

Chapter 14

Using Realist Social Theory to Explain Project Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

In researching IS phenomena, many different theoretical lenses have been advanced. This paper proposes the use of Margaret Archer's Morphogenetic Approach to Analytical Dualism (MAAD) as a social theoretic approach to explain why social phenomena may occur in a case study. This paper provides a brief overview to MAAD, providing a description of its tenets and methodology for use in an empirical study. As an example, the author applies MAAD to the implementation of Lotus Notes in the Alpha consulting organization as reported by Orlikowski (2000). This approach shows that the differential success of the implementation efforts in the different organizations was due to the diverse cultures and possible experiences with technology found in those organizations. This example shows that the use of this social theory can provide explanatory purchase where social phenomena are involved. For practitioners, it suggests that structural analysis at the beginning of a project may provide direction as to how to make the project more successful.

INTRODUCTION

In the study of project management, it is often desired to discover why a project succeeded or failed. While the definition of project success may be disputed, it is commonly defined in the textbooks as occurring when a project produces the desired deliverables on time, on budget and with the proper quality (Brewer & Dittman, 2010; Gray & Larson, 2008; Kerzner, 2009; Schwalbe, 2007). However many times these goals are not met. The CHAOS study of the Standish Group

has documented much of the issues of information systems project management (Rubenstein, 2007) in that many projects fail to deliver anything at all and many fail to achieve one or all of the goals of a successful project.

Two characteristics of projects stand out as important to be considered in the study of their success. The first characteristic is that they are designed to be change activities. Projects are commonly defined as an activity with a defined lifespan, an established objective, cross-functional involvement and novel objectives (Gray & Larson, 2008; Schwalbe, 2007). The novel objectives

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described in the definition indicate that projects are designed to bring something to pass that has not existed before. That new something may be an information technology artifact, a redesigned work system or the implementation of technology into a business process. In all these cases, change is involved. In information systems, we can consider the process in two phases: development of the IT artifact and then its implementation in an organization. In the first phase, the IT artifact is brought into existence, a change from conception to reality. In the second phase, business processes are changed to incorporate the IT artifact.

Second, the definition tells us that those projects, especially information technology projects, are social activities in that they usually have cross-functional involvement. It is not an individual activity but one in which groups of people interact either in harmony or in conflict. In developing an information system groups of developers and users interact to bring the IT artifact into existence. Similarly, when an artifact is implemented into an organization, the developers and users interact to create a new business system that incorporates the artifact. The resultant artifact or implementation of an artifact is rarely that which is intended by any one of the parties. Rather, it is usually the outcome of the negotiated interactions between the parties.

Thus, the study of project success or failure (outcomes) requires an approach that considers the social aspects of change. In the field of sociology, one of the major concerns has been the issue of creating a general model of change in social structures. The question is asked that if we have a social structure such as a culture, division of labor, organizations etc. how do those structures come into existence and how do they change over time? In particular, how do actors and agencies interact with the structures to produce such change and under what circumstances does it occur? This type of questions seems to be very useful for information systems research. If we consider such things as business processes (whether they involve

technology artifacts or not) as social structures, then social theory, the use of theoretical frameworks to study and interpret social structures and phenomena (Wikipedia, 2009), could be one way that we can analyze project interactions to explain how the project generated the results that it did.

Social theory has typically been implicit within information systems analysis. That is project results have been analyzed without explicitly considering the context or how social structures might have affected project results. However, recently, research has been done which explicitly attempts to apply Giddens' Structuration theory (ST) (Jones & Karsten, 2008; Jones, Orlikowski, & Munir, 2004) to a wide variety of situations in the IS literature (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Jones and Karsten (2008) indicate that ST has been used in a variety of ways. First, it has been taken as a "given" and used to offer insights on IS phenomena and applying it in general to the phenomena in question. A second way it has been used it to provide a "background" to the analysis and focus on certain aspects of it. A third, smaller group has focused on Giddens' later writings to emphasize certain concepts. Additionally, it has subjected to reinterpretation within the IS field manifesting in variants such as Adaptive Structuration Theory (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994) and Duality of Technology (Orlikowski, 1992).

While ST has been widely utilized in the IS literature, it has been subject to a number of criticisms. For example, in general sociology it has been criticized for an a-historicity in its model of relations between structure and agency (Archer, 1995). Because of its melding of structure and agency, analysis can only take place in the "now". Examination of the effects of previous structures is ruled out since different people than those here constituted them present. Another issue is the over-privileging of agency with respect to structure. Since social structures are regularized social practices, they do not exist until instantiated by actors. Thus they have no relatively enduring existence apart from the actors. Therefore, while they

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