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.

Keywords: critical systems thinking; evaluation; ethics; Foucault; information systems; power

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) aspects 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 ethi-
cal 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 stakehold-
ers’ 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 improve-
ment as well as Michel Foucault’s ideas on
power and ethics, this article extends current
understandings of power to inform IS evalua-
tion. 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 rela-
tions; and (2) Dealing with ethics. With these
areas, different manifestations of power can be
accounted for and related in evaluation inter-
ventions. In addition, inquiry into these areas
enables people involved to reflect on the ethics
of their own practices.

The article is structured as follows. Criti-
cal systems thinking is introduced in relation
to three (3) commitments that can inform sys-
tems 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 paper 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 paper stems from the UK-based sys-
tems research and practice, in which there is a
variety of systems methodologies that contain
principles, ideas, and methods to facilitate
intervention for social improvement (Check-
land, 1981; Flood & Jackson, 1991b; Flood &
Rom, 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, & Weitznfeld, 2003).

In the UK, the popularity of systems
thinking can also be reflected through the use
of soft systems methodology (SSM) as a learn-
ing tool (Checkland, 1981) and its applications
in several areas in information systems. These
include information requirements definition
( Checkland, 1990; Checkland & Scholes, 1990;
Lewis, 1994; Wilson, 1984, 2002), systems
development (Avison & Wood-Harper, 1990),
intervention methodology (Clarke, 2001; Clarke
& Lehaney, 2000; Midgley, 2000; Ormerod,
1996, 2005), and professional practice (Avison
et al., 1998; Checkland & Holwell, 1998).

To this popularity, however, it has also
been argued that the use of some methodologies
like SSM can help in reinforcing the ‘status
quo’ in a situation if it is not used in a more
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