



Feminism asks the “Who” questions in HCI[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In this brief personal essay, I describe some of the ways that feminism has influenced my life as a researcher and practitioner in HCI and CSCW – in the creation of work to be read by others, in the critical reading of works that were created by others, and in the planning and framing of practical work in enterprise workplaces. I discuss three variations of “Who” questions that feminism helps us to ask in HCI: The “who” of the identity of the user; the “who” of the identity of organizational actors; and the “who” of the practitioner or researcher.

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1. Essay

I write as a man who has appreciated the influence of feminism in his life. As a male person, I think I should not try to make general pronouncements about the nature of feminism. This is, then, a personal statement about some of the ways that feminism has helped me to think about HCI and CSCW.

2. Who speaks for the user?

Feminism has historically asked a series of what I think of as “Who” questions that directly and indirectly address issues of power and privilege. For example, *who speaks for women?* *Who speaks for a particular woman?* Feminism was among the movements and philosophies and epistemologies that warn us about “the problem of speaking for others” (Alcoff, 1991; Roof and Wiegman, 1995; see also Muller, 1997, 2007a), and thus encourages us to seek and hear the voice of the person who is being described or discussed, even if that person is conventionally silenced.

In HCI, feminism helped us to think about how to hear “the voice of the user.” These thoughts led to innovations in methodology, especially in qualitative research and analysis (see below). These thoughts also led to redefinitions of the concept of “users” in the workplace, to include people who are affected by a computer product or system. However, as Dimond et al. note, “The study and design of technology has expanded from the workplace and public

sphere into the private sphere of the home” (Dimond et al., 2010). Rode’s analysis of gender and identity in the work of home computing provides an example of discrete user roles in relation to security software (Rode, 2010). Gradually, these thoughts also led us to a more fundamental expansion of the concept of users, from waged workers to unwaged workers (Star and Strauss, 1999), seniors (Massimi et al., 2007), children (Druin, 1999), and from the narrow domain of paid work in workplaces, to people who are at play (Nardi and Harris, 2006), in love (e.g., Kaye, 2006), at home (Rode, 2010; Woodruff et al., 2007), or solving personal or group problems (e.g., Preece, 2000). These expansions of view and viewpoint have sometimes been led to deep reconsiderations of our old paradigms in HCI and CSCW (e.g., Schmidt, 2009). At risk in these questions is both scientific accuracy (i.e., how accurate can our reports be, if we do not listen to the best sources of information?), and also social justice (i.e., how responsible can our designs and implementations be, if we do not listen to the people who will be affected by those designs and implementations?).

More controversially, feminism was among the perspectives that contributed to participatory design, in which users (i.e., workers, but also others) speak for themselves in design activities, and by extension in participatory analysis and participatory evaluation (Bjerknes and Bratteteig, 1995; Bjerknes et al., 1987; Kyng and Matthiessen, 1997; Massimi et al., 2007; Schuler and Namioka, 1993). Many perspectives in feminism encourage communication, collaboration, community, and the maintenance of relationships (e.g., Gilligan, 1993). These values are also reflected in the “mutual validation of diverse perspectives” (Bødker et al., 1988) that is at the heart of much participatory design practice. Work in participatory design has often featured methods for users to be heard by designers, software professionals, and executive. These methods typically involved moves away from formal language and the

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concept of specification, into less formal and sometimes playful techniques that expand a space for discourse about new understandings and new possibilities (Muller, 2007b). The result was argued to be better, multi-“sourced” information to inform design and implementation, and also better working relationships among the workplace constituencies who had participated in informing the design (Muller, 1991; for comparative studies, see Cotton et al., 1988; Saarinen and Saaksjarvi, 1990).

In this way, feminist ideas helped us to re-orient our thinking away from an authority-given set of objectives, to a more polyvocal (Krupat, 1992) way to describe needs and goals (Muller, 1997, 2007a), in which the “poly” of “polyvocal” referred to many more perspectives brought to bear on a problem, and “vocal” of “polyvocal” was specifically about assisting the silenced voices of diverse users to speak and to be heard. This way of thinking also helps to expand our view of “the user,” from what might be called a “proximate definition” (i.e., “the person who interacts with the computer”) to a more pluralistic “distal definition” (i.e., “people who are affected by the system”), as in the analysis of Rode (2010).

We were able to use these insights to move from a totalizing sense of “the voice of the user” to a more diverse and informative sense that there are many users, many needs, many voices. We moved, then, from a simple reliance on a unitary “sourcing” of user needs, to the more difficult and more rewarding questions of the diversity of users and needs (e.g., Bardzell, 2010; Irani et al., 2010; Satchell, 2008), and the immensely valuable problem of how to combine those voices and needs into a solution framework, or a set of frameworks. Many of the specific methods of participatory design are concerned to make opportunities to speak and be heard, for previously-unheard voices of users and other stakeholders in the design (surveyed in Muller, 2007a,b).

The practical results were a need to talk with more people, in more diverse roles, in order to understand their worlds and their problems before any system was to be designed and implemented. We also had to re-think our ideas about the consequences of the system-to-be-built, involving consequences not only for the people who interact directly with the system (the proximate or direct users), but also for the people who depend on those interactors (the distal or indirect users). Following the Heraclitean view of Floyd (1987), we also began to understand that people’s needs change over time, and in this way we could begin to think about designs that could evolve over time, and eventually about designs that could adapt to the needs of individual users and of distinct groups of users.

