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Identity, Legitimacy and the Dominant Research Paradigm: An Alternative Prescription for the IS Discipline*

A Response to Benbasat and Zmud's Call for Returning to the IT Artifact

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Abstract

In this commentary, I respond to Benbasat and Zmud's (2003) call for a new identity for the IS field. While agreeing with the need for change, I disagree with parts of their portrayal of our new identity and the means for achieving it. I first suggest that identity should be flexible and adaptable rather than inflexible and rigid. A flexible identity can be changed more easily when circumstances require. Second, I caution against promoting our own new identity too vigorously because self-promotion can produce the undesirable image of an insecure field concerned with its reputation. It would be better, in my opinion, to protect past accomplishments while responding to the pragmatic demands of immediate audiences through research that addresses their concerns. Third, we need to heed Benbasat and Zmud's advice to establish our identity without severing ties with contributing disciplines. Finally, IS should avoid the lure of a dominant paradigm. Despite its potentially galvanizing effect, a dominant paradigm threatens the rich diversity that has characterized IS research since its inception.

* Detmar Straub was the accepting senior editor for this paper.

Benbasat and Zmud's (2003) call for a new identity for the IS field is both timely and welcome. Their message is positive and constructive, and I admire their leadership in expressing important concerns. The field of IS does need a more coherent identity with information technology at its core. Benbasat and Zmud conceive of this core as a nomological net linking key antecedents and consequences to the IT artifact. Guided by this redefinition of core properties, IS researchers may establish a stronger shared identity, avoid errors of inclusion and exclusion, and achieve greater legitimacy within our discipline's organizational field.

My own vision differs from Benbasat and Zmud's in several ways. First, I see advantages to a more *flexible identity* for IS, one that can be revised when needed. Second, gaining and preserving legitimacy is not simply a matter of formulating and implementing a strategic plan. *We need to think cautiously about the process of changing our identity* because change involves risks that may subvert our attempts to establish greater legitimacy. Third, IS needs to *strengthen ties with contributing disciplines*, not sever them in the rush to establish unique IS theories. Finally, I urge the IS field to *avoid the lure of a dominant research paradigm*.

Identity as Mutable and Adaptive

Organizational image and identity have been the subject of numerous empirical and conceptual articles in the management and organization sciences, including a special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* (January 2000). These inquiries are motivated by an assumed connection between organizational identity and positive outcomes such as organizational reputation and legitimacy. If a core identity can be created and shared within an organization, it might be projected externally as a positive image. Because traditional sources of identity have been lost as organizations and professions have faced economic and ethical crises, the study of identity has become more relevant and challenging. "A sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters" (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p. 13). It is essential, therefore, that any organization or occupational field be concerned with managing its image and identity.

However, having an established identity does not necessarily imply stability. Although identity generally connotes a stable set of core characteristics, it may also be conceived as a mutable and adaptive property. For example, Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) conceive of identity as fluid and unstable, treating it as a dynamic property of organizations. Paradoxically perhaps, organizations (or occupational fields such as the IS research community) should be prepared to change their identities as they face changing conditions. Thus, a flexible identity becomes useful when the need for change arises. According to Gioia and his colleagues, organizations that are able to change their core identities are more likely to succeed than organizations that cannot. A stable identity might even become a liability that limits a professional field's ability to change in response to environmental changes.

Indeed, Benbasat and Zmud's (2003) call for a new identity is motivated by changes in the environment of IS (p. 184), and a mutable and adaptive identity for IS might permit the flexibility needed to change. For example, IS has shifted its identity from a narrow preoccupation on computer programming and application development methodologies to an identity that encompasses the social context of IS development and use. As

technologies change, the IS field also needs to change to remain relevant. For these reasons, we should adopt a mutable identity that allows us to adapt to our rapidly changing environment.

In sum, I would re-interpret Benbasat and Zmud's call for *establishing* an identity for IS as a call for *revising* our identity as an ongoing practice. We have revised our identity in the past and we will need future revisions. As a field, we should adopt a strategy of "adaptive instability" (Gioia et al., 2000), one that fosters adjustment through appropriate changes in identity over time.

Establishing and Preserving Pragmatic Legitimacy

Benbasat and Zmud (2003) distinguish among several types of legitimacy. They claim that IS has already achieved significant progress regarding socio-political legitimacy, which encompasses both moral and regulatory acceptance. However, they argue that IS has not yet gained "cognitive legitimacy," which is the state of being taken for granted by environmental constituents. They believe that a less amorphous definition of IS's core phenomenon would lead to cognitive legitimacy.

I disagree. Cognitive legitimacy is beyond the reach of IS academic research. Suchman (1995) regards cognitive legitimacy as lying "beyond the reach of all but the most fortunate managers" (p. 583). For IS to become cognitively legitimate, alternatives to IS would have to become unthinkable. For a maturing academic field to attain taken-for-granted status in an era when centuries-old cultural, social, political, and religious institutions are being challenged would seem unlikely. Even the legitimacy of more established business disciplines like accounting and finance was challenged in the wake of corporate scandals at Enron, WorldCom, Mirant, and other corporations in the early 2000s. It is inconceivable that IS could rise above such heightened social scrutiny and attain a taken-for-granted status.

