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EDITORIAL

## The Personal in the Policy Cascade

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### Abstract

Policy change can cascade down from law and regulation, but Giddens' structuration theory argues that it can also flow upward from everyday action. We all have the power to take immediate action in our professional lives to create the policies we want. We use the example of gender equality to show the daily choices that you as an IS academic can make that strengthen or change existing policies. You can enhance the voices of members of undervalued groups, reduce inequities in access to resources and positions of power, and create and enforce rules, regulations, and codes that encourage more equitable outcomes. Policy influences action, but action equally influences policy. Your everyday actions either reinforce existing policies and structures or undermine and change them. We should make these choices mindfully, with an understanding of the power we are wielding, the values we are enacting, and the society we are creating.

**Keywords:** Structuration Theory, Policy, Gender, Equity

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### 1 The Policy Cascade

We work in organizations and live in a society in which individuals do not think everything is as it should be. Policy to change things can cascade down from law and regulation but these are just one kind of influence. A policy cascade for a given topic is not inevitable, and there is no need to wait for the cascade to begin. Policy is an organizational issue, part of planning, strategic or otherwise. Policy can be seen as values put into action. IT policy, informed by information systems (IS) research, can be designed to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness in topics as diverse as outsourcing, "bring your own device" strategies, and collaboration tool selection. Policy relevant to IS is not confined to the CIO or corporate boardrooms. The pursuit of short-term profit is not the only IS value. IS academics face policy choices every day, and choices express values and strengthen and change existing

policies, or sometimes create new ones. IS academics should make these policy choices mindfully, with an understanding of the values that are being enacted.

The personal is important. It can help organizations (and even society) "get ready" for what will come—for what is "right." This paper uses the example of gender equality to explain this. This cascade begins with social movements, some of which have influenced law and regulation, and some of which have not. By using the personal to help get the organization ready for the coming cascade, the information systems' academic puts expertise to use. Social change can include policy change but may take longer than many imagine. An early start would be wise.

### 2 The Personal

Although there are antidiscrimination laws, women are consistently undervalued and marginalized in society

and in the ivied walls of academia—bastions of embedded gender structuring since their early roots in European monasteries. Faculty positions typically reflect men’s life circumstances, not women’s (Bird, 2011). The tenure clock often ticks when women are in their childbearing years and decisions about women’s task assignments, promotion, and tenure are often made by men who may not necessarily be aware of women’s life circumstances and the ways that these challenge their advancement. The impacts on women’s careers are significant. Compared to men, women are less likely to have their work cited (Maliniak, Powers & Walter, 2013; Peñas & Willett, 2006); they are less likely to be invited to give talks or to be included in panels (e.g. Flaherty, 2014; Jaschik, 2016); their student ratings are lower (e.g., Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, 2017; MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Mengel, Sauermann & Zölitz, 2017; Wagner, Rieger & Voorvelt, 2016); they are less likely to be assigned to work that contributes to their promotability (Bagues et al., 2017; Misra et al., 2011); they are less likely to attain tenure or promotion (Bagues, Sylos-Labini & Zinovyeva, 2017; Guarino & Borden, 2016; Misra, Lundquist & Templer, 2012; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiovritis, 2011); for the relatively small percentage of women who are promoted to full professor, it takes them longer (Misra et al., 2011; O’Meara et al., 2018); and, in the case of IS professors, they may be less likely to be named AIS Fellows.

This pattern is not unique to academic organizations. Kanter (1977) recognizes the presence of gender identity in models of organizations when she describes a “masculine ethic” that underpins the image of managers. This “masculine ethic” is one of rationality and reason devoid of personal, emotional considerations when involved in problem solving and decision-making. Kanter states, “While organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines, masculine principles were dominating their authority structures” (1977, pg. 46). Kanter views gender as external to the structure (Acker, 1990), but Acker (1990, pg. 146) argues that gender is embedded in organizations such that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between...masculine and feminine.” Gender, for Acker, is deeply embedded in organizational processes and, consequently, organizations are not gender neutral.

