

# The use of Grounded Theory and of Arenas/Social Worlds Theory in Discourse Studies: A Case Study on the Discursive Adaptation of Information Systems

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**Abstract:** This paper exemplifies the combined use of Grounded Theory and of the Arenas/Social Worlds Theory in a study of the discursive interaction amongst middle managers at a UK University administration and academic computing services. This study aimed at exploring the role of discursive interaction and negotiation in the organisational adaptation of information systems, by defining the premises upon which discourses were constructed and deployed on the basis of particular worldviews and how in turn they informed back different worldviews. It presents key lessons learned from this approach in relationship to the roles of codification, of relationships between conceptual categories and between theoretical influences and empirical work, as well as those emerging from the lived experience of research analysts.

**Keywords:** grounded theory, arenas/social worlds theory, discourse analysis, case study, information systems adaptation

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents an exemplification of the combined use of Grounded Theory and of the Arenas/Social Worlds Theory in discourse studies, based on a case study exploring the role of professional discourses in the organisational adaptation of information systems. The idea of using Grounded Theory or the Arenas/Social Worlds Theory in discourse studies is not new and Clarke (2005) presents recent examples of this. The methodological approach of Grounded Theory and the conceptual framework provided by the Arenas/Social Worlds theory appear, in effect, particularly congruent with each other, as suggested by Clarke (2005). Both originate within the Chicago Symbolic Interactionism School of sociology and have Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, amongst others, as early proponents. Grounded Theory was the methodological approach that was developed and proposed as a result of the studies in medical institutions that were amongst those that led to the development of the Negotiated Arenas/Social Worlds Theory, as a framework for explaining social interaction in complex large professional organisations, such as hospital environments, where groups of clinicians espousing different ideologies and deploying different professional rhetorics coexist.

The combination of both seems therefore appropriate and of usefulness in discourse based studies that take a focus on the constitutive (rather than just merely representational) role of discourse and on negotiated interaction as the vehicle for the constitution and reproduction of discursive behaviour. In this paper it is argued that this approach is particularly powerful for:

1. analysing different perspectives on issues through the discursive practices of involved organisational actors,
2. defining the premises around which these discourses are constructed and deployed and, simultaneously,
3. exemplifying how, in turn, discourses inform back different worldviews in dynamic social contexts.

However, whereas both Grounded Theory and the Arenas/Social Worlds Theory have been used extensively in various fields, they have both been subject to various re-interpretations and re-elaborations, as will be discussed ahead. This paper presents an example of an interpretation of both methodological approach and conceptual framework that is perhaps closer to their original formulation than further reformulations. An exploratory case study using this framework was carried out at a University in the United Kingdom during the implementation and post-implementation phases of a University-wide Management Information System. This study set out to explore what was perceived as a relatively neglected theme in the information systems research literature – the role of discourse in the organisational adaptation of information systems within a constructivist perspective.

## 2. The conceptual framework: some (loose) connections between the negotiated arena/social worlds and discourse studies

The Arenas/Social Worlds framework implies exploring the social world as different arenas, where multiple worldviews coexist within processes of negotiated interaction (Strauss et al., 1964, 1981). Clarke (1991: 128)

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defines an arena as “[...] a field of action and interaction among a potentially wide variety of collective entities”. Social worlds were explicitly referred to only in Strauss’s later work (1978), although Clarke (1991) argues that they were implicit in his original study of psychiatric institutions (Strauss *et al.*, 1964, 1981), and are defined as “universes of discourse” (Mead, 1938:518, referenced in Clarke, 1991: 130) and as “[...] groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about building their business” (Clarke, 1991: 131). Social worlds are composed by individual actors who also bring personal interests and commitments to action, although, as Clarke (1991) notes, in the arena framework, they are essentially seen as representatives of their social groups.

