

Chapter 1

Power Relations in Information Systems Implementation: The Potential Contribution of Turner's Three-Process Theory of Power

Michelle Ye

University of Tasmania, Australia

Judy McKay

Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

Peter Marshall

University of Tasmania, Australia

Kristy de Salas

University of Tasmania, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter critically reviews the literature on power relations in information systems implementation projects. IS projects redistribute information and power in organizations and are thus implicated in both project progress and ultimately project success. The review firstly considers the ideas of Foucault, Giddens, Clegg, Lukes, and Latour, as these are the most established and prominent theories in the major IS papers on power. This chapter argues for a consideration of a new theory of power and social influence from social psychology deemed suitable for use in IS research. The ideas of this theory have not yet been examined empirically in IS studies of power relations in IS implementations but arguably offer an important opportunity for IS researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Despite significant research, and many books and research papers offering prolific advice on the issues involved in the implementation of information systems (IS) (Avison & Torkzadeh, 2008; Iacovou, Thompson, & Smith, 2009; Keil & Mahring, 2010; Seddon, Calvert, & Yang, 2010), IS implementation is a task with many challenges.

Indeed, a large number of IS implementations fail to meet their objectives, and some fail disastrously (Standish Group, 2004). The research into IS implementations has identified many critical success factors along with corresponding reasons for failure (Flowers, 1997; Kappelman, McKeeman, & Zhang, 2006; Oz & Sosik, 2000). The factors identified as being implicated in IS failure include a lack of top management commit-

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ment to the project, lack of corporate leadership (including a weak project champion), inadequate information requirements determination, communication issues, organizational politics, lack of user involvement and participation, and change management problems generally (Grainger, McKay, & Marshall, 2009; Kappelman et al., 2006; Liebowitz, 1999; Oz & Sosik, 2000). The fact that organizational politics, participation and corporate leadership issues are among the reasons for failure indicates that power relations could be an important element in IS implementations. Indeed, power has been explicitly mentioned as a factor of interest and influence regarding project success/failure (Iacovou et al., 2009; Smith & Keil, 2003). Without an understanding of power, an important dimension of social behaviors in IS implementations would be missing, resulting in an impoverished understanding of IS implementations. Thus, this chapter will review and critique the literature on power relations in IS implementation projects demonstrating strengths and weaknesses, and will develop an argument to suggest that Turner's Three-Process Theory of Power offers the elements that may offer important insights into the nature of power relations and the exercise of power in IS implementations.

Most IS literature on power in IS implementations is focused on the work of social and political theorists, in particular, Clegg (Silva, 2007; Silva & Backhouse, 2003; Smith, Winchester, Bunker, & Jamieson, 2010), Giddens (Brooks, 1997; Chu & Smithson, 2007; Hussain & Cornelius, 2009), Foucault (Doolin, 1999, 2004; Hardy & Philips, 2004; Knights & Vurdudakis, 1994), Lukes (Howcroft & Light, 2006; Markus & Bjorn-Andersen, 1987) and Latour (Bloomfield, 1991, 1995; Bloomfield, Coombs, Owen, & Taylor, 1997). These theories somewhat rely on the notion that power springs from the control of resources, at least implicitly. As stated by Giddens (1984), "domination", which is the one of the three dimensions of structure, "refers to power, in terms of access to resources" (p. 33). Clegg (1989a) also states that "power is a

capacity premised on resource control" (p. 190) in his framework of power. To Foucault (1980b), power and knowledge are closely linked and given the view that knowledge is a resource, Foucault's theory also essentially considers power as stemming from control of resources. In his words, "knowledge constantly induces effects of power ... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (p. 52). In the first dimension of pluralistic power relations in Lukes' model, "control over resources is the prime basis of power" (Lovell, 1993, p. 74). Latour (1986) believes that resources play the most important role in building a network of alliances, the process of which involves power relations. "Power", in his words, is "transferred to the many resources used to strengthen the bonds" (p. 276). However, in the view of the authors of this chapter, the work of these theorists is highly abstract and fails to deliver a clear and useful picture regarding the source of power and tactical applications of power in given situations, particularly in IS implementations. If the control of resources was the primary element in power relations, it would be difficult, once one group established control over important resources, to see how social change would ever be possible. Thus the analyses based on these works offer little practical guidance regarding the effective management of power in IS implementations. However, there are also a few recent publications by academics in the IS field that contribute a pragmatic and tactical analysis of power relations in IS implementations (for example, Mathiassen & Napier, 2014; Sabherwal & Grover, 2010). However, while more practical and useful, these contributions may lack a theoretical grounding in the behavioral science underpinning the behaviors they describe. The IS research on power in IS implementations currently is clustered either in a strong theoretic-low pragmatic grouping, or a strong pragmatic-low theoretic grouping: there is little evidence of research being grounded in strong theoretical traditions and strong pragmatic

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