

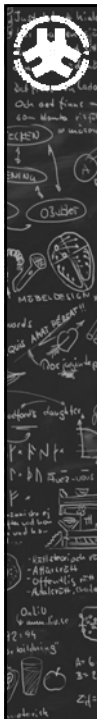


# Practice research: Three kinds of pragmatism in social research

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## Göran Goldkuhl

- Professor in information systems, Linköping University
- Guest professor in service oriented information systems, Stockholm University
- Research director, Reserch group VITS
- Main interests, focus and experiences
  - Development of workpractices and information systems
  - Socio-pragmatic theories on workpractices, services, IT
  - Methods for change, design and evaluation
  - Pragmatic approaches in social research
  - E-government (IT in the public sector)

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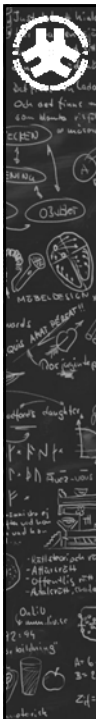


## Agenda

- Pragmatism as a research paradigm in social research
- Three kinds of pragmatism
- Practice research vs. Action research
- Constructive knowledge & practical theory

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## Documentation

- Goldkuhl G (2008) Practical inquiry as action research and beyond, in *Proceedings of the 16th European Conference on Information Systems*, Galway
- Goldkuhl G (2008) What kind of pragmatism in information systems research?, *AIS SIG Prag Inaugural meeting*, Paris
- Download from [www.vits.org](http://www.vits.org)

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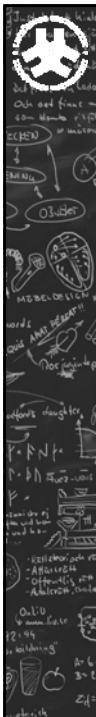


## Documentation

- Goldkuhl G (2005) Socio-Instrumental Pragmatism: A Theoretical Synthesis for Pragmatic Conceptualisation in Information Systems, in *Proc of the 3rd Intl Conf on Action in Language, Organisations and Information Systems*, University of Limerick
- Cronholm S, Goldkuhl G (2004) Conceptualizing Participatory Action Research – Three Different Practices, *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, Vol 2 (2)
- Goldkuhl G, Cronholm S (2010) Adding theoretical grounding to grounded theory – Towards Multi-grounded theory, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol 9 (2), p 187-205
- Download from [www.vits.org](http://www.vits.org)

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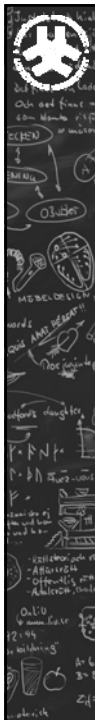


## Is Pragmatism a research paradigm?

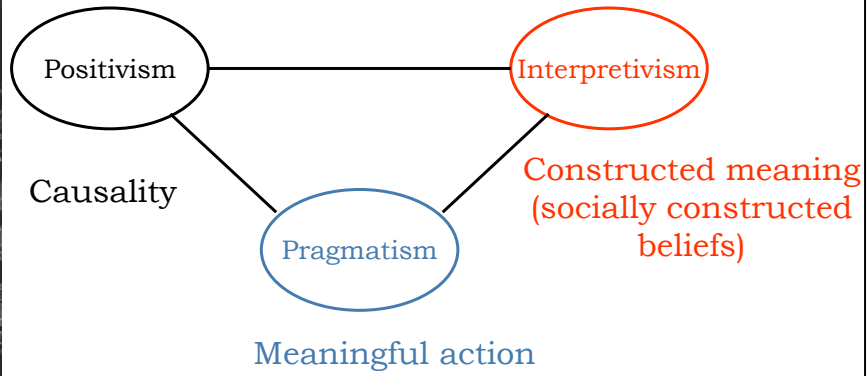
Positioning pragmatism

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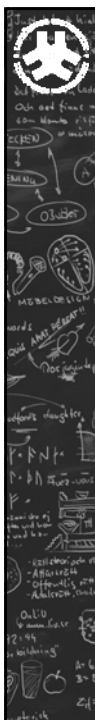