A development of the original arenas framework that is particularly relevant to this study is the establishment by Clarke (2005), after Castellani (1999), of an explicit focus on issues of power and of a link between the work of the Chicago Symbolic Interactionism school and that of Foucauldian studies on discourse and power. Clarke (2005:52), in effect, states that “*If action is at the heart of Strauss’s project and power at the heart of Foucault’s work, they meet in related conceptualizations of practices as fundamental processes of action and change [...]*”. She stresses that concepts of practice, which include on Foucault’s part, discourse/discipline and regimes of practice, and on Strauss’s part, social worlds/arenas and negotiated orders, are however not equivalent, but, rather, related. In effect, while both authors emphasized discourse as being constituted through interaction (Clarke, 2005), Strauss seeing social worlds as “universes of discourse”, Foucault placed discourse far more explicitly in frames of power and characterised discourses as “[...] effected by disciplining practices that produce subjects/subjectivities through surveillance, examination, and various technologies of the self [...]” often through the influence or the imposition of social groups (Clarke, 2005: 54).

A further influence in the perspective of discourse that is herein adopted is provided by the work of Bakhtin (1984, 1986). Bakhtin was an early proponent of the view of language as rooted in social interaction, rather than being an abstract and politically neutral system of signs. In contrast, language is often framed, in his view, within social struggles. This was represented, in his work, through the tension, expressed in the form of a conflict, between centripetal forces, focused upon the production of standardised and codified meanings expressed in dogmas and accepted views of universal truth, and centrifugal forces that promote diversity and variation informed in different and alternative discursive genres. The tension between centrifugality and centripetalism, between standardisation and diversity, is especially significant to the discussion of the findings of the case study explored in this paper, as will be discussed ahead. It has interesting parallels with the proposition by Ellis (1986:116) that the widespread use of IT leading to the proliferation of computer based information systems in organisations has led to the concurrent development of two opposite effects in organisations: “*the centrifugal effect of the rapid, but often uncoordinated growth in the use of*” computer based information systems and “[...] *centripetal efforts to coordinate and control the information handling function [...]*”

It was thought that these theoretical influences form a particularly interesting vehicle to address how the complexity of the information environment was represented and explored at the case study organisation, how this in turn affected the relationship between organisational tensions and the management of information and, finally, how the discursive practices of organisational actors were formed around these perspectives and how these perspectives were, in turn, informed by those discourses.

### **3. The methodological approach and design: an interpretation of the grounded theory approach**

This study focuses on discourse and on how the interplay between discourses plays a critical role in the organisational adaptation of information systems. The emphasis taken in this study is that discourse plays a constructive and constitutive role, rather than just merely a representational role. Therefore, a naturalistic inquiry approach seemed more appropriate to the research aims, where minimising the manipulation of situations was sought, in order to study comprehensively the complexity of issues involved and to avoid prior constraints to the outcomes of the study. The emergent trajectory of naturalistic inquiry is often, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 203), “[...] *‘played by ear’; it must unfold, cascade, roll, emerge*”.

The design of the research adopted a case study approach and was largely based upon some of the general principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It should be stressed that it was guided by generic principles of Grounded Theory, rather than following a step by step adoption a particular version of the Grounded Theory methodology. In effect, although, as referred by Brown (1990:9), grounded theory can

be shaped and used as 'a fully fledged methodology replete with a method of analysis', it is above all a 'particular style' of research, founded in generic principles, such as theoretical sampling and the use of constant comparisons as a basis for analysis. It can also be said, as noted by Bryman (2001:391) that, although in effect Grounded Theory is by far one of the most cited methodological approach to qualitative research, it "[...] may have been honoured more in breach than in observance" and has been deployed in many different ways.

