

Women's Role in ICT Accounting Research: An Account from Self- Reflection

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Abstract

The term feminism, which began to gain ground in the 1970s, is used by those who object to the perceived deprivation of a woman's right to proper professional development. Very little evidence exists, however, as to why so few women have undertaken careers as an Academic researcher. John Lucas (1973) suggests that the feminist debate may lead to the application of certain concepts of justice, equality, and humanity. This being so, a central question for this paper is "Why is the academic management industry far from being gender neutral?" The author argues that such issues need to be highlighted, as he perceives that society as it stands is still unfair to women, and that this unfairness should be addressed. The paper also identifies that there are still, unanswered questions as to whether discrimination against suitably qualified women for such positions could ever be defended according to the current principles of social justice.

Keywords: Academic research, Reflective Practice, Women's education, Practitioner professional development.

1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to examine why senior management in the academic sector is far from being gender neutral. It discusses the feminist debate through the author's self-reflective accounts, which rely upon the application of certain concepts of justice, equality, and humanity. In recent years there has been an increased controversy regarding the role of women in the academic research arena. Should the fact that a person is a woman create a presupposition that she is therefore unsuited to senior academic research management? Since academic research focuses mainly on mathematical forms of judgment, that is the quantitative research approach, the dearth of women in this sector might have something to do with the fact that more opportunities exist for boys to study higher mathematics than for girls, but this fact cannot be used to justify the exclusion of girls. Surely those girls who like to solve differential equations ought not to be prevented from doing so on the grounds that they are female (Panteli et al., 1998; Margolis, Fisher and Miller, 1999). Even though there are very few senior academic researchers, there is no reason why any particular woman should not be employed in the academic research industry. In this paper, the importance of relevant femininity issues is to be explored.

Although the issues of a woman's role in the academic and corporate management industry are becoming a major subject in debates about both academic and professional practitioners, it is important that we get this issue properly focused.

Can we prove that it is always unfair to choose a man rather than a woman for something they would both like to do, when the woman could do it better than the man could? The author believes that when considering the rejection of a woman who is actually more suitable for the position in question than the competing man, then it is not discrimination.

If however, women are rejected on the grounds that they will perform badly within a prejudiced work force, or because someone is wanted who will not be away to have children, then, that may show unfairness in the structure of society, but does not necessarily involve the actual rejection of suitable women at this point.

The selector cannot be accused of selection discrimination as long as they choose the best candidate for the purpose in question. Discrimination on grounds of sex is counting sex as relevant in contexts where it is not, and leads to the rejection of suitable women. It is not discrimination on grounds of sex to reject women, who are not suitable, even if being a woman causes their unsuitability. When that happens it is their unsuitability, and not their sex, that has caused their rejection (personal reflection, May 2007).

As argued by leading feminist advocate J. Lucas (1973):

“Should the fact-‘the mere fact’- of a person’s being a woman disqualify her from being the Bench of Bishops or the House of Lords, or from obtaining a mortgage, owning property, having a vote or going to heaven? Is it not, the feminists are saying, just as irrational and inequitable as disqualifying a man on the grounds of the colour of his hair? Should we come to enunciate the formal platitude that women are the same as men in some respects, different from them in others, just as men are the same in some respects, and different in

others? Even if women are different from men, a feminist might argue, why should this be enough to debar them from being a member of the Bench of Bishops, when, apparently, there is no case of sexual abuse from women clergyman?’

(Lucas, J. 1973, p. 162.)

Stanworth (2000) argues that the research management industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy, and in theory it should be gender neutral, that is, the industry should be accessible to both men and women at all employment levels. As Panteli, Stack, Atkinson and Ramsay (1998, p.171) state:

“In many occupations, the sexual division of labour has been established through an historical sedimentation of role allocation such as the clerical (female-dominated) and engineering sectors (male-dominated). Computing, which has only come into existence during World War II (Kraf, 1997), might be seen as potentially less bound by traditions, for example, as men’s work or women’s work, and therefore as a gender-neutral occupation offering opportunities to both men and women to enter and progress”.

In a similar view with R. Richard’s (1984) philosophy, the author agree that the feminist claim of injustice would be established if totally unisex societies sprang up and flourished; or if there were as many societies in which the roles of men and women were reversed as there were traditional ones. They also agree with Richard’s ideal that the existence of any successful and stable society in which the roles of the sexes are reversed is evidence in favour of the claim of feminism (Richard 1984).

The question that arises in this paper is how to explore how a “real” woman thinks and acts, and what the feminist perception of the issues within research management industry might be. Thus the focus will be from the perspective of educational development in the higher education research management industry, whose relevant principles, the authors perceive, can be stated as follows:

Are the patterns of senior academic research management employment among men and women, different in our society?

Examining the individual’s interests and desires are paramount in the determination of career choices. For example, even if there are very few female senior academic researchers, are there reasons why any particular woman could not be an academic researcher?

The first section of this paper introduces the literature, which outlines some of the ways that a person’s sex may determine attitudes towards academic researcher. The next section discusses the academic research skills shortage, and the participation of each sex within the industry. The third section discusses a case study from the author’s self-reflective perspective, and the last section identifies areas for future improvements.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women and IS.

In this section, the author comment on the issues of feminism, those that are in dispute. The

author believes that the development of genetic theory may be of some help. We know that men differ from women in having one Y-chromosome and only one X-chromosome whereas women have two X-chromosomes. Men and Women share the same gene pool. So as far as chromosomes, other than the X- and Y- ones are concerned, men and women of the same breeding community are far more alike than members of different species, or even men of different races.

The author is of the same view as most conservative movement leaders that provoked a powerful argument against the doctrine that woman are protected due to the kindness of men who want to protect their women. This view contrasts with the view of many young males - that women are just 'birds' and provides empirical support to arguments based on the principles of Universal Humanity. In line with Richard (1984), the author further argues that women are worthy of respect for the same reasons as men are, and so humanity as a whole. If it is wrong to hurt a man, to harm him, to humiliate him or to frustrate him, then it is also wrong to hurt, harm, humiliate or to frustrate a woman, as they are both serious parts of the group we call humanity.

Lucas (1973) points out that the genetic theory may be too simplistic to illustrate the controversial issues we are now facing. Hence, he came out with two factors. The first factor was his concept of chromosome heredity. He argued that although chromosomes occur in pairs, each single one being inherited independently of every other one, each chromosome contains not just one, but probably many thousands of genetic factors, and the one responsible for haemophilia (a hereditary disease in which blood fails to coagulate), was sex-linked. He further commented that the Y-chromosome is smaller than the X-chromosome, and so, presumably, carries less genetic information. He suggests that the mathematical talent might be like haemophilia or colour-blindness, for example: only one in a thousand inherits the genetic factor, and if a boy inherits it then it becomes manifest. But what if a girl inherits it? Society might still be reluctant to accept the fact that the girl is gifted, arguing that there are 999 cases out of a thousand to the contrary.

Secondly, there are the other "genetic factors" that can affect heredity in males and females even though they do not appear to be sex-linked. For example, generally, only men go bald, and there are many other physical features and physiological processes that are affected by whether a person is male or female. Although there is reasonable evidence of women inheriting the genetics of baldness, it usually doesn't manifest itself because it has to be inherited from both parents, being a recessive gene. Hence, while there are similarities between men and women, the differences are pervasive, systematic and of great biological significance (Lucas, 1973).

3. Industry Skills shortage

Data from the US and UK suggest that there is currently a serious skills shortage in the IT industry (O'Neill and Walker, 2001).

As Gaudin (1999, p.53) states,

"the IT worker shortage is fast becoming a crisis that could threaten this country's global

technology leadership and economic strength, according to industry observers and government officials.”

Australia appears to be following the US and UK in the aspects of industry skills shortages. Barnard (2000, p.3) points out that

“almost half the nation’s employers are being forced to hire information personnel from overseas because of a shortage at home.”

As mentioned by O’Neill and Walker (2001), there is a shortage of skilled personnel within the industry, and the problem has become more complex and involves the information systems management industry itself, in terms of its image and more so in the gender ratios of current staff.

3.1. Women’s participation in the accounting information systems management industry.

Very little evidence exists about why there are so few women employed or acting as Information Systems (IS) researchers. Joshi and Kuhn, 2001 found that women are not entering the industry at the same rate as men. One school of thought suggests that the prevailing reason is that the prerequisites of computer related careers are school subjects such as maths and science, and these are areas that traditionally do not attract young women (Panteli et al., 1998 c.f. O’Neill and Walker, 2001). They believe that these lead to fewer women going into computer science courses at universities and therefore there are less women qualified to enter into the information systems management industry. Cromie (1999) in her study of high school children in Canada states, “computers are still perceived as being a male domain by both girls and boys, and these perceptions are developed early. More boys play with computer games, and the games are clearly designed to appeal to boys.” As an example, computer games are often of a pseudo-military nature, which might not appeal to young girls.

As Cole-Gomolski (1998, p.4) states:

Compared to 10 years ago, women make up a smaller percentage of information systems management graduates, and the percentage of women in information systems management has shrunk from 35% in the early 1990s to 29% today, according to recent data from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Gunter, in her review of the ‘information revolution’, relates how information systems management industries in the 1960’s had almost a 50:50 male to female ratio (Gunter, 1994 c.f. O’Neill and Walker, 2001). One of her interviewees put this down to the newness of the industry and the fact that man had not ‘wised up’ to the industry’s potential, therefore women were still ‘allowed’ in.

This change over time parallels the change in perception of the gender based use of computers evolving from being associated with routine clerical tasks, to becoming an integral part of the overall working environment and IS also becoming an essential management tool, and therefore the domain of men.

3.2. Men's participation in the accounting information systems management industry

According to O'Neill and Walker (2001), the culture of maleness and stereotypical gender roles prevails within the information systems management industry. In their paper, they highlighted an interesting analysis of this stereotyping. Michaelson (1994) in his review of cartoons featuring women, men and computers, identified that overall women were less represented and were mostly drawn in subservient stereotyped employment positions.

The author agree with O'Neill et al (2001) that the innocent portrayal of women in non-authoritarian positions simply perpetuates the notion of women not being 'capable' of doing the technical research aspects of information systems management. Hence, to deny people the fruits of their examination success or deprive them of their right of choice is wrong. As Ben, et al (1959) states:

Unfortunately what frequently happens is that we see what sort of facts would bring what sort of principles to bear upon our individual decisions and the general structure of our laws and institutions. We need to know not only whether there are differences, but whether these differences are integrally or only contingently connected with a person's sex. Hence the more integrally and the more invariably a difference is concerned with a person's sex, the more we are entitled to insist that the mere fact of being male or female can constitute a conclusive reason against being allowed to do something. We believe the arguments from Justice and Humanity must come into play as requiring us to pay respect to the interests and inclinations of each individual person, and to weight her actual interests, as against those of the community at large, on the basis of her actual situation and actual and reasonable desires (Benn et al , 1953).

The author agree with O'Neill et al (2001) that to overcome some of the problems and barriers women as a whole have encountered in the information systems management industry, governments in all countries need to develop supportive programs and initiatives. As mentioned by O'Neill et al (2001), most government's policies do not actually address the core problem, which in this case is encultured masculinity within the role-play of who works at what type of job. As Stanwort (2000) cited in O'Neill et al (2001), points out when referring to UK policies:

Such initiatives tend to emphasise the changes that women themselves have to make in order to relate more successfully to technology and enjoy successful careers in technological work. The male is treated as the norm, and the women are supposed to adopt masculine ways of relating to technology (Stanwort , 2000, p. 22).

3.3. Methodology

The methodology chosen for this pilot study was qualitative, which includes Moustakas' (1990) notion of validity in heuristic research. Based mainly on Moustakas's (1990, pp. 32-34) notion of validity in heuristic research, the authors began to investigate seriously Schon's (1983) admonition to be a reflective practitioner. This was in line with Habermas', Moustakas' and Tesch's emphasis on the importance of self-reflection and in line with the thrust in qualitative research literature on researcher's voice and signature, researcher bias,

and managing subjectivity (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, Pp. 424).

The following section illustrates a pilot study in which the authors investigated the possibilities of femininity's issues of women as IS researchers, in the hope of providing a catalyst for the development of egalitarianism.