## Different paradigms in social research

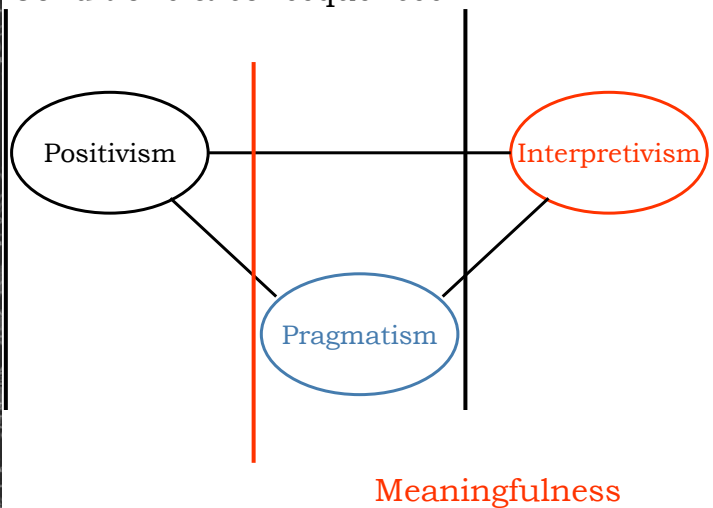


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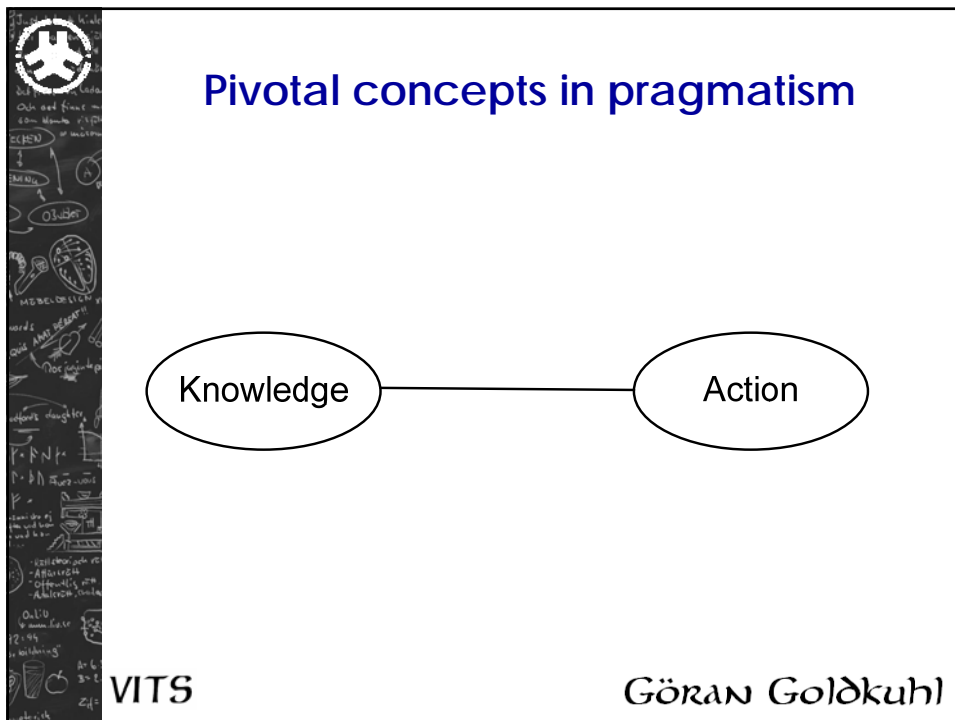
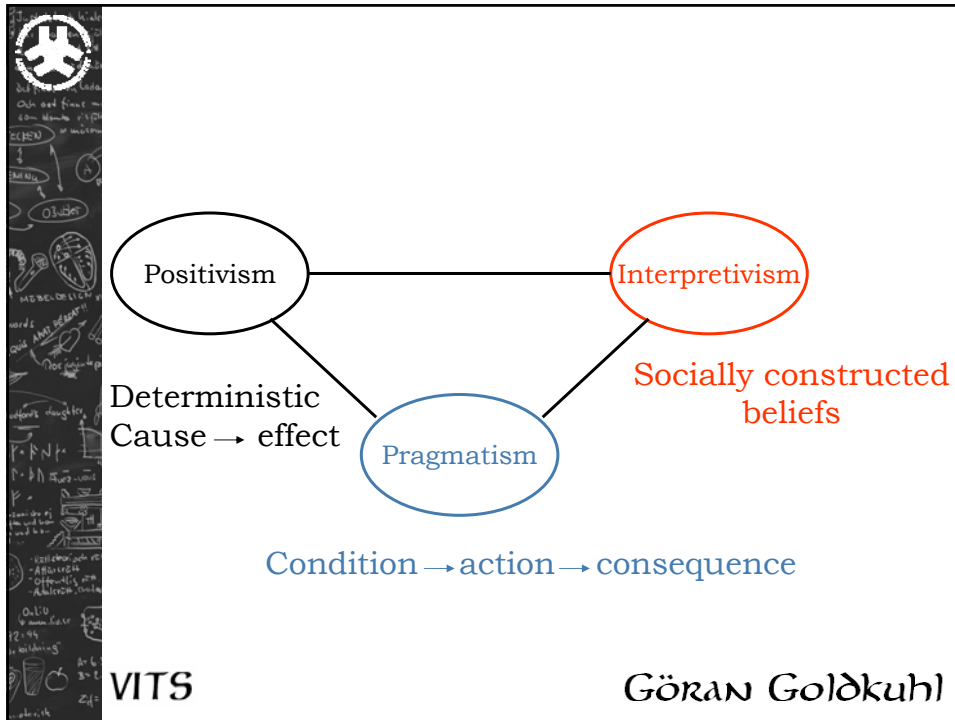


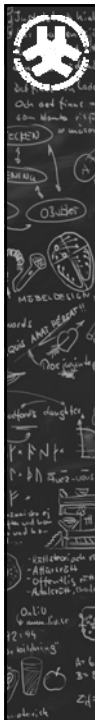
## Realist position Conditions & consequences



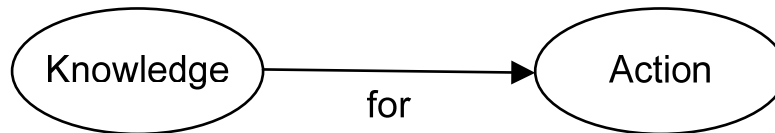
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## Functional pragmatism

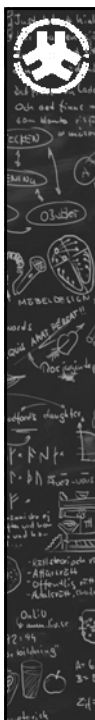


**Why this knowledge?**

**Action is the purpose**

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## Functional pragmatism

- **Knowledge for action**
- Knowledge should be *useful* for action and change
- Functional means that knowledge should be useful and applicable in action
  - Explicitly prescriptive
  - Guiding attention towards certain phenomena

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## Referential pragmatism

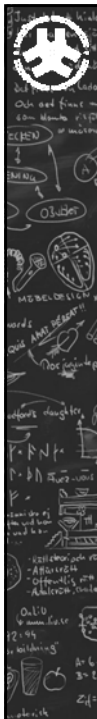


**Knowledge about *what?***

**Action is the *object***

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## Referential pragmatism

- **Knowledge about action**
- Describing the world in action-oriented ways
- “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”

(Herbert Blumer, 1969)

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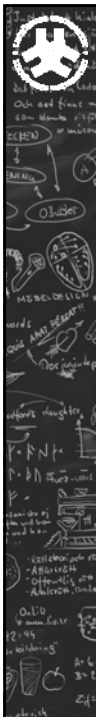


