

INFORMATION SYSTEMS JOURNAL
SPECIAL ISSUE ON INDIGENOUS THEORY
CALL FOR PAPERS

In the Information Systems (IS) discipline, we routinely expect contributing authors to our premier journals to make significant contributions to both theory and practice. Theories are considered to be important for a number of reasons, including: their facilitation of the systematic treatment of a topic; their sense-making potential; their explanation and prediction of some aspects of human behaviour; and their ability to reduce our knowledge to the most fundamental and universal ideas, thereby demonstrating the underlying patterns and relationships. Lee and Baskerville (2003, 2012) suggest that theory plays a role in the generalisation of research findings, since findings from one study can be generalised to theory (either by creating a new theory or by modifying an existing theory) and a theory can be validated in a context different to the one where it was originally developed, thereby leading to further generalisation of the ideas. Theory should therefore be practical, helping us to advance knowledge, guiding researchers towards the essential questions and ultimately enlightening both the academy and practice (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). Theory should also be appropriate to the context where it is applied if we are to reach an accurate understanding about the phenomenon investigated. An inappropriately applied theory could be very dangerous since the assumptions that frame the theory may not exist in a different context.

Although the benefits of theory are well recognised, the actual process of theorising is less well understood, with relatively few scholars tackling this thorny issue. Examples include: Martinsons et al.'s (2015) illustration of an instrumental theorising process; and Mathiassen's (2017) reinterpretation of Van de Ven's (2007) work on engaged scholarship to propose a model for theorising. Theorising often blends concepts culled from a thorough review of both the literature and the focal phenomenon in a specific context. Historically, much theory development work in IS and Management journals that is conducted and published in English has been undertaken in the more developed economies of the West, sometimes referred in the IT for Development community as the global North. Of the 104 theories (the vast majority published in English) listed on the IS Theory Wiki (<https://is.theorizeit.org/>), it is remarkable that 87 were created by authors based in the USA with the remainder coming from authors based in the UK (10), Hong Kong (3), The Netherlands (3), Australia (2), Canada, (2), France (2), Germany (2) and one from each of: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Japan, New Zealand and Norway. Not a single theory has an author from Africa, South or Central America, Asia (except the relatively developed economies of Japan and Hong Kong) or the Pacific Islands, i.e. the less economically developed countries of the world.

A salient consideration here is the language in which the theory development work was done and later published. Many of us may unconsciously neglect the issue of language, assuming it to be English because this is the language that many of us work in professionally, even if we speak different language(s) at home. However, it is arrogant and hegemonistic to assume that theory work can only be undertaken, and theory only published, in English. Many non-English language journals exist, including those in the IS and Management domains, and so the potential for non-English theory contributions to be published is apparent. Nevertheless, the current review is largely restricted to theories published in English (of the 104 theories above, all except one were published in English) and this call for papers is also similarly restricted since the Information Systems Journal only publishes articles in English.

The imbalance that is indicated by this pattern of theory development is startling. Notwithstanding the remarks about the opportunities to publish theory in languages other

than English, it would appear that scholars in the less economically developed societies have made very few contributions in the English language to the development of original theory in IS, as well as other disciplines, notably Management. As a result, the rich cultural heritage of these societies is not represented in theories that would be available for testing and validation. Further, researchers in developing economies rely to a large extent on the theories developed in the developed economies, perhaps accepting this implicit theoretical hegemony and imagining that their own indigenous concepts are not worth theorising formally or that only Western theories are valid, with the consequence that indigenous theories are not brought forward and published.

There are exceptions to the above pattern, though they are not easy to discern. For instance, the Chinese cultural concept of *guanxi* (together with allied terms such as *renqing*, *mianzi*, *ganqing*, *huibao* and *hexie*) has been drawn on by a few IS, International Management and Cross-Cultural Psychology scholars in their theorising (see for instance Martinsons, 2008; Ou et al., 2014; Tsui, 2004; 2006; Xiao and Tsui, 2007; Young et al., 2012). There is also a small number of studies of indigenous concepts in other societal cultures, including *waqf* (Arab), *sanuk* (Thai), *hygge* (Danish/Norwegian), *sisu* (Finnish), *jugaad* (Indian), etc. (Radjou et al., 2011; Radjou et al., 2012; Amin et al., 2014).

In this special issue we focus on indigenous theory and define this as a theory of human behaviour or mind that is specific to a context or culture, not imported from other contexts/cultures and purposely designed for the people who live in that context or culture (cf. Kim and Berry, 1993). The word indigenous itself needs some unpacking, since it can be interpreted in different ways. Some would argue that indigenous people are those who were the first inhabitants of a place, sometimes called First Peoples (Wikipedia). Examples might be the Inuit of Nunavut, in what is now Northern Canada or the Kelabit of the island of Borneo (today's Malaysian Sarawak and Indonesian Kalimantan). Others would argue that indigenous can be applied more loosely and refer to any people who live in a particular location but with an emphasis on the local nature of the context. Our intention here is to be inclusive, recognising the validity of different interpretations of ethnic indigeneity.

