IDEA GROUP PUBLISHING **ITB13740**

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Tel: 717/533-8845; Fax 717/533-8661; URL-http://www.idea-group.com

This paper appears in the publication, **Issues and Trends in Technology and Human Interaction edited by B.C. Stahl** © 2007, Idea Group Inc.

Chapter I

Conducting Feminist Gender Research in the Information Systems Field

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Abstract

In this chapter,[1] *we explore the methodological and epistemological implications of conducting feminist, gender research in the information systems field. These implications revolve around four core themes: (1) that feminist research is situated in the margins; (2) that current gender and IS research is not adequately problematized; (3) that feminist research questions the legitimacy and appropriateness of positivist research; and (4) that reflection on the personal characteristics of the researcher such as race, gender, sexuality, and class can inform feminist research. We propose four criteria for conducting feminist IS research: (1) engaging in*

researcher reflexivity; (2) challenging the hegemonic dominance, legitimacy, and appropriateness of positivist epistemologies; (3) theorizing from the margins; and (4) problematizing gender.

Introduction

The research area of gender and information technology (IT) is focused on uncovering, understanding, explaining, and predicting the influence of gender and biological sex on one's engagement with IT. A number of disciplines conduct this research including: information systems, human computer interaction, information sciences, telecommunications, computer supported cooperative work, and science, technology and society. In this chapter, we focus on the discipline of information systems (IS). By IS 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 (typically) managerial decision making in business organizations. We concentrate on IS 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, women may achieve some measure of success (by the majority definition). We argue, however, that what is woefully underrepresented in gender and IS research is a critical, feminist perspective on gender.

IS researchers typically examine the ways in which sex-based differences in IT use 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). Sex-based disparities also occur in the mundane and the overt ways in which power and performance are enacted in organizational settings (Adam, Emms, Green, & Owen, 1994; Eriksson, Kitchenham, & Tijdens, 1991; Von Hellens, Nielsen, & Trauth, 2001), in societal and cultural influences on IT careers choices (Nielsen, von Hellens, Pringle, & Greenhill, 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 inconsistent in its depth of theorizing on gender in order to provide a basis for explanation and prediction. In our view, the topic of gender and IT is under theorized in three ways. First, gender is seldom considered as an independent factor in sociotechnical studies of IS in context (Wajcman, 2001). Instead of viewing gender as a