# Referential pragmatism

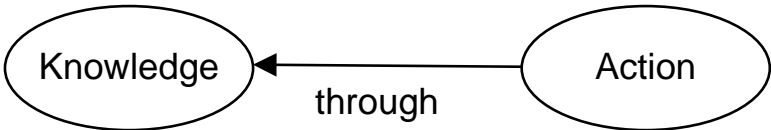
- **Knowledge about action**
- Focus on actions, actors, conditions for and results of actions, activities, practices
- Use of action-oriented theories
  - Social action theories
  - Symbolic interactionism
  - Activity theory
  - Stucturation theory
  - Speech act theory/communicative action theory
  - Affordance theory
  - Socio-instrumental pragmatism

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# Methodological pragmatism



**How generate knowledge?**

**Action is the source and medium**

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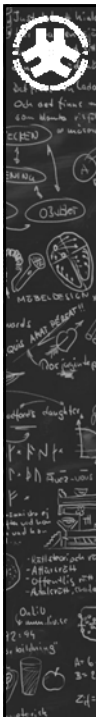


## Methodological pragmatism

- **Knowledge through action**
- We learn about the world through action
- Knowledge is based on actions, experiences and reflections on actions
- The “true” nature of phenomena is shown first when we try to change them

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## Pragmatic epistemology

- Functional pragmatism
  - Constructive knowledge
- Referential pragmatism
  - Action-conceptualised knowledge
- Methodological pragmatism
  - Experiential knowledge

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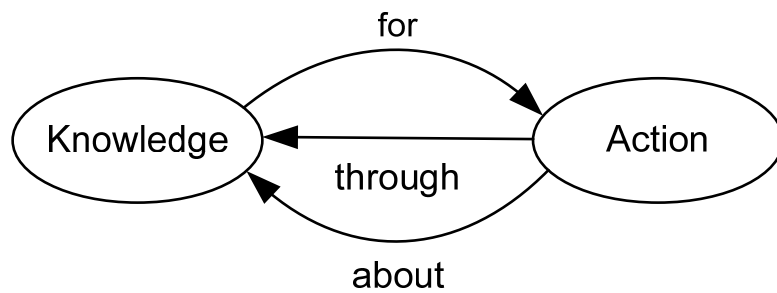
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## A call for *full* pragmatism

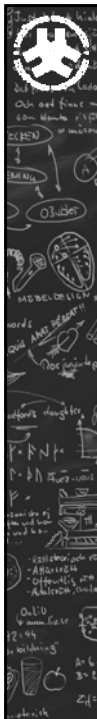
Combining

- Functional pragmatism
- Referential pragmatism
- Methodological pragmatism



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## Research approaches on pragmatic grounds

- Contributing to practice
  - Practical improvement
- Active researcher participation
  - Learning through experiences
- Focus on actions and change
  
- Is Action research *the* answer?

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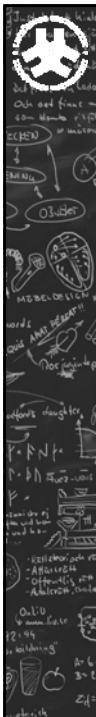


## Does Action research cover all three kinds of pragmatism?

- Action research is directed towards solving local practice problems
- Does this local relevance of problems also imply a general practical relevance?
- Are the proposed and utilised solutions relevant outside the local practice?
- Are theoretical results always stated in action terms?

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## Definitions of Action Research

“Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework”

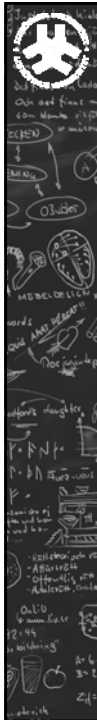
Rapoport (1970)

*Action research simultaneously assists in practical problem-solving and expands scientific knowledge, as well as enhances the competencies of the respective actors, being performed collaboratively in an immediate situation using data feedback in a cyclical process aiming at an increased understanding of a given social situation, primarily applicable for the understanding of change processes in social systems and undertaken within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.*

Hult & Lennung (1980)

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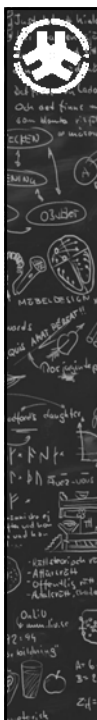


## Action research

- The practical goal is differentiated from the scientific goals
- The goals of science are not formulated as a matter of practical concern
- What claims for practical relevance outside local practice?

