Four Tensions Between HCI Research, Social Justice Aspirations, and Grassroots Politics

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ABSTRACT

Recent work has introduced justice-oriented critical theory to the HCI community, including feminist HCI, anti-oppressive design, intersectional HCI, post-colonial HCI, queer and disability theory, and more. While these frameworks have important differences, they agree that the HCI community should 1) acknowledge the existence of structural oppression and 2) center minoritized communities in design processes. In this short workshop paper, I reflect on four structural tensions at play in the emancipatory aspirations of these critical theories vis-a-vis the real-world incentives and reward systems of academia vis-a-vis the work that grassroots, community-based organizations are doing. These structural tensions are: History and Trust, Money, Time and Expertise. In each case, I surface examples of those tensions that arose in my own collaborative work as a way of pointing towards broader questions for the field around incentives, privilege, power, myopia and social change.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**; • **Social and professional topics** → *Race and ethnicity*; *Gender*.

KEYWORDS

oppression, health, critical theory, gender, race, community, social justice, participatory design, hackathons

INTRODUCTION

Recent work has introduced justice-oriented critical theory to the HCI community. These approaches include feminist HCI, anti-oppressive design, intersectional HCI, post-colonial HCI, anarchist HCI, queer theory, critical disability theory, design justice and more [1–3, 5, 6, 9–12]. While these frameworks have important differences, there is agreement across them that the HCI community should 1) acknowledge the existence of structural oppression and 2) center minoritized[1] communities in the design process.

Several colleagues and I have recently submitted a CHI paper (under review) supporting these conceptual linkages, but pointing out that because these are preliminary forays into linking anti-oppression social theory to HCI, these frameworks have not yet proposed specific guidelines regarding how to go about collaborating with minoritized groups, how to navigate the trauma and other powerful emotions that survivors of systemic oppression have experienced (and may re-experience in the design process), and how the design process itself can function as a way to heal and to build collective solidarity. If the goal is to use HCI for social justice, then there are many design process considerations that arise from the nature of structural oppression itself.

In this short paper, I would like to step back and reflect on some of the structural tensions at play in the emancipatory aspirations of these theories vis-a-vis the real-world incentives and reward systems of academia vis-a-vis the work that grassroots, community-based organizations are doing. I will use examples and anecdotes from *Make the Breast Pump Not Suck*, an on-going collaborative project on post-partum health design which we have described in prior work [4, 8]. Because this is a project that foregrounds racial equity in breastfeeding in the US, I use racial identifiers for all of the examples.

[1]I use the term *minoritized* to describe groups of people who are positioned in opposition to a more powerful social group. While minority describes a social group that is comprised of fewer people, minoritized indicates that a social group is actively devalued and oppressed by a dominant group, one that holds more economic, social, and political power. With respect to gender, for example, men constitute the dominant group, while all other genders constitute minoritized groups.[7]

When I say "we" for the creators of the project, I am speaking of our leadership group which consisted of four white women and two Black women, all middle- to upper-class professionals.

TENSION: HISTORY AND TRUST

When colleagues and I were initiating research for the *Make the Breast Pump Not Suck* project, we came up with what we thought was a good model - our lead researcher, a white woman, would partner with, train and pay a person in the community and they would conduct interviews together. When we spoke with the Executive Director of a nonprofit that focused on supporting families of color in Detroit, she pushed back. After learning that the research was to support a large-scale hackathon at an elite institution, she asked us, "The main value of this project seems to me to be the event. So, how many Black designers are you going to have at the event?" In further conversation, we learned that academic researchers had frequently come to Detroit, interviewed people in the community, and never returned to share findings or follow-up in any way. Although this was never our intention, we took the point that we fell into a category of people that had not treated her community well.

For us, this exchange led to a recognition of how we needed to build in structural ways for how communities most impacted by breastfeeding inequities could be present at the hackathon itself. This resulted in a 9-month program called the Community Innovation Program which supported innovators from four different geographic locations to bring their projects to the hackathon. We ultimately were able to build trust with the nonprofit and with the community innovation teams, pay people for assisting the research component, and host them at the hackathon. We also built relationships that have continued and deepened since then. For the purposes of this paper, this exchange brought to our attention the idea that academics have traditionally not treated grassroots organizations and minoritized communities well. Too often, research has been conducted via parachuting in and extracting information with little to no follow-up or authentic relationship-building with the community. Grassroots organizations have extremely good reasons to distrust academics.

The questions that arise for the workshop, then, are as follows:

- How do we take responsibility for a flawed history of academic-community interactions?
- Could using anti-oppression frameworks in HCI actually be more harmful than traditional models because they lead to researchers relying on moral superiority ("trust us - we are some of the good guys") and inauthentic horizontal treatment ("we are the same as you") while failing to recognize the very real differences in identity, power and money that are at play?