It would be more sensible, in my view, for IS to pursue what Suchman calls pragmatic legitimacy, which "rests on the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences" (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). For IS to become pragmatically legitimate, we need to be seen as a valued partner in intellectual exchanges with our external constituents: the governing bodies, business executives, university officials, and scholars from other disciplines who are the key actors in the IS organizational field (Benbasat and Zmud, 2003, p. 185). For this to occur, we need to conform to the expectations of the environment by meeting the needs of various audiences. We also need to persuade our audiences that what we do is valuable (Suchman, 1995).

These pragmatic concerns are most easily realized if we conduct our research rigorously and report it widely. However, none of these efforts is likely to result in the taken-for-granted status associated with cognitive legitimacy. As noted earlier, few institutions achieve taken-for-granted status, and those that do probably lack the incentive to be rigorous in their efforts to respond to environmental constituents simply because they are, in fact, taken for granted. Our efforts can, however, further strengthen our socio-political legitimacy.

If we take pragmatic legitimacy as our objective, Suchman suggests that we should *perceive future changes* and *protect past accomplishments* (1995, pp. 594-597). The

key to perceiving future change is to deploy boundary-spanning agents to learn about audience values, beliefs, and reactions (Suchman, 1995, p. 595). Indeed, Benbasat and Zmud do an excellent job of perceiving future changes by identifying potential threats to our legitimacy. We must continue to monitor our institutional environment and not become complacent with our current level of socio-political legitimacy.

The IS field also needs to protect its past accomplishments. Suchman (1995) offers two strategies for protection that are relevant to IS: policing internal operations and “curtailing highly visible legitimation efforts in favor of more subtle techniques” (p. 595). Benbasat and Zmud believe that internal policing (in the form of research standards and editorial practices) is effective in IS (2003, p. 185), but that our conferences and journals need to adopt practices that uphold high standards for relevant scholarship. I agree but caution that such vigilance not be so severe that the IS field “eats its young” as a regular practice. The imposition of lofty research standards may help to establish our identity as a more rigorous and legitimate field, but we may simultaneously disable the ability of junior faculty to grow into more senior roles. Protecting past accomplishments clearly implies the preservation of established research standards, but it does not imply a rapid escalation of those standards.

It is less clear whether Benbasat and Zmud’s proposal requires overt (and possibly egregious) attempts to promote IS to its constituents, or more subtle techniques for establishing legitimacy. The dangers of egregious self-aggrandizement have been articulated by Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) as the “self-promoter’s paradox,” defined as constituents’ tendency to interpret self promotion as a clue that an organization is in trouble. Thus, too much self promotion can jeopardize legitimacy, an effect opposite of that intended. I strongly advise that IS avoid inflating its contributions while drawing attention to its substantive achievements.

In sum, IS should abandon any hope for cognitive legitimacy and focus instead on establishing and preserving pragmatic legitimacy. This can be accomplished by diligent application of rigorous research methodologies and publication strategies that reach our varied audiences, both academic and practical. Pragmatic legitimacy can best be accomplished without blatant self promotion, which would be interpreted suspiciously by our audiences as a sign of weakness. If we position our contributions strategically, without inflating them, we should continue to strengthen the pragmatic legitimacy of IS research.

Strengthen Connections with IS’s Contributing Disciplines

I attribute the phrase “contributing disciplines” to Allen Lee (2001), former Editor in Chief of *MIS Quarterly*. Prior to Lee’s clarification, we routinely discussed the importance of “reference disciplines” in IS research. Lee’s semantic distinction suggested that, on the one hand, disciplines such as economics, organization science, computer science, and management science can continue to contribute theories and methods to inform IS research. On the other hand, those disciplines provide poor models for how IS research should be conducted because they typically do not focus on technologies in their social contexts of development and use. In Lee’s view, IS needs to establish an identity through research that is distinctively different from the research in other disciplines, while drawing valuable contributions from them.

Benbasat and Zmud acknowledge the value of the contributing disciplines but observe that “the current emphasis with theories from other disciplines has distracted the IS research community from developing its own theories” (2003, p. 192). Indeed, it is difficult to identify many true “IS theories,” even after several decades of IS research. For example, most of the components of Benbasat and Zmud’s proposed nomological net refer to constructs that are thoroughly researched in organizational behavior, strategic management and other non-IS fields. Should we shore up a unique identity by severing ties with contributing disciplines? Benbasat and Zmud do not advocate such a course, but I worry that their advocacy for building IS theories might be interpreted as a call for separation from contributing disciplines rather than effective integration.

In my view, it would be unwise to ignore valuable sources of theory and method in other disciplines. Although developing our own theories might increase the distinctiveness of IS, it might also lead us into an isolationism that could impoverish IS and threaten it further. I do not think that the IS field can risk severing ties with contributing disciplines. Rather, we should strengthen our connections with those disciplines and exploit them for the value they offer.