Organizations are situated within their societies. Risman (2004) views gender as a structure deeply embedded in society and notes that Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory contributes to analyzing gender as a social structure in which there is a recursive

relationship between social structure and individuals. Gender identity is formed and shaped by very early social interactions (Acker, 2012). For example, parents use more emotion words and discuss emotions (other than anger) more often with their daughters than with their sons; mothers discuss feelings more with their daughters, whereas they go into more detail about the causes and consequences of emotions with their sons; girls develop language facility earlier than boys and they are more adept at expressing their feelings; further, girls tend to play in small intimate groups in which hostility is minimized and collaboration is maximized whereas boys tend to play more competitive games in larger groups (Goleman, 1995).

Gender identity is also formed and shaped by interactions among men and women in work practices (Acker, 2012). Society tends to view employees as accepting of hierarchy, the ideal worker as masculine, and organizations as gender neutral. Some of the earliest large organizations were armies and monasteries, organizations populated almost exclusively by men and reliant on well-defined hierarchies. Men held all the decision-making positions in these organizations. Today’s organizations’ views of the ideal worker are rooted in the gendered views deriving from early male-dominated organizations. The ideal worker is unencumbered and has no obligations outside of work (Acker, 2012). The ideal worker reflects a “masculine” gender identity that is competitive and emotionally detached (Bird, 1996).

There is gender inequality. The research convinces us of this. We emphasize the importance of being grounded in the facts at the beginning of any policy consideration. As IS academics who have accepted that there is gender inequality, we face three questions: Why? Does the current state reflect my values? If not, what policy effect can you and I have on the issue at hand through our recurring practices? Our answers take direction from Giddens’ structuration theory as we focus on salient features of gender equality<sup>1</sup> that IS academics can influence in the organizations they work in, do research in, or consult for.

### **3 An Intellectual Model**

Policy can cascade down from governmental laws and regulations to organizational policies, and from there down to individual compliance or resistance, but this is just one direction of influence. Giddens’ structuration theory presents a more complete view of the social cycle connecting agents and structures within social systems (Possebon & Pinsonneault, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that many of the choices discussed here could also be used to combat other forms of inequity such as

discrimination on the basis of race, age, country of origin, or religion.

Structuration theory attempts to reconcile the tension between individual agents who can take action (like IS academics) and structural constraints that are hard to change (like academia as instantiated by universities, professional organizations like AIS, conferences, and journals). It posits that shared knowledge creates expectations that influence actors' behaviors and suggests that these behaviors then reinforce existing expectations, if they are consistent with them, or weaken them, if they are inconsistent. Expectations arise from behavior patterns and then influence future behavior patterns—a feature termed the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984).

But what can you, as a mindful IS academic who values equal treatment and inclusivity, do about any of this? A lot!—and you don't even need to change federal laws to have an influence. Structuration theory points out that structure rests on shared knowledge, expectations, and assumptions. You can consciously choose to weaken the existing structure and strengthen an alternative structure by changing your actions. Giddens describes three self-reinforcing pillars: signification (meaning), domination (power), and legitimation (norms). Individual actions can influence each of them.

## 4 Signification and Communication

Signification denotes the encoding of meaning by existing interpretive schemes during communication. Being undervalued and marginalized, women's communications are often interpreted as unimportant, but there are a number of policy activities that you can perform that will enhance the voices of women in academia, normalize their place in academia, and show that they are valued. Some are activities that you, along with others, can perform repeatedly to slowly help modify structure, such as:

- **Using amplification to change the way that women's voices are heard and the meaning attached to their communications.** This is a strategy employed by Obama's women staffers to overcome "manteruptions" and "bropropriations"<sup>2</sup> (Hatch, 2016). You can mindfully repeat the comments of other women and give credit to them.
- **Publicly and repeatedly attributing the success of women to their capabilities.** Women differentially suffer from doubts and low self-esteem and often do not attribute success to their own skills or competence. When complimented on doing something well, they tend to say that their success is due to external

factors, such as luck or help from others (Sandberg, 2015). Further, when performing tasks typically performed by men, if there is any ambiguity about a woman's contribution to the joint task, the woman's contribution is generally downplayed (Ceci & Williams, 2011). You can consciously acknowledge the contribution of women to team efforts.

