



Playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show: Feminist acts in usability study work

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ABSTRACT

As a feminist HCI agenda develops, feminist analyses of behaviour must venture beyond the dominant liberal feminist approach to include other feminist approaches. Using the personal narrative or auto-ethnographic method, this article explores the role of gender in usability work, a common research practice in HCI. In this article, the author interprets three gendered behaviours that occur in usability work – playing stupid, caring for and about users, and putting on a good show – demonstrating that while these behaviours appear anti-feminist in a liberal feminist framework, they appear feminist in alternative feminist frameworks, such as relational/care-giving, sex-positive, multicultural, post-colonial and Third Wave. The article demonstrates how a feminist HCI agenda that embraces the multiplicity of feminisms necessarily forces a re-examination of usability work's relationship to both feminism and HCI research methods.

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1. Introduction

The field of HCI's embarkation on an exploration of feminist HCI undertaken in this special issue offers a unique opportunity to examine the salience of gender in HCI research methods. Whether in formal lab studies, pre-design interviews, online discussion groups, customer panels, or remote usability studies, HCI practitioners interact regularly with potential and actual users in the quest to design usable systems. Simply juxtaposing feminism and HCI forces an acknowledgement that HCI's research methods are indeed gendered. The recent call for a feminist HCI agenda looks to practitioners and researchers to “incorporate feminism in user research, iterative design, and evaluation methodologies to broaden their repertoire for different contexts and situations” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1305). An engagement between feminism and HCI immediately begs the question: which kind of feminism. This question is not simply rhetorical. Rather, exploring which feminisms are relevant to HCI provides a way to better analyze and address the role of gender in HCI research methods, and, ultimately, in HCI itself.

The choice of a feminist approach influences how we interpret behaviour in HCI research contexts. My analysis identifies three behaviours in usability work, a common HCI research method – playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show. All three are recognizable forms of doing (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or performing (Butler, 1990) gender that resonate with

traditional notions of femininity. While the three behaviours themselves are, of course, available to both genders, women more readily engage in and are associated with them.

Discussing gender and sexuality's role in research methods is challenging. The potential for embarrassment, misunderstandings, political missteps, and even legal repercussions feels high, and the topics themselves are ever open to context and subjective interpretation. In academic fields such as anthropology and sociology, the relevance of gender, sex and, more recently, sexual orientation and sexuality's role in qualitative data collection is fairly common. In the field of HCI, sex and sexuality, however, are more rarely addressed. As the organizers of a 2006 CHI workshop noted “it is not that such issues are actively covered up, but rather politely ignored, despite their role in technology use and development.” (Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1696). We, as researchers and practitioners, have an obligation to acknowledge and explore gender and sexuality in our work.

This article is intended to be a step in the exploration of how different feminist approaches allow for alternative interpretations of behaviour related to gender and sexuality in HCI research settings. First, I provide a very brief sketch of academic work on feminism, with an emphasis on illustrating the import of the plurality of feminism. Second, I discuss the context of usability work in HCI and its relation to gender. Third, through a reflexive, personal narrative method, I identify three gendered behaviours – playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show—that mainstream feminism would easily portray as anti-feminist and demonstrate how other feminist approaches offer alternative explanations. I

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conclude by encouraging participants in the feminist agenda to take heed of the dangers of embracing only one kind of feminism and applying it uniformly to the practice and field of HCI.

2. A question of feminism

2.1. Feminism defined

From the complex debate of what constitutes feminism, a productive definition of feminist projects is that of Janet Halley (Halley, 2006). In the context of the United States, and I would argue in Western mainstream cultures, Halley (Halley, 2006) describes feminist projects as having three characteristics. First, they make a distinction between m and f, for example, male and female, masculine and feminine, or men and women. Second, feminist positions posit “some kind of subordination as between m and f, in which the f is the disadvantaged or subordinated element” (Halley, 2006, p. 18). The subordination is descriptive, not prescriptive. Third, feminism opposes the subordination of f. While this formulation of feminism intentionally blurs and downplays the complexity of the fuller intellectual debate – notably differences among women – it highlights what are, for the purpose of this article, the most crucial elements of feminism: a focus on gender and an acknowledgement of its role in relationships of power.

