Ups and Downs in IS Projects – The Dynamic Interplay Between Control and Emotions

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Ups and Downs in Information Systems Projects – The Dynamic Interplay Between Control Activities and Emotions

Short Paper

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Abstract

The control of information systems (IS) projects is an important pursuit for organizations that are seeking to realize the value-creating capabilities of IT. Realizing this goal, however, has proven to be a complex undertaking that has engendered research illustrating unique challenges of IS project control. Extant research in this domain has focused primarily on the configuration of controls in terms of control modes and control amounts, but has largely overlooked ongoing dynamics of control (i.e., a process view) and is reticent on the socio-emotional aspects of control processes. In this study, we report preliminary findings of a longitudinal case study that evaluates the dynamic interplay between control activities and emotions within the context of a large-scale healthcare information systems (HIS) project. Early findings show that emotions can impact, or be impacted by, control activities, but also provide some seemingly paradoxical evidence regarding the mechanisms underpinning this dynamic.

Keywords: Healthcare information systems (HIS), IS project control, Control dynamics, Emotions, Process perspective.

Introduction

An enduring and prevalent theme in the information systems (IS) literature is the problem of IS project control, or the attempt to motivate project stakeholders to act in accordance with organizational objectives (Kirsch 1996). Academic interest in this concern has been attributed to the complexity associated with getting diverse stakeholders, who often do not have prior working relationships, to work together to achieve organizational goals (Chua et al. 2012). This complexity is compounded by distinctive features of IS projects such as: (1) their highly abstract and difficult ways to measure work processes and
outcomes; (2) their frequently changing goals and requirements, task characteristics, team composition, stakeholder involvement, and organizational context factors; and (3) the uncertainty and difficulty associated with their temporal nature and typically non-routine and non-recurring performance of tasks (Remus et al. 2015). Indeed, IS project failures are often not failures of the technology itself, but rather can be attributed to the complexities associated with stakeholder interactions and relationships (Kirsch 2004).

One such complexity is the role that emotions play in the enactment of IS project control. Since emotions are attributed to creating and sustaining work motivation (Barsade and Gibson 2007) and project control is essentially an attempt to motivate individuals to behave in manners consistent with organizational objectives (Kirsch 1996), it is expected that emotions will influence project control activities, and vice versa. The nature of this interplay, however, is unclear. In one perspective, for example, the notion of control is associated with negative emotions that reduce creativity, satisfaction and motivation (Orlikowski 1991; Gregory and Keil 2014b). The contrasting view suggests that control accomplishes the opposite by clearly articulating expectations and thus providing stress-reducing structure with respect to the control situation (Roberts et al. 2006; Boss et al. 2009).

In order to shed light on the interplay between IS project control activities and emotions, this research in progress adopts a dynamic view of control that sees it as an ongoing organizational process that can be promoted or constrained by individual emotions (Cram et al. 2016). The paper is thus positioned to help address a gap in the literature related to a dearth of papers that examine control as a dynamic process. The large majority of existing studies have focused on the configuration of control portfolios in terms of control modes and control amounts, thus addressing the question of “what’ controls should be in place” (Wiener et al. 2016). This was at the expense of addressing ‘how’ questions, which involve viewing controls as ongoing and dynamic organizational processes. Further, this paper is also positioned to contribute to a gap in the IS literature related to the topic of emotions. Similar to the dynamic view of controls, the IS literature on emotions in general (e.g., De Guinea and Markus 2009; Thompson 2012; Stein et al. 2014; 2015) and in particular on how emotions might affect control processes over time (e.g., Cram et al. 2016) is extremely scant.

More specifically, in this research in progress, we examine the impact that different modes and types of controls (e.g., formal vs. informal) as well as the style in which such controls are enacted (authoritative vs. enabling) have on both controllee and controller emotions. In turn, we also aim to learn more on how controller and controllee emotions influence and shape control processes. We therefore wonder: How do project control activities affect the emotions of project stakeholders, and vice versa, over the course of an IS project? By exploring the dynamic interplay between control activities and emotions, our study aims to explore the socio-emotional antecedents and consequences of control activities, thereby contributing to the growing control literature in the specific context of IS projects.

