Theorizing Masculinity in Information Systems Research

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INTRODUCTION

I want to argue that understanding masculinity is an important part of understanding gender and sexuality as it relates to information and communications technologies (ICTs), specifically those under the lens of the information-systems community. In order to do this, the landscape of gender and sexuality research in general is referred to along with such research in the field of information systems (IS), with reference as necessary to masculinity studies. I will then suggest some possible areas where a more thoroughgoing theorization may prove useful. In sum, future research might focus on the relationship between marginalised masculinities and the construction and consumption of IS in work organisations and society.

BACKGROUND

For my purposes here, gender is seen as a system of social practices that creates and maintains gender distinctions, which are used to organise relations of inequality (Wharton, 2005). The field, which Beasley (2005) links with sexuality studies, can be broadly seen as comprising feminist studies, masculinity studies, and sexuality studies. Feminist studies refute the masculine bias of mainstream Western thinking and practices that render women marginal and distort understandings of men. These studies usually put women at centre stage. Masculinity-studies writers are largely social constructivist and profeminist in nature, and aim to critique and destabilise mainstream conceptualisations of masculinity. These studies usually put men at centre stage. Sexuality writers generally focus on lesbian, gay, and transsexual regimes with the similar aim of social destabilisation, usually from a postmodern perspective. Some feminist studies do consider sexu-

ality, but in general, as with masculinity studies, the emphasis is on sexed regimes. Sexuality studies in turn generally pay less attention to gender. Within IS, gender-theory-informed work usually refers to feminist studies and the literatures on gender and technology (again, mostly feminist in nature). Masculinities and the gender link with sexualities are seldom theorized in any great depth. Here, the focus is mostly on masculinity, although I recognise the inextricable links between gender and sexual regimes.

GENDER, IS, AND THEORIZING MASCULINITY

Within IS, gender is a neglected area of investigation. As A. Adam (2002) points out, given gender is viewed as an important part of behaviour in the social sciences, and IS is often viewed as sociotechnical, with the social being as much a part of the genealogy of the area as the technical; it is then surprising that this aspect of the social is neglected. Certainly, gender relations are one of the few things in life that everyone has a stake in, yet this does not seem to enter the discussions about IS as being relevant. Instead, the focus is on relevance to the management of organisations in terms of such things as improving performance. Indeed, the landscape of gender and IS research is pretty limited. A. Adam, Howcroft, and Richardson's (2004) survey of the top mainstream IS journals unearthed only 19 papers published during the period of 1993 to 2002. They found, with a few exceptions, a lack of reference to the more general literature on gender and technology and a focus on using gender as a fixed variable. Moreover, those articles that theorized gender seemed to be free of a thoroughgoing theorization of masculinity. Looking toward the gender and technology literature, studies of masculinities

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and technologies are also sparse. Whilst Lohan and Faulkner's (2004) introduction to their special issue on masculinities and technologies states that feminist technology studies have much to learn from masculinities studies, and vice versa, they point out that the articles submitted came from the former, despite soliciting contributions widely. This dearth of research matters because whilst there may be some commonly recognised masculinity characteristics, it is necessary to understand the mutual shaping of these and technology. Indeed, those who study gender and technologies, specifically those in the area of feminist technology studies and gender and IS, subscribe to Wajcman's (1991) view of technology as a masculine culture. Moreover, IS is still recognised to be dominated by men as a field of academic study and in work organisations and society (Panteli, Stack, & Ramsay, 2001; Robertson, Newell, Swan, Mathiassen, & Bjerknes, 2001). So, gender is relevant to IS research, and I would suggest that developing a rigorous understanding of masculinities could contribute to the field.

A FOCUS ON MASCULINITIES STUDIES

It is necessary to distinguish between the men's movement that emerged in the 1970s and the academic study of masculinities. The men's movement tends to shore up stereotypical conceptualisations of Western masculinity and its dominant social status. Implicated in the movement are, for example, anti-feminism and homophobia. Thus, the academic study of masculinities has an equivocal relationship with the mainstream politics of the men's movement. Masculinity-studies writers do not take up the cause of masculinity; they seek to understand and critique its role in gendered and sometimes sexual regimes. Additionally, in contrast to the men's movement, there is a more wide-ranging recognition of differences amongst masculinities. Masculinity is presented as involving the dominance of men over women and other men. From this there are two considerations.

First, who are these other men and masculinities? To answer this, it is necessary to direct attention to theorizations of masculinity that recognise multiple differences. In this respect, one of the most perva-

sive concepts in masculinity studies is that of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Lee, & Connell, 1985; Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemonic domination. It is concerned with the idea that a particular definition of masculinity is culturally exalted and latently imposed upon those in society. This hegemonic masculinity is not seen as merely held by one person or group; it is institutionalised. In line with Wharton's (2005) more general theorization of gender, this locates the forces of oppression outside the individual and recognises its meshing with wider society. Thus, legal, welfare, and educational institutions and others like them become implicitly and explicitly imbued with the masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity subordinates competing masculinities and, of course, is used as a reference for subordinating femininities and constructing emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). In terms of the domination of men by men, we can see competing, socially constructed categories of masculinities, such as race, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class, come into play—categories, of course, that are equally appropriate to women (Trauth, 2002). Indeed, as Lohan (2001) notes in relation to the domestic landline telephone, similarities and differences in the use of technologies and the construction of gender relations around these may vary in terms of age and sexuality. Moreover, she notes that such constructions might be further unpacked within any given group, as I shall illustrate later in relation to gay men.

The second point highlights contradictions in masculinity studies. Even though Connell (1987) states that masculinity is not inherently a man's characteristic, men are usually the foci of investigation. Thus, care has to be taken to avoid drifting into essentialist accounts of masculinity that determine it as the purview of one sex. Indeed, Halberstam (2002) argues that those who do not interpret masculinity as a synonym for men are rare. However, in Western society at least, that which is deemed masculine is constructed as held by men. For example, we could look at the film adaptation of the Marvel comic book *The X-Men* (2000). Ironically, in a fantasy world where anything is possible, the status quo prevails. The team is called the X-Men when there are several women members. We learn that two men built the supercomputer Cerebro and that it is too

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