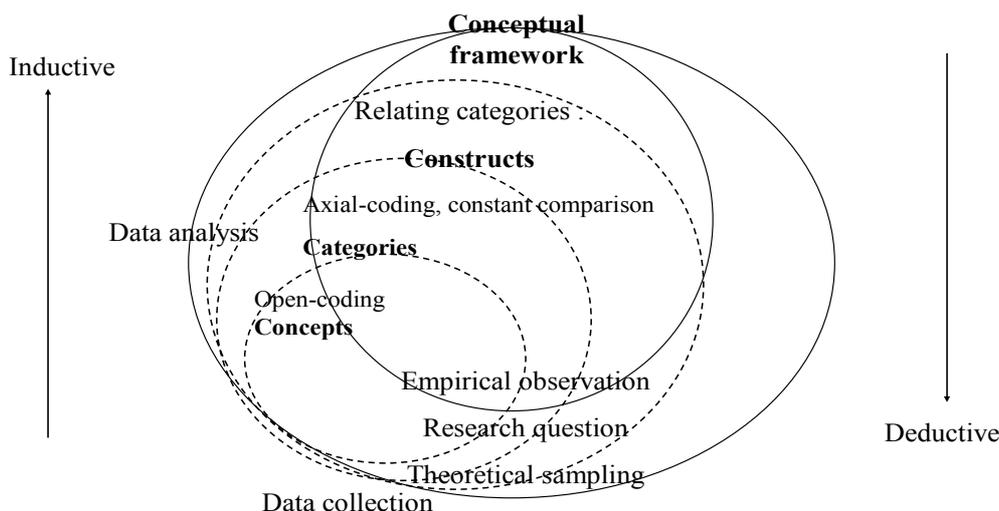
In its original formulation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), it was intended as a flexible approach to generate theory from data, based upon the three generic principles of theoretical saturation, constant comparison method of analysis and theoretical saturation. The subsequent reformulation of Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin (1992) placed strong emphasis on its proceduralisation and formalisation into a series of techniques, arguing the need to "[...] spell out the procedures and techniques [...] in greatest detail [...] in step-by-step fashion" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:8). Their approach placed greater emphasis in the codification of data. Core to this version of Grounded Theory is what Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to as the 'paradigm model', defined as a systematized cause and effect schema to explain the inter-relationships between broader categories and sub-categories. The publication of this version of Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin led to a divergence of perspectives regarding the nature of the methodology between its two original authors, as Glaser (1992) considered that the new version was too prescriptive and emphasized too much the role of coding, whereas the original essence and intention of Grounded Theory was to focus on theory development: "Anselm's methodology is one full of conceptual description and mine is grounded theory. They are very different, the first focusing on forcing and the second on emergence. The first keeping all of the problems of forcing data, the second giving them up in favour of emergence, discovery, and inductive theory generation" (Glaser, 1992:122).

The approach adopted in this study is more aligned with its original formulation and is influenced by the three key principles that guided the original formulation of Grounded Theory of theoretical sampling, inductive derivation of the key findings through constant comparison of interview data and an attention towards theoretical saturation to decide the delimitation of the key categories of findings and the inter-relationships between them, which forms the basis for the framework emerging from this study.

It differs from many applications of Grounded Theory (for example, Kirk and Vasconcelos, 2003; Länsisalmi, Peiró and Kivimäki, 2004; Clarke, 2005), and certainly from Strauss and Corbin's version, in that, although interviews were initially marked with open concepts and constant comparison led to define the characteristics of key categories of findings, the approach to data analysis was rather more loose than those approaches that place emphasis on the formal and detailed process of data codification and did not apply the cause and effect schema included in Strauss and Corbin's paradigm model to formally delimit the properties of categories, sub-categories and their inter-relationships. Glaser and Strauss (1967:31), in their original formulation of Grounded Theory state, themselves, that theory generated through its principles can be presented "[...] either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion".

#### 4. The research in action: empirical environment, data collection and analysis

The diagram in Figure 1 below attempts to represent the research process that was undertaken in action. This was experienced and is seen as rather circular in the inter-relationship between different phases of research and in the use of the literature to help illuminate and discuss the implications of the findings. The circles that represent these processes are not concentric and should be seen rather more as rotating ellipses that form contacts with each other at different points in the research in action. For example, constantly revisiting the data led to reformulations of both key categories of findings and of how the more specific and detailed concepts fitted with them, as well as to reconceptualising the relationships between findings. This often led to *post hoc* explorations of different strands of the literature prompted by new findings and constructs. At points, this process resembled 'going around in circles' although the important aspect of this was that, each time a circle was completed, the research arrived at a different point and advanced towards what seemed a clearer outcome in terms of the interpretation of the inter-relationships between different elements of the argument. The methodological approach that was adopted throughout the study was inherently emergent, as was the understanding of the research problem that was derived through this process, but this allowed the need for the flexibility in planning and enabled the shifts in the understanding of situations necessary to accommodate nuanced accounts inherent to "the centrifugal messiness" (Sullivan and McCarthy, 2004) of complex professional arenas. There were several areas, specifically in the process of data analysis, that are particular to the process undertaken in this research which will be detailed in this section.