The paper is structured as follows: We first introduce two complementary conceptualizations of IS project control activities and review extant literature on IS project control dynamics and emotions. Next, we describe the research methodology and context of our case study. Finally, we present the findings of our preliminary case analysis and outline next steps.

Theoretical Background

**IS Project Control**

Consistent with prior IS project control studies (Kirsch 1996; Choudhury and Sabherwal 2003) and related studies in contributing disciplines (Ouchi 1979; Das and Teng 1998), we define control as any attempt to motivate participants to behave in a manner that is consistent with organizational goals. In this behavioral view of control, a control situation involves a controller who carries out control activities to influence the behavior of a controllee, or group of controllees (e.g., Choudhury and Sabherwal 2003). Here, extant literature offers two complementary views to conceptualize IS project control activities.

The majority of IS project control studies conceptualize control activities in terms of control modes (e.g., Henderson and Lee 1992; Kirsch 1996), which can be further divided into two types: formal and informal. Formal control modes (input, behavior, and outcome control) rely on explicit controller prescriptions, whereas informal control modes (clan and self-control) rely on rather implicit determinants of controllee...
behavior (Jaworski 1988). More precisely, input control concerns the allocation and manipulation of IS project resources (Jaworski 1988; Mähring 2002). Behavior control aims at specifying work processes and monitoring controllee adherence to these processes (Kirsch 1996). Outcome control focuses on measuring actual outcomes and comparing them with prespecified outcomes (Ouchi and Maguire 1975), regardless of how the results were produced (Kirsch et al. 2002). With regard to informal control modes, clan control emphasizes the reinforcement of acceptable behaviors through the development of norms and values shared by IS project participants (Ouchi 1979). In self-control, the controllee herself sets the specific goals and behaviors to achieve these goals (Henderson and Lee 1992; Kirsch 1997).

A complementary view to conceptualize IS project control activities considers how the controller enacts control through her interactions with the controllee(s), emphasizing the multidimensionality of control activities (Gregory et al. 2013). In this regard, Wiener et al. (2016) draw on earlier IS project control research to introduce the distinction between two ‘extreme’ control styles: authoritative and enabling. An authoritative control style relies on bureaucratic values and represents a top-down control approach (Adler and Borys 1996; Gregory et al. 2013; Gregory and Keil 2014a), which is designed to ensure and, if needed, enforce controllee compliance. In contrast, an enabling control style involves frequent interaction between controller and controllee (Gregory and Keil 2014a), promotes bilateral feedback (Adler 1999; Gregory et al. 2013), and grants the controllee some flexibility in dealing with real-work contingencies (Adler and Borys 1996). There are two central features that distinguish an enabling control style from an authoritative control style; repair and transparency (Adler and Borys 1996; Wiener et al. 2016). The repair feature of an enabling control style anticipates breakdowns in control activities and provides capabilities for fixing them by appreciating controllee feedback about, and facilitating controllee responses to, real-work contingencies (Adler and Borys 1996; Wiener et al. 2016). The transparency feature of an enabling control style concerns the visibility of control and other project activities (internal transparency) as well as the visibility of the broader project organization and context (global transparency).

Although prior IS project control research points to the importance of considering the applied control style in combination with the employed control modes (Wiener et al. 2016), empirical studies on this topic remain scarce (Remus et al. 2015). Considering the controller’s control style along with control modes can be expected to further our understanding of control dynamics, which is an under-researched topic in the IS project control literature (Wiener et al. 2016).

**IS Project Control Dynamics and Emotions**

As noted above, project control is essentially an “attempt to motivate individuals to behave in a manner consistent with organizational objectives” (Kirsch 1996, p. 374). Emotions have been credited with creating and sustaining work motivation (Barsade and Gibson 2007). We thus propose that emotions are relevant to understand dynamics in control processes.

