
Promises and Challenges for Intersectional Participant Research

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Abstract

Often, when researchers adopt a critical analytical stance to address inequalities in research and design, we seek out marginalized perspectives through qualitative interviews. We may rely on trusted channels to provide a “way in” to communities that don’t have reason to open up to researchers. We may also employ member-checking to provide “a way through” complex analysis recognizing that we as researchers are outsiders with problematic ideologies. Drawing on intersectionality as well as participatory action research (PAR), we propose a participant researcher (PR) framework that offers both a “way in” and a “way through.” We describe the promises and challenges of conducting research with those whose role is to provide access and challenge privileged ways of thinking through participating in recruitment, design, interviewing, analysis, and reporting of results.

Author Keywords

Privacy; intersectionality; participant research

ACM Classification Keywords

HCI theory, concepts and models

Introduction

CSCW and HCI scholars have increasingly been concerned with the way that inequalities existing offline

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are reinscribed into technologies and the challenges we face in adopting methodologies to adequately address them [7]. There is an argument that marginalized perspectives are the starting point for studies of online harassment [2], privacy [8], and HCI design more broadly [1] but we have less experience with how to engage in these types of research.

Studies of privacy in marginalized communities have sometimes adopted alternative methodologies to accommodate their outsider stance. For example, “trusted channels” to provide access and credibility [6], “participatory researchers” (PRs) to overcome otherness and privilege [8], member-checking used as a refreshingly critical tool [5], and arrangements that overcome distrust by not conscripting participants as “research participants” at all [10]. Yet, less often does research claim an intersectional stance, which we argue is a potentially critical component to studies of marginalized perspectives, even when it requires some extrapolation.

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that allows us to consider the marginalized user whose identities (class, race, sexual orientation) represent an alternative epistemology and question how systems of power suppress their perspectives and lead to discrimination and oppression. In that sense, research that aims to challenge hegemonic categories of available knowledge and privilege intersectional perspectives offers a “way through,” but it doesn’t necessarily articulate a “way in.” We think this is essential as it can help to expand intersectionality’s application. Participatory action research (PAR) with its emphasis on participation directs our attention towards

the possibility of engaging perspectives more proactively and deeply.

In this paper, we consider the two epistemologies (intersectionality and PAR) that have shaped our approach to participant research. We then describe our approach to participant research—the expanded role of PRs—what we hope to achieve, and the challenges we anticipate.

Drawing on Diverse Research Traditions

Intersectionality helps us to consider the marginal individual whose context demands a contextualized (rather than normative) narrative. It has a great deal to say about underrepresented groups relative to power and policy [4] and also begins with the perspective of exclusion and vulnerability. As a field of study, as an analytical framework, and as a praxis, intersectionality’s reach is “broad and unspecified” [3]. This lack of specificity is indeed a feature not a bug. While our critical framework is intersectional, we adopt PAR to assist in development of more concrete ways to navigate these uncharted waters and more adequately execute a critical analytical stance.

PAR involves communities in research as a part of an epistemological stance and a strategy for change. It is concerned with cultivating perspectives that are grounded in human agency. Participants are both those who study and those being studied; they are subjects who are full collaborators in a position to enact change. This is particularly constructive for critical turns, like those outlined by Torre et al. [9], where the goal is to document structural inequalities and challenge categories projected onto communities such as “delinquent” or “victim.” We see intersectionality,

particularly Crenshaw's [4] articulation of structural intersectionality, as a congruous counterpart to this idea. Crenshaw used the example of a battered women's shelter where policies that assume a certain narrative about newcomers effectively ignore other dimensions of experience (structural discrimination in our laws, poverty, conditions of immigration, etc.) and systematically exclude people from entering.

While intersectionality doesn't necessarily call on researchers to involve participants to do the research or the analysis (the latter of which PAR importantly doesn't either), it leaves open these types of applications by virtue of its being an evolving critical epistemology [3]. At the same time, while PAR offers a way in, the way through is essentially inextricable with the change it engenders and is thus limited in its applicability (i.e., to surface inequalities existing in technologies designed elsewhere by others). Even while intersectionality suggests a way through and PAR a way in, neither epistemology prescribes the type of full engagement that we aim to achieve.

Overview of Research Design

We recently began a qualitative study of privacy in marginalized communities that involves participant researchers. We have outlined an approach to involving participant researchers who are part of and serving the marginalized communities under study in every step of the research process (interview training, recruitment, interviewing, analysis, and reporting).

Our process began by reaching out to community-based organizations serving low-resource neighborhoods, minority communities, and LGBTQ

individuals. We aimed to recruit participant researchers either as part of volunteer service or as paid interns.

When we first designed our study, our instinct was to simply engage PRs as liaisons with the community to help recruit interview participants. However, it became clear to us that as outsiders, we were unlikely to illicit in-depth discussions of privacy concerns as they related to features of people's identity that we did not share and break down privileged (hegemonic) ideologies that undoubtedly seep into our methods and interpretations. As full collaborators, PRs will work with us to develop the protocol, recruit, conduct research and analysis, and write-up results. This integrated approach to research with marginalized communities puts them at the front lines of research without necessarily being tasked with change—a critical departure from PAR. But it also reaches beyond PAR in that we hope to inform the design (elsewