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Essentialism, Social Construction, or Individual Differences

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Per the United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau's latest available statistics, the percentage of women employed in computer and information technology occupations was consistently lower than the average for all occupations. When broken down by selected characteristics, these numbers range from 12.4% in computer network architectures to 35.2% in web development.[1] Is this trend reflected in the libraries? Although no comprehensive statistics are available for women in library IT, Lamont's study does reflect the same trend in that the number of women as library IT department heads has been about one half that of men between 2004-2008.[2] Why is there an under representation of women in library IT leadership? Is gender a concern? To answer this question, a more essential question should be addressed, i.e. what makes a successful IT supervisor in libraries? We posit that a successful supervisor is reflected in the morale and self-esteem of their reports, as well as in the integrity, productivity, and efficiency of the department or group they head.

Based on our experiences, a supervisor may exhibit a broad spectrum of traits, from what is traditionally considered masculine to what is traditionally considered feminine. Our female supervisors are generally more understanding, compassionate, supportive, and likely to take a vested interest in their employees. They are also less likely to show aggression or anger. However, they may be seen by others as more easily manipulated and less commanding. In contrast, our male supervisors are generally more confident, commanding, and firm. They may be stronger leaders with higher expectations, but may also be more obtuse, aggressive, demanding, and unconcerned with the self-esteem or well-being of their employees.

We have found that a successful supervisor is aware of the importance of their subordinates' state of mind and can also exhibit firmness, organization, and confidence. It is therefore the combination of the more favorable personality traits associated with each gender that ensure productivity, reduce conflicts, and protect the morale of subordinates. These differences in traits have been highlighted in our work under male and female IT supervisors. Below are a few of our personal stories.

Story 1: I worked for a younger man who had very little supervisory experience. His self-confidence often prevented others from offering support or feedback which would have benefitted him as an inexperienced supervisor. He tended to respond to questions or requests for clarification from those under his supervision with aggressive or belittling phrases, such as "Why would you do that?" or "Of course. Think about it." Additionally, he balked at employee input on projects or workflows. The implications, whether perceived or factual, were that he considered his employees incapable of making decisions, lacking in value to the institution, and unworthy of his concern.

At another job, I worked for a small office and library with joint IT. Several short-term interns worked under a female head of IT who was a disorganized supervisor and often forgot which training or tasks

had been completed and by whom. At one point, she had a week-long business trip to attend and only then realized she had not assigned anyone to maintain the website in her absence. Before her departure, she merely managed to give us a login without any additional documentation or instruction. Needless to say, we were left in a hopeless state during her absence.

In contrast, one of my more successful IT supervisors was a woman who was organized and managed to balance the needs of her employees and the work. She made her expectations clear and was firm about requirements. However, she also showed interest in her employees' lives and wellbeing. As a simple example, she found out that one of her employees had suffered an injury the previous night. She offered to allow them to go home to finish their work in comfort, since there was a project to which the employee could contribute from off-site. Her handling of the situation showed concern for the employee's wellbeing, demonstrated the value she placed on the employee's work, and reinforced her expectations that the day's work be completed.

Story 2: I was hired by a female supervisor holding a high-ranking position at the organization, overseeing other supervisors and employees. From the onset, the contrast between this supervisor and the male supervisor at my previous job was striking even though both supervisors are considered effective and skillful leaders. The female supervisor immediately established herself as a mentor, who would assist with any problems or difficulties I had, and offered guidance if I made a mistake. The male supervisor made it clear that he had a dominant personality type and hoped my personality type was not, or there would be conflict. This made him seem unapproachable, and created concern of his reaction to any mistakes I might make.

My work environment and personal experience was of concern to the female supervisor. She sensed my need for privacy, and enacted some changes to my work area to shield it from the view of others, without any request. This action immediately made me feel of value and that my work was considered important. Under the male supervisor, I was more likely to hide mistakes due to the uncertainty of his reaction, creating an unpleasant situation that often caused complications in the future. The female supervisor was always positive, giving me room to learn while affirming the nature of a mistake. She ensured that I was aware of the cause of the mistake, and discussed future actions to avoid repeating the situation. Overall, the mental and physical work environment established by the male supervisor was inferior compared to what was established by the female supervisor.

Based on these experiences, we have found that women who are good supervisors in library IT are compassionate and understanding, but also confident and decisive. They exhibit the most favorable traditional traits of both genders. On the other hand, our male supervisors are often confident and decisive, but are also uncaring, impatient, and aggressive. This discrepancy compounded with the statistics of male dominant IT leadership would suggest that today's supervisory positions maintain the emphasis of traditionally masculine traits. Naturally, women who do not possess masculine traits may avoid a position with a masculine expectation, whereas women who do possess masculine traits or are more willing to develop them may be drawn to the supervisory IT role. We conclude that this attraction or revulsion to a career IT leadership role is based on the individual's perception of the role and how much personal change is required or acceptable to attain it.

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This brings us back to our initial query. If women can possess the qualities of a successful supervisor, why are they less likely to be IT supervisors? Trauth, Quesenberry and Morgan suggest that the reason is neither owing to "essentialism," which theorizes that women just are not suited for technological work, nor to "social construction," which theorizes that women can do the work but are hampered by social expectations. Instead they propose individuals respond to IT work in a range of individual ways.[3] We agree from our observations and analysis that the pursuit of a supervisory role in the IT landscape and success within that role can be attributed to individual preferences, experience, and personality rather than a sole factor of gender differences.

References

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