

## **GENDER, EMANCIPATION AND CRITICAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper addresses ways in which theorizing gender may be important in forming an understanding of the topic of emancipation which is central to the new critical information systems based on Habermas's thinking. After briefly introducing current research on gender and IS and arguing that we need to look towards feminist philosophy for appropriate theory in order to understand foundational issues such as emancipation, the paper reflects on the reasons why technical disciplines may find feminist theory threatening. The development of feminist philosophy and epistemology is introduced. Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' is problematized in relation to feminist writing on male and female communication juxtaposed with recent research in computer mediated communications. The paper continues by exploring the concept of emancipation through feminist epistemology and closes by analysing how these concerns may be applied to critical IS.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

There is much evidence to suggest that gender is a fundamental, and possibly even the most fundamental aspect of the way we organize and categorize our social existence [Evans, 1994]. The first thing we are told about a baby when it is born is whether it is a boy or girl. We are often thrown off guard if someone of the 'wrong' gender appears in a given role. We phone Professor Smith and her secretary, Mr Brown, answers the call. Someone who feels like man trapped in a woman's body, or a woman trapped in a male body may go to extreme lengths to change sex. Leaving aside procreation and potential fleshly pleasures, there is no doubt that gender, and ordering the world along gendered lines, matters a great deal to us. Yet, given that it is accepted alongside class, and ethnicity, and even age, sexuality and religion, as an important determinant of social behaviour in research in the social sciences, it rarely appears in the 'technical' disciplines as a research topic.

This paper briefly reviews current research on gender and information systems, both from within a tradition of writing on gender and information technologies and from within IS, to conclude that, so far, little has been written on gender aspects of more foundational issues in IS as the concept of 'gender' itself has remained under-theorized. I reflect on why feminist theory may hitherto have appeared threatening to technical disciplines. It is suggested that feminist theory, feminist philosophy and, within that, feminist epistemology, may be a fruitful starting place to analyze the problematic concept of emancipation which has been imported into critical IS through the work of Habermas. Habermas's [1972] theory of knowledge-constitutive interests

is a critique of epistemology which questions the validity of our knowledge of the world. The concept of emancipation is crucially linked to epistemology through the ideal of emancipatory interests overcoming technocracy. Yet feminist writers [Meehan 1995] have criticized Habermas for his tendency to universalize and the gender-blindness of his work. The paper analyzes associated problems through, first of all, considering the 'ideal speech situation' of communicative rationality which has proved an appealing idea in critical IS and linking this to recent research in computer mediated communications (CMC). Secondly, arguments from feminist epistemology are adduced to contend, in more detail, that, until the fine structure of emancipation is better understood, attempts to emancipate may not achieve their ends. Finally these arguments are applied to critical IS.

### **1.1. Gender and IS from Gender and IT**

Although there has been a widespread turn towards treating social and organizational issues as important and legitimate areas for IS research, work which has specifically addressed gender as a research variable has remained limited in scope and in quantity within the IS domain. At the same time, it is interesting to note that feminist research on information systems has dwindled from a high point in the late 1980s and early 1990s where a number of reasonably high profile projects were funded and reported in the literature [Green, 1994; Green et al, 1993; Bjerkenes and Bratteteig, 1987; Vehvilainen, 1997]. Although there appears to be just as much interest on gender and information and communication technologies as ever, this implies that the 'gender equity' inspired empirical research project in IS seems to have all but disappeared.

One problem is that this type of research appears to have lost momentum as research on gender and virtuality and the Internet has overtaken earlier workplace studies. But it should be pointed out that, at the same time, the projects listed above were all but ignored by the IS mainstream. For instance, although the FLORENCE project was reported in a widely cited edited collection [Bjerkenes et al., 1987] I have found only one citation of FLORENCE itself in a major IS publication [Hirschheim et al., 1995].

Clearly this area of research does not fit into mainstream IS as such, belonging instead to a more specific 'gender and information technologies' research community. Nevertheless the seeming failure of gender and IS as a research paradigm, within this apparently very relevant sub-community, further adds to the feeling that gender and IS research is in the doldrums and a failure to get anywhere near the mainstream may have contributed the apparent atrophy of this paradigm of research.

