner (1990) as well as his own research, Dick Boland will elaborate on the role narrative plays in constructing work practices that facilitate coordination in environments of distributed cognition.

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