

Chapter 4

“For Me it Doesn’t Matter where I put my Information”: Enactments of Agency, Mutual Learning, and Gender in IT Design

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ABSTRACT

In information technology (IT) design it is essential to develop rich and nuanced understandings of messy design realities. In this chapter Karen Barad’s agential realism is used as an analytical approach in order to obtain such a multifaceted understanding of a local IT design project. The purpose of the paper is to explore entanglements of agency, mutual learning, and gender in a business process analysis. The main argument here is that these issues were inextricably intertwined with each other and with the sociomaterial relations of which they were part. All empirical material used in the chapter was collected with the help of ethnographic methods. Finally the chapter concludes with a discussion about agential realism as an analytical approach.

INTRODUCTION

In information technology (IT) design it is important to obtain rich and situated understandings of relevant design contexts, and this requires proper analytical methodologies. Analytical methods which result in simplified understandings can lead to a range of various problems. If the analytical methods are too simplified we might (in an IT design context) end up with categories such as ‘users’ and ‘designers’, without understanding that behind these categories

there are a number of different professional identities and working relations (Suchman, 2002). If this happens we might also be unable to see that those who at first seemed to be users might, related to an IT systems design project, also be considered designers. A part of any methodology for understanding situations in all their complexities might be to develop an awareness of gender. Otherwise there is a risk of using gender blind methods in IT design. Such gender blind design methods might lead to the exclusion of certain groups of female users, even though the intention was to include everybody (Oudshoorn et al, 2004). Researchers in Participa-

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tory Design have underscored the importance of user participation in IT design. They mean that if the (work) practices which an IT system is supposed to improve are not understood in all their intricacies, chances are good that the users will not be able to use the IT system in a way that can help them conducting their assignments (see e.g. Bjerknes & Bratteteig, 1995, Bødker et al, 2004). What our analytical tools make visible as relevant is a question of ethics, moral and politics, since our understanding of reality regulates what can be designed, and thus the kind of world that can be created (see Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004, Beck, 2002). We need analytical tools which are sensible enough to make visible these and other kinds of problems that may appear in technoscientific practices such as IT design. How is it possible to see and understand technoscientific practices as complex processes, consisting and dependent of a range of interrelated issues, instead of understanding them in a simplified and isolated manner? There is always a risk that analytical tools sort out issues that might at first seem irrelevant, but later turn out to be highly relevant. Consequently it becomes central to consider what is included and what is excluded as relevant in IT design situations – and who gets to decide this. In order to reach deeper understandings it is essential to learn to see and understand in richer ways, to include rather than to exclude what is taken into account as relevant. How and what we see also shapes what becomes possible to do. Donna Haraway (1991b, p. 190) writes: “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see”. Several research traditions have attempted to develop methods for how to see and understand the world as something dynamic, multiple and situated. Some of these attempts come from feminist technoscience¹. Within the tradition of feminist technoscience Haraway’s figuration of diffraction (see Haraway 2000, 2004, 1997) is one such attempt, and Karen Barad’s agential

realism (1998, 1999, 2003, 2007) is another. In this paper Barad’s agential realism will be used in order to explore some of the complexities of one specific technoscientific practice; the design of an IT system. The purpose of the paper is to explore entanglements of agency, mutual learning, and gender in a business process analysis. The argument in the paper is that these were deeply and inextricably entangled in each other and with the sociomaterial relations of which they were part, and that changes in one of these resulted in changes in the others.

The paper is structured in the following way: after the introduction there is a section which is concerned with the case study of an IT design project, the project group that was researched, and the IT design method used. The third section concerns the theoretical framework, and consists of a discussion of mutual learning and of feminist technoscience and agential realism. Then follows a fourth section concerning the research methodology, which provides details of how agential realism was used in the analysis. The fifth section presents the analysis of the empirical material, and the final section provides a concluding discussion of the results, and of the use of agential realism for this type of analysis.

THE IT SYSTEMS DESIGN PROJECT

The empirical material in the paper is based on an ethnographic study of an IT systems design project in a government agency in Sweden, here referred to as The Insurance Agency (TIA). At the time of the observations (2005-2006) TIA had approximately 320 employees, and its core business was the administration of a part of the Swedish public social insurance system. The project started in September 2005; it was extensive and spanned several years, and was considered to be critical for TIA. The (initial) name of the project was ‘Project IT support for administrative officers’.

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