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# THE RATIONALIZATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING: IMPLICATIONS OF GROUP SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR POWER, SYMBOLISM AND FACE-WORK

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## ABSTRACT

Current Group Support System (GSS) theory is heavily influenced by a rational model of human behavior, which in turn leads to some fundamental assumptions about what meetings are all about and what can be done to improve them. The purpose of this paper is to examine these fundamental assumptions, but from a perspective other than the more typical one of small-group processes and dynamics. Instead, we draw on organizational theories of power and politics, organizational culture and symbolism, and interactionism to provide new vantage points from which to examine these fundamental GSS objectives. Each of these perspectives represent fundamentally different philosophies on the nature and processes that characterize organizational meetings. From this theoretical triangulation, a much richer picture of organization meetings emerges. In particular, it becomes apparent that the rich shading and nuances of meaning that characterize organizational meetings are not adequately captured by a strictly small-group based, rational model of human behavior. To hope to understand how technology will change the dynamics of decision-making, hidden agendas, veiled threats, hidden meanings, the formation and disintegration of alliances, the shifting nature of power and status, to name but a few, a theory base as rich as these dynamics will be needed.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Are group dynamics synonymous with meeting dynamics? Can the insights gained by explorations of how individuals act and react in group settings be used to predict their actions in a meeting setting? Group Support Systems (GSS) represent a use of computer and communication technology to enhance the performance of organizational meetings. As GSS move from being solely the province of academic researchers into actual workplace settings, these questions become crucially important. This is so because current GSS theory is based so heavily on the small group research literatures of social psychology and communications. In addition, the great majority of empirical GSS research has taken place with small groups in a laboratory setting. Thus, small group research provides both the theoretical and empirical basis for predicting how GSSs will function. Does this provide a sufficient foundation for

understanding the likely performance of GSSs in actual workplace settings?

One obstacle confronting GSS researchers is the different levels of analysis required as small-group insights are extrapolated to an organizational setting. In most of the group dynamics literature, the unit of analysis is the group and the individuals that comprise the group. Frequently, the groups are constructed solely for the experiment and are zero history groups — often composed of students. The problem with the easy generalization of these results is not so much that the dynamics and processes demonstrated will no longer exist when moved to an actual meeting situation, but rather that a whole new set of processes and influence factors, which were controlled at the group level, now suddenly appear at the organizational level. The key question is the relative strength of these new factors in relation to the ones discovered at the group level.

A meeting's existence is defined by the organizational context in which it takes place. This will generate the composition of the group, the creation of the group, the continuance of the group, and, most importantly, how the group and the individuals in the group will be judged. To capture this set of influence factors, it is necessary to move the level of analysis to the organizational level and examine this new set of contextual influence factors in relation to the dynamics of small groups. For example, if the corporate culture of the organization discourages risk taking and innovations, how well will techniques to improve creative idea generation in the meeting work?

The purpose of this paper is to examine some fundamental assumptions about how technology — in the form of a GSS — should be used to “improve” meeting performance. Rather than focusing on specific GSSs and the particular technological approach they may implement, this paper will highlight the underlying assumptions which seem common to GSSs in general. These assumptions will be critically examined — not from the perspective of small group dynamics, but rather from four very different organizational perspectives on the nature of meetings: Meetings as function, meetings as power and politics, meetings as ceremony and symbolism, and meetings as face-work. Each of these perspectives represent very different positions on the fundamental processes that characterize organizations and meetings. This theoretical triangulation allows a much richer picture of the obstacles that can be expected as GSSs move from the lab to organizational settings.

## 2. RATIONALIZING THE MEETING

Few would deny that meetings are an integral part of organizational life and experience. Yet, the meeting itself, as an organizational phenomenon, remains a substantially under-researched topic in organization studies (Schwartzman 1986). As used in this paper, a meeting is defined as a “communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of the organization or group” (Schwartzman 1989, p. 7). Two notable management theorists who have recognized and commented on the significance of the meeting are Michael Dalton (1966) and Henry Mintzberg (1973). Dalton's *Men Who Manage* and Mintzberg's *The Nature of Managerial Work* both emphasize the amount of time taken up by organizational meetings and their centrality to the managerial process. However, as pointed out by Schwartzman (1986), for the most part, organizational researchers have regarded the meeting more as a context in which to study various other organizational phenomena including group processes (Blau and Scott 1962; Paulus et al. 1976) and decision making (March and Olsen 1976; Van de Ven and Delbecq 1974).