### **1.2. Gender and IS from IS**

Research on gender and IS from within the more broadly defined 'gender and IT' community can be compared in style to the much more slender body of quantitative and qualitative research on gender and IS which is located and reported in the IS literature. The problem with research on gender and IS from within IS itself is somewhat different. Apart from the fact that there is not very much of it, I argue that, currently, much of this work is under-theorized with regard to the concept of gender itself. Quantitative research revolving round statistical surveys which look for differences in men's and women's behaviours, tends to force men's and women's characteristics into stereotyped straitjackets [Gefen and Straub, 1997; Igarria and Chidambaram, 1997; Truman and Baroudi, 1994; Venkatesh and Morris, 2000 ].

On the other hand, although there are exceptions [Wilson and Howcroft, 2000], qualitative, or, perhaps more properly, non-statistical research on gender and IS tends to focus on the low numbers of women in the profession and how to attract more of them [Camp, 1997; Panteli et al, 1999; Robertson et al., 1999]. Camp's [1997] notion of 'shrinking pipelines' captures the mood of such work well. Whilst low numbers of women continues to be a problem, it is much harder to tackle the question of why information technology is unappealing to women in the first place. Last year's ECIS conference panel on gender was possibly one of the very few mainstream appearances of the topic ever, but this does not represent a major project in the area [Robertson et al., 1999].

### **1.3. Feminist Theory – Why is It Threatening?**

Reviewing gender and IS research from within the IS discipline itself, points to the conclusion that this area needs to be informed by a more thoroughgoing theoretical perspective and, in particular, a perspective which places gender centre stage as an analytical category. One place to look for such a perspective is academic feminism, which has been a tremendous academic growth area in the last twenty or more years. But understandably most ‘technical’ and mainstream disciplines shy away from feminist writing. It is not difficult to see why. Put bluntly, but without intending to universalize the experiences of women, feminist writing starts from the base point that women generally stand in an inferior position to men in most walks of life. Whilst analyzing and reporting, at the same time much feminist research looks to ways in which such situations might be alleviated. It is therefore a political project. Not surprisingly this can be seen as threatening, particularly for areas such as IS, which subscribes to a rhetoric that, as a relatively new discipline, it may have escaped old discriminatory practices prevalent in longer established domains [Truman and Baroudi, 1994]. A dimension to this potential threat is that if women are the oppressed then it could be argued that men are the oppressors.

Not surprisingly such a position would seem threatening to say the least. Nevertheless this is not a position which is generally held in contemporary feminism which eschews such a stark and unanalyzed view of the many facets of oppression. Here I am attempting to present the extremes of the argument to find reasons why feminist thinking often appears threatening to mainstream writing. Indeed, as I suggest above, the stereotypes promulgated by a major strand of gender and IS writing i.e. statistical gender difference studies, are just as oppressive to men as to women. Therefore it would seem to be in everyone’s interests that gender relations are thoroughly explored and then couched in an appropriate theoretical framework.

### **1.4. Addressing ‘Non Gender’ Topics in IS with Feminist Theory**

It would be easy to view the ‘pipeline’ style and statistical research reported above as the acceptable face of feminism, where figures and statistics can be endlessly analyzed, thus postponing the requirement to look at deeper, underlying reasons for women’s absence from technical disciplines.

The question of relative absence remains important and must not be dismissed. Yet, if we were to believe that the only contribution that feminist theory can make to IS is at the ‘equal opportunities’, human resources end of the subject then we would be missing out on its potential to contribute significantly to the critical, analytical end of the IS spectrum. A further, and equally important task for feminist theory in the service of IS involves combining the lessons learned from the diverse literature on gender and information technologies with relevant aspects of feminist philosophy and bring all these to a discussion of the development of the theory of IS.

This means that a more radical job for feminist theory would be to see if it could contribute to debates fermenting round important topics in IS which have hitherto hardly been seen in gendered terms at all [Adam, 2001; Adam and Richardson, 2001]. The rest of the paper addresses the latter area, namely a contemporary, apparently ‘non-gender’ topic (i.e. not, on the surface related to masculinity and femininity) from the point of view of various aspects of feminist theory.