Strengthening ties with contributing disciplines increases the risk of committing Benbasat and Zmud’s “error of inclusion,” defined in terms of the causal distance between IS and non-IS constructs in a nomological net. It is appropriate, therefore, to position IS as an *applied discipline*. As we draw theories from relevant disciplines and employ them skillfully to inform problems specific to the IT artifact, we can strengthen our identity and earn respect from the contributing disciplines. In addition, we can minimize the risk of under-specification in IS research models (Benbasat and Zmud, 2003, p. 192) and spare ourselves the considerable effort required to construct unique IS theories.

Sharpen the Focus on IT as the Core Phenomenon but Resist the Lure of the “Dominant Research Paradigm”

Finally, I disagree with Benbasat and Zmud’s assessment that IS needs a “dominant research paradigm.” The lure of the dominant paradigm is thinly masked in Benbasat and Zmud’s essay. On the one hand, they say that their commentary is *not* about “whether such a diversity of topics is beneficial for the IS field” (2003, p. 184). However, while accepting the intellectual diversity that characterizes the IS field, they view the lack of consensus regarding a dominant design as “troublesome” (p. 185). This problem of diversity drives their call for a dominant paradigm, including standards and designs for research.

Benbasat and Zmud offer a glimpse of what a dominant research paradigm might be. Their nomological net is portrayed as a causal “box-and-arrow” diagram (albeit with two-way arrows), and their concluding rules of thumb assume the use of a conventional model to guide research. Their view fails to accommodate exploratory, interpretive, qualitative, and critical research, which are typically not rendered in the form of causal models. Thus, their call for a new identity potentially excludes IS traditions that are skeptical of the value of positivist, causal modeling. However, Benbasat and Zmud’s desire to “clarify the IS nuances” in IS research (2003, p. 193) might be satisfied better with qualitative research that provides rich interpretations of the interplay between social

systems and technical artifacts than with research that operationalizes elements of their proposed nomological net.

We do need to sharpen the focus on the IT artifact, which occupies an appropriately central position in Benbasat and Zmud's nomological net. Such positioning would ensure that IS research engages the IT artifact in the spirit suggested by Orlikowski and Iacono (2001). However, as Orlikowski and Iacono argue, the central position of the IT artifact can be addressed in many different ways that do not necessarily conform to a "dominant" paradigm. Although the IS field might gain a new identity by eliminating valid avenues for investigating IT, such a course would only be wise if we had collectively judged some research paradigms to be inferior to others. In my view, such a judgment has not occurred.

Although I am reasonably sure that Benbasat and Zmud did not mean to exclude any particular research methodology or theoretical perspective from the dominant paradigm, I fear that readers may interpret their analysis more narrowly. Thus, I urge caution in responding to the lure of the dominant paradigm. Adopting a dominant paradigm increases the risk of silencing interesting debates and lines of research before their contributions can be evaluated. Dominance may be a characteristic of some successful fields, but I suspect that a diversity of perspectives and controversy keeps them adaptable.

In sum, I believe that we need to foster diversity rather than view it as the source of our identity problem. A diverse range of research methodologies that focuses on the IT artifact in all of its complexity is likely to enhance our identity more than premature closure on a narrow range of methods associated with a dominant paradigm. As an applied discipline, we depend upon a diversity of research approaches to ensure that we learn about the IT artifact in as many ways as we can.

Conclusion

I have argued that Benbasat and Zmud's (2003) vision of a new identity for the IS field requires some modifications. As a field, we should view the identity issue not as a one-time adjustment but rather as a continuing process of evaluation and reflection that leads to changing our identity to meet the expectations of our immediate audiences. This will not be easy, and it will demand constant vigilance. We should also not underestimate the complexity of responding appropriately to our institutional environment. Establishing and maintaining legitimacy requires a commitment to monitor our audiences and to formulate responses that are not seen as entirely self serving. In pursuing legitimacy, the IS field would be wise to continue to exploit contributing disciplines. At the risk of muddying our identity, we should not ignore the wealth of theoretical and methodological guidance available in related fields. Finally, the lure of the dominant paradigm, in whatever guise, continues to disturb me.¹ Surely we can succeed as an applied discipline by sustaining current trajectories that draw from relevant contributing disciplines. I have little hope that IS can survive by ignoring alternative paradigms and rallying around a narrower, and perhaps impoverished, identity.

¹ For my prior arguments advocating diversity in the IS field, see Robey (1996).

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Daniel Robey is Professor and John B. Zellars Chair of Information Systems at Georgia State University, holding a joint appointment in the Departments of Computer Information Systems and Management. He teaches courses on Qualitative Research Methods in Information Systems and Information Technology and Organizational Transformation. He earned his doctorate in Administrative Science in 1973 from Kent State University. Professor Robey is Editor-in-Chief of *Information and Organization* and serves on the editorial boards of *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Information Technology & People*, and the John Wiley series on Information Systems. Professor Robey is the author of three books and numerous articles in such journals as *Management Science*, *Organization Science*, *Information Systems Research*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *ACM Transactions on Information Systems*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Information Technology & People*, and *Decision Sciences*. His current research includes empirical examinations of the effects of a wide range of technologies on organizational structure and patterns of work. It also includes the development of theoretical approaches to explaining the development and consequences of information technology in organizations.

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