**Figure 1:** A diagrammatic representation of the use of Grounded Theory, superimposed to Rudestam and Newton's (1992) research wheel.

The case study that was carried out took place in a single organisational setting and was centred on the implementation of a corporate wide management information systems at a University, part of a national initiative called the MAC (Management and Administrative Computing) Initiative, funded by the UK University Grants Committee, which had the aim of introducing common administrative software to allow data comparability across the sector. This institution was chosen because it represented what seemed to be a very interesting opportunity, as at the time interviews started it was implementing the MAC system and, simultaneously, changing its administrative and technical structures, leading to the centralisation of the control over its 'corporate' information processing activities under a new department, the Corporate Information Department. As a large professional organisation, the University also offered a rich ground for exploring the negotiated arena concept where negotiated interaction further reproduces social structures and forms *loci* for learning (McAuley, 1994; Cohen, Duberley and McAuley, 1999; McAuley, Duberley and Cohen, 1999; Darwin, Johnson and McAuley, 2002).

The principal vehicle for data collection was qualitative interviewing, supported by the analysis of some internal documentation, as well as official reports on the higher education sector in the United Kingdom. The interviews were carried with a group of twelve middle managers at the University Administration and at Academic and Administrative Computing Services in the University chosen for the case study. Dick (2004: 207) shares with King (2004:207) the understanding that in the constructivist style of interviewing, particularly in discourse studies, tends to typically involve a small number of interviewees: *"This is because the focus is on the text, not the individual and because the aim is to provide an in-depth analysis that is focused on explanation, rather than generalization"*. McCracken (1988: 17) goes further, when referring to sampling in in-depth interpretive approaches, *"The first principle is that 'less is more'. It is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than specifically with many of them. For many research projects, eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient. The quantitatively trained social scientist reels at the thought of so small a 'sample', but it is important to remember that this group is not chosen to represent some part of the larger world. It offers, instead, an opportunity to glimpse the complicated character, organisation and logic of culture"*. This stance influenced the process of data collection in both the style of interviewing and in the selection of the interviewees.

The individuals that participated in the study had in common the fact that they were middle managers in the administrative and technical services of the University, located in different departments, who were either directly involved in the implementation of the MAC system or for whom the MAC system had directly impacted on the way they carried out their work. The choice of middle managers was deliberate, as it was considered that it could lead to particular insights, due to the mediating role between the core and the periphery of organisations that middle managers often carry out (Clegg, 2003; Clegg and McAuley, 2005). The group of interviewees included, for example: a senior manager at the Registry in charge of overseeing the development of the information strategy process; the deputy director of the department in charge of implementing the new system, its project manager and two other managers responsible for particular aspects of the systems; the systems manager at the Finance Department and an IT manager at Academic Computing Services; the administrators in charge of systems at the undergraduate and postgraduate Student Offices and heads of administration and of IT services at two different academic departments (one a

heavy user of IT, the other less so). These managers participated in different areas of the administrative and technical arenas at the University, both at the centre and at the periphery of the decision-making process and represented both consenting and dissenting voices towards the changes related to the new set of systems, which intersected and clashed with each other.

The various interviews were relatively unstructured in their style, in that they did not follow particularly prescribed formulations of questions or even a formally defined guide, although there were particular issues that were set as important to explore, albeit in a non-prescriptive manner allowing, thus, the exploration of unanticipated avenues. The following themes were set as particularly relevant to explore throughout the interviews, without, as mentioned, precluding other potentially important areas:

- The first issue concerned the expression of the roles and of perceptions of these roles of the different interviewees;
- A second area for discussion related to perceived difficulties expressed by the interviewees in undertaking the activities required by their roles;
- Views regarding the restructure undertaken at the University were explored in particular depth;
- Another theme included the use of information within their professional activities and the role of the newly implemented information systems within that, as well as issues of control and ownership over different areas of information management;
- Finally, activities and options regarding the planning, implementation and use of these systems were also discussed.”