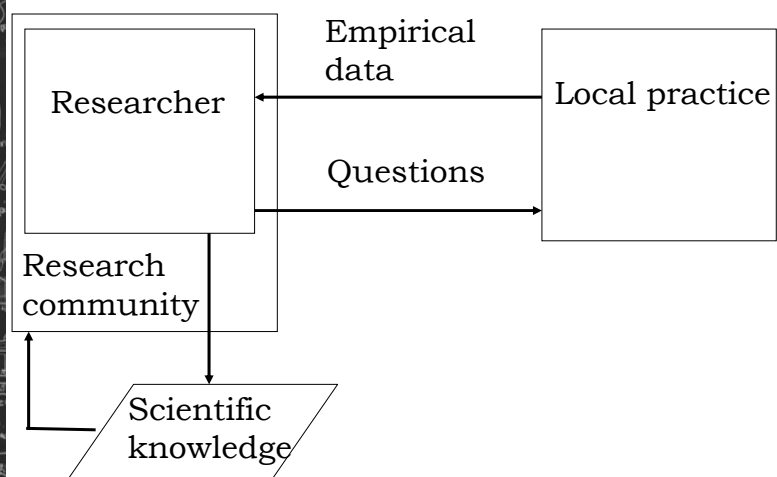
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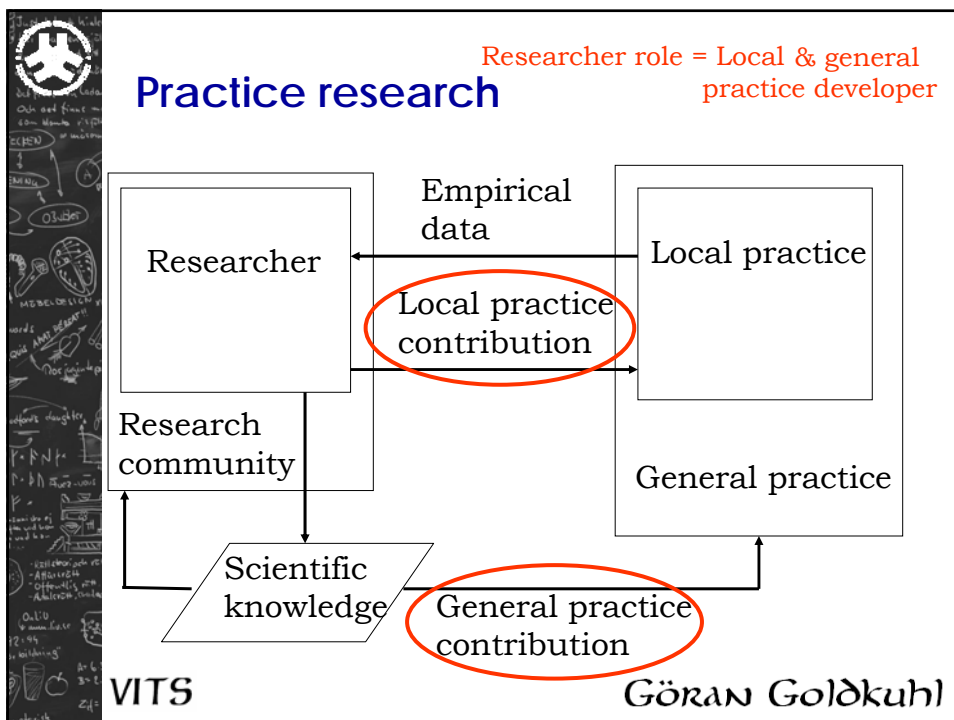
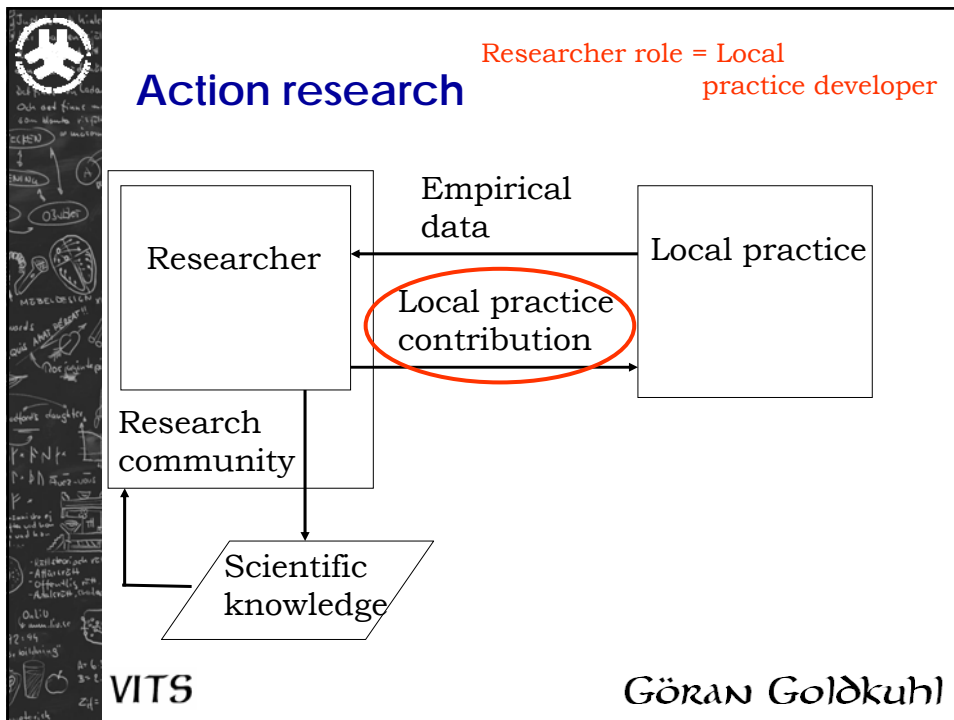
Researcher role = spectator

## Traditional research



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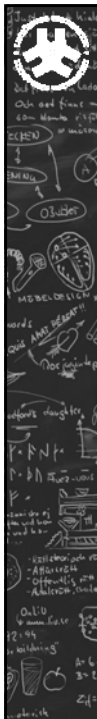


## Practice research

- Practical research is based on a **pragmatic paradigm** that sees commonsense as well as scientific knowledge as means to improve human practices (Dewey, 1938)
- Scientific knowledge about human practices needs to be **useful** for management and improvement of such practices
- The main goal is to create **scientific knowledge of practical value**

