Giving Voice to Feminist Projects in MIS Research

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the methodological and epistemological implications of conducting feminist projects in management information systems (MIS) research. These implications revolve around four core themes: that feminist research is situated in the margins, that current gender and MIS research is not adequately problematized, that feminist research questions the legitimacy and appropriateness of positivist research, and that reflection on the personal characteristics of the researcher such as race, gender, sexuality, and class can inform feminist research. We propose three criteria for giving voice to feminist projects in MIS research: (a) challenging the hegemonic dominance, legitimacy, and appropriateness of positivist epistemologies, (b) theorizing from the margins, and (c) problematizing gender.

Keywords: critical research; feminism; feminist methods; gender; interpretivism; MIS; qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

The research area of gender and information technology (IT) is focused on uncovering, understanding, explaining, and predicting differences between men and women with respect to their engagement with IT. A number of disciplines conduct this research, including management information systems (MIS), human-computer interaction, information sciences, telecommunications, computer-supported cooperative work, and science, technology, and society. In this essay, we focus on the discipline of MIS. By MIS research, we mean those studies that examine the arrangement of equipment, resources, and procedures, often computerized, that are required to collect, process, and distribute data for use in managerial decision making in business organizations. We concentrate on MIS because this field examines IT in business contexts in which managerial perspectives are privileged. Moreover, IT is often used to intensify and expand the exercise of managerial power. To the degree that women adopt managerial values and beliefs as their own, woman may achieve
some measure of success (by the majority definition). We argue, however, that what is woefully underrepresented in gender and MIS research is a critical, feminist perspective on gender.

In MIS studies, researchers typically examine the ways in which gender differences shape and are shaped by numerous practices such as the conceptualization and use of IT (Gefen & Straub, 1997; Star, 1995), the design of IT artifacts (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Woodfield, 2002), and the persistence of students in science, math, engineering, and technology-related disciplines (Camp, 1997; McGrath Cohoon, 2001). Gender disparities also occur in the mundane and the overt ways in which power and performance are enacted in organizational settings (Adam et al., 1994; Eriksson et al., 1991; Von Hellens et al., 2001), in societal and cultural influences on IT career choices (Nielsen et al., 1999; Trauth, 2002), and in the continued underrepresentation of women in the IT workforce (Freeman & Aspray, 1999).

While this research provides many insights into the relationship between gender and IT, the resultant picture is highly fragmented, patchy in its coverage, and lacking overall depth in its theorizing on gender to provide a basis for explanation and prediction. We contend that the topic of gender and IT is undertheorized in three ways. First, gender is seldom considered as an independent factor in sociotechnical studies of information systems (IS) in context (Wajcman, 2001). Instead of viewing gender as a socially constructed category, researchers seek to understand gender by fixating on differences between biological sexes. Second, much of the published research focuses on data analysis rather than theoretical implications that relate to the existing body of gender, and gender and IT literature (Adam et al., 2001). Third, there exists an insufficient understanding of the underlying causes of gender underrepresentation in the IT profession that would inform educational policies and workplace human-resource strategies to attract and retain more women (Tapia et al., 2004).

So, how should we study the role of gender in shaping one’s engagement with IT? Based upon our understanding of and participation in the field of MIS, we argue that there needs to be a stream of gender research that is also feminist research. Whereas the term gender research refers to any research project that is concerned with gender and IT use, the term feminist research refers to research projects that study gender and IT use from the vantage point of particular methodological and epistemological positions. In this paper, we present the argument for giving voice to feminist projects in MIS research. We discuss three criteria for characterizing gender research as feminist research: (a) it challenges the hegemonic dominance, legitimacy, and appropriateness of positivist epistemologies as the sole approach to gender and MIS research, (b) it theorizes from an understanding of the margins, and (c) it problematizes gender.

Before presenting our framework, however, we take a reflexive turn to consider the ways in which the characteristics of the researcher, such as (but not limited to) race, gender, sexuality, and class, can be leveraged to inform feminist research. We also consider how our position within the field of MIS shapes our desire and ability to conduct feminist research projects. Through this reflection, we demonstrate how our situated knowledge can be used creatively to produce innovative feminist theory (Collins, 1990).
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