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## Felt quality of sociomaterial relations: Introducing emotions into sociomaterial theorizing



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### ABSTRACT

Sociomateriality, in helping to overcome the longstanding dualism between the social and the technical, has become an increasingly popular theoretical perspective in Information Systems (IS) research. However, while recognizing the usefulness of sociomaterial theorizing, we contend that it also inadvertently perpetuates other kinds of dualisms—particularly that of objectivism–subjectivism and cognition–emotion. We argue that sociomateriality's current inability to express what it feels like to be a human agent, and the inadvertent perpetuation of the cognitive–emotional dualism, is problematic in terms of the limited practical insights these perspectives generate. To address this limitation, we propose and illustrate two different approaches for including emotions in sociomaterial theorizing. By proposing two approaches for the inclusion of emotions into applications of sociomateriality in IS research (one founded on critical realism, and the other on agential realism), we provide researchers with the conceptual tools to generate richer practical and theoretical insights.

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### 1. Introduction

Sociomaterial theorizing (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) has entered the arena of IT implementation studies relatively recently and is an increasingly popular choice for generating a nuanced understanding of this

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phenomenon (cf. [Leonardi, 2009](#); [Wagner, Newell, & Piccoli, 2010](#)). It does not attribute social change to either the material features of the technology or see it as a product of social agendas; rather it considers social change to be the emergent outcome of the mutual constitution of the social and the material. For example, packaged software is inscribed with standard templates from which to configure the product. The product becomes entangled with decision makers' choices and activities to buy rather than build; to enter long-term partnerships with vendors; to adhere to so-called software-based 'best practices', and to change long-standing work practices. Such activities are only relevant in the circumstance of configurable packaged software, and of shifting work practices and power relations that become bound up with the standard templates. A broadly sociomaterial perspective, therefore, focuses researcher attention and helps draw insights related to the *joint* agency of the social and the material, acting together.

While sociomaterial theorizing can help overcome the longstanding dualism of the social and the technical in IS research ([Latour, 2005](#); [Leonardi & Barley, 2008](#); [Orlikowski & Scott, 2008](#); [Pickering, 1995](#)), it inadvertently perpetuates other dualisms—particularly that of the objective/cognitive vis à vis the subjective/emotional (cf. [Thompson, 2012](#)). This critique has been leveled against IS research in general, as well as against practice-oriented explanations of technology implementation more specifically. Thus, IS research is generally characterized by a relative lack of consideration of the emotional side of individuals ([Bagozzi, 2007](#); [McGrath, 2006](#); [Zhang, 2013](#)), partly due to its roots in computer science and rational scientific management (cf. [Hirschheim & Klein, 2006](#)). In practice-oriented research, it has been pointed out that, while processes of “meaning-making” are illuminated, the “subjective experience of agency”—how human agents feel about themselves and their circumstances—tends to be devalued ([Thompson, 2012: 189](#)). Most studies adopting a sociomaterial perspective have also tended to focus on social norms and standards, work goals and collective practices, as the social or human agency (e.g., [Leonardi, 2011](#)). The point that human agency often works through the reflexive intentionality and motivations of individuals has been recognized (e.g., [Pickering, 1995](#)); however, what tends to get neglected in such studies is that what often motivates humans are their emotions ([Thompson, 2009; 2012](#)). Notwithstanding, it is precisely this “biographical awareness (elaborate sense of self) that allows a person to position herself relationally against unfolding social reality, [and] this juxtaposition occurs within consciousness, which is *felt affectively*” ([Thompson, 2012: 195](#)). This suggests that in many IT projects key concerns for all stakeholders are related to their biographical awareness, which includes issues of self and identity on an individual and a collective level and which is reflected in how they *feel* their sociomaterial circumstances. In sum, many sociomaterial accounts of IT implementation offer an under-personalized view, where human emotions and biographical awareness play little or no role in the dynamic interplay between the social and the technical. [Thompson \(2012: 204\)](#) calls for the examination of the mutually constitutive relationships between, not only the social and material dimensions of reality, but also the subjective/biographical dimension. He only explores the duality (as against the dualism) of the social and biographical structures in detail, however.

In order to investigate how sociomaterial theorizing could include emotions, we first need a better grasp of what sociomateriality actually means. In recent years it has been increasingly recognized that there are multiple appropriate and valid ways of conducting a sociomaterial inquiry ([Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Leonardi, 2013](#)). While researchers subscribe broadly to a relational ontology, they differ in the specifics of “how they theorize the status of nonhuman agency relative to human agency” ([Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 1244](#)). Furthermore, over the years many, slightly different, relational perspectives have been proposed, all of which can be broadly characterized as sociomaterial ([Leonardi, 2013; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008](#)). Examples include the “mangle” of practice ([Pickering, 1995](#)); actor-network theory ([Latour, 2005](#)); human-machine (re)configurations ([Suchman, 2007](#)); imbrication ([Leonardi, 2011](#)), and constitutive entanglement ([Orlikowski, 2007](#)). Recently, two broad philosophical foundations for sociomaterial theorizing have been discussed: critical realism and agential realism ([Leonardi, 2013](#)). The choice of foundation influences not only the kinds of theoretical arguments and contributions one can make, but is also expected to have pragmatic consequences in terms of research methods and empirical inquiry ([Leonardi, 2013: 73](#)). More importantly from the perspective of this paper, as we illustrate below, theories associated with both foundations have tended to ignore emotional aspects as they examine relations between the social and the technical. In this paper, then, we consider both of these ‘types’ of sociomaterial theorizing and examine how each perspective could include the emotive domain. In sum, our study focuses on the research question: *How can sociomaterial theorizing include emotions?*

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