While the organizational meeting has been a neglected topic for a long time, we are now at a point in the evolution of organizations when it seems particularly vital to understand its form and nature. We are at a point when a variety of new communication technologies are poised to transform the way in which we conceptualize and conduct meetings. Accordingly, we suggest that having a richer comprehension of the nature of organizational meetings would help managers and researchers appreciate both the problems and benefits in using various computer-mediated-communication technologies such as GSS.

### 2.1 Meetings as Function: The Roots of GSS Theory

Of the four organizational perspectives examined in this paper, the functional view of meetings seems closest to a worldview that permeates GSS research. While not all GSS theories are based on this perspective (Poole and DeSanctis 1990), roots in the Decision Support Systems area continue to exert a powerful influence. These roots influence our assumptions of the purpose of meetings, what should take place in meetings, how to judge whether a meeting has been successful, and what should be done to improve meetings. It is these fundamental assumptions about what a meeting should be, and the subsequent GSS goals that are derived from them, that will be the focus of this section.

While there is very little research that directly focuses upon or discusses the organizational meeting, organizational researchers make a number of tacit assumptions about it. For the most part, the meeting is seen as a formal and structured (or semi-structured) forum for the exchange of information and divergent opinions (Bradford 1976; Chapple 1953; Van de Ven and Delbecq 1974), and as a venue for making formal announcements. Meetings are also regarded as domains for organizational planning and strategizing (Mintzberg 1973) and as gatherings in which key decisions are taken regarding organizational goals and missions (Siciliano 1993). Thus, for many researchers, the organizational meeting is primarily a *functional* gathering of organizational members, in which key tasks may be accomplished and vital information shared.

Within this broad framework, the work of Herbert Simon has had an enormous impact on how we conceptualize human behavior within the organization. In *Models of Man*, Simon's (1957) primary goal was to develop a workable model of rational decision makers. Simon defined a rational individual as one who “when confronted with two alternatives...will select that one which yields the larger utility” (p. 197). Choice is the essence of Simon's rational model. The main problem facing rational agents is their

own cognitive limitations in making choices. To make choices, the rational individual needs information to understand the problem, to create alternative solutions and to choose the optimal solution.

From this starting point, it is not surprising that Simon felt that the reason organizations exist is to aid individual decision makers in overcoming the limitations of individual cognitive ability. From this view, "organizations are interpreted as instruments of rational individuals who... share the same goals and make decisions based on a rational assessment of problems and potential solutions" (March and Olsen 1976, p. 83).

Just as important as what behavior the rational model captured was what behavior it did not capture. Simon contrasted the rational models of economics with psychological models, which focus on motivations, emotions and other affective dimensions of human behavior and sociological and anthropological models, which tended to explain human behavior in terms of the culture in which it was embedded (p. 1). Thus, the affective side of decision makers, as well as the influence of the context in which they operated, was effectively excluded from the behavior which the rational model was meant to illuminate.

## 2.2 GSS Objectives

These twin themes of focusing on information needed to make choices and minimizing the impact of affect and contextual factors resonate through the GSS literature. Each of these will be briefly reviewed.

### 2.2.1 Focus on Information

The focus on information is clearly evident in an early GDSS theory paper by Huber (1984). Huber stated that managers spent a large amount of time participating in decision oriented meetings where "people possessing different facts, expertise and points of view share and use information in order to select their individual or collective courses of action" (p. 195). According to Huber, the purpose of a group decision support system is to "increase the effectiveness of decision groups by facilitating the interactive sharing and use of information among group members and also between the group and the computer" (p. 196).

DeSanctis and Gallupe (1987) also echo this emphasis on the value of information. Building on what they called an *information-exchange* view of group decision making, they felt that a GDSS brings about changes in group performance by changing the patterns of interpersonal information

exchange within the group, and the primary aim of a GDSS must be to alter the structure of this interpersonal exchange (p. 591). Rao and Jarvenpaa (1991) suggest that GDSSs are "aimed at managing the processing of increased pools of information in meetings and to alleviate the communication breakdowns that occur in groups" (p. 1347). Nuna-maker et al. (1991) list information exchange difficulties such as having to share communication time in a group, losing your own creative ideas while listening to other's ideas, information overload, coordination problems, incomplete use of information and incomplete task analysis as group problems which a group support system can help alleviate (p. 46).

