



Chapter II

Möbius Transitions in the Dilemma of Legitimacy

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 years, qualitative research has gained acceptance in the academic Information Systems (IS) discipline in the U.S., following the lead of European nations and Australia (Lee & Liebenau, 1997). In many leading-edge organizations, principles derived from qualitative research now inform information technology (IT) policies and principles. For instance the idea of communities of practice, which draws on the phenomenological sociology of Bourdieu (1977) and upon ethnomethodology, which is Heideggerian in origin (Wenger & Lave, 1991, Seely Brown & Gray, 1995) has been deployed in U.S. corporations (Wenger, 1999; Knowledge Garden, 2000).

The whole group of methods denoted “qualitative” and the theories that guide them originated in the 19th century. Max Weber, respected by virtually all sociologists, was emphatic on the point that it is delusional to believe one can describe social phenomena without, in his words describing them from a “particular point of view” in each and every case.

ore comprehensive the validity—or scope—of a term, re it leads us away from the richness of reality, since in order to include the common elements of the largest possible number of phenomena, it must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence *devoid* of content.... All knowledge in cultural reality...is always *knowledge from particular points of view*. When we require from the...research worker that...they should have the “point of view” for this distinction, we mean that they must understand how to relate the events of the real world...to “cultural values” and to select out those relationships which are significant for us. If the notion that those standpoints can be derived from the “facts themselves” continually recurs, it is due to the naïve self-deception of the specialist who is unaware that it is due to the evaluative ideas with which he unconsciously approaches his subject matter, that he has selected from infinity a tiny portion with the study of which he concerns himself. (Weber, 1949)

This statement stands in strong contrast to the positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and followers of this philosophy who believe that a final truth, even about social phenomena, can be reached through the methods of science, where science is understood as expressed in measurements. The term positivism derives from the belief that society will become ever more perfect as a result of advances in science, including the social sciences. Positivism, which in IS research is often equated with scientific rigor, is in fact based on a philosophical belief about what science can accomplish in the social realm (Comte, 1988; Jones, 1998). This belief also implicitly underlies the notion that technology will improve human existence. Positivism is often equated with empiricism. However, this too is problematic. Merriam-Webster’s online includes the following contradictory definitions:

- 1: originating in or based on observation or experience <empirical data>
- 2: relying on experience or observation alone often without due regard to system and theory
- 3: capable of being verified or disproved by observation or experiment <empirical laws>

Linked to positivism are the two foundational ideas of analytic philosophy and of rationality.

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