As this study was focused on discursive practices and based upon the text of the interviews, tape recording and subsequent full transcription of interviews was carried out in order to ensure the complete capture of this data.

The first step of analysis involved a familiarisation with the data. For that, it was important to review interview transcripts as soon as possible after the interview and to note concepts and themes that became immediately apparent and cross-referencing them to their occurrence in the interview transcripts. Then the interview transcripts were marked and annotated with these concepts. At this stage, referred to as open coding in the constant comparative method, these were rather loose and spontaneously generated concepts – they were a first approach to identifying topics without being driven by too much concern with formalization. These different concepts seemed, at first, disparate, with loose connections and, in some cases, some potential overlaps. A large number of open concepts were initially defined and examples include, for instance, ‘resistance and buy-in [to the systems]’, ‘accuracy of local data’, ‘sensitive data’, ‘access’, ‘user participation’

The next stage involved the comparison each of these concepts with the data that they relate to. This often led to the observation of certain patterns in the data, defining broader key categories of findings that presented internal coherence, in this case related to the identification of tensions between discursive practices. This process involved:

1. firstly the analysis and discussion of the nature of the tensions between discursive practices, which in the case of this study were articulated around information centrifugalism and information centripetalism, as competing models of the information environment, and between a focus on standardisation of process and a focus on negotiated meanings, as models for the management of the information environment;
2. further than that, explaining how these two different tensions can be in turn inter-related and how they relate to broader discourses and perceptions of learning and sense-making and uncertainty and complexity;
3. and finally, how these inter-relations can be understood within the interpretative framework of an information arena and the particular aspects of interaction and negotiation within that characterises it, as a means to explain the role of discourse in the organisational adaptation of information systems.

The process of constantly revisiting the data led to reformulations of both the characteristics of key categories of findings and of how the more specific and detailed concepts fitted with them, as well as to reconceptualising the relationships between findings, which ultimately led to the framework that emerged from the study and is presented in the following section.

## 5. The findings: discursive tensions and connections at the University information arena

The principal finding in this study is that the discursive interaction amongst social actors plays a fundamental role in the organisational adaptation of information systems through the exploration of tensions between different discursive resources and interpretive repertoires. As stated by Brown (1998: 52), “[...] *the capacity of IT to coordinate, structure and control is contingent only, and [...] actors often have much considerable discretion over their use of technology that making reasonable a priori predictions regarding the consequences of a particular implementation is often impossible*”. Discretion comes from the ability to explore tensions between discursive resources and negotiate meaning through the constitutive role of discourse. The following paragraphs discuss the findings of the study against each of its aims.

The first aim of the study concerned the analysis and exploration of perspectives on the relationship between the management of information systems and of the wider information environments they belong to, through the discursive practices of organisational actors. The analysis of the empirical material revealed that the discursive practices of the various interviewed professionals were focused upon the context of their work practices and activities, rather than projecting information and their information behaviour as a beginning or an end in itself. The information environment in which they operated, which included a variety of sources, systems, processes, behaviours, but also attitudes and cultures, was largely referred to, often implicitly, as an enactment and a representation of their social environment, structures and interaction, in its formal and informal manifestations. We can then extend the notion of negotiated arena to consider the University administration information arena as a field of interaction between different worldviews on information environments that coexist in the same social setting. The University administration information arena was both represented and constituted by particular discursive practices that made reference to different interpretive repertoires and resources.

The second aim of the study was referred to as *defining the premises around which these discourses are constructed and deployed*. As mentioned previously, these discourses were articulated around three major categories of interpretive repertoires and discursive resources:

- models of the information environment, expressed through the tension between information centripetalism and information centrifugalism;
- models of information management approaches, expressed through the tension between a focus on the control over processes and a focus on sense-making and negotiation of different meanings;
- and, underlying the previous elements, assumptions about the nature and complexity of the environment, strategies for dealing with uncertainty and correlated models of learning, expressed through exploitation as a complexity reduction strategy and exploration as a complexity absorbing strategy.

