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PANEL 2 STRUCTURATION THEORY IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH: DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS

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PANEL 2

STRUCTURATION THEORY IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH: DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS

Panel Chair: Daniel Robey, Florida International University

Panelists: Richard Boland, Case Western Reserve University
Wanda Orlikowski, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Geoff Walsham, University of Cambridge

Orlikowski and Robey (1991) have suggested that structuration theory (Giddens 1984) can serve as a useful theoretical framework for research in information systems. Briefly, the theory argues that human action simultaneously constitutes and is constrained by social structure. For Giddens, structure and action exist as a duality. Humans draw upon structure to shape their actions and, in doing so, they produce and reproduce structure. New structures can be created through human action, although action is always constrained by structure.

The duality of structuration poses challenges to information system researchers seeking to apply its insights. While Orlikowski and Robey have proposed an agenda for information systems research based on structuration theory, executing it requires researchers to address the empirical problems that Giddens' work poses.

The first challenge is to address the positivist requirement that research propositions be falsifiable. With its inherent duality, structuration seems to violate this requirement by not offering propositions that can be tested (Archer 1982). The positivist tradition requires that a theory set forth falsifiable propositions.

The second challenge is to capture the simultaneity of the structuration process, i.e., the empirical question of accounting for constituting and constraining that occurs at the same time. If causes and effects are situated in the same time and space, how is it possible to draw analytical distinctions between them (Archer 1982)? A common solution to this challenge is to suspend the strict assumption of simultaneity and to examine the relationship between action and structure across time. While expedient, this approach seems not to capture Giddens' idea of simultaneous duality.

Wanda Orlikowski will draw on her theoretical and empirical research in the development and use of CASE tools (Orlikowski 1991, in press) and communication media (Yates and Orlikowski 1992) to indicate how she has dealt with these problems. Geoff Walsham will draw upon his empirical research applying structuration theory as one element in the analysis of three applied case studies involving the introduction of information technology (Walsham in press). Richard Boland will evaluate the efforts of Orlikowski and Walsham to deal with the dilemmas and add overall comments.

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