Diversity in Studying Gender and IT

Michael J. Gallivan
Georgia State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the IS literature has been transformed from one that has virtually ignored gender issues to one in which gender frequently appears center stage. Just 8 years ago, Gefen and Straub (1997, p. 390) noted that "gender has been generally missing from IT behavioral research." Other scholars have also drawn attention to the paucity of gender research in the IS literature even into the 21st century. For instance, Adam, Howcroft, and Richardson (2004, p. 223) noted that "whilst interest in gender has begun to permeate and influence other disciplines, the domain of IS has remained fairly watertight against incursions from gender analysis." In the past few years, however, the IS field has made considerable headway in terms of the number of studies that address gender analyses of IT use and women's experiences in the IT profession. Some advances include special journal issues (Adam, Howcroft, & Richardson, 2002; Gurak & Ebeltoft-Kraske, 1999), an edited book (Green & Adam 2001), and even a focused IS conference track on gender and diversity issues.[1]

This growing interest in the subject of gender and IT has been accompanied by recent claims by scholars regarding appropriate ways to define, conceptualize, and study gender. For instance, the first papers in leading North American journals that prominently featured gender during the 1990s were all quantitative, survey-based studies—either of gender differences in IT use (Gefen & Straub, 1997; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000) or comparative studies of men and women IT employees (Igbaria & Baroudi, 1995; Truman & Baroudi, 1994). Adam et al. (2004) criticized such quantitative approaches to gender in their conceptual review of gender in IS research, noting three shortcomings: Such studies (a) overlook the literature on gender from the social studies of technology field, (b) dichotomize gender into a nominal category, and (c) fail to provide a rationale for why the experiences of men and women differ with regard to IT. They conclude that:

... it is the style of explanation that is problematic in these papers. In a nutshell, this research has difficulty explaining the phenomena it apparently uncovers as it does not adequately theorise the construct of gender, nor indeed the construct of technology. (p. 227)

Their critique of many studies is on target, especially quantitative studies in which the authors neglect to provide insights into factors that shape the different experiences of men and women regarding IT usage or IT-related career experiences. A variety of labels have been employed to describe the underlying logic for why men's and women's experiences and behavior may differ: *social constructivism* (Wilson, 2002), *social shaping* (McKenzie & Wajcman, 1985), *essentialism* (Wajcman, 1991), *feminist standpoint theory* (Harding, 1991), *radical feminism* (Daly, 1992), the *individual-differences perspective* (Trauth, 2002), *gender as performance*, and others. Some of these traditions of scholarship related to gender are more popular in different parts of the world, in different academic disciplines, and at different times in the evolution of various disciplines.

The key message that readers should draw from this critique by Adam et al. (2004) is that all researchers should clearly articulate their conceptualization of gender, including fundamental beliefs the authors hold for what gender means and for why the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of men and women may be similar to or different from each other. Such articulation of authors' beliefs about gender is highly advantageous—whether their studies compare the beliefs or experiences of men and women, or whether they examine just women (or men) in isolation. Second, I support the advice by Adam et al. that researchers should be cautious

about citing certain theories as explanations for differences between men and women whose premises were grounded in an earlier era given that we live "in a world where women make up a much larger proportion of the workforce than when many of the original reference studies were conducted" (p. 228).

On the other hand, it is important that researchers not conclude from their critique of the gender and IS literature that all quantitative, positivist studies of gender and IT are necessarily suspect. I fear, however, that many readers will draw exactly this conclusion. If one were to dismiss all quantitative, positivist studies on IT and gender, this would eliminate nearly 75% of the studies of gender and IT that have been published to date. To reject these studies would, in effect, return us to an era that Adam et al. (2004, p. 223) criticize as being characterized by "difficulties of finding published research on the topic of gender and IS, whether that be interpretivist or positivist in emphasis."

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

One common assumption appears to be that quantitative studies that statistically analyze data to identify differences between men and women are misguided because they necessarily assume an essentialist view that that men and women are innately different from each other. While some quantitative scholars certainly subscribe to essentialist beliefs, citing prior literature on innate biological or psychological differences between men and women (as Venkatesh & Morris, 2000, do in citing early research from cognitive psychology), not all quantitative scholars who study gender and IT share such essentialist beliefs. Indeed, researchers who conduct comparative studies need not accept essentialist or deterministic explanations as the underlying reason for the differing experiences of men and women with regard to IT or IT careers. Treating gender as a nominal variable (one that facilitates comparative analysis, whether qualitative or quantitative in nature) is also consistent with a view that gender is socially constructed. For instance, in her qualitative comparative studies of IT use and resistance, Wilson (2004, p. 84) argued that differences between the experiences of men and women are "based on the role of socialization in creating gender

difference—rather than ... [different] innate abilities and characteristics." Similarly, Woodfield (2002) also conducted comparative studies of men's and women's experiences in IT careers, offering a social-constructivist explanation for the specific skills and attributes that have been ascribed to women vs. men:

My own position on the question of whether women are indeed more socially skilled than men is that women as a group, by dint of their socialisation, are typically more relational in focus, more people-oriented, and often have a more co-operative style of interaction. (p. 121)

Thus, scholars who conduct comparative studies of the beliefs, actions, and experiences of men and women need not subscribe to essentialist or determinist tenets that men and women are innately different from each other. Of course, researchers who write about gender should clearly explicate their beliefs regarding the meaning of gender and the underlying factors that shape men's and women's experiences regarding IT and IT careers, whether their work is comparative or not. Such scholars may subscribe to essentialist, social constructivist, radical feminist, feminist standpoint, or any of a host of explanations and philosophical traditions regarding the meaning of gender and the reasons for similarities and differences between men and women.

We should be skeptical of all studies that neglect to offer any definition of gender or conceptual basis for the differences they posit between men and women; yet, we must also let the authors speak for themselves rather than draw the unwarranted conclusion that all scholars who analyze comparative, quantitative data on men and women believe in essential, inborn differences between the sexes. Nor should we assume that all qualitative researchers who study gender necessarily assume a social-constructivist perspective on gender. Such views, however, are implied in the statements quoted from Adam et al. (2004), above. As further validation of my argument that quantitative researchers do not all subscribe to essential differences between the sexes, nor do all qualitative researchers hold social-constructivist beliefs, I conducted a literature search of all studies on IT and gender published in the

6 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/diversity-studying-gender/12739

Related Content

Online Life and Gender Dynamics
Jonathan Marshall (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 926-931).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/online-life-gender-dynamics/12851

Checking Female Foeticide in the Information Age
Chetan Sharmaand Divya Jain (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 90-95).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/checking-female-foeticide-information-age/12720

Matrix
Irina Aristarkhova (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 882-884).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/matrix/12843

Postcolonial ICT Challenges
Birgitta Rydhagenand Lena Trojer (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 1012-1017).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/postcolonial-ict-challenges/12864

Challenging Gender Stereotypes Using Virtual Pedagogical Characters
Agneta Gulzand Magnus Haake (2010). *Gender Issues in Learning and Working with Information Technology: Social Constructs and Cultural Contexts (pp. 113-132).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/challenging-gender-stereotypes-using-virtual/42492