4. Self-reflection account on a case study

The author describes an experiment, illustrating the dominating methodological issues in the conduct of an information systems seminar. Six doctoral students were formed into two groups and asked to think about how they, and others, might react to the differences in the intellectual achievements and typical behaviour between men and women.

The two groups believe that women were prevented from exercising their talents to the full or given rein in their natural inclinations (personal case study No 1, June 2002). As group one feminist doctoral participants summarised:

"In ancient Greece, for example, when the advocate of male supremacy marshalled his masses of major poets against a solitary 'Sappho', the women were so confined by domestic pressures and so inhibited by convention that those few [women] with real poetic talent never had opportunity to bring it to flower. Male poets might have been poor, but at least they could listen to the 'Muse' undistracted by baby's cries: whereas potential women poets, unless they lived on 'Lesbos' were married off and made to think of clothes and nappies to the exclusion of all higher thoughts. Perhaps women feel more strongly about their homes than men do, so that although we ought not, on grounds of humanity, to hurt either men or women, deprivation of her home would constitute a greater hurt to a woman than to a man. In some ways, then, women might be seen as more sensitive than men, but this does not mean that women are not capable of performing the technical aspects of information systems management."

In addition, it has been shown through some studies that women are by nature less competitive and aggressive than men are, and therefore have little interest in pushing against the "glass ceiling", as they do not want to expend energy in competing with their colleagues

When dealing with contentious issues such as the role of women in any given area of expertise, it is essential, in our opinion, that the researcher uses reflection to identify and distance themselves from their own assumptions and conditioning (Personal interviews, June 2002).

The author conducted another experiment, this time to try and find evidence either for or against the issues about feminine abilities and attitudes particularly in information systems management (personal case study No 2, July 2002). As group two feminist doctoral students summarised:

"With sufficient care we may be able to disentangle what is true in the feminists' contention from what is false. At least we should be able to avoid the dilemma, which seems to be taken for granted by most participants in the debate, that we must say that women either are in all respects exactly the same as men or else are in all respects different from, and inferior

to them, and not members of the same universe of discourse at all. We do not share Socrates' feeling about gender. I think the sexes are different, and incomparable. No doubt, women are not quite as good as men, in some respects are, but since men are not nearly as good as women in others, this carries with it no derogatory implication of uniform inferiority. What angers us most is the de-personalisation of women in society and one cannot but sympathise with their protest against women being treated as mere objects of sexual gratification by men. Given the fact that women have demonstrated that they are equally capable of succeeding in all industries, allowing encouragement, it would be short-sighted not to employ women, in any field of endeavour, including information systems research." (Personal interviews, July 2007).

5. Conclusion – Self Reflection Account

On reflection we realised that we agreed with the above participants point of view, yet we found it difficult to understand why we were in such close agreement with them. Evidence for and against deprivation of women's rights is hard to find in an IS research context. Therefore, we found ourselves concluding that social pressure is the main cause of discrimination in these areas.

Few people deny that social pressures have a considerable bearing on our behaviour and capacities. Some people argue from the analogy with other animals, whose behaviour are indubitably determined genetically and differs according to their sex; or by extrapolation from purely physical features. Humans are animals, but unlike other animals, our behaviours are mostly socially and culturally determined. It seems likely that much of our behaviour is learned, and although recent studies seem to indicate that some behaviour may be inherited, we are unlike other animals in so many ways, for example, very few of our actions can definitely be attributed to instinct. So here again, we are obliged to allot women's apparent lack of interest and ability in the mathematical field to learned behaviour and condition. For example, the would-be numerate "Sappho" is penalised by society that denies women the opportunity to engage in all facets of information systems management and treats the male as norm, expecting women to adopt masculine ways of relating to technology. This would be unjust as handicapping a talented youthful entrepreneur because of his lack of years and inability to enter into legal contracts because he has not attained the age of majority.

Limitation of the study

The limitation of this pilot study pertains to the information gathered through the interviews with the participants. The historical construction of the data gathered rest on the integrity and knowledge of the interviewed participants.

Future research

The following issue may therefore need to be further investigate:

Can women succeed in those areas in which their gender makes them less similar than men for the work, eg road building?

(Total 3700 words)

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