- **Mindfully citing research by women.** It has been shown that the research of women is cited less than that of men (Maliniak et al., 2013; Peñas & Willett, 2006). Although women do publish less than men (especially earlier in their careers), women also do not cite their own work as much as men do and are less likely to be in citation groups that systematically cite one another's work (Maliniak et al., 2013). When there are multiple references that could be used to support a point, you could choose to include those that were written by women.
- **Implementing Owen Barder's pledge<sup>3</sup>:** "At a public conference I won't serve on a panel of two people or more unless there is at least one woman on the panel, not including the Chair." You can urge your organizations to ensure that there is at least one woman (other than the chair or moderator) on panels at their conferences. AIS's special interest group on the Adoption and Diffusion of Information Technology has adopted this pledge for their workshops. Recently the NIH director did the same by vowing not to serve on what have been termed "manels" (Bernstein, 2019).

Additional actions that you can take involve urging collectives to promote changes in institutions (i.e., universities and academic associations) and more radically altering structures with embedded gender. For example, you can urge your department to do identity-blind doctoral program admissions (like we do double-blind reviewing), making knowledge of the applicant's gender less influential.

## 5 Domination and Power

Domination is where power is applied, particularly in the form of the control of persons (authoritative power) or resources (allocative power). Gender has been embedded in organizations both through differential access to resources and, structurally, through the underrepresentation of women in positions of power.

- **Sharing information to help overcome inequitable allocative power.** Often allocative power is preserved through secrecy, but you can

<sup>2</sup> *Time* magazine defines manterrupting as the "unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man" and bropropriating as

"taking a woman's idea and taking credit for it (Bennet, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.owen.org/pledge>

enhance equality by sharing information about performance ratings, workloads, and resources allocated such as salaries, graduate students assigned, and travel money provided. Several major Canadian universities recently examined their employee data and, upon discovering that their female faculty had been consistently undercompensated, allocated equity increases (Loriggio, 2016). One of the authors of this paper won a gender discrimination case against a major oil company after two of her many colleagues shared salary information with her; this resulted in a salary adjustment for all women in the unit. Those of her colleagues who were unwilling to share their salary information might have felt that they would be seen as losers or whiners (Acker, 2000)

Authoritative power can be used to enhance equity by addressing workload inequities that result in women having less time to do their research (Misra et al., 2012) and, consequently, contribute to lower promotion and tenure rates for women (Guarino & Borden, 2016) as well as slower promotion to full professor (O'Meara et al., 2018). The inequity in workloads is the result of many decisions over time.

- **Assigning high visibility jobs to address workload equities.** You can choose women to serve in jobs with high visibility and high impact. Women are more likely to be asked to do tasks associated with low promotability (i.e., those that are time-consuming, detailed, and that do not improve their visibility or lead to better jobs) and are more likely to accept these requests (Babcock, Recalde, & Vesterlund, 2017). Studies repeatedly find that women are given more of these “institutional housekeeping” tasks (e.g., Misra et al., 2011) and fewer high-visibility tasks that provide critical career experiences (Pace, 2018). A simple intervention would be to implement in your organization a shared rotation of time-intensive, less promotable, but necessary tasks, as well as a rotation of the more preferred ones.

More systematic change can be accomplished when departments implement a coherent program of interventions that might include a workshop on implicit bias in faculty workload assignments, collecting and sharing transparent annual faculty workload data (a “dashboard”), using the dashboard to identify equity issues, developing a Department Equity Action Plan, etc. These interventions have been used successfully to increase the perceived transparency and equity of workload assignment activities and assignments and to change the choice architecture for faculty workload allocation assignments (O'Meara et al., 2018).

Other policies could be especially helpful in enabling women faculty to devote more time to research within the context of their life experiences. In the US context, just as workplaces make accommodations for members of the military reserve who are called up for duty, could provide paid parental leave for childbirth, reduced teaching/service requirements for faculty during intensive child or elder care-giving periods, affordable university-based childcare or elder care, retooling support after parental leaves, and the ability to move between full-time and part-time status at various stages during the tenure-line career (Bird, 2011; Ceci & Williams, 2011; Misra et al., 2012;). To be successful, it is argued that such policies must move beyond mere training and lip service to recognize that systemic barriers need to be destroyed and that these new policies can only be maintained with the continued support and active participation of key administrators (Bird, 2011).