We suggest that indigenous theory is important for several reasons. While some fundamental aspects of human behaviour (the need for shelter, food, safety) may be universal, many other aspects involve culture to a greater or lesser degree. Since culture varies considerably across different social and cultural contexts, it is reasonable to assume that theoretical explanations of specific behaviours will also need to vary if they are to be accurate at the local level. An interesting example concerns the phenomenon of trust. Trust has been researched extensively in the literature, notably in the functional context of buying and selling on e-commerce platforms, but also in the context of knowledge sharing. It has been asserted, for instance, that trust is the single most important factor that determines the willingness to engage in knowledge exchange (Rolland and Chauvel, 2000). The fact that trust plays a central role in many e-commerce studies, since it is asserted that customers need to trust e-commerce sellers and platforms, hints at its hegemonic power here too. However, is trust as universally important as these assertions suggest? Could any other factor be equally or more important? In her prior work on buyer behaviour on Chinese e-commerce platforms, Ou (and her colleagues) (2014) modelled the effect of *guanxi*, in addition to trust, and their respective impacts on buyer behaviour. *Guanxi* turned out to be a significant influence on buyer behaviour, challenging the earlier notion that trust is the universally single most important factor. Similarly, Davison et al. (2013) observed in their study of knowledge sharing practices in Chinese professional service firms that *guanxi* was a critical enabler of knowledge sharing behaviour. In the absence of *guanxi*, employees found it extremely difficult to engage in knowledge sharing.

Having identified and theorised indigenous concepts, those same concepts become available for adoption and assessment in other societal cultures and contexts. While the word *guanxi* is a Chinese concept, just as the word *trust* is an English concept, the extent to which a concept is limited to the societal context that informed its development is open to validation. A powerful justification for indigenous theorising is thus the opportunity not only to offer a better explanation of behaviour at the local or indigenous level, but also to offer new explanations of behaviour globally. Thus, Sue-Chan and Dasborough (2005) noted, in their study of HR decision making in Australia, that behaviours akin to *guanxi* are, perhaps surprisingly, prevalent there too. A further justification for indigenous theorising is the need to engage in research that can usefully inform practitioners. Given that the social contexts and the belief systems of professionals vary, it is important that we generate research findings appropriate to the context where they may be applied. For instance, given the Chinese reliance on *guanxi*, it is reasonable to expect that Chinese firms need to be sensitive to *guanxi* in their marketing efforts. A research study that involved the collection and analysis of data in China based on a non-Chinese theory and that failed to theorise and measure any Chinese constructs, could hardly be expected to have much value for Chinese organisations: the findings would at best explain only that aspect of the phenomenon that overlapped with the non-Chinese theory. All the Chinese aspects would be absent. It should now be apparent that context is very much bound up with theory, for a theory can only be valuable so long as it is plausible or appropriate in a given context (Davison and Martinsons, 2016).

In this special issue, we wish to champion the development of new theory that draws on indigenous cultural elements from specific contexts around the world. We emphasise that a new theoretical development need not be exclusively drawn from the contexts wherein the new theory is situated, since there are likely to be aspects of human behaviour with respect to technology that are universal. However, we are looking for substantively new theoretical developments that are anchored in specific contexts, rather than modifications to existing theory.

There is no list of suitable topics for this special issue. However, it is critical that an explicit Information Systems focus be central to the new theory. Further, we expect that authors will both propose a new indigenous theoretical contribution and perform at least an initial empirical validation of the theory. The more precisely the extent to which the scope and boundary of the new theory can be delineated, the better.

Some examples of possible contributions include:

- Explain an IS phenomenon in a particular organizational/social context using concepts and theories that are local to that context. E.g. *Guanxi*, *Stiff Upper Lip*, *Face*, *Frugality*, *Jugaad*, *Letsema*, *Waqf*, etc.
- Explain an IS phenomenon in a particular organizational/social context using high-level theoretical concepts and relationships that may not be local to the empirical setting, but which the study particularizes to the local setting by developing new concepts/constructs and relationships.
- Examine counter-intuitive relationships among concepts that go against conventional theoretical wisdom, through concepts and relationships that are local to the empirical setting
- Develop new theoretical constructs from local contextual concepts and explain how they may usefully contribute to a better understanding of local phenomena
- Blend theoretical concepts from multiple different contexts into a single holistic model in order to explain an IS phenomenon
- Critique current theories or theoretical models by explaining why they are inappropriate for a local context and then improve the situation by introducing

new locally-appropriate theoretical constructs that ameliorate understanding of the relevant IS phenomenon

In order to provide constructive and indicative advice, we encourage interested authors to submit an initial draft of their proposed contribution by 31-12-17. This initial draft, which should not exceed five pages, should be submitted via the ISJ website (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/isj>) and the special issue on Indigenous Theory should be selected. We will provide editorial feedback on this draft in order to help authors prepare a final submission with a deadline of 31-12-18.

The Managing Editor of this Special Issue on Indigenous Theory will be Robert Davison, who also serves as the Editor in Chief of the ISJ. Additional editors associated with the SI are:

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