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Emergent Research Forum (ERF)

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Abstract

In this research-in-progress paper, we argue that feminist epistemologies can greatly benefit Information Systems research as it tries to grapple with societal issues of marginalization, emancipation, and distribution of power associated with digital technologies. Indeed, Information Systems scholars' growing focus on "doing good" requires us to think carefully not only about who the subject and objects of study are, but also on our own privileges as researchers. By drawing on Spivak and Deleuze and Guattari, we propose that feminist perspectives can play a key role in researching marginalized voices. We engage in asking questions and emphasize the need for IS research to (1) locate experiences of alternative subjectification done in environments where people are subjugated or obliged to conform to an imposed identity; and (2) enter a dialog with major theories to showcase the contradictions within dominant discourse.

Keywords

Subjectivity, feminism, critical research, objectification, methodology

Introduction

The Information Systems (IS) literature on gender-based marginalization encompasses four streams. The first stream studies the barriers that women face in IT organizations (Gorbacheva et al. 2019), the second is a critique of the AIS as a professional body (Windeler et al. 2020), and the third stream engages in organizations in general (Heath and Babu 2017), including online communities (Naidoo et al. 2019). Such studies have advanced our understanding of the issues impeding the equitable inclusion of women and minorities within organizations (Trauth 2017), often by taking a structural view of the barriers erected against them.

The fourth stream is currently attracting a resurgence of interest: the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of research that seeks to understand and challenge the causes of gender discrimination. Notwithstanding these ambitious goals, a number of articles within this stream have questioned some assumptions found within the critical tradition (Adam 2002; Mitev 2006; Trauth 2017) forwarding critique to its reliance on Habermas (Mitev 2006), and the epistemic positioning of the researchers as both definers and providers of emancipation (Adam 2002; Garcia 2021). For example, the word 'research' that our field relates to knowledge and emancipation is not shared by everyone. For indigenous people, "'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary [...] The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (Smith 2008, p. 1). Can we assume the universality of concepts especially when studying discriminated groups whose epistemic capabilities have been marginalized and

their ontological 'subjectivity' has been questioned? What kind of research do we create when working with people who may have little or no voice? Sometimes, our research may even exacerbate harm if we are not careful. As Manon Garcia (2021, p.85), for example, argues that "to say about a woman's experience that it is one of submission is to risk implicitly making this woman's submission a part of her essence."

There is thus a danger that our research betrays its own emancipatory goals by contributing to stereotyping or essentializing the role and organization of discriminated people. This is particularly the case in spaces where digital technologies are key and in which stereotyping is part and parcel of how those spaces are organized. Examples abound: in the gaming industry (Naidoo et al. 2019), or open source communities (Lee and Carver 2019), or social media (Selander and Jarvenpaa 2019). What is needed, our research will argue, is a focus on the voices of the subjugated and not only on the structures that subjugate. There is value in understanding how those who are marginalized organize themselves despite of the barriers, and how they create necessary spaces to contribute among those that would cast them out. Feminist research provides a specific methodological design that takes as a central tenet the preservation of the authenticity of discriminated voices and their experiences. A condition to such a methodology thus requires that we unlearn our privilege so that we may be attentive to the specific.

In this emergent research forum paper, we engage in exploring *how a feminist methodological design can contribute to our understanding of the voice of the subjugated?* We heed Trauth's (2017, p. 16) call to "reach across disciplinary boundaries into relevant literatures that are located in feminism" and propose two key methodological elements required for Information System scholars engaging in researching voices of the subjugated. We particularly emphasize the need for IS research (1) to locate experiences of alternative subjectification done in environments where people are subjugated or obliged to conform to an imposed identity (2) to enter a dialog with major theories to showcase the contradictions within dominant discourse.

Feminist Research in Information Systems

Gender discrimination issues in IS and the production of digital technologies have come a long way since the early works by several prominent scholars such as Enid Mumford. The critical research tradition has been fundamental in advancing emancipatory issues (Trauth 2017) and highlighting discriminatory structures in organizations against women (Bapna and Funk 2020). Early critical IS papers have leaned heavily on Habermasian concepts (Myers and Klein 2011), including IS gender studies (Adam 2002). While there is an increased opening in critical research to accommodate different critical perspectives, notably from Bourdieu and Foucault (Wang et al. 2019), with the IS field being open to epistemological and methodological diversity (Mendling et al. 2021), there remains room for wider exploration.