Facilitating information exchange, removing communication barriers and lessening process losses are different approaches to understanding how a GSS should "improve" the group, but each shares the underlying assumption that the focus is on information. Information to understand the problem. Information to generate alternatives. Information to choose the optimal solution. Although recent GSS researchers have broadened the role of GSS from GDSS, these deep roots in the rational decision making literature are still very much shaping our assumptions about what a GSS should do to increase meeting performance.

### 2.2.2 Minimize Affective and Contextual Factors

In addition to detailing what a rational decision maker was concerned with, Simon's rational model highlighted what was not germane to the rational model: affective and contextual factors that might influence decision makers. Although Simon solved the problem of how to deal with these types of factors by not including them in his model (or by assuming them to be in the form of fixed and given preferences), clearly in an actual meeting setting these factors are not so easily ignored. Rather than ignoring them, a basic theme in GSS research has been to view these as negative (because they can impede the optimal flow of information) and attempt to minimize the impact of these types of influence factors.

Among the problems experience by decision-making groups, DeSanctis and Gallupe include dominance of discussion by one or more members; extreme influence of high status members and lack of acknowledgement of the ideas of low status members; and undue attention to social activities relative to the task activities of the group (p. 596). They state that to the extent that GDSS technology encourages equality of participation, and discourages dominance by an individual member or subgroup, perceived member power and influence should become more distributed and decision quality should improve (p. 605).

The ability of the GSS to provide anonymity to the participants of the meeting and require communication through media which tend to strip away non-verbal cues and signals are two ways that a GDSS can lessen some of these affective and contextual influences, such as pressure to conform to the group majority (Nunamaker, et al. 1991; Williams 1977; Clapper, McLean and Watson 1991). The fact that anonymity and lean communication media tend to strip away many of the affective and contextual cues and signals which are normally embedded within communication would seem to indicate that a GSS is ideally suited for implementing the assumptions concerning ideal rational behavior just discussed.

### 2.3 Meeting Rationalization

The prior sections have shown how the fundamental GSS objectives of focusing on information and information exchange, and on minimizing the "social" side of group processes can be seen as flowing from Simon's rational behavior model. DeSanctis and Gallupe echo this emphasis on rationality: "one of the objectives of GDSS is to add rationality and a systematic approach to the decision process" (p. 605). In a very real sense, then, a GSS can be seen as a tool for rationalizing the organizational meeting.

Although many non-technology based group structuring techniques, such as the *Nominal Group Technique*, can also be viewed as tools of rationalization, a GSS would seem to offer both new tools and a greater degree of control in rationalizing group processes than previously available. Given the potential of GSSs for much more effectively implementing the rationalization of meetings, it seems timely to ask what we might lose in the process.

### 3. THE MERITS OF RATIONALIZATION: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Although the rational model has become so thoroughly ingrained in much of the management and GSS literature that its assumptions seem self-evident, it nonetheless is still a model. A model by definition represents an abstraction — some characteristics are left-out, by definition. This tradeoff between parsimony and comprehensiveness is something we take for granted. However, in this paper we ask the question: What crucial aspects of meetings have we left out by building so strongly on a rational model of behavior? More specifically, how desirable are the objectives of meeting rationalization when viewed from alternative theoretical perspectives?

To answer these questions, the following sections will draw upon various streams of contemporary thinking in organization theory to present three quite different perspectives on meetings: meetings as power and politics, meetings as ceremony and symbolism, and meetings as arenas for face-work. One theme common to all three of these perspectives is that meetings are more than simply functional gatherings of organizational members.

#### 3.1 Meetings as Power and Politics

In recent years, a substantial group of organization theorists have studied organizations as political systems (Bacharach and Lawler 1980; Murray and Gandz 1980; Pettigrew 1973; Pfeffer 1981). This view highlights the fundamentally political nature of all organizational activity and underscores the role of interests (Culbert and McDonough 1980), conflict and control (Clegg and Dunkerley 1980) and power (Bacharach and Lawler 1980; Clegg 1979; Hardy 1985) in everyday organizational life. For the most part, these theorists provide insights into the political dimension of all organizational activity. While few of them focus explicitly on the organizational meeting, many of their ideas and assumptions have direct relevance for understanding the conduct and practice of meetings.

From this perspective, the organizational meeting is clearly more than a forum for exchanging information and getting business done. Meetings in organizations can be understood as being akin to city councils or parliaments with respect to their role within the organizational political system. Consequently, meetings become domains for the exercise of power and influence (Clegg and Dunkerley 1980; Hardy 1985). If we understand the political ramifications of organizational actions, meetings can also be seen as forums where coalitions become visible (through voting patterns on any agenda), and where power and status are displayed. In other words, meetings can be arenas for the enactment of overt and covert political strategies including negotiation and compromise.

