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Critical Race Theory for HCI

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ABSTRACT

The human-computer interaction community has made some efforts toward racial diversity, but the outcomes remain meager. We introduce *critical race theory* and adapt it for HCI to lay a theoretical basis for race-conscious efforts, both in research and within our community. Building on the theory's original tenets, we argue that racism is pervasive in everyday socio-technical systems; that the HCI community is prone to "interest convergence," where concessions to inclusion require benefits to those in power; and that the neoliberal underpinnings of the technology industry itself propagate racism. Critical race theory uses storytelling as a means to upend deep-seated assumptions, and we relate several personal stories to highlight ongoing problems of race in HCI. The implications: *all* HCI research must be attuned to issues of race; participation of underrepresented minorities must be sought in *all* of our activities; and as a community, we cannot become comfortable while racial disparities exist.

Author Keywords

critical race theory; race; racism; storytelling; theory

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models;

INTRODUCTION

Recent events in the United States have prominently surfaced issues of race and ethnicity: a rise in hate crimes targeting people of African, Arab, Asian, Jewish, and other origins [36]; a growing list of Black citizens killed by police officers [62]; the response through the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement; the 2017 White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA. Meanwhile, public sentiment toward technology has turned more critical with concerns about data privacy [123], dissemination of 'fake news' [31], election meddling [131], exacerbation of inequality [49], and other issues instigating employee protests [81], Congressional hearings [79], and fines for technology companies [126].

These trends intersect in a way relevant to human-computer interaction, and HCI scholars have responded with several

papers highlighting race. For example, in a 2016 paper, "*Does Technology Have Race?*" Hankerson and colleagues enumerate a number of digital technologies that have different consequences for people of different races [63]. In 2018, Schlesinger, O'Hara, and Taylor consider the complexities of avoiding racism in chatbots, with conclusions that have broader scope [110]. Even more recently, O'Leary et al. explore how "conventional design practices may perpetuate forms of institutional racism," and suggest an alternative that emphasizes pre-existing forms of creativity [92].

It is not that racism has reappeared, as much as that ongoing racism – that never went away – is currently receiving more visibility. While this bump in interest is welcome, public attention is fickle. Any community hoping to eliminate racism must sustain attention, resources, and effort toward meaningful change. And here, too, the HCI community has not been idle. Its special interest group, SIGCHI, has buttressed efforts toward greater inclusivity through an appointed chair [42], a series of Diversity & Inclusion lunches [20], and so on.

Yet in spite of such efforts, the inequitable consequences of racism are severe even in a community like ours that often considers itself to be socially progressive. For example, of the 133 current members of the CHI Academy – those recognized by our community as having made substantial contributions to HCI – 124 (93%) appear to be White¹. Only 9 appear non-White: 5 of East Asian descent (3.8%), 2 South Asian (1.5%), 2 Latinx (1.5%), and 0 Black/African descent. These numbers are far from reflective of the global or U.S. proportions of these groups, and they are less diverse than, for example, leadership at companies that have been criticized for poor diversity [69].

As one step toward greater inclusivity, we propose that HCI scholars and practitioners engage more substantially and consistently with *critical race theory*, both as a way to advance inclusive research, but also to reduce our community's own racial disparities. Critical race theory is a theoretical framework introduced in the 1970s by legal scholars to challenge the dominant discourse on race and racism [34]. Particularly for an intellectual community such as ours, maintaining a focus on race requires not only the formation of institutions and processes, but engagement with relevant theory. Critical race theory offers a starting point for such theoretical engagement, and in this paper, we introduce and adapt several of its key tenets for the HCI community: the ordinariness of racism; the social construction of race; interest convergence – the idea

¹We arrived at these numbers by inspection of websites and CVs (a methodology we do not advocate for determining race in general). Self-identified racial tallies may differ, but are very unlikely to invalidate the larger point being made.

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