The significance of emotions to IS project control is also supported by prior literature. Cram et al. (2016), for example, found that structural characteristics of the IS control mechanisms and control environment encourage intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and thus have the ability to influence individual participation. Moreover, structural control characteristics cultivate feelings of satisfaction that can in turn reinforce the related controls and produce improved outcomes. Indeed, as Adler and Borys (1996) observed, there are two antithetic perspectives on the relationship between control activities and emotional experience. In one perspective, control is associated with reductions in creativity, satisfaction and motivation (Orlikowski 1991; Gregory and Keil 2014b). The contrasting view suggests that control accomplishes the opposite by clearly articulating expectations and thus providing stress-reducing structure with respect to the control situation (Roberts et al. 2006; Boss et al. 2009).

While, therefore, emotions are important to the practice of IS project control, there is still a gap related to our understanding of how control activities trigger emotional responses as well as how these responses in turn lead to subsequent changes (i.e., dynamics) in control activities (Cram et al. 2016; Wiener et al. 2016). The task of developing such an understanding is nevertheless fraught with difficulty not the least of which is the abundance and confusion surrounding different emotion-related concepts (Stein et al. 2015). This task is also complicated by an implicit tension between the rational, goal-oriented attributes of the notion of control and the visceral, spontaneous traits of individual emotions. To address these challenges, our study builds on novel developments in the IS field that have helped advance our conceptualizations of emotion in IS contexts.
In this regard, Zhang’s (2013) affective response model unifies a mélange of emotion-related concepts. Zhang accomplishes this unification by establishing ‘affect’ as “an umbrella term for a set of more specific concepts, which include emotions, moods and feelings” (Zhang 2013, p. 247). Zhang (2013) also offers stimulus and core affect as two fundamental concepts that encapsulate this vast domain. Building on Zhang’s (2013) work, Stein et al. (2015) show how different characteristics of an IT stimulus event, or emotional cues, interact to produce various types of emotional appraisals and responses that in turn impact IT use patterns. Stein and colleagues draw from Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2010) who categorize emotional appraisals along two dimensions: (1) threat vs. opportunity and (2) low vs. high autonomy. On this basis, they introduce four classes of emotional responses, namely loss (threat and low autonomy), deterrence (threat and high autonomy), achievement (opportunity and low autonomy), and challenge (opportunity and high autonomy). It is worth noting that, in the context of our study, emotional cues relate to the specific features of a control-related activity that induce particular emotional appraisals.

On a related note, Stein et al. (2015) recommend the conduct of longitudinal analyses of emotional cues, appraisals, responses, and behavioral patterns since such studies can be used to reveal more about the conditions under which cues change over time, and might highlight the influence of these changes on resultant emotions and behaviors. Stein et al. (2015) also offer a dynamic model of emotions that we have revised and adapted to fit the specific context of IS project control processes (Figure 1). In particular, in our emotion-centered model of IS project control dynamics, a control process starts with a controller performing a control activity, referred to as controller activity in Figure 1. As noted above, such a control activity can be classified along two main dimensions: control modes (what) and control style (how). From the controller perspective, the controller activity may contain an emotional cue, and eventually trigger an emotional response by the controller. For example, a controller may perceive the controller’s request to provide daily updates on the progress of the IS project to be inappropriate (emotional appraisal: threat and low autonomy), and thus may feel disrespected (emotional response: loss). The controller’s emotional response is then expected to influence her or his behavior, referred to as controller activity in the figure below (e.g., the extent to which she or he adheres to the behaviors prescribed by the controller). From the controller perspective, the controller activity may be perceived in terms of an emotional cue, and eventually trigger an emotional response by the controller. The emotional response may then result in an adaptation of the enacted controls by the controller (“controller activity”).

Figure 1. An Emotion-Centered Model of IS Project Control Dynamics
Research Methods and Setting

Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis

In this study, we chose a qualitative, in-depth approach to examine ‘how’ questions related to the dynamic interplay between IS project control activities and emotions (Myers 1997; Baskerville and Myers 2002). In particular, following Easterby-Smith et al. (2008), we chose a single case study to allow close observation of the organizational actors’ everyday practices based on fieldwork and the collection of supplementary data. The primary data used in this paper was collected through a series of 40 interviews that were conducted between November 2010 and October 2011 aimed at understanding various dynamics occurring during the implementation of a large-scale healthcare information system (HIS). Interview length varied, but a typical interview lasted about one hour. Most study participants were interviewed only once, but interviews with the project manager were recurrent to obtain updates on the project’s progress. Informed by past research capturing work practices through interviews (Scott and Orlikowski 2014; Orlikowski and Scott 2015), we conducted informal, open-ended and semi-structured interviews aimed at collecting as much detail as possible through carefully listening to the ‘stories’ of project participants around their direct experience and personal perceptions and feelings during the various phases of the implementation project (Walsham 1993, 2006). We were thus able to collect both retrospective (2007-2010) and longitudinal (2010-2011) data. All the interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Note-taking during the interviews was deliberately sparse with a goal of making the interview feel more conversational than interrogative. Reflection and memo writing were conducted shortly after the interview to help solidify the insights derived from the interview. In addition to the interviews, we collected documents on system demonstrations, attended conference calls, and examined archival data in the form of reports, news clippings and other filed documents. We exchanged follow-up emails with some of the study participants to further clarify details. We decided to stop interviewing individuals once most of the details around the implementation process became recurrent allowing theoretical data saturation (Bowen 2008).

The data collection was part of a dissertation project, therefore some of the interviews have previously been analyzed for purposes not related to this study. However, given our interest in control processes and associated emotions, and because this particular dataset is extremely rich on these two aspects (controls and emotions), we decided to undertake a fresh data analysis involving two new researchers. In fact, all details arising from our preliminary case analysis (briefly described next) were driven in no way by the interviewers, and thus genuinely emerged from loosely structured conversations with focal actors involved in the HIS project implementation.

Our preliminary data analysis was performed using NVivo. We undertook an open coding approach (Miles and Huberman 1984), which is consistent with prior research aimed at interpreting and making sense of how phenomena unfold in practice (Orlikowski 2002; Nicolini 2011). For purposes of this research endeavor, we scanned the interview transcripts as well as the open coded data (approximately 5,500 initial codes) to develop preliminary observations related to significant emotional events in the HIS project as well to identify any overt links between these emotional events and IS project control activities. For example, to capture controllee emotions in the data, we employ Stein et al.’s (2015) approach that identifies the presence of affective data by looking for emotional terms (e.g., pleased; worried; angered) in interviewee depictions of the HIS project. We then grouped these responses into the four affect categories used in Stein et al. (2015) (i.e. loss, deterrence, achievement, and challenge) and analyzed the reasons given for these responses to understand how they are associated with specific control activities by the controller(s). In particular, to understand what specific aspects of control activities trigger emotional responses (i.e., contain emotional cues), we assessed whether or not respondents link these emotional expressions to particular control modes (i.e., input, behavioral, output {formal}, clan, and self {informal}) or control styles (i.e., authoritative and enabling).

To illustrate this coding process, which is grounded in Stein et al.’s (2015) approach to capturing emotions from semi-structured interviews, we demonstrated the main steps associated with analyzing the following depiction of the HIS project by one of the controlees (user in marketing department) when discussing the history of the initiative:
“...I think IS is still paying a price for a very poorly executed centralization. I think they thought they were doing it really well, but that particular model that they used, which was kind of just napalmed across the organization, created a lot of hard, hard feelings, a lot of distrust. I think they struggle to listen and really be that kind of service or client service model mentality, tell us what your goals are and then we are going to be subject matter experts to help you accomplish your goals.”

In the initial coding this response was coded as follows: poorly executed centralization, conflicting perceptions of centralization success, napalmed centralization, hard feelings and distrust, IS listening struggles, client service model unachieved. Hard feelings and distrust were then deduced from these codes as the core emotional terms in the discourse and these were placed in the loss category of emotional response, which was prompted by the controllee’s perception of threat and low autonomy (emotional appraisal). This emotional appraisal could also be linked to a particular emotional cue, that is, to the use of a particular control mode (input control) and control style (authoritative) because centralization, or the reallocation of resources, is a classic example of input control (see Table 1 for the criteria used to identify particular control modes) and because the fact that this was “napalmed” across the organization indicates a lack of repair and transparency and is thus illustrative of an authoritative style of control.

