Chapter XIII
Power and Ethics in IS Evaluation

José-Rodrigo Córdoba
University of Hull, UK

Wendy Robson
University of Hull, UK

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we widen the perspective on power as an issue in the practice of information systems (IS) evaluation. Power is frequently seen as a resource that some people have and some do not. Therefore it is primarily discussed in the context of IS development methodologies and little is said about power in evaluation. Based on Michel Foucault’s ideas, we discuss the role(s) of power and ethics strategies in the evaluation of information systems plans. Reflections from practice of an evaluation at Javeriana University in Colombia led us to identify some salient features of ethics and power in IS evaluation, which we could use to inform further IS evaluation exercises. The experience also led us to acknowledge two layers of power that influenced the evaluation: An institutional level and an “emerging” local level. At the time of the evaluation, these layers exhibited their own mechanisms by which information systems projects were defined, justified, implemented, and evaluated at the organization. These layers also influenced the ethics of evaluators. Recognising their existence could influence the strategies that evaluators define to deal with issues that emerge in the process of information systems development and implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Information systems (IS) evaluation has been a popular and long-standing research topic for many years (Smithson & Tsiavos, 2004). Through this process, the value of information systems investments and plans are assessed prior to the investments themselves (exante evaluation) or after their implementation (expost) (McAulay, Keval, & Doherty, 2002). There are different perspectives about what, how, and why evaluations need to be carried out. For instance, those individuals responsible for investments need to identify benefits and tradeoffs that are to be made. At the same time, those individuals being affected by the investments need to see how they
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can benefit (and hopefully not being harmed) themselves from the process (Serafeimidis & Smithson, 2003). With a variety of perspectives emerging in IS evaluation, and participation becoming an important element of it (Remenyi & Sherwood-Smith, 1999), it is worth asking how organizations are dealing with IS evaluation, and what could be done to improve it.

In this chapter, we focus on the relationships between power, ethics, and IS evaluation as a way of advancing evaluation practice. We detail a relational view of the concept of power by exploring how power relations shape—and are shaped by—individual and group ethical behavior, and how this affects evaluation of information systems investments. We use Michel Foucault’s ideas on power and ethics. These ideas allow us to draw some elements for analysis and reflection in IS evaluation. Using these elements, we describe and reflect on a practical exercise of evaluating an information systems plan at Javeriana University in Colombia. The insights gained from this experience lead us to suggest some insights that could be used to recognise the practical nature of power and ethics in evaluation processes in organizations. As Foucault, we see power as an analytical property attributed to human relations by which actions influence other actions (Foucault, 1984a) and this includes ethical behavior.

Our aim to use power as an aide is not to declare that power needs to be considered as an inherent feature of IS evaluation. Instead, we would like to use the notion of power to generate insights as to how evaluation is influenced by issues that are not traditionally considered in the realm of information systems. About ethics, we hold the view that ethics defines “acceptable” or “ethically appropriate” ways of relation between individuals, themselves and others (Foucault, 1984b).

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by briefly situating IS evaluation within the context of organizational power (often called “politics”). We then assess how power has been dealt with in the IS literature. This leads us to argue that the existence of a relational view of power can help us enrich our understandings of evaluation. We present some of Foucault’s ideas on power and ethics that we consider useful to inform the practice of information systems evaluation, and draw three (3) elements for analysis and reflection. Using these elements, we then present our reflections on a practical exercise of evaluation of an information systems plan at Javeriana University. Our discussion leads us to identify two layers of power, which at Javeriana shaped the definition, implementation, and evaluation of information systems at the institution. We conclude the chapter by suggesting how practitioners could improve their evaluations by being aware of power relations and ethics.

POWER IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS EVALUATION

We begin by situating power within an organizational context in which it has been often understood as “politics” (Checkland & Scholes, 1990; Markus, 2002; Symons & Walsham, 1988). This view coincides with that of an organization as a set of “coalitions,” alliances, and struggles between individuals and groups, in which some people try to privilege their interests at the expense of other people, often succeeding in their effort (Morgan, 1997). The view of power as politics seems to impact understandings of IS evaluation, where this process is seen not as “the result of a single group of stakeholders, but rather of the complex interplay of various actors, both human and non-human” (Smithson et al., 2004, p. 207).

What this “political” view of power and IS evaluation could mean for evaluation activities is that the knowledge used for evaluation as well as the knowledge produced (i.e., in relation to the “value” of investments) is somehow influenced by people’s interests. That knowledge could be for instance on which evaluation methods are regarded as suitable during an IS evaluation.
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