The topic in question is the emancipatory vector of critical IS in its basis on Habermas’s writing. The following sections bring a critique and analysis of Habermas’s writing, developed from feminist philosophy, to bear on the important topic of emancipation. Critical IS has appropriated the term ‘emancipation’ based on its adoption of an anti-positivist position based on Habermas’s critical theory. Although it might be tempting to regard the concept of emancipation as purely beneficial, I argue that a better understanding of the implications of this term can be made through a feminist analysis to show that we need a much more sophisticated understanding of the fine structure of emancipation. This shows that attempts to universalize the concept are problematic. In particular I draw on feminist critiques of Habermas’s writing [Benhabib, 1986; Meehan, 1995] to argue that, just as feminist writers have criticized Habermas’s theories as being gender blind, there is a danger that this ‘gender blindness’, with its concomitant problems, may be imported

by critical IS in its adherence to Habermas's critical theory. In what follows I will argue, in particular, that the concept of 'emancipation' is problematic and that calls for emancipation may actually mask existing power structures and hence reinforce them, offering little scope for true emancipation.

## **2. FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND EPISTEMOLOGY – A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION**

Space permits no more than the briefest introduction to feminist theory through feminist philosophy which I have argued can provide a fruitful perspective from which to analyze contemporary issues in the foundations of IS, and in particular crucial concepts in critical IS. Feminist philosophy is one of the most theoretically developed parts of contemporary feminism and at the same time is one of the most important developments in contemporary philosophy, particularly at the radical end of the discipline [Tong, 1994]. It has two major roles; firstly to form a critique of mainstream philosophy and secondly to offer alternative theoretical positions, ones which often rest on feminine inspired attributes such as intuition, collective responsibility and fairness rather than what are often perceived as masculine norms of individual rights and rationality. Since World War Two it has developed two distinctive branches, Continental or what is sometimes termed 'postmodern' feminism and Anglo-American feminism [Hekman, 1990].

Anglo-American feminism originated from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s within which the struggle for women's liberation was prominent. Equal rights, equality, power struggles, inclusion, emancipation, liberation –these are all terms which inspire this strand of feminism. Hence the foundations of this strand of feminist thinking belong more to the fight for women's equality with men than within postmodern feminism's challenge to the rational order which men have apparently created. Within feminist philosophy itself the two largest branches are feminist epistemology [Tong, 1993] and feminist ethics [Card, 1991]. Feminist epistemology challenges traditional epistemology's propensity to ignore the knowing subject and the contingency of knowledge. Feminist ethics challenges traditional ethical theories, particularly in their tendency to focus on the individual rational moral agent at the expense of more collectivist approaches towards moral theory. Both feminist epistemology and feminist ethics have a bearing on the critique of Habermas's view of epistemology and ethics. However, for reasons of brevity it is a more general introduction to a feminist critique of critical IS through some aspects of feminist epistemology which is introduced below.

Although I do not have space to rehearse the arguments in detail here, it must be emphasized that contemporary feminist writing argues strongly against tendencies to universalize women's experiences. For instance, early second wave 'women's liberation' was later criticized as being a white, Western middle class feminism of limited relevance to women of non-white and/or working class origins.

At a time when new IS writing is beginning to locate itself within critical theory, and where IS developing a distinct critical voice, feminist philosophy as an alternative major contemporary critical theory may offer an alternative critical approach. Secondly, in following the history of IS's turn to critical theory, it is clear that power, emancipation, participation, democracy and inclusion are concepts which inspire contemporary IS writers and these too are central concepts of feminist theories.

## **3. THE CRITICAL APPROACH TO INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

The relatively new critical theory school in IS associated with Hirschheim, Klein and Lyytinen [1995: 1996; see especially Hirschheim, 1985] amongst others, looks to the social theories of Habermas in arguing for communicative rationality as an alternative to the instrumental rationality of positivism. As technical knowledge interests have come to dominate society through 'technocracy' i.e. expertise supported through a positivist view of science, critical debate, through communicative competence is required. Within this new anti-positivist approach there lies the possibility to free individuals from oppressive and unwarranted expressions of power – the emancipatory ideal. If such ideas can be translated into the design and

development real information systems then the systems analyst can act as emancipator rather than someone who imposes a technicist solution on a group of unwilling users.