Based on the literature, we suggest that organizational members frequently engage in political acts in meetings. These might take the form of hostile verbal engagements, negotiation and compromise, coalition building, displays of authority, the exercise of influence, etc. Broadly, these actions themselves are reflections of more fundamental political issues relating to personal or organizational control, interpersonal and departmental conflicts, the acquisition of power, etc. While different organizational meetings are likely to vary in the intensity of the political dimension, the literature would nevertheless suggest that power and politics are integral elements of organizational meetings.

### 3.1.1 The Power and Politics Perspective on Rationalization

As discussed earlier, meetings in organizations are substantially influenced by the dynamics of power and politics. Yet, the fundamental assumptions underlying GSSs fail to take the political dimension into account. For instance, from the rational perspective, the minimization of status differences among group members in meetings is a desirable goal. However, the power and politics perspective would imply that meetings could provide an important arena to deliberately accentuate status differences in order to serve certain political interests.

Likewise, GSSs are often designed with an intent to promote *equal* participation among group members. Again, we need to note that organizational power and politics flourish on the dynamics of inequality (Clegg and Dunkerley 1980). Lewis (1978) further suggests that our social institutions reward individuals based on competitiveness and other hierarchical criteria. Meetings therefore, like many other organizational situations, are characterized by demonstrations of "superior" performances and more "visible" participation. In other words, some organizational actors derive certain payoffs from unequal participation levels and would therefore be less likely to welcome a technology which attempted to equalize participation.

Although it may be tempting to dismiss power and politics as a fly in the ointment of the rational model, a substantial body of organization theory would argue that organizations are inherently political systems. It seems very unlikely that any effect due solely to technology — any type of technology — can overcome these core human tendencies. Instead, it appears much more likely that either the technology will be co-opted by powerful individuals and groups in a way that furthers their own political agendas or that these groups will stonewall the use of the technology. A GSS theory base relying too heavily on a rational model of human behavior will offer few insights for either of these scenarios.

### 3.2 Meetings as Ceremony and Symbolism

If we understand organizations as cultures (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Morgan 1986; Trice and Beyer 1984), the meeting takes on a more ceremonial dimension. By adopting a cultural perspective of organizations, certain organization theorists suggest that organizations are essentially systems of collective meaning that are enacted in the form of rites, rituals, ceremonies, sagas, myths and so on (Boje, Fedor and Rowland 1982; Dandridge 1988; Martin 1992). This view of organizations underscores the *expressive* side of organizations above the technical and the instrumental. Substantially influenced by cultural anthropology (Geertz

1973) and sociology (Durkheim 1965), this perspective posits that organizations are held together by the *shared meanings* of their members. These shared meanings, moreover, are constantly reinforced and legitimized by various cultural events and practices which include organizational gatherings of all kinds. The organizational meeting is one such cultural event (Mintzberg 1973; Olsen 1972; Schwartzman 1986).

More specifically, Schwartzman (1986) suggests that organizational meetings perform ritualistic functions in organizations. In much the same way as cultures rely on the ceremonies and rituals of religion (Durkheim 1965), organizations also need ritualistic activities in order to reinforce a sense of shared membership among different organizational actors. Several organizational researchers (Mintzberg 1973; Olsen 1972; Schwartzman 1986; Trice 1985) have dwelt on the ceremonial nature of organizational meetings. Mintzberg (1973) and Schwartzman (1986) both argue that all organizational meetings have a ritual-like quality to them, which gets reflected in the traditional sequencing of events and the habitual performance of certain meeting rites including preliminary greetings, announcements, and patterns of discussion.

Trice further suggests that organizational meetings are situations in which certain "conflict-reduction rites" are exercised. These rites function "to moderate the disruptive and aggressive forces arising within groups or at the organizational level" (p. 241). According to Trice, the ceremonial and stabilizing quality of meetings can mollify certain disgruntled organizational groups and reduce cultural tensions within the organization.

Overall, a cultural perspective implies that the ceremonial nature of meetings serves as a mechanism for the reinforcement of a sense of collective membership in organizations. Organizational meetings mainly bring different actors together, legitimize organizational actions and existence, and even diffuse conflict and tensions on account of their ceremonial and ritualistic quality.

