

# Gender, Place, and Information Technology

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## INTRODUCTION

The individual sense of gendered identity and location are embedded within information technology (IT) usage (Meyrowitz, 1985). Exploring gender in relation to place and IT assists to reveal the impact that cultural knowledge has upon IT usage. This article illustrates the intertwined complex of issues that associate gender and place with IT by examining the currently dominant approaches to research conducted around this topic. The article begins with a presentation of the founding concepts regarding location and the construction of the gendered self, and then discusses investigations of gender, place and IT usage that utilize geographical and bounded constructs and, alternatively the concept of socially occupied space.

## BACKGROUND

Situating experience physically—and by implication, locationally—reveals how socio-cultural and socio-technical knowledges play a significant role in the shaping of human action. Maintaining a sensitivity to sociality within IT-oriented research prevents solely technical considerations being interpreted as primary causal factors. Culturally shared knowledge—including media events, physical location, physical sensation and sexual innuendo—is utilized in all IT-enabled exchanges of information. These exchanges serve to strengthen “group” identity and solidarity. Although computer-mediated presence is not a physical environment, the range of possible experiences that can be achieved through engagement with IT-enabled environments are influenced by existing inequalities in the enveloping physical environment. The continual presence of this surrounding physical environment influences knowledge formation to all activities conducted in the IT-enabled environment. IT usage can locate the user—and their actions—simultaneously at many hundreds of machines, cre-

ating a physical indeterminacy of presence that challenges the dualisms of physicality, spatiality and the traditional understandings of gender formation (Green, Owen & Pain, 1994). While gendered examinations of inequality abound (Adam, Howcroft & Richardson, 2002; Wilson, 2004), explorations of the gendered body in relation to technical artifacts are relatively under-represented within IT-based research. By exploring this gap and the intersections of gender, place and technology, it is possible to identify the significance of existing socio-cultural experience and technical knowledge as both barriers and gateways to knowledge acquisition in IT. The conflation of self presence with a “place” makes identity formation a complex phenomenon difficult to isolate or parameterize.

The notion of place and identity are well established in social science disciplines and particularly within geography (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995). “Place” is considered by many (Soja, 1996; Massey, 1994) as primarily a geographic construct providing the individual with a sense of “where” and “when.” However, with few exceptions (see Boland (Jnr), 2001), “modern” organizational forms tend to be analyzed and constructed within traditional and, consequently, physically fixed world views. Predominant discussions (e.g., Gagliardi, 1992) relating to an organization’s physical form reinforce underlying assumptions regarding IT and gender. These positions limit the scope of current analysis in IT research and in relation to gender as self-legitimizing arguments that obfuscate critical perspectives.

## IT Artifacts and Human Activity

The argument presented by this article is indicative of a growing body of research (Gagliardi, 1992) that predominantly combine anthropological and geographical approaches to the examination of human activity and IT artifacts within organizations. Most notably among these approaches is the collection by Gagliardi (1992). These studies critically consider

the limits imposed by IT usage on employees' success in their day-to-day activities. Arguably, the utility and strength of these studies is the parallel considerations of IT artifacts and organizational culture. As Ciborra et al. in Gagliardi (1992) state, "We submit that most recounts overlook the complex interactions between systems as dynamic artifacts and organizational culture." There is a conscious effort in these works to move away from the causal considerations of computers as tools or control devices towards their role as participatory elements in the organizational environment.

The long history of social constructionist research has tended to look beyond physical form as the primary determinant in the examination of humans and technology. Notions of gender, place, space and even time are seen as social constructs that shape human perspectives of location, boundary and border.

The inclusion of daily lived experience and, specifically, gendered experiences, into the consideration of IT is a significant departure from technologically focused theories associated with implementation and organizational considerations (Ashkenas et al., 1995). Acknowledgement of the significance of cultural roles and everyday life enables an alternative interpretation of the spatiality that is embedded in IT. Geographically focused approaches that consider gender and IT usage, in contrast, utilize physical and observable boundaries (Johnston, 1997), including the spatial limitations imposed by a location. The neglect in explicitly articulating the gendered self of the researcher and the subjects of their research also consequently ignores the socio-cultural aspects of spatial constructions. Examining "place" in relation to the gendered body associates a series of physically bound artifacts, including computers and their intricate ongoing relationship with humans.

### Sense of Place

Massey (1994, p. 119) describes "place" as a gendered experience that allows individuals to experience "locality" and "inhabitation" along with their own feelings of self-awareness:

*So the search after the 'real' meanings the 'self' in relation to 'place,' is the unearthing of*

*heritages and so forth, which is interpreted as being, in part, a response to desired fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change. Obtaining a 'sense of place', of rootedness, can provide—in this form and on its interpretation—stability and a source of unproblematical identity.*

"Unproblematical identity," which encompasses gender-inclusive identity, is pivotal to the successful inhabitation of IT-enabled places. Inhabitation can be described as the willingness that people have to visit and continue to revisit a space, including IT-enabled environments. This willingness is reflected in the familiarity and closeness that people access and use IT. Anzaldua (1987) offers an example of how familiarity and descriptive closeness can influence relationship and identity formation in relation to "place." Anzaldua extends her observations of marginalized gendered experiences, providing insight into the intimacy through which she experiences place.

*I am a border woman, I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that Texas-Mexican border, and others all my life. It's not comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the predominant features of this landscape.*

*However, there have been compensations for this mestiza [a woman of mixed racial ancestry], and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element ... [that] has become familiar—never comfortable, not with societies clamour to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home. (Anzaldua, 1987, preface)*

Massey (1994, p.151) explains that a sense of "place" is established when individuals are able to achieve the combined sense of "locality" and "inhabitation." The "feeling" of place is achieved through stable identity formation, including and acknowledg-

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