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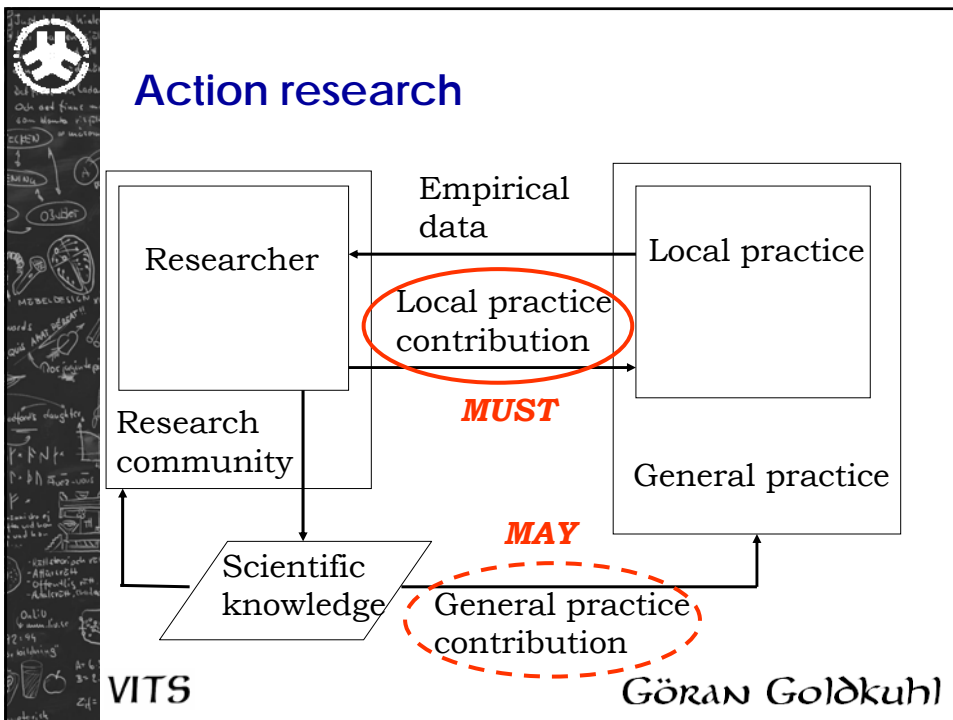
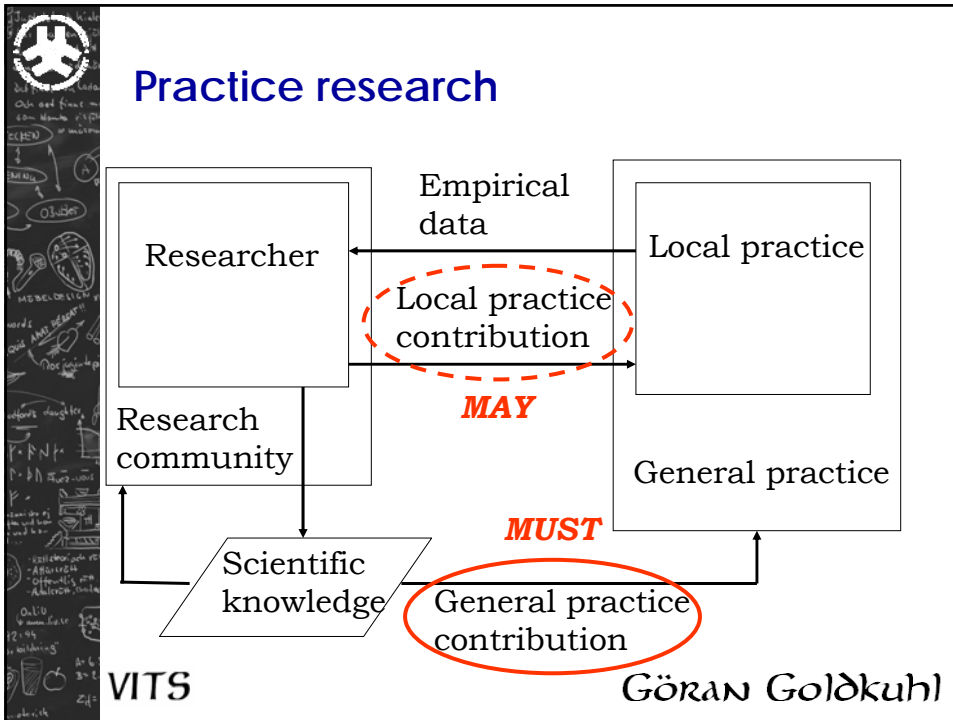


## The purpose of practice research

- Through empirical study on practical matters in local practices, to contribute to general practical knowledge
- This practical knowledge will be part of the scientific body of knowledge and it aims to be useful for practical affairs

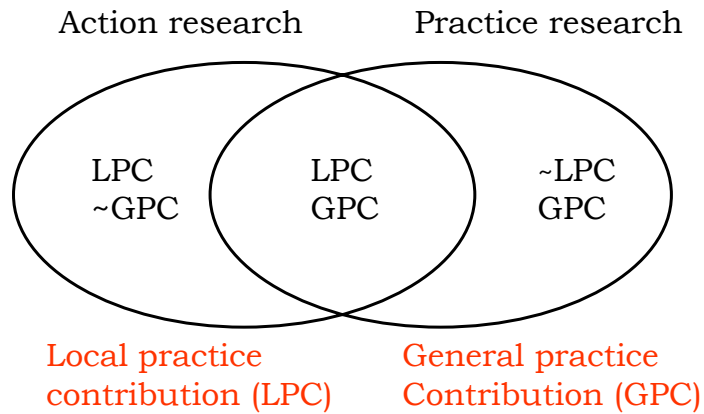
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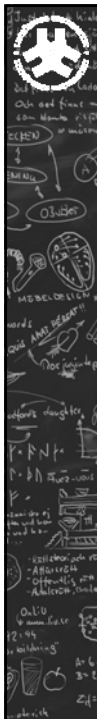


## Practice contributions



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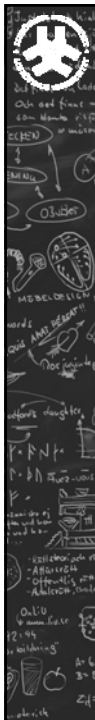
## Phases of action research

- Diagnosis
- Action planning
- Action taking
- Evaluation
- Specifying learning
- Susman & Evered (1978)