There are two interlinked aspects that we find particularly salien which tend to essentialise those who are discriminated. First, the privileged role of researchers in their use of key constructs such as emancipation developed in privileged environments. The first issue is the reliance on privileged theoretical constructs whose emancipatory potential has been developed in privileged environments. For example, Spivak's (1988) criticism of Deleuze and Foucault questions the theoretical capacity of many of their concepts and their assumptions of a 'subject' that can be active in its own emancipation. Similarly, critical theory walks a fine line in its ethical objective, risking to emancipate according to the emancipator's logic. Take Hirschheim and Klein's (1994) advocacy of infusing software development methodologies with emancipatory purpose. They propose four conditions for methodologies to be emancipatory. The first two highlight the contradiction raised by Spivak between our role as researchers of local and situated epistemologies and as emancipators, bringing to bear our own universalistic and privileged epistemology. On the one hand, condition one calls for deploying a methodology to support "an active process for individual and collective self-determination (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, p. 433)". On the other hand, the same methodology must "support a process of critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a, p. 434)" for a planner to "*initiate a process of emancipatory self reflection on the part of the affected.*" (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994, p. 87-88; original emphasis). The researcher initiate bottom-up processes of emancipation, but also emancipate *"on the part of the affected."*

These aims are commendable, but can they co-exist effectively? Can certain local experiences and organizational requirements make sense to the emancipator? At heart, the issue requires us to recast the role of the researchers and their ability to understand situated issues of emancipation. Perhaps more importantly, how can we research marginalized epistemologies without betraying them (Garcia, 2021) or

effecting epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988)? To enshrine the situated epistemic authenticity, we must be capable of developing and deploying a research apparatus with those who are marginalized. Doing so is no easy task since many of these voices, to us, would not be heard since their very subjectivities have been objectified, essentialized, stereotyped. How to co-create research with subaltern voices and not only *for* them? How to talk with and about subjects which are continuously essentialized and stereotyped, that are only subjects in-becoming, beings as flows (Mousavi Baygi et al. 2021)?

The second linked issue refers to the focus of critical theory on barriers and structures that prevent the full participation of marginalized people. We do not challenge the usefulness of such an approach, but we want to highlight the importance of discriminatory experiences. Indeed, there is a risk of structural views to stereotyping and encouraging identity discourses. For example, several IS studies have alerted on the dangers of stigmatizing, stereotyping, and 'othering' users who are hesitant or refuse to adopt ICTs (Díaz Andrade and Techatassanasoontorn 2020; Klecun 2008).Similarly, scholars such as Ahmed (2017) and Mendes et al.(2019) have advanced the 'affective economy' or 'affective fabrics' to account for the role of affects in organizing and sustaining collectives. The participation of marginalized people in online communities bears little resemblance to that of non-marginalized. The very act of participating where one is not expected to becomes a political act that relies on digital affective labor (Mendes et al. 2019, p. 179). They write: feminist campaigns are "the result of complex negotiations, actions, and initiatives by various groups of people, who have donated countless hours to these projects, with little to no financial compensation, security, or even recognition." A woman's participation in an online community will rest on these often invisible work and infrastructures Naidoo et al., (2019) showcase the "unequal discursive power that white males have when discussing social inclusion", highlighting how the discursive social practices reproduce dominant constructs and makes others invisible to our research. In other words, different genders have unequal capacities to influence epistemological constructions.

Preliminary Discussion and Implications

Here, we advance two implications derived from feminist critique of critical theory. We draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (1997) concept of minor theory to conceptualize the digital work done in the margins by discriminated people. In particular, we draw on Cindi Katz's (1996, p. 488) early efforts to think about alternative geographies, and how minor theories can help perform theories on "another register", to find "different ways of reading, writing, talking that apparently remain veiled to those still bent on 'mastery'". We offer two key ideas from how such theorization impact methodological approaches. Katz (2017, p. 596) adroitly summarizes the purpose of minor theorizing to study how: *"the minor reworks and decomposes the major from within. [Aspiring] to revolutionary consciousness through a disavowal of mastery and an embrace of marginality—a marginality that recognises and relates to all that it edges and all of its edges."*

There are two methodological implications from minor research. First, it is located within spaces where individuals and collectives work to undermine and resist works of 'subjectification', that is, the determining of what a 'good' subject is. It is easy to forget, for example, the role those illegal female migrants played in putting Silicon Valley at the forefront of technological innovation, effectively slashing the cost of prototyping such expensive components. Instead, history remembers visionary tech entrepreneurs working confidently in their parents' garage developing software, forgetting the "nimble fingers of 'Oriental' women (Haraway 1991, p. 14); "these little foreign gals are grateful to be hired—very, very grateful—no matter what" (Pincus 2019, p. 162). Can we talk of Silicon Valley's visionary digital innovation and libertarian emancipation without talking about the objectification of women?