Table 1. Coding Criteria for Control Modes and Mechanisms (adopted from Wiener et al. 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Mode</th>
<th>Key Characteristics</th>
<th>Control Mechanisms (Examples)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input control</td>
<td>Specify, monitor, and manipulate resource allocations (human, financial, and material) Reward or sanction the controllee based on her ability to utilize allocated resources</td>
<td>• Recruitment, selection, and replacement of project staff • Training programs • Changes in allocation of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior control</td>
<td>Specify and monitor rules, procedures, and processes Reward or sanction the controllee based on her adherence to the specified behaviors</td>
<td>• Mandated IS development methodology • Regular status meetings/calls • Weekly and monthly reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome control</td>
<td>Specify and evaluate outputs (interim and final) Reward or sanction the controllee based on the outputs delivered</td>
<td>• Defined project milestones • Functional specifications • Weekly software delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clan control</td>
<td>Shared norms and values as well as a common vision that motivate goal-directed controllee behaviors within a peer group</td>
<td>• Ceremonies and rituals • Socialization (e.g., team events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>Self-monitoring of controllee behaviors based on intrinsic motivation and individual standards and objectives</td>
<td>• Individual empowerment • Self-management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above example, we then examined links between the controllee’s emotional response of loss and the controllee’s subsequent activities and evaluated how the latter in turn impacted controller emotions and activities (see Figure 1). Specifically, in this example, the marketing department’s reaction to the emotion of loss was the development of a parallel consulting engagement (emotional cue) that was couched as a marketing endeavor, but also positioned to cater to its unique IS needs. This controllee activity contributed to controller (IS project manager) perceptions of threat and reduced autonomy (emotional appraisal), which can be linked to the emotional response of loss from the controller. This emotional response resulted in a subsequent recalibration of control activities that was manifested in a ‘level setting’ document, which attempted to control the discourse and define the boundaries of HIS initiative.

Generally, this emotional dynamic was assessed in terms of controller-controllee interactions and this relationship served as the unit of analysis. Due to the vast amount of data collected, the analysis of the case data is still ongoing. We next provide contextual details on the case.
**Case Context**

This study examines a large-scale IS project aimed at implementing an HIS to enable data exchange between a private health system (referred to as Southeast Health System—SHS) and a community-owned cancer center (Eagle Cancer Center—ECC).

In June 2007, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) provided a major grant to the SHS’ flagship hospital (Lakefront Regional Center—LRC) and ECC, which was affiliated with LRC. The grant was the early impulse for the HIS project and was provided through NCI’s National Community Cancer Center Program (NCCCP), which was developed with the aim of extending the reach of NCI research beyond its network of 63 designated cancer centers principally based at large research universities to include community-based treatment centers. The NCI grant was awarded to LRC based on its relationship with ECC. Although LRC and ECC would share in treatment of individual cancer patients, the two entities maintained separate electronic medical records for their patients. Thus, one of the key goals of the federal grant was to increase the synergy that existed between the two entities by creating a mechanism for electronically sharing data between these organizations (as well as for transferring this data to the NCI database). The initial control structure for the HIS project consisted of two primary control relationships: (1) the relationship between the senior management teams of SHS/LRC and ECC (controller) and the IS project manager (controllee); as well as (2) the control relationship between the IS project manager (controller) and the members of the different business departments at LRC and ECC (controllees). The two control relationships were intertwined since, in the second relationship (IS project manager vs. business departments), the project manager was mainly acting as an agent of the senior management team.

Roughly two years later, with advent of the $787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and its constituent $22 billion Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinic Health (HITECH) Act, the HIS project was absorbed into a larger initiative. Specifically, instead of completing a simple interface between LRC and ECC (as had been previously envisioned), the two parties opted to implement a more complex interface between the two organizations as well as the three other acute care hospitals run by SHS in order to meet one of the “meaningful use” requirements stipulated by the HITECH Act for receipt of its incentive payments. At this point, the organizations decided to involve a third-party vendor to help implement the increased scope of the HIS project, which also marked the advent of a third controller-controllee relationship between the project manager (controller) and the vendor (controllee). This control relationship was predominantly contractual. The vendor involvement also resulted in a shift in project management methods as the vendor utilized an agile approach to project management while the SHS project management office was used to running its projects in a traditional waterfall approach.