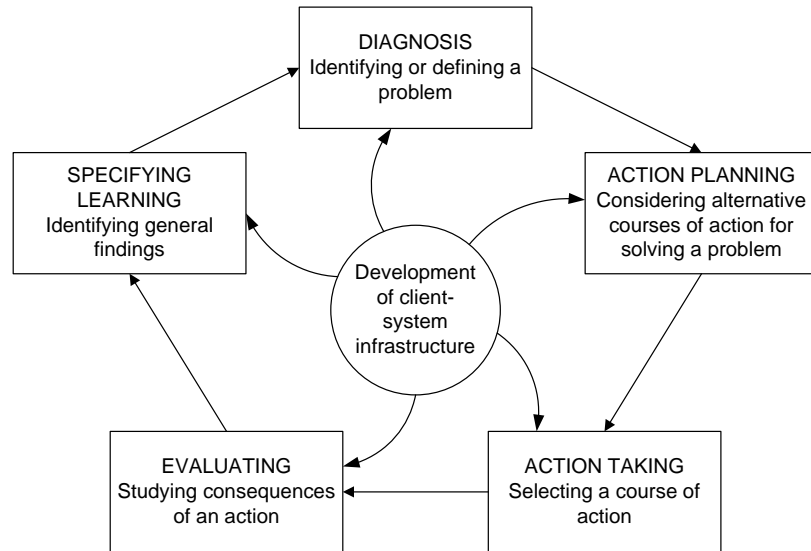
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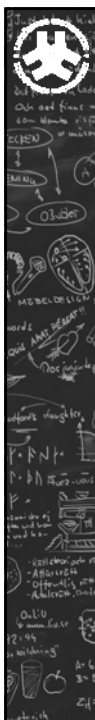


## The cyclical nature of Action research



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## Phases of action research

- Diagnosis (of current situation)
- Action planning (incl evaluation)
- Action taking (incl evaluation)
  
- Specifying learning included in these phases

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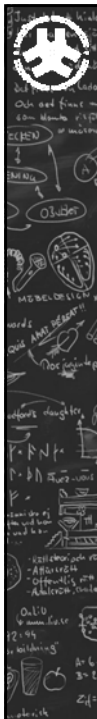
## Phases of action research - different degrees of intervention

- Diagnosis intervention
    - Diagnosis
  - Design intervention
    - Action planning
  - Implementation intervention
    - Action taking
- } Partial Action research
- } Full Action research

Evaluation & specifying learning are considered as integrated parts of the other phases

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## Practice research - different degrees of intervention

- Diagnosis without intervention
- Diagnosis intervention (partial action research)
- Design intervention (partial action research)
- Implementation intervention (full action research)
  
- Different degrees of local practice contributions

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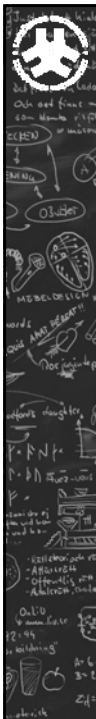


## Good reasons for a practice researcher to make local practice contributions

- **Trying out knowledge** (intended for practical use) is a good way to ensure that this knowledge really is practical
- Socially appropriate to **give something in return** to the local practice, if you have had the opportunity and benefit to study a local practice
- **Joint knowledge creation** can give deeper insights into practices
  - Collaboration between researchers and local practitioners

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## Practice research - Inquiry

- Practice research will often be performed through inquiry processes
- John Dewey (1938) Logic: The pattern of inquiry
- "Human inquiry is natural part of life aimed at improving our condition by adaptation and accomodation in the world"
- "An inquiry is an investigation into some part of reality with the purpose of creating knowledge for a controlled change of this part of the reality"

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## Practical inquiry is an inquiry of practices

- How things work?
- What works?
- What does not work?
- How things might be better?

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## Knowledge interests of practice research: The prospective of practices

- How can things be bettered?
- How can the practice function better?
- How come that the practice does not reach its potentialities?
- How can new more ambitious objectives be stated and how can they be reached?
- **Practical inquiry is pursued with an interest of change and improvement**

“An empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past has no place for possibility and for liberty”

John Dewey (1931)

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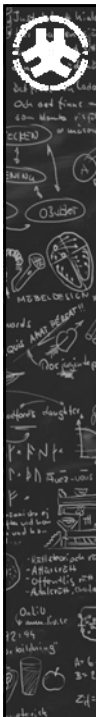


## An interest for change relies on knowledge about the *good* and the *bad*

- Why do not things work well enough?
  - **Critical** knowledge concerning the **problematic**
- How come that a practice reach its objectives?
- Why is a practice working well in certain respects?
  - Knowledge needed to **retain good practices** and not to destroy the good in practices when changing them

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## Practice research as action research and **beyond**

- Practice research strives for practical relevance *beyond local practice*
  - as a general practice contribution
- There may be other kinds of studies, *beyond intervention*, which may give empirical data for generating knowledge for general practice
- **Practice research intends to make a difference to the world, generally and often locally**

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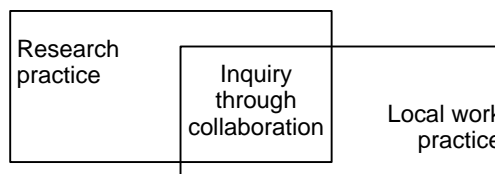


## Practice research

### Two practices

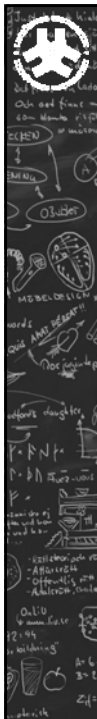


### ... starting to collaborate



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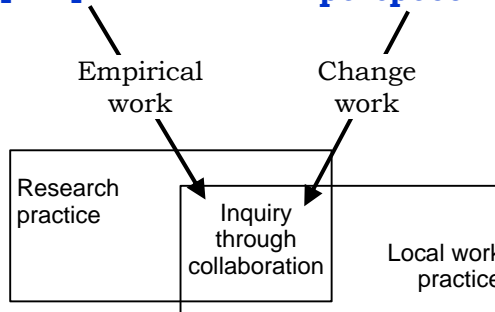
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## Practice research