3. Who is an organizational actor?

Feminism asks a second family of “Who” questions. The general structure of these questions is *who is allowed to ____?* (or *who is recognized as contributing to ____?*). In matters of education and of medicine, feminism has very constructively asked the question, *who is allowed to make choices that affect a woman?* In HCI, this kind of question can appear as: *who is allowed to speak for users?* (see above) and, more crucially, the participatory design question of *who is allowed to design?* (e.g., Bjerknes et al., 1987; Druin, 1999; Kyng and Matthiessen, 1997; Schuler and Namioka, 1993; Scrivener et al., 2000). While extending participatory design into a “layered” approach, we asked similar questions, suggesting that users could not only *speak* for themselves, but also *design* for themselves (as advocated in participatory design), *interpret* workplace information for themselves, and *analyze* their needs and the implications of technology choices for themselves (Muller, 2001). The distinction here is a matter of moving from speech to action. The question of *who speaks* is important (Alcoff, 1991; Roof and Wiegman, 1995), but the question of *who acts* is even more important.

In view of the increasing interest in knowledge work, privacy, and ethics, perhaps feminism can again help us to ask questions such as *in an organization, who is allowed to act as a knower?* and *in policy-making, who is allowed to act as an expert on each person’s privacy needs?* and *in civic society discussions of technology choices, who is allowed to act as an ethicist?* Ignoring these questions can lead to a constrained set of knowledges, accountabilities, and enfranchisements in organizational learning and decision-making. Complex problems require many viewpoints if we are to have good solutions, and excluding viewpoints often leads to sub-optimal designs, or wrong designs, or designs that achieve only localized goals while failing to achieve more systematic or large-scale goals. When forming a team to address a problem, organizations would do well to consider the breadth of knowledges needed and the people who hold or steward those knowledges (Cotton et al., 1988; Saarinen and Saaksjarvi, 1990). Once that analysis of knowledge-holders is done (e.g., *who is allowed to act as an expert?*), then the selection of team members can proceed, with some confidence that the required knowers will be participating, and that the involved workplace constituencies are more likely to approve the outcome as a direct result of their involvement in creating that outcome.

Through these questions, a feminist approach helps us to question the conventions through which organizations and cultures assign authority, responsibility, and voice to certain individuals and groups (e.g., Holmström, 1995), sometimes at the cost of ignoring and silencing others (Alcoff, 1991; Roof and Wiegman, 1995; Star and Strauss, 1999). Once these questions have been entered into, feminism helps us to diversify the voices – and hence, the knowledges – that inform discussions and decisions. It is true that many organizations are still wrestling with the problems of how to combine those diverse knowledges, but it is also true that, in general, we and our organizations make better decisions when more knowledges – and more knowledge-holders – contribute to those decisions.

4. Who are we as researchers and practitioners?

Finally, feminism also encourages us to think about a third family of “Who” questions. Traditional science has emphasized objectivity and detachment as virtues in a researcher or a scientist (for review, see Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997; Harding, 1991). Feminism asks us to focus on the perspective of each scientist or reporter. From a position of critique, Haraway (1991) has famously questioned the scientific “voice from nowhere.” She advocated, instead, that the researcher should disclose the perspective that s/he brings to the question (see also Krupat, 1992; Suchman, 2002), as well as the relevant aspects of her or his background and identity as they may affect the researcher’s report (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997).

This argument converges with the concept of standpoint epistemologies (e.g., Orbe, 1998; Rudy, 1999) which argue that the observer, reporter, or knower is always *observing* from some location, is always *knowing* within a disciplinary, social, and personal background of other knowings and other knowledges, and is always *reporting* from a perspective and striving to influence an audience that has its own perspective(s) (see also Suchman, 2002). While this position sounds like radical subjectivism or relativism to some, Harding has extended the argument into a scientific epistemology that she convincingly calls *strong objectivity* (1991; see also Pohlhaus’ (2002) continuation of this approach from individuals to communities).

In Harding’s view, the claim of a universal, disembodied objectivity is a myth, because the scientist can never achieve such complete detachment, such depersonalized aloofness, such universality of view (see also Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997; Hartsock, 1983). In Harding’s analysis, objectivity *returns* to science when the scientist

discloses her or his cultural perspective and disciplinary locations. When the researcher acknowledges these starting points, an active reader can understand not only *what* has been written, but also *who* has written it. The active reader can then engage with the report as an active interpreter, based on both its content and on the reader's knowledge of the researcher and her/his perspective (i.e., her/his standpoint). In this way, scientists-as-writers become more responsible for what they write, and scientists-as-readers become more responsible for what they infer from those writings, and the scientific project moves from abstraction and disembodiment toward a fully human activity.

I am hoping to learn more from feminism, and from related critiques (e.g., Bardzell, 2010; Bardzell and Bardzell, 2008; Cockton, 2006; Friedman and Nathan, 2010; Irani et al., 2010; Light et al., 2005; Rode, 2010; Satchell, 2008; Sengers et al., 2005; Sengers and Gaver, 2006; Star and Strauss, 1999), to help us work together on these difficult “Who” questions.

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