**Preliminary Findings**

Based on our preliminary analysis, we were able to identify five prominent emotional events (i.e., incidents of heightened emotional content as manifested by a prevalence of emotional terminology in interviewee depictions of the event) over the course of the HIS project (see Table 2). The first emotional event occurred in November 2007 after SHS consolidated the management of its IS function by moving it away from its constituent hospitals to its corporate office. This action was met with a sense of widespread dissatisfaction among business stakeholders. According to Stein et al.’s (2015) conceptual framework, the emotions at this stage can be characterized as an instance of loss. There was also heightened emotional discourse associated with the February 2009 passage of the HITECH Act, which can be characterized as a stage of mixed emotions. On the one hand, the Act produced expressions of anxiety (deterrence) from organizational respondents due to substantial penalties that were associated with not meeting the meaningful use provisions. On the other hand, there were also expressions of hope (challenge) associated with the $30 million dollars in incentive payments from the federal government that were to be achieved with a successful demonstration of meaningful use.

Another peak in emotional terminology was observed in discussions of events that occurred in November 2010 when SHS’s meaningful use committee announced its vendor of choice for the HIS project. A prominent group of business users applied terms of resentment and anger (loss) to depict their reaction to this event. There was a similar uptick in emotional discourse in January 2011—this time primarily from respondents in SHS’ senior management team—in response to SHS’ project management announcement.
that the project that was initially chartered at $300,000 was now slated to cost about $3.2 million. Then in May 2011, within the context of interactions with the vendor of choice, there was another spike of emotions related to a failure of the project to meet important milestones on time and heightened concerns that the project would not meet deadlines associated with meaningful use payments.

Table 2. Timeline of Emotional Events in HIS Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Emotional Response</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>Consolidation of SHS hospitals’ IS functions into corporate function</td>
<td>Loss (controller) Business users had no voice in decision (low autonomy) and feared this decision would decrease their access to IS resources (threat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Passage of the HITECH Act (broadened the scope of the original grant)</td>
<td>Deterrence/Challenge (controller): Act contained both rewards for compliance (opportunity) as well as penalties for non-compliance (threat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2010</td>
<td>Announcement of involvement of (external) software vendor to meet provisions of HITECH Act</td>
<td>Loss (controller) Marketing department had no influence on vendor choice (low autonomy) although this decision impinged upon a separate relationship between this department and an outside consultant (threat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Announcement of significant increase in project cost from $300,000 to $3.2 million (this increase became apparent after the contract was signed and new technical details surfaced)</td>
<td>Loss (controller) Senior management felt they were locked in the vendor contract (low autonomy) despite the cost increase (threat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Failure to meet important project milestones on time (one of the factors in delay was the prolonged time that it took for senior management to approve the increased cost of the HIS project)</td>
<td>Deterrence/Loss (controller) Senior management and IS project manager expressed concern related to a potential loss of about $30 million in incentive payments from the federal government (threat)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

On this basis, our preliminary analysis revealed several links between some of the above described emotional events and the control activities carried out in the HIS project. One example of where control activities were instrumental in producing the emotional responses that were observed in this project occurred when SHS’s senior management team consolidated the IS function away from its four constituent hospitals to a centralized corporate function (input control). This restructuring was decided and implemented by the senior management team without engaging the business users (i.e., authoritative control style) and produced the emotional response of loss on behalf of the controllees. While this emotional response did not have an immediate impact on controller-controllee interactions, it did affect the behaviors of business users later on in the HIS project. Specifically, the IS project manager expressed continued exasperation with business users who were rejecting the recommended choice of vendor for the HIS project based primarily on lingering hurt feelings that still stemmed from the heavy handed execution of IT consolidation. This was evidenced by the users rejection of the proposal, even though they found no technical faults with the system.