### Research perspective

### Local practice perspective

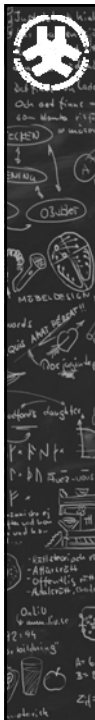


**Collaborative situational inquiry is multifunctional**

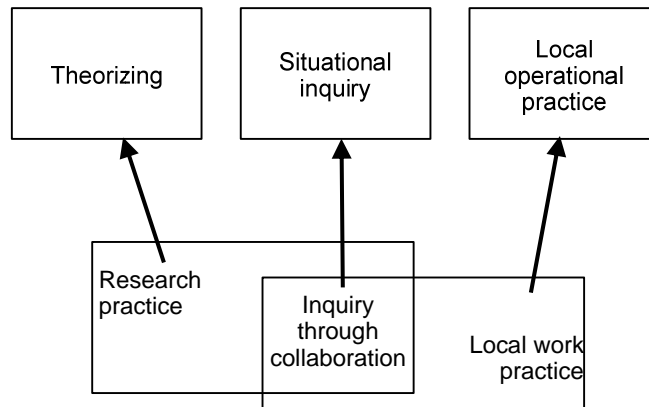
*Empirical research + organisational change*

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## Three related practices



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## Different roles

- Researchers (active in practice research) = R
- Practitioners (active in local practice) = P
  
- Other researchers (target group in research community) = OR
- Other practitioners (target group in general practice) = OP

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## Full pragmatism through practice research

- A way to combine all three kinds of pragmatism
- Functional pragmatism (FP)
  - Local practice contributions (LFP)
  - General practice contributions (GFP)
    - Practical theories, models, methods
- Referential pragmatism (RP)
  - Action-oriented theorizing
- Methodological pragmatism (MP)
  - Participating in change, exploration

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## Full pragmatism through practice research

- Practice research is research **about** practices
  - Referential pragmatism
- Practice research is research **for** practices
  - Functional pragmatism
- Practice research is research **in/through** practices
  - Methodological pragmatism

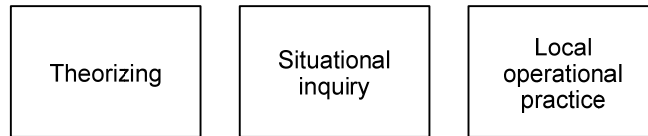
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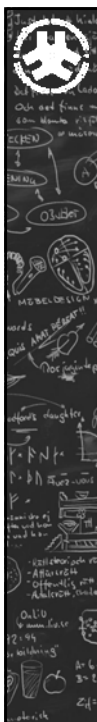


## Three related practices

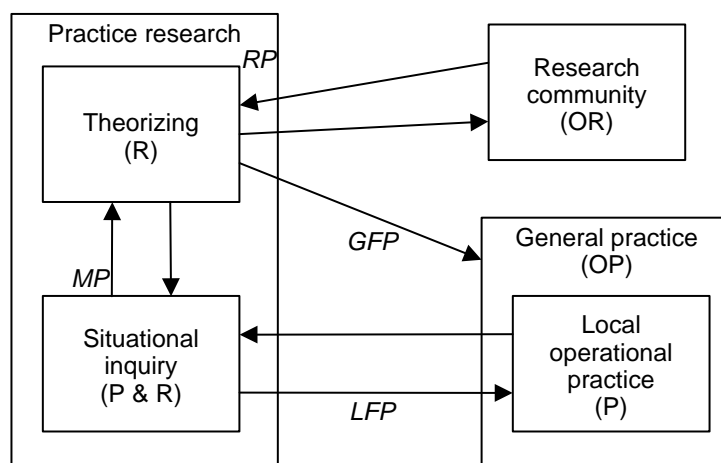


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## Three kinds of pragmatism in practice research



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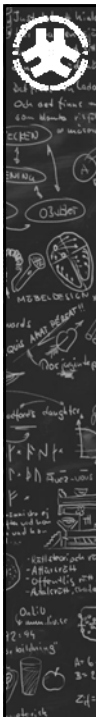
## Empirical data from situational inquiry

Three data-generating subpractices:

- Diagnosis/Design/Implementation
- Embedded data collection (within DDI)
- Theory-required data collection

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## Empirical data from situational inquiry

- Inquiry results from Diagnosis/Design/Implementation
  - 1) informing Local Operational Practice
  - 2) informing Theorizing
- Embedded data collection (within DDI)
  - 1) informing (and part of) Diagnosis/Design/Implementation
  - 2) informing Theorizing
- Theory-required data collection
  - informing Theorizing

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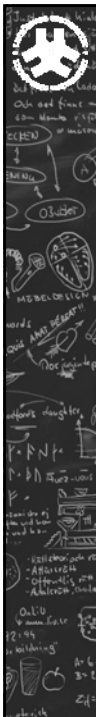
## Theorizing

Theorizing serves

- Situational inquiry → LOP
  - Practical theories, models, methods etc (from Research community)
  - Conceptualisations theorized situational knowledge
- Research community (SBK)
  - Validated/new practical theories etc
- General practice
  - Practical theories etc

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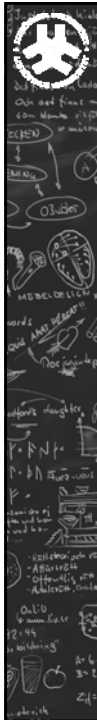


## Results from practice research

- Situational knowledge
  - Local practice contributions
- Abstract/general knowledge
  - General practice contributions
  - Contribution to scientific body of knowledge

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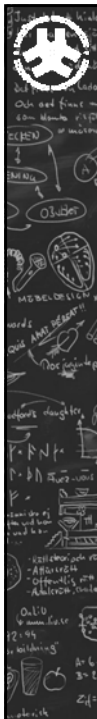


## Functional pragmatism demands useful knowledge

### Constructive knowledge

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## Constructive knowledge

- Conceptual knowledge
  - Directing attention
- Prescriptive knowledge
  - Giving guidelines
- Normative knowledge
  - Exhibiting values
- Prospective knowledge
  - Suggesting possibilities
- Critical knowledge
  - Challenging & questioning tactics and results

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## Constructive knowledge

Structured in

- Practical theories
- Methods

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## Practical theory

“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.”

Vernon Cronen (1995)

“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”

Vernon Cronen (2001).