### 3.2.1 The Ceremony and Symbolism Perspective on Rationalization

For the most part, GSSs are designed to expedite the functional purposes of meetings. However, the ceremonial view argues that meetings play a symbolic role in organizations (Olsen 1972; Schwartzman 1986). From this perspective, therefore, the point of meetings is not merely to make key decisions or to exchange information. Meetings function as ceremonial gatherings intended to reinforce organizational solidarity and to legitimate organizational action. Thus, the meeting has value for the organization partly because of its form and structure. Organizational members

derive a collective sense of belonging and renewal in part because meetings provide a forum for personal contact, affirmation of shared values and mechanisms for the diffusion of conflict.

With their focus on information exchange, GSSs tend to neglect the ceremonial value of organizational meetings. In fact, it is very likely that the basic objectives of GSSs prevent the enactment of rites, rituals and ceremonies in organizational gatherings. From the rational perspective, ceremonies and ritual are likely to be viewed as time-wasters — decreasing the efficiency of the meeting. This viewpoint, combined with the high degree of control that a GSS can exert on participant behavior, seems to indicate that ceremonial behavior in organizational meetings will be significantly reduced when using a GSS.

Thus, in some ways, GSSs can be said to displace the ceremonial function of organizational meetings. Given their current design, they do not facilitate the kind of ritualistic patterns in meetings discussed by Mintzberg. Neither do they allow for the diffusion of tension among different organizational groups through the enactment of conflict-reduction rites (Trice 1985). Thus, while they may indeed enable groups to make decisions more “efficiently,” they may also have negative consequences for the collective morale of organizational members.

DeSanctis (1993) has suggested that most GSS technologies have an in-built individualistic bias that results in an overlooking of the collective side of organizations. GSS-enabled meeting rationalization overlooks how deeply embedded ceremony and rituals are in an organization’s cultural practice. Any technology that ignores this core dimension of organizational being is likely to experience difficulties in the course of its implementation and adoption.

### 3.3 Meetings As Face-Work

A segment of the organizational literature, drawing on the interactionist theories of Erving Goffman (1959; 1963), regards personal encounters in organizations as arenas of “face-work.” From this perspective, organizational meetings are seen as situations in which participants maintain or enhance their public images or “faces.” Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that social actors have a need to present both a “positive face” as well as a “negative face” in organizational situations. The first ensures that the person is well-liked, while the second deters other organizational actors (including bosses, subordinates, and colleagues) from taking advantage of him or her. While “face work” can take place even in written communication or during telephone conversations, Goffman (1967) suggests that it is likely to be far more intense in face-to-face encounters. As he maintains, “during direct personal

contacts...unique information conditions prevail and the significance of face becomes especially clear” (Goffman 1967, p. 33).

Based on these insights, organizational meetings acquire an importance that far exceeds their instrumental value in planning, coordinating and decision making. In effect, organizational meetings can now be understood as places where people manage others’ impressions of them (Goffman 1967), and where they engage in a number of practices such as diplomacy, tact, or politeness designed to save or enhance other organizational participants’ faces as well (Hiemstra 1982). Inevitably, then, meetings also become venues for the display of certain emotions and the containment of others (Rafaeli and Sutton 1989). Overall, the organizational meeting takes on a more dramaturgical flavor, becoming an arena where organizational members can practice various strategies of face-work.

#### 3.3.1 The Face-Work Perspective on Rationalization

Most GSSs concentrate on ways of improving the generation, exchange and processing of information as well as the making of key decisions in meetings. However, a face-work perspective would argue that, traditionally, meetings have been more than sites for information generation and decision-making. As discussed in the earlier section, meetings are also venues for the enactment of face-work. Hiemstra (1982) and Goffman (1967) would suggest that meetings provide an opportunity for sending certain signals about interpersonal relationships within the organization. Meetings are also places where certain boundaries are drawn between acceptable and non-acceptable interactions. All this is done in a variety of ways described by Brown and Levinson (1978) as “politeness strategies.” Mostly, these politeness strategies involve direct face-to-face behaviors and include practices such as smiles, voice modulation, gestures, jokes, clapping the shoulder, and nudging.

The fundamental design of most GSSs are antithetical to the conduct of face-work since, for the most part, they minimize rather than facilitate any kind of physical or verbal face-to-face interaction. Thus, GSSs mostly eliminate the interpersonal texture of organizational meetings. From a purely rational perspective, this may not be all that bad. However, a face-work perspective would argue that when meetings are locations for the display of courtesy and politeness, they also facilitate the forging of everyday working relationships throughout the organization.