The discursive tensions were identified through the analysis of critical incidents in the data. There were many examples of these incidents and the following paragraphs will exemplify how the analysis of these incidents led to the identification of the tensions. This will be illustrated by two examples of these critical incidents centred around the internal debates that occurred around the notion of “*devolvement*” and introduction of a new “*corporate data model*” as a consequence of the implementation of the new management information systems.

“*Devolvement*” was a concept frequently articulated by various of the interviewees. It was seen as key to define the roles of the various actors and to define what constituted legitimate intervention in the implementation and use of the system. However, although most interviewees used this term they different meanings to it.

Actors at the Centre of the decision-making process articulated these roles through the distinction between “*normative*” and “*functional*” responsibility:

*“[...] there’s different levels of responsibility which I find get in the way, like people who are responsible for the functional, actually just doing , and there’s normative responsibility who say ‘this is how it ought to be’. Now we confuse both of them in this place so we have some people who believe they are responsible for things who are doing it just at the lower functional level.” (Cl.4:25)*

In this discursive sphere the distinction between “*normative responsibility*” (as defining rules) and “*functional responsibility*” (as working within the rules and being accountable for complying with them) led to distancing from the decision making process actors at the periphery of the systems implementation process – in this case, administrators at central support services and at academic departments and faculties. “*Devolvement*” was seen as a means to define accountability.

*“I don’t necessarily think that people are going to be losing responsibility because they are still responsible within their department [...] responsibility is not going to be taken away because it will only be done with the approval of the central department because when it comes back to it they are responsible for the data and responsible to the Registrar - making sure that the data on the system is accurate, so I don’t think there is a sense that they are going to lose that responsibility” (Cl.1:30)*

On the other hand, administrators at central support services and at academic departments and faculties interpreted “*devolvement*” as a means to ensure the preservation of local autonomy in terms of work practices and requirements.

*“It is our responsibility as end-users of the system to find the changes/improvements we want on this Central University database and that the system operates efficiently. It is the Department of Corporate Information’s responsibility to put that into practice, in the sense of technical amendments to the software and the programmes and then come back to us and say ‘we’ve done this – is it better for you?’ and then we enter into negotiations like ‘well, that’s very good but can you just make one final change and that will be fine for us’ [...].” (SO.1:25)*

In this discursive sphere, the periphery reclaims “*normative responsibility*” through the reinterpretation of meaning in relationship to what constitutes legitimate action in systems interventions.

The debate around “*devolvement*” provides an example of a critical incident underlying the tension between models of the information environment that emphasized information centripetalism, manifested itself through a trend towards the concentration of control and coordination of information handling activities at the Centre, and those that were positioned around information centrifugalism and emphasized the diversity of local processes and practices, and correlated knowledges.

Other incidents underlying discursive tensions, in this case between approaches to information management focused on the control of processes and those focused on the negotiation of meanings, were found in the debate concerning the introduction of a new “*corporate data model*”. The new “*corporate data model*” was underpinned by new funding models and formulae and had strong implications for the allocation of resources across the University. It required the standardisation of processes and procedures across the University administration. Both the Corporate Information Department and the Finance Department at the University concentrated on defining approaches to information management focused on the standardisation of processes and procedures. Approaches to information management focused on process fostered an assumption that the definition of processes and procedures was, in effect, a means to ensure adequate meaning and information accuracy. For the administrators that adopted this approach, a focus on standard processes and procedures, rather than on the variety and multiplicity of local information, allowed the establishment of a homogeneous and consistent way of making sense of the complexity of the world of the University.

*“From my point of view as an administrator the focus is on the process because it’s not my responsibility to achieve targets, it’s my responsibility to show that we may or may not achieve targets and to show that you need processes that will give you the information and enable you to present it in a particular way. “ (DIS.2:13)*

On the other hand, at central support services, such as the Postgraduate and Undergraduate Student Offices and at academic departments, administrators argued that establishing the “*accuracy*” of what was being presented through the new information systems was vital. They asserted their positions by establishing their focus of action on assuring that the meaning of the content of the information systems was accurate. The simplification introduced by the funnel effect of centripetalism and standardisation (Boisot, 1998) was presented as detrimental to both information richness and accuracy.