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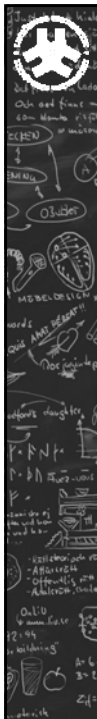


## Practical theories as input vs output

- The same theory acts as input and as output
  - as an unchanged version (perhaps given more confirmation)
  - as a modified version based on new insights and other evidence
- Other practical theories that are used as bases than is the end result
  - a new practical theory can evolve through the practical inquiry
  - although linked and related to ones used as theoretical instruments in the inquiry

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## Practical theory

both contribution to

- The scientific body of knowledge
- General practice (as transferable and useful knowledge)

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## Uses of practical theories

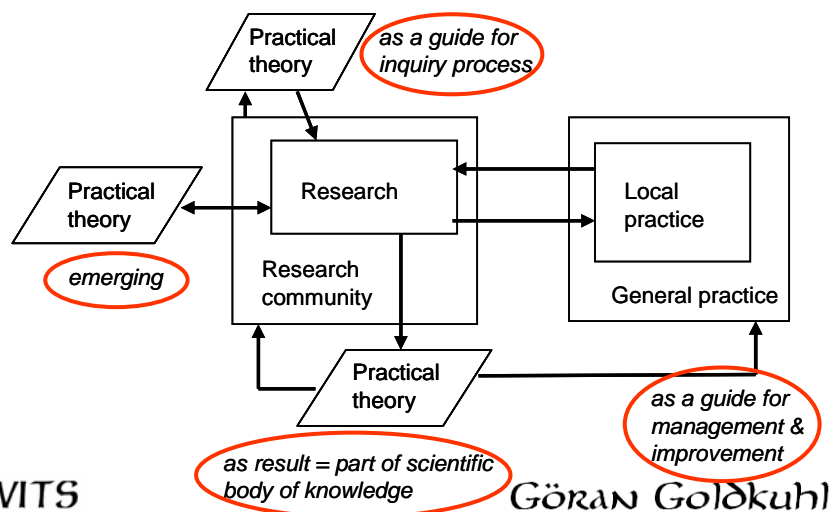
- An appropriate instrument for conducting practical inquiries
  - Scientific concerns (and thus practical concerns)
- An instrument for practitioners struggling to manage and improve their practices
  - Practical concerns

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## Practical theories are important instruments and results of practical inquiries



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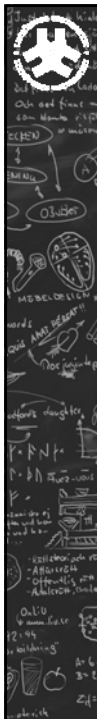


## Practical theory: Constituents

- Conceptualizations
  - what things, properties and relations that exist
- Patterns
  - how things (may) work
- Normative criteria
  - the goodness of things
- Design principles
  - how to create good things
- Models
  - illustrative crystallizations

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## Theory

- not restricted to explanation and prediction
- “systems of generalizations”
- “typologies of social phenomena”
- “models of social affairs”
- “accounts of what social things are”
- “conceptual frameworks”
- “descriptions of social life couched in general, abstract terms”

T Schatzki (2001)

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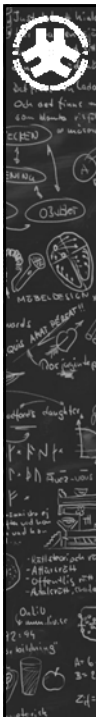


## Practical theory: Conceptualizations

- **What things, properties and relations that exist in practices**
- **Concepts**  
(categories/constructs as abstracted phenomena) and  
*relations* between the concepts
- Described through
  - Definitions
  - Diagrams of conceptual structures

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## Practical theory: Patterns

- **How things (may) work**
- Abstractions of socio-pragmatic processes in practices
- No strict causality or determinism
- Pattern descriptions unfold socio-pragmatic possibilities based on interpretations, voluntariness, customs and habits
- Theory diagrams  
(pattern coding, axial coding)

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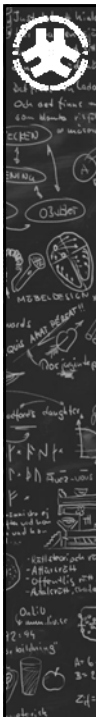
## Practical theory: Patterns

Pattern descriptions include

- preconditions,
- enablers,
- affordances,
- obstacles,
- strategies,
- tactics,
- actions,
- states,
- transitions,
- consequences and
- similar meta-categories

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## Practical theory: Normative criteria

- ***The goodness of things***
- Practices are social phenomena arranged intentionally and as such they inherently include values
- Explicit articulation of different values associated with practices and their roles, actions and artifacts

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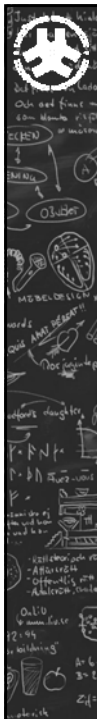


## Practical theory: Design principles

- **How to create good things**
- Ways to create certain goals/values of practices
  - Design principles are instrumental in relation to normative criteria
- Design principles should not be equated with methods
  - Design principles = on a general, abstracted and principal level
  - Method = concrete procedures and instruments

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## Practical theory: Models

- **Illustrative crystallizations** of some important part of practical theory
- Aimed as analytic instruments when applying the theory.
- Graphical or a tabular description
- May guide researchers or practitioners to observe, understand, analyze, evaluate and redesign phenomena within practices

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## Pragmatic epistemology

- Provisional knowledge
  - Knowledge is in a state of becoming
  - Continually developing
- Dialogical knowledge
  - Knowledge evolves through oral and written dialogues
- Co-created knowledge
  - Several participants contributing to cumulative knowledge
  - Knowledge aims at creating a common understanding
- Prospective knowledge
  - Knowledge should contribute to a possible and better world
  - “An empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past has no place for possibility and liberty.” (Dewey, 1931)

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