### **3.1. Feminist Philosophy and Emancipation**

The concept of emancipation is a central part of the epistemology of the new critical IS. Yet, the power structures which play such a large part in the making and acceptance of knowledge need more detailed analysis than is currently available within the new IS approaches.

The will for a generalized unanalyzed emancipation is not enough; indeed it may serve to reinforce rather than alleviate oppression if it leaves unexplored the material conditions which cause the oppression in the first place. This version of emancipation leans toward a form of liberalism which is unlikely to achieve its ideals unless we direct attention towards more detailed analysis of power relations within organizations and the wider society which make emancipation seem so desirable in the first place. Indeed the power relations will remain unbalanced if the systems designers cast themselves as the liberators or emancipators, with a privileged epistemology based on the new critical IS, storming the barricades of ignorance in emancipating the system users who maybe did not even realize that they were candidates for emancipation.

Feminist philosophers such as Assiter [1996], Haraway [1991] and Harding [1991] emphasize pluralism in epistemology. They argue that a viewpoint from an epistemic community committed to emancipatory values gives greater access to knowledge, by bringing to light information previously hidden from view, than viewpoints from other types of community. The implications of this claim are explored in the remainder of the paper.

### **3.2. A feminist Critique of Communicative Rationality**

It is this tendency to universalize human experience and thereby to assume that democracy and liberation are the same for everyone that has been a particular focus of feminist critiques of Habermas [Meehan, 1995]. Habermas would like a universal moral theory yet feminist moral theorists [e.g. Code, 1993] argue for the cultural specificity of ethical theory and argue that all ethical decision makers are not equally placed to contribute to ethical decision making. Critical theory suggests that increased communicative rationality leads to increased opportunity for emancipation yet many feminist linguists argue that speech situations for women may be far from ideal. For instance Spender's [1980] research shows that women are interrupted more than men in public discourse. Despite popular conceptions of women's 'chattering', Spender argues that men contribute more than women in public meetings and that women who take up the same time as men in speaking publicly are seen as 'overcontributing.' Similarly Tannen [1992] argues that women and men have different speech styles; women are often more supportive in conversation; men are often more abrupt.

These concerns have been taken up in the rhetoric surrounding CMC, particularly in writing which idealizes the utopian potential of the Internet to act as an instrument of communicative rationality for an ideal speech situation [Sproull and Kessler, 1991]. Ess [1996] emphasizes that unanalyzed claims as to what is meant by democracy tend to weaken claims for the Internet's potential to achieve a democratic polity along the lines that Habermas outlined in his critical theory. This mirrors the position taken in the present paper that an undertheorized notion of emancipation cannot be pressed into service for all groups who might require it.

Herring [1996] points to the way in which communications on the Internet magnify stereotypical male and female interaction into flaming and supportive interaction respectively, rather than somehow smoothing it out and making all voices equally heard. Sexual harassment on the Internet is problematic enough but extreme versions, in the form of 'cyberstalking' can result [Adam, 2001]. In the end Ess [1996] realizes that democratization via CMC along ethical and political dimensions cannot take place without attention to ethical and social aspects to include under-represented voices such as those of women and minorities.

This short discussion barely scratches the surface of the subtleties of male and female communicative interaction. Yet unless there is some understanding of its complexities it is hard to see how communicative

rationality, through an 'ideal speech situation', in the world of information systems can be achieved until we accept that ideal speech situations are not the same for all, and until more complex analyses are available of the ways in which concepts such as democracy and emancipation are not equally divided.

#### **4. EXPLORING FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EMANCIPATORY VALUES**

Thinking about the potential for feminist philosophy to analyze the fine structure of the problem of emancipation, feminist epistemology may be particularly pertinent. Assiter's [1996] arguments are important in this respect. She claims that the major value of feminist epistemology is in its questioning of the ways in which traditional theories of knowledge regard the business of knowing as independent of social and cultural context. By contrast, a feminist approach argues for a situated understanding of knowledge. Yet the realist element must not be lost as it is vital to recognize the reality of the oppression of various social groups. A completely relativist approach, which is a danger if we go too far in completely rejecting positivism, has no way to recognize the reality of oppression and therefore the will towards emancipation is fatally undermined.