Interestingly, at this instance, the IS project manager’s use of an enabling control style did not improve the situation. Rather, the use of this control style seemed to have enabled expressions of pent up emotions that impacted controllee behaviors and also impacted the control activities of the controller. For example, prior to this emotional event the IS project manager had relied primarily on input and outcome controls, but with the advent of user antagonism increasingly relied on behavior controls such as an increased number of teleconference calls and more frequent meetings with business users. In parallel, there was an
increased effort to enhance the degree of socialization that took place between the IS project manager and the business stakeholders (e.g., dinner meetings). Taken together, these findings offer preliminary evidence for the dynamic interplay between control activities and emotions over the course of the HIS project.

In addition, our preliminary case analysis indicates that there were heightened emotions in the HIS project, which were not directly linked to IS project control activities. There was, for example, a noticeable amplification of emotional terminology when describing the attainment of the NIC grant at the initiation of the HIS project. Similarly, there was a general increase in emotion related to the passage of HITECH Act. Although IS project control activities did not seem to have (exclusively) produced these emotional events, our analysis points to subsequent adjustments in project control activities that could be attributed specifically to controllers’ emotional responses to these particular events.

Conclusion, Implications and Next Steps

Our preliminary findings suggest that emotions have the ability to impact, or be impacted by, control activities. We thus expect our study to contribute to the literature on IS project because we highlight the relevance to adopt a process view to study the dynamic reconfigurations of control activities over the course of a large-scale IS project and to explore their interplay with emotions. In addition, we expect to contribute to the literature on emotions by acknowledging the key role of emotional cues and responses in explaining the effectiveness of control activities as well as in triggering changes in such activities.

Our preliminary results unfold relevant implications. Most notably, learning about the extent to which emotions can positively or negatively influence the ways control processes unfold over time is of paramount importance for managers (controllers). In this regard, scholars who focus on non-prescriptive types of control (e.g., Ouchi and Maguire 1975; Ouchi 1979) suggest that organizational culture, engagement and leadership might lead to more effective ‘clan control’, where supervision is replaced by trust and empowerment. While these findings are being widely applied in modern organization dynamics, it seems managers have not yet fully embraced a leadership philosophy that accounts for understanding the relevance of emotions at the work place and therefore often do not leverage emotions, as they should.

For instance, in a recent Harvard Business Review article, Herminia Ibarra (2015) quotes a senior manager at a transportation company who claims that “I can do the storytelling too, but I refuse to play on people’s emotions. If the string-pulling is too obvious, I can’t make myself do it.” This is illustrative of the lack of awareness that managers currently have which is related to the ‘power of emotions’ (Newell and Marabelli 2016). To this end, and following Stein et al. (2014), emotions are produced relationally (Thrift 2008); that is, relations between actors (e.g., controllers and controllers) not only produce emergent task-related outcomes, but also produce human emotions, which can result in a particular felt quality or mood that characterizes our being-in-the-world (Ciborra 2006). Thus, emotions are not simply experienced as an afterthought of action that is produced by an individual’s interpretation of a specific control-related situation; rather, emotions are a psychosocial phenomenon that emerges from collective action. Indeed, Dreyfus (1991) argues that a mood is always present, shaping and being shaped by our collective actions and this mood can generate a collective energy (or its opposite—apathy). This, in practical settings, might represent a powerful asset that can be used by controllers (but also by controllees, paradoxically) to shape the ongoing dynamics of complex control systems.

In terms of the future development of our work, during fall 2017, we plan to undertake an in-depth analysis of the 40 interviews as follows: first, one of the authors (the lead contributor of this work) will review the already existing open codes and perform an exhaustive mapping of these codes to the focal study concepts, namely control modes and styles (Wiener et al. 2016) as well as emotional cues and responses (Stein et al. 2015). Second, the lead author will analyze the instances (codes) identified and look for interactions between control activities and emotions. After each step, we will involve a second researcher (another author of this study) to perform reliability testing. Also, a third researcher will do an additional reliability test on 10% of the codes. We will then reflect on particular instances where control activities stimulated emotional responses by the controllees, and/or when emotional responses triggered changes in control activities. We will take this as the starting point to look back at the literature on IS project control and emotions with the aim of extending prior research.
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