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Organizational culture and information systems adoption: A three-perspective approach

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ABSTRACT

Organizational culture continues to be cited as an important factor in the success or failure of information systems (IS) adoption. This is evidenced by the growing trend in the number of studies that address cultural issues in IS literature over the last several decades. Regardless of the contribution of many research studies up to now, various challenges still need to be addressed: firstly, studies continue to view culture as well integrated and shared equally among organizational members; secondly, there is a tendency for studies to downplay the dynamics of culture and how this influences IS adoption over time; and thirdly, there is an increased need to analyze culture using in-depth interpretative and longitudinal methods. This paper proposes that our understanding of IS culture can be enhanced by combining theoretical approaches in which the weakness of one approach can be complemented by the strength of another. More specifically, by combining Martin's (2002) three perspectives on culture – integration, differentiation and fragmentation and grid and group cultural theory (for instance, Douglas, 1970; Thompson et al., 1990), can offer a more penetrating account of how organizational culture influences IS adoption. This argument is demonstrated using an in-depth interpretative (retrospective) case study of a further and higher education college in the UK and its unsuccessful attempt to adopt a virtual learning environment (VLE).

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, interest in understanding and exploring cultural issues among IS practitioners and academics has intensified. This is evidenced by the growth in conference and journal

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papers dedicated to its study. Davison and Martinsons (2003), for example, found a growing trend in the number of studies that address cultural issues in IS literature over the last several decades. One reason for this growth is attributed to the fact that too many IS adoption initiatives fail due to a misfit between culture and the IS introduced, or the failure of managers to understand culture and how this influences IS adoption practices. Moreover, culture is becoming increasingly important given the adoption of groupware applications, enterprise resource planning systems and other internet based systems by organizations, which support cross collaboration and require greater user participation at all levels.

Many researchers have investigated cultural issues in IS research, as witnessed by the variety of topic areas. Leidner and Kayworth (2006), for instance, in conducting a systematic review of how culture has been applied in IS research found several distinct topics emerging from the literature, including: “(1) culture and IS development; (2) culture and IT adoption; (3) culture, IT use and outcomes; (4) culture, IT management, and strategy; (5) IT’s influence on culture; and (6) IT culture”. As it would be unworkable to examine all these topics simultaneously, one topic of interest is exploring the relationship between organizational culture and IS adoption.

Notwithstanding the importance of organizational culture in the context of IS adoption (Barrett, 1999; Cabrera, Cabrera, & Barajas, 2001; Davison & Martinsons, 2003; Gallivan & Srite, 2005; Hoffman & Klepper 2000; Huang, Newell, Galliers, & Pan, 2003; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006), this paper recognizes that the concept of culture, to date, has been used rather restrictively. Firstly, IS culture studies typically view culture as well integrated rather than pluralistic or ambiguous in nature. Secondly, existing studies tend to downplay the dynamics of culture, failing to understand how and why cultural values collide and shift over time. Thirdly, existing approaches tend to view culture more as a variable – something an organizational ‘has’ which can be objectively measured through surveys, rather than viewing it as something an organization ‘is’ using in-depth interpretative and longitudinal methods.

This paper proposes that combining theoretical approaches – Martin’s (2002) three perspectives on culture – integration, differentiation and fragmentation and grid and group cultural theory (for instance, Douglas, 1970; Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990), can provide a rich understanding of the multifaceted nature of culture and how culture influences IS adoption. Furthermore, the study recognizes that when the three perspectives are considered sequentially they can offer a more penetrating account of the cultural dynamics at work. This is illustrated using an in-depth case study of a further and higher education college in the UK and its failed attempt to adopt a VLE.

This paper is organized as follows. First, the concept of organizational culture is introduced and explored more fully in relation to IS literature. Some of the main challenges faced in IS culture studies are explored. This is followed by research questions for this study. Next, the rationale for combining Martin’s (2002) three perspectives on culture and grid and group cultural theory are justified. Next, a discussion of the research methods and data analysis techniques used for this study are outlined and followed by a discussion of the empirical results. Finally, implications, limitations and conclusions of the study are outlined.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizing culture

Despite the importance of organizational culture and its study, research challenges continue to destabilize the concept. One major challenge is defining what exactly organizational culture is and how it should be studied (Ngwenyama & Nielsen, 2003). Davison and Martinsons (2003, p. 3), for example, note that “culture is difficult to study, partly because it is not an easy concept to define”. It is not the scope of this paper to systematically review or provide a comprehensive list of definitions of culture existing in IS research; nevertheless, some of the more prominent ones are now reviewed.

Culture has been defined in terms of something learned and passed on to new members. Some studies (Cabrera et al., 2001; DeLisi, 1990; Igira, 2008), for example, have been influenced by the work of Edgar Schein (Schein, 1985, 1990). Schein (1985, p. 84) defines culture as “the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group have invested, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and integration and that has worked well enough in the past to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those

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