*“I think the core information is important, though. I don’t think it is just a process issue, because we are dealing with individual student places, I would say. Obviously, the purpose of having procedures is to try ensure as much as possible that the information is correct [...]” (SO.1:28-29)*

Administrators at the periphery responded therefore to centripetal attempts to control processes and standardise meanings by asserting their position and emphasizing their role as key to ensure accurate meanings. In the area of student administration, which had an important impact in the allocation of funding to Universities, this was done by developing rhetorics around notions of ‘accuracy’ and of its importance, establishing themselves key holders to information accuracy, in a context where ‘accuracy’ was in many instances established through negotiation of multiple meanings (in different academic committees, for example).

These different categories of interpretative repertoires and discursive practices that inform information arenas and the tensions that characterise them arise from the characteristics of the interaction between Centre and Periphery, where the former is driven by colonising intents (Prichard and Willmott, 1997), requiring the simplification of the complexity of the environment and the development of knowledges and discourses of controlling organisations (hence the focus on process, standardisation and singularity of meaning), and the latter is driven by a concern to maintain a local *modus operandi* and identity, exploring the complexity of the environment through various niches of professional expertise (hence the focus on local knowledges, and practices and on the negotiation of multiple meanings).

It would be simplistic to characterise the various tensions both, on one hand, in terms of the antagonism between two opposing and exclusive poles, and, on another, as part of some inherent invisible rational logic that would inevitably draw the interaction between forces into some state of desirable *equilibrium*. The response to the third aim of this study, to explain *how, in turn, discursive practices inform worldviews on the information environment* - addresses this issue. Although there were clear inter-linkages and alignments between these tensions, there were not always necessarily automatic correspondences between them and different individuals carried out activities of organisational translation, by framing the interests of some communities in the terms of the discourse adopted by other communities (Cohen, Duberley and McAuley, 1999), as well as, when necessary, making appeal to different rhetorical strategies and ‘orders of discourses’ that sometimes implied contradictory assumptions. This suggests that the relationship between different forces in information arenas can also be characterised by elements of connection, as well as by tension. In this context, the interplay between different discursive regimes in negotiated arenas allows the reconstruction of their social environment, as well as representing it and enacting it.

Much of the original literature on managerialism in Higher Education has over emphasized the imperialising effect of managerial discourses over academic work (Willmott, 1995; Parker and Jary, 1995). This case study illustrates that in the Higher Education administrative information arena, the managerial discourse, clustered around information centripetalism, an emphasis on process standardisation and generic knowledges of managing (in the sense of planning and controlling) organisations, could be successfully nuanced by discourses that emphasized professionalism, centred around information centrifugalism, plurality of meanings and local practices and knowledges. The interplay between these different discourses is much more marked by mediation and negotiation than by antagonism, as is stressed in more recent work by Prichard and Willmott (1997), Trowler (1998, 2001) and Clegg and McAuley (2005). In this context, we can also conceptualise information arenas as force fields of negotiated interaction, marked by discursive tensions and contacts. The University administration information arena can then be seen as a force field where these tensions and connections between “universes of discourse” are both informed by and informative of action and interaction (in the Straussian sense) or practice (in the Foucauldian sense), whether it is conflicting, collaborative, disciplining, negotiating. In doing so, these different discursive regimes served, in the particular case that was explored in this study, as a vehicle for the organisational adaptation of information systems from an initial centripetal agenda to a more distributed and negotiated model.