2.2. Plurality of feminism

The mere existence of more than one kind of feminism – both as a theoretical approach and as a social orientation – may come as a surprise to audiences unfamiliar with the topic. The plurality of feminisms reflects the complexity of taking gender seriously conceptually and practically. The struggle to elaborate feminism's different forms can be understood as competing fields of thought, but also as definitions with political consequences. Each feminist approach carries with it views of the current and ideal world, determining what issues are worthy of its attention. While some issues implicated in this debate – reproductive control, motherhood, domestic labour, violence – appear more distant from the core work of HCI, others appear central, such as work environments free from informal or formal discrimination, the role of care, parity in pay, and value of work.

2.2.1. Liberal feminism

The liberal feminist approach is what most commonly comes to mind in mainstream discussions of feminism. Rooted in the rational framework of the Enlightenment, it focuses on the attainment of social and legal equality for women and men (Wollstonecraft, 2004; Mill, 2007) and is “characterized by a view that women and men are, for all legitimate purposes, the same; equality is its central and social legal goal” (Halley, 2006, p. 79). In the United States, the United Kingdom and some Western European democracies, it is the feminist approach most readily associated with women's liberation movements of the 1970s and nurtured by the United Nations' decade of focus on women (1975–1985). This feminist approach recognizes gender inequity, but views individualized agency – particularly women's agency – as the locus for productive change toward gender equality.

The liberal approach characterizes much of the sparse existing work in HCI on gender and feminism. With the goal of formal equality in mind, many policy initiatives in HCI and its related fields focus, for example, on narrowing the gender gap in computer science education or honouring the contribution of women to the field. The starting assumption that a lack of gender equality is a problem that needs to be solved for the sake of women and for the betterment of society yields academic research on issues such

as the gender digital divide, for example, in Internet use or digital gaming. Many of the characteristics that Bardzell describes as the central commitments to feminism “agency, fulfilment, identity and the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1301) belong firmly in the liberal feminist approach.

2.2.2. Alternative (non-liberal) feminisms

The cultural, relational or care-focused feminist approach emphasizes that the characteristics traditionally seen as female – such as care-giving, communal awareness and intimacy with nature – are and should be regarded as a source of strength. While the liberal feminist approach stresses the import of equality, independence, autonomy and liberty in legal, social and economic terms, the cultural feminist approach “stress[es] the role of non-rational, the intuitive, and often collective side of life” (Donovan, 1985, p. 31). Cultural feminist approaches maintain different stances about the role of biology in the propensity for care-giving behaviour, but they agree on the positive value of care and relationships, not only in personal relationships and motherhood, but also to the public sphere. This approach centres feminism around “an ethic of care [that] has as its core a central mandate to care for the relationships that sustain life and... this ethic both grounds and is expressive of the care-giving work women distinctively perform” (West, 1997, p. 8). The argument is that moral justice, both informally and as coded in law, has prioritized men's prioritization of autonomy and individualization, while devaluing women's prioritization of relationships and care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

Other feminist approaches have challenged the assumption inherent in liberal and cultural-relational feminism that women belong to a single category, particularly one that has been defined by situationally privileged women. Multicultural (Shohat, 1998; Hooks, 1999; Collins, 1990; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1984; Kim and Villanueva, 1997; Minh-ha, 1989), post-colonial (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988; McClintock, 1995), ‘Third World’ (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Narayan, 1987) feminist approaches resist the idea that women, simply by the fact of being women, can always be conceptualized as sharing a common experience of the world. These approaches argue that identities are complex, and, that many women's “woman-ness” intersects with other structural realities of their position, such as nationality, ethnicity, wealth, religion and race. Feminist approaches popular among privileged women often ignore the degree to which complex intersections of identity make different issues more or less important. As Spelman writes, “Any attempts to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice versa” (Spelman, 1988, p. 3).

Women's sex and sexuality also play a more central role in non-liberal feminisms. For example, the sex-positivist approach, which arose in the 1980s largely as a response to anti-pornography feminist projects, emphasizes that sex and sexuality could be a site of pleasure for women rather than solely one of danger and declares that “Like gender, sexuality is political” (Rubin, 1989, p. 309). Sex-positive feminists emphasize the diversity of women's sexual experiences (Vance, 1989) – notably that not women did not need men to experience their sexuality – and encourage women to embrace and assert their sexuality, rather than fearing it or letting it be defined by men. Lesbian and some radical feminists, in line with Adrienne Rich's classic essay (Rich, 1981), argue for the centrality of “woman-identified experience” in women's lives and sexuality. Similarly, the Third-Wave feminist approach (Walker, 1992; Baumgardner, 2000; Hernandez, 2002; Jervis, 2006) takes the diversity of women's sexual experiences and their agency over their own sexuality as a given. This feminist approach

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