Chapter 15
A Critical Systems View of Power–Ethics Interactions in Information Systems Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Current developments in information systems (IS) evaluation emphasise stakeholder participation in order to ensure adequate and beneficial IS investments. It is now common to consider evaluation as a subjective process of interpretation(s), in which people's appreciations are taken into account to guide evaluations. However, the context of power relations in which evaluation takes place, as well as their ethical implications, has not been given full attention. In this article, ideas of critical systems thinking and Michel Foucault's work on power and ethics are used to define a critical systems view of power to support IS evaluation. The article proposes a system of inquiry into power with two main areas: 1) Deployment of evaluation via power relations and 2) Dealing with ethics. The first element addresses how evaluation becomes possible. The second one goes in-depth into how evaluation can proceed as being informed by ethical reflection. The article suggests that inquiry into these relationships should contribute to extend current views on power in IS evaluation practice, and to reflect on the ethics of those involved in the process.

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued extensively in the literature of information systems (IS) evaluation that failures in implementation of information systems occur due to lack of consideration of different (e.g., softer) as-pects that influence information systems adoption (Hirschheim & Smithson, 1999; Irani, 2002; Irani & Fitzgerald, 2002; Irani, Love, Elliman, Jones, & Themistocleus, 2005; Serafeimidis & Smithson, 2003). Among these aspects, the issue of ethics also gains importance, yet few evaluation approaches

consider it explicitly (Ballantine, Levy, Munro, & Powell, 2003). When evaluating the implementation of information systems, there is still a need to consider the *context* of human relations within which evaluation takes place (Walsham, 1999), and more specifically, the nature and impacts of *power relations* (Doolin, 2004; Gregory, 2000; Introna, 1997). This consideration has also been noticed in the realm of systems thinking, but there is a dearth of approaches to deal with the complexities of power (Gregory & Jackson, 1992; Jackson, 2000). In IS evaluation, power has been mainly considered as a "contextual," "political," or "external" variable (Serafeimidis & Smithson, 1999), and its impacts in practice (for instance regarding the treatment of ethical issues) are far from clear. Power is often understood as "politics" (Bariff & Galbraith, 1978), "interests playing" or struggle between parties (Walsham, 1993), and is associated with the dynamics of organisational change that are said to be difficult to manage (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1987). These connotations could limit a better understanding of the nature of power in IS evaluation and how practitioners can act in relation to it.

Awareness of the nature of power for intervention has been a subject of discussion in *critical systems thinking*, a set of ideas and methodologies that aim to clarify stakeholders' understandings prior to the selection and implementation of intervention methods in situations of social design (Flood & Jackson, 1991b; Jackson, 2000; Midgley, 2000). Using the commitments of critical systems thinking to critical awareness, pluralism, and improvement as well as Michel Foucault's ideas on power and ethics, this article extends current understandings of power to inform IS evaluation. The article proposes a relational view of power that is dynamic, transient, and pervasive, and which influences, and is influenced by, individuals' ethics. With this view, the article defines a "system of inquiry" with two elements of analysis for IS evaluation: (1) Exploring the *deployment* of evaluation via power relations; and (2) Dealing

with ethics. With these areas, different manifestations of power can be accounted for and related in evaluation interventions. In addition, inquiry into these areas enables people involved to reflect on the ethics of their own practices.

The article is structured as follows. Critical systems thinking is introduced in relation to three (3) commitments that can inform systems thinking and practice. Then, information systems (IS) evaluation as *interpretation(s)* is described and reviewed in relation to how the issue of power is currently being addressed. It is argued that a critical, pluralistic and ethically oriented view of power is needed. To build up this view, the article presents the basic tenets of Michel Foucault's work on power and ethics, highlighting implications for IS evaluation. A system of inquiry into power for IS evaluation is defined, and its relevance for evaluation practice discussed.

CRITICAL SYSTEMS THINKING

This article stems from the UK-based systems research and practice, in which there is a variety of systems methodologies that contain principles, ideas, and methods to facilitate intervention for social improvement (Checkland, 1981; Flood & Jackson, 1991b; Flood & Romm, 1996; Jackson, 2000, 2003; Midgley, 2000; Stowell, 1995). The use of systems ideas has also pervaded the information systems (IS) field. Currently, it has been accepted that a *systemic* view of IS practice, one that looks at different elements of activity in organisational, social, and technical domains, can contribute to make sense of a variety of efforts in the IS field (Avison, Wood-Harper, Vidgen, & Wood, 1998; Checkland, 1990; Checkland & Holwell, 1998). This view also shares a common idea with other systems research movements elsewhere that conceive of an information system as part of an organisational system (Mora, Gelman, Cervantes, Mejia, & Weitzenfeld, 2003).

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