## **6. Concluding remarks: lessons from the research approach**

This paper argues that the combined use of Grounded Theory, as a methodological approach, and of the Negotiated Arenas/Social Worlds Theory, as a conceptual framework, is of usefulness in discourse based studies that take a focus on the constitutive (rather than just merely representational) role of discourse and on negotiated interaction as the vehicle for the constitution and reproduction of discursive behaviour. Its major strength lies in the flexibility and openness that enable to capture shifts in the understanding of dynamic situations in complex organisational arenas, as mentioned above. This is particularly the case

where the exploration of tensions between different discourses leads to forming new understandings and shapes the interaction between different social actors. Both the methodological approach and the conceptual framework, originally developed in the field of the sociology of healthcare and of biomedicine, are sufficiently flexible, abstract and adaptable to be applicable to a wide range of studies and across different disciplines to explore evolving and complex social environments and can be geared especially to understand how social actors negotiate meaning in contexts marked by the coexistence of different social worlds. They are also particularly useful in helping distinguish nuances in the understanding of these contexts.

Several learning points were derived from this study and are inter-related. The first concerns the dangers of over emphasizing the codification of data, and thus of typifying behaviours, which is at the heart of the schism between Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1978), through the tension between conceptual description and emergence of theory and explanation. As stated by Goulding (1998: 55), “[i]t is important to recognise that most individuals engage in a type of behaviour without being typed by it; they engage in other behaviours as well” and Grounded Theory categories are concerned with patterns in social practices, including discursive practices, rather than in types of persons and whether they are, as individuals, representative of particular categories of actors. It is the recognition of this stance that allows the identification of nuances in complex arenas and their social worlds. It is argued that the adoption of Negotiated Arenas/Social Worlds conceptual elements should be used as an interpretive framework to bring out complexity and fluidity in social worlds, rather than as a vehicle to further proceduralise and formalise the process of analysis through the development of rigid codification schema.

A correlated aspect is that relationships between key categories of findings are as important, if not more, as the delimitation of analytical categories. In this study, it became clear that the focus should be to consider the multiple dimensions of its context, where different forces and tensions, articulated through the discursive practices and rhetorical strategies of the various interviewees, appeared to interplay and to in turn weave a more complex situation. The crucial point at this stage was a departure from considering in isolation the different discursive categories that were identified to move on to a different stage of analysis, where mutual relationships between these categories were reflected upon. This departure from analytical categories as ideal types considered in isolation to a focus on interaction, tension and contacts, allowed the focus on the interplay between different discursive regimes and practices to reflect the dynamic nature of interaction in professional arenas. It is in this area that the contribution of the Arenas/Social Worlds Theory as a theoretical framework was crucial to help reflecting and characterising complex, multidimensional and shifting environments and arenas.

This leads to acknowledging the key role of sensitising influences to the meaning and significance of emerging analytical categories and their inter-relations: “*This is vital, for without this grounding in extant knowledge, pattern recognition would be limited to the obvious and the superficial, depriving the analyst of the conceptual leverage from which to develop theory*” (Goulding, 1998:52). Glaser and Strauss, themselves, state that Grounded Theory “[...] will tend to combine mostly concepts and hypothesis which have emerged from the data with some existing ones that are clearly useful”. What it does not do is to commit research to “[...] one specific preconceived theory”. As stated by Dey (1993:65) “[...] there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head. To analyse data, we need to use accumulated knowledge, not dispense with it”. In other words, analysis is emergent, but not “atheoretical” (Goulding, 1998). As stated by Glaser (1978) and Goulding (1998), the development of Grounded Theory is based upon an understanding of the interplay between theoretical influences and empirical work.

Other important influences, however, stem from the “*lived experience*” (Sullivan and McCarthy, 2004) that analysts bring to their work. While conducting this research the researcher also developed a lecturing career in information management and information systems in various institutions in the Higher Education sector. This brought a particular slant to the understanding of the focus of this study and, conversely, the study itself also brought new insights over work practices and changes in the sector. McAuley (2004) refers to the interweaving of the personal experience of researchers, which forms a pre-understanding in hermeneutic studies, with the ways in which the subjects of the research develop and present understandings of the situation under study: “*Lying at the heart of the hermeneutic approach is this notion of openness to the data, the artful development of the interplay between the intuition of the researcher, the data (text or whatever) of the subjects of study, the interpretative frameworks that are brought to bear on the analysis of the text and, ultimately, the reader. If this openness is undertaken in good faith then the product of the research is on the one hand truthful (authentic) to the data but is, on the other hand, not the only truth (authentic account) that could be produced*” (McAuley: 2004:201).

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