TENSION: MONEY

At a certain point in our project, we determined that we needed to go back to one of the funders and request more funds for a media component of the project. We created the request and secured the funds. Later, one of our Advisory Board members, a Black woman with decades of professional experience, expressed frustration that the process was so easy for us. It turned out that she, along with several other community-based organizations working on the issue, had proposed a similar project multiple times to the same funder and hadn't received funding.

For me, this example highlights the racial and institutional privilege at play in academic-community interactions. Why was it easier for a group of majority white women who had much less domain experience to secure funds? The fact that the money flows more freely to academia (and, likely, to any larger, whiter institution) is a power differential that we must contend with. It might be subverted in various ways - for example, through diverting academic funds towards uplifting community efforts - but it is important to note that the academic institution/academic researcher is almost always still in charge of that allocation.

Questions for discussion:

- What do anti-oppressive funding models (that still involve academics or academic institutions) look like?
- Can people in HCI leverage racial and institutional privilege without reinscribing it?

TENSION: TIME

When we set out to create an equity-focused breastfeeding hackathon, we allocated one year to planning, advance research and outreach. This seemed like an ample amount of lead-up time. People in the tech and design community who heard that we were spending a year planning a hackathon were confused. "What are you doing for a whole year prior to the event?" was a frequently asked question. The answer was that we were speaking with mothers, parents and healthcare providers around the country, running a 9-month community innovation program for four groups in different geographic locations and doing some very challenging identity work on ourselves. This included internal readings, workshops and a facilitated group on whiteness for the white members of the leadership team.

In retrospect, that year was barely enough time to develop and deepen relationships of trust. We made it work, but our organizing team got feedback multiple times from the people that we were

working with that we needed to slow down, make space for processing, and not rush people through agendas.

This raises questions around time and speed and tone - are we urgent or are we capacious? As with the other tensions, this one is complicated, because often what dictates project timing is what one needs to deliver to a funder at the end of a grant. We found that working in an equity-centered model consistently demanded far more time and emotional labor than we had previously estimated. As director of this project, I feel that many people who worked on it, including myself, were not adequately compensated for the amount of additional time and emotional labor that they contributed.

Zooming out from the individual project scale: in follow-up interviews, many of our participants expressed that their goals for transformative social change would take decades or lifetimes to achieve. This prompted me to reflect that while academic knowledge is archived in long-term formats, the knowledge itself typically comes from short-term projects (which usually represent short-term en-gagements, if there is engagement at all). Is there a way to interrupt or rethink that dynamic?

Questions for discussion:

- What are our long-term goals? And how do we move slowly, capaciously and sustainably towards them?
- How do we think beyond and outside of the timelines of single projects?
- What might HCI research stand to gain if we prioritized (and rewarded) long-term thinking and long-term relationship building?

TENSION: EXPERTISE

Early in this project, we recognized that we were not the right people to be designing the best breast pump or the most effective nursing environment and shifted our efforts towards creating events and communities of practice that support others to 1) Create their own design solutions and 2) Learn about breastfeeding and postpartum challenges through encountering others' design ideas and 3) Build relationships and solidarity across intersectional lines of difference.

One of the on-going challenges to framing this work as HCI is that many of the projects that people created do not, in fact, have anything to do with computation. For example, a group of Native women modified their ceremonial regalia to make it more breastfeeding-friendly. This is a low-tech, culturally appropriate, and significant design contribution that did not need HCI to happen. The tension here

lies in being able to determine when HCI expertise may be useful and when to move out of the way for other types of expertise to take center stage.

Likewise, because HCI expertise is grounded in creating computational systems, this creates a structural tension (or a structural myopia) that may lead researchers to design short-term solutions that engage in harm-reduction (such as a better breast pump) as opposed to working on efforts that seek to dismantle structural barriers entirely (like passing paid leave policy). An exclusive focus on harm reduction is incompatible with anti-oppression critical theory, and also incompatible with the work of many grassroots organizations.

Questions for discussion:

- If/when HCI needs to move out of the way, what role does the HCI researcher/designer play?
- What is the role of HCI research and design in dismantling structural oppression?
- How do we connect design ideas to structural forces? How do we balance harm reduction and long-term, transformative justice?

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined four tensions that arise at the intersection of HCI research, anti-oppression theory and grassroots politics. Each tension arises from a specific encounter during my time working with collaborators on the *Make the Breast Pump Not Suck* project. I welcome the opportunity to discuss some of these questions at the workshop.

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