In addition to addressing the workload issue, we can work individually or collectively to encourage our universities and associations to reduce their reliance on biased performance indicators that negatively affect women's career progression. Collectively, we can attack the gendered structure of academia in several ways:

- With big data, we can now analyze student ratings and correct for the bias against women.
- We can stop using the h-index as a measure of influence or insist that it can only be used once it is corrected for demographic biases.
- We can reduce the risk of sexual harassment, which was recently estimated at 58% in the academic workplace, by reducing isolation and power imbalances (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Assigning more than one mentor to each graduate student and to each junior faculty member would provide options and support for those with little power and may help curtail abusive behaviors due to fear of exposure.

## 6 Legitimation

Legitimation consists of the normative perspectives embedded as societal norms and values and enforced through rules, regulations, and codes that sanction and reward. Many of the actions previously discussed can assist in changing these norms. In addition:

- **Promulgating codes of conduct.** Increasingly, conferences are requiring a code of conduct to which all attendees must agree. These codes promulgate a specific set of behavioral norms intended to reduce harassment and encourage respect (Baker, 2015). You can also discuss these norms with your colleagues and students,

thereby setting expectations for a workplace free from harassment.

- **Establishing norms about child care.** Fathers can perform their parental duties publicly so that care of children is seen as something that both men and women do. This means men taking parental leave and discussing their childcare responsibilities and constraints, something that is now predominantly done by women. It also means not punishing academics who take parental leave. You can also recognize that caregivers may not be able to join and participate in social networks outside of work that would provide them with valuable information or attend late afternoon meetings and research seminars (Bird, 2011).
- **Addressing the thorny norms of authorship.** Each of us can look at our research teams and co-authorship networks, assess their degree of diversity, and identify methods to increase it.
- **Working to make AIS Fellows more closely reflect our membership.** A lower number of AIS Fellows are typically awarded to women than men each year. While, commendably, the AIS by-laws state that there must be a minimum of one man and one woman on each AIS committee, they also state that only current AIS Fellows can serve on the nomination committee, which reinforces the lopsided underrepresentation of women (women make up one third of the membership but receive one quarter of the awards). Most AIS Fellow Nominating Committee members are male. They may be subject to homophily and, consequently, may tend to select people like themselves (e.g., Bagues et al., 2017). Further, women do not tend to self-nominate or nominate other women, thus women receive fewer Fellow nominations. The AIS Women's Network (AISWN) has started to encourage its members to nominate women for AIS honors. You can join this effort.

In addition, our top journals could increase their acceptance of papers and special issues on topics of particular concern to women, a group that is known to

be more socially motivated and more oriented toward helping others.<sup>4</sup> As a field, IS is not known for research that focuses on improving the lives of people who are marginalized, poor, or working class; on strengthening government services and social programs; or on increasing the effectiveness of nonprofits. Engaging societal challenges such as social and economic inequality, mass incarceration, climate change, childhood poverty, sustainability, the opioid epidemic, and mass migration could help ensure that women's concerns are reflected in IS research. Emphasizing cooperation and stewardship over competition and profits would realign the field away from the traditional hierarchical masculine view of organizations. Although some steps have been taken in this direction, much more could be done. Indeed, in writing this piece we received recommendations to shift our focus from gender equity to more general power differentials and to add research ethics as another example, which would have thus diluted our message.

## 7 The Personal as Actionable

As an IS academic, you can perform many of these everyday actions immediately, although some can only be done when you have seniority or are in a position of power. You can enhance the voices of women and members of other undervalued groups in academia. You can reduce inequities in access to resources and in positions of power. You can create and enforce rules, regulations, and codes that encourage more equitable outcomes and discourage inequities experienced by undervalued groups. Mindfully taking these actions will change expectations and stocks of knowledge, which will change the structures of signification, domination, and legitimation, resulting in a more equitable system. These societal-level changes will then shape new practice, new laws, and new regulations that affect organizational policy and influence future practice. In short, policy influences action, but action equally influences policy. Your everyday actions either reinforce existing policies and structures or undermine and change them. We all have the power to take immediate action in our professional lives to create the policies and the society in which we want to live and thrive.

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<sup>4</sup> A recent poll of likely voters found that women see gender equality, income inequality, race relations, healthcare, and

education as more important than do men (<http://www.genderwatch2018.org/what-women-want/>).

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