In addition, the information exchanged and generated in meetings is usually interpreted in the context of the face-work strategies that accompany them. For instance, a suggestion made by any organizational actor may be re-

ceived more favorably if accompanied by “positive” signals such as a confident tone of voice and assertive gestures. Likewise, hesitancy about a proposal may be conveyed more by the tone of voice and through facial expressions than words alone. Thus, face-work of all kinds itself constitutes an informational context in which ideas and opinions get evaluated in meetings. Therefore, technologies that tend to remove these face-work cues — which GSSs tend to do — may actually endanger the context of organizational decision making.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Which of the perspective’s presented represents the “real” truth about the nature of organizational meetings? This paper does not attempt to answer that question and it is probably unanswerable anyway. Our point was not that any of the alternate theoretical perspectives discussed is better than the rational viewpoint, but rather to highlight the fact that each — including the rational model — by definition can only capture part of the picture. Each perspective has a substantial body of research and theoretical literature behind it and, as such, has insights to offer and “truths” about the nature and dynamics of meetings. The danger is not that the wrong model will be chosen, but rather that one model will become so accepted that we forget that it is in fact a model, not reality.

The models examined here represent fundamentally different ways of understanding organizations and organizational meetings. This difference extends beyond just somewhat different opinions about what are the most important aspects of meeting dynamics. They extend to significant epistemological differences about how researchers actually come to know meetings. The majority of empirical research on which our understanding of GSS is based was done in a laboratory setting. As mentioned earlier, GSS research has been strongly influenced by the rational model and, additionally, suffers from the limitations which arise from using the experimental method in a laboratory setting.

In some ways, by offering different epistemologies of meetings, this paper alerts GSS designers and implementers to alternate assumptions behind organizational practices. We actually believe that all the perspectives discussed here are relevant for understanding the role of GSSs in organizational meetings. However, they are not likely to be *equally* strong in all meetings. Unique moments in an organization’s history and culture can often determine which dimensions are most likely to dominate organizational meetings. To illustrate, periods following organizational takeovers and mergers are likely to be intensely political and to spill over into organizational meetings as well. Similarly, an organization’s culture and tradition can influence the levels of face-work practiced in meetings as

well as the nature of ritualistic activity. These conditions in turn can affect the success or failure of GSSs and their implementation in organizations. Understanding these organizational contexts is therefore key to making implementation decisions.

Multiple perspectives on meetings are valuable not just for the insights they provide about the nature of meetings, but also the insights they provide about how we know what we know about meetings. This theoretical and methodological triangulation is crucial because in essence the meeting is the organization *writ small* (Schwartzman 1986). The meeting is a microcosm of the organization. It provides one of the smallest arenas to fully view the unfolding dynamics of power plays, political moves, ceremonial and symbolic acts and perhaps even rational decision making. To hope to understand how technology will change the dynamics of decision making, hidden agendas, veiled threats, hidden meanings, the formation and disintegration of alliances, the shifting nature of status and power, to name but a few, a theory base as rich as these dynamics will be needed.

Finally, this kind of theoretical discussion also implies that GSS researchers might want to adopt a variety of methodological frameworks for understanding both organizational meetings and the impact of GSSs on them. All we have done here is to suggest that organizational meetings have several non-rational dimensions which mostly tend to be overlooked by GSS researchers. This can result in two variants of outcomes.

On the one hand, neglecting political, symbolic and interpersonal dimensions of organizational meetings can render GSS technologies dysfunctional. That is, organizational members may either reject the technology or refuse to use it because they fail to benefit in terms of power, symbolism and so on. On the other hand, it is equally possible that GSSs will be used and appropriated in ways that provide political, ceremonial and face-work payoffs.

Two fruitful lines of future inquiry would be examining resistance to and appropriation of GSSs, keeping in mind some of the theoretical perspectives discussed here. Clearly, this in turn, will require other forms of inquiry than traditional experimental designs. Some obvious research methods might include participant observation, action research, focus group interviews, and document analyses. Beyond the methods themselves, this line of inquiry might also need the adoption of diverse methodological frameworks including ethnography (Barley 1988), hermeneutics (Palmer 1969), symbolic interaction (Prasad 1992), semiotics (Fiol 1989), ethnomethodology (Mehan and Wood 1975) and institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Many of these methodologies are better suited to studying organizational processes than small group



laboratory studies and may therefore offer a richer picture of GSSs in "real" organizational contexts.

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