Submission of Abstract to 10th Annual Liverpool Symposium Reflection in Action: Taking Stock of 10 Years of Ethnography Symposia

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Title of Paper: A critical ethnography of benefits realisation of information technology in an NHS trust.

The context for this research is the continued difficulties associated with realising benefits of IT in the NHS which, according to the National Audit Office, has failed to deliver two thirds of forecast benefits of a £10Bn national IT project (NAO, 2013). Benefits realisation is an evaluation method used by NHS Trusts to plan, deliver and measure benefits of IT. Developed as both a stand alone enterprise and as a work package within the Projects in Controlled Environments (PRINCE) project management system benefits realisation is a recognised and documented concept in the NHS. The concern is whether the existing approach to benefits realisation of IT delivers meaningful benefits which adequately meet the needs of all relevant social groups.

The realisation of benefits, or otherwise, matters to society and is therefore a relevant topic of study for both academics and practitioners. The focus and concerns of such studies range from positivist to more interpretive discussion with many prescribing practical methods for effective delivery of benefits from investment in IT. There is little evidence, however, that espoused theory has translated into effective results and insufficient empirical investigation of what organisations are doing in practice to realise benefits of IT.

This ethnographic study, which is carried out within an NHS trust as they engage with benefits realisation, builds on contemporary studies, which challenge traditional perspectives and emphasise a more critical approach. By critically investigating the practice of benefits realisation it evaluates how it actually occurs by providing an alternative reading and reinterpretation of current understanding. More specifically the critical view draws particular attention to issues of politics and power relations.

Design/methodology/approach

From the outset of this project power relations emerged as a key aspect of the topic. In order to interpret and evaluate those findings rather than just describe them requires a critical perspective. A critical ethnographic exploration helps to understand actors’ endeavours to participate in benefits realisation practices. The assumption that multiple realities exist requires a triangulation of these perspectives, therefore, data includes participant observation and interviews with organisational members involved (and excluded) in benefits realisation activity. To explore such an approach a critical strategy is developed on the two dimensions of critical understanding and in-depth examination and open discourse and transformative redefinition or action.

Findings

Early findings of this doctoral study indicate that overly rationalistic approaches ignore political and power issues and the possibility that the meaning of benefits is opposing and contradictory.

Originality/value

A critical orientation, based on a protracted ethnographic over thirteen months, to the social and political aspects of benefits realisation and in particular the question of cui bono – who benefits? and who is excluded offers a new and alternative reading to provide more insight and ultimately progress benefits realisation theory and practice.