What is the link between emancipatory values and knowledge? Some feminist writers have particularly emphasized the way that taking seriously the viewpoint of subjugated groups, in expressing their will towards emancipation, may be taken to open up new forms of knowledge. Haraway [1991] and Harding [1991] argue that a standpoint taken from women's lives, and a commitment towards emancipatory values for women leads to more knowledge, adding a dimension to knowledge which is hidden from the viewpoint of a 'value free' abstract science. For instance, witness the way that the discovery of the importance of 'woman the gatherer' in addition to 'man the hunter' has changed our view of our evolutionary history. Secondly, Gilligan's [1982] research on women's moral evolution has challenged earlier views that women were morally less mature than men, thus changing our views of moral development.

So it seems that writers on feminist epistemology are in agreement with Habermas that the model of a good science (e.g. in this case information systems) should be guided by liberatory, social goals and interests and a commitment to such goals reveals gaps, continuities and partialities in traditional accounts of knowledge. This aspect of revealing the hidden is particularly important in feminist thinking. Repressive values can blinker this. Those who are committed to the emancipation of a particular group may offer us radical insights into the world which may of value to others, not just those in that chosen group. Knowledge can advance, in this way, by a window onto new truths. However, in following such a process, we cannot claim that emancipatory values always lead to knowledge, rather that the possibilities for new knowledge are opened up.

Haraway [1991] and Harding [1991] argue that those who are in a 'subaltern' position excluded from dominant groups, for instance women, are in a better position to articulate emancipatory values which will ultimately lead to knowledge. This echoes older Marxist thinking which looks to the proletariat for a truer picture of the world. Yet the feminist position makes no truth claims, rather it is arguing for the knowledge of oppressed groups to be taken seriously to be seen as on a par with the knowledge of other groups. Although in agreement with Habermas in some aspects this seems to cut across his attempts to universalize. Seeing emancipation as part of everyday relations, he argues, at the same time, that it reaffirms common humanity through universality [Benhabib, 1986]. The point about the feminist argument is not that we should lose sight of common humanity, which is the universal aspect which we share, but rather that we must recognize how a pluralism of epistemological understanding contributes to this common humanity.

#### **5. CONCLUSION – HOW CAN FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY SERVE INFORMATION SYSTEMS?**

It is not immediately clear how critiques of Habermas, and in particular, the problem of emancipation, can have a practical bearing on critical IS. Nevertheless there are ways in which these concepts can offer lessons. First of all they imply that attention to social and cultural context is paramount. This serves to underline IS's

commitment to position itself within the social/cultural arena, in contrast to the more formal stance of traditional computer science. Secondly, feminist theory's calls to retain realism with emancipation are in accord with current approaches to IS, where unbridled relativism seems impossible to maintain alongside calls for emancipation. These two aspects are already part of the rationale of much writing in IS. But a particular emphasis stems from the third message from feminist epistemology, relating to Haraway's [1991] Harding's [1991] emphasis of the knowledge of subordinate groups in developing their own approaches towards their emancipation. Applying this to IS reveals at least two aspects. Communicative rationality through 'ideal speech situations' as described above, may be quite differently construed within a subordinate group. Secondly, this specifically challenges the whole notion of the systems analyst as emancipator. It suggests further that managers, systems analysts and those in high positions in the organizational hierarchy cannot easily achieve emancipation of workers lower in the hierarchy. Rather we must look to the subordinate groups themselves for an expression of their own emancipatory values through their own knowledges. This is a much stronger claim than the more liberally inspired 'user participative' approaches often found in IS. The way forward would seem to be a return to the 'feminist theory' inspired IS projects described at the beginning of this paper, to take seriously the idea that feminist theory can inform the critical approach to IS, and to explore this in a more thorough way than can be accomplished within this space, and finally to provide practical demonstrations of how this may be achieved.

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