The stark contrast between the prevalent 'hero' entrepreneur myth that hides the objectified women valued for their 'nimble fingers' shows the power difference in narrative building between sovereign subjects able to deify their actions, and non-subjects or subalterns whose values depend on physical properties and their willingness to submit. The consequence is that we know little about these subalterns and their role in digital innovation. How many such people are objectified in digital communities? How much feminist work is being done that we do not cover, much less theorize on and which are nonetheless indispensable to how things work? Viewed through these questions, a theory capable of dislodging those master narratives are not just any other kind of theory, they perform an ontological and epistemological overturn; a *retournement épistémologique* in French, which echoes and invites us to recast the value of situated epistemologies.. The consequences of this upturn are 'minor' in the sense that they offer a way to work "through the contradictions and limits more imaginatively" "to mark and produce alternative subjectivities, spatialities,

and temporalities" (Katz 1996, p. 490). Such work on 'alternative subjectivities' is particularly relevant when in the context of digital technologies where the subjectivity of women is denied them. In many cases marginalized genders are not subjects but *made* subjects through an ordering power. Naidoo et al.'s (2019) study shows the uphill battle to work alternative epistemologies within contexts of the dominant discourse. As such, women and marginalized people hold and represent multiple subjectivities, escaping constructed 'natural' orders, which depend on their ability to resist, contest, and secure their position as subjects in contrast to their objectification (as subjugated and submitted).

The second methodological implication is where we situate minor research, and how it can relate to major theories in their attempt to challenge dominant discourses. It bears repeating that minor theories such as feminism in IS are not against critical theories. On the contrary, as Katz (1997, p. 491) puts it: "The minor is so much a part of the major that its deployment completely reworks the major *from within*. One cannot 'translate' it into the major, so to speak, 'without destroying it'". The tension offered between the major and the minor is what effects the possibility of an epistemological upturn. For Orlikowski (1996) metamorphosis exists in part for its tension against the monolithic, the stable, the predicted change, Further, for Feldman (2004), potential for large, seemingly strategic change can be found within the everyday routines. The minor exists in the shadow of the major, but whose revealing can make evident the contradictions sustaining the dominant discourses and show a way forward to escape those formal signifying structures. The strength of their ordering power (towards the singular, the identitarian, the immobile) is revealed to hold cracks by the very presence of a multiplicity of minor identities that escape the singular. Further, these practices, processes, infrastructures such as Mendes et al.'s (2019) 'affective fabrics' that give free reign to these identities, lay the ground for a change to happen, for the dominant structures to be displaced. Immobile as they are, these structures can crumble. As such, minor research can 'seep into' spaces of contradictions that undermine the dominant discourse to reveal alternative and successful ways of organizing. Women have been de-organized from digital institutions and online labor communities, but they are not disorganized within them. 'Minor' research can render their digital work visible. In this way, feminist research help develop our understanding of all who are marginalized and their role in defining and sustaining IS and digital communities.

In developing this paper, we will systematically contrast the principles that underpin critical research with those behind feminist theories. From this analysis, we will discuss how feminist studies can complement critical research. Our preliminary analysis suggests that such complementarity can happen under certain methodological and conceptual conditions. Through this analysis, we can propose a research agenda that recasts the role of women as not only marginalised, but capable of action within marginalising processes. This work has important epistemological consequences that enter in dialogue with research theoretical proposals of flowing and fluid ontologies (Mousavi Baygi et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to propose feminist studies as an important alternative and complement to critical theories in IS. We have highlighted two issues within critical theory and how feminist theorization can help. Further we have positioned feminist studies from a 'minor' perspective to suggest that the dialogue between major and minor theories can help destabilize dominant discourse. Our objective has been to re-invigorate the debate in IS and to argue that current feminist studies and debates represent an important source of theorizing for current and future IS and digital phenomena. Following Adam's (2002) challenge: feminist studies are not about women's issues. In a world of increased complexity, identities and meaning are more fluid and intersectional (Mousavi Baygi et al. 2021). We 'are' no longer, but 'become'. The 'who' in a fluid world becomes an undecided 'when'. A continuous intersection between technologies and animals (Haraway 1991). Feminist studies bring an important epistemological and methodological apparatus that builds on themes of belonging and multiplicities within dominant discourse—a cyborg politics. As Haraway (1991, p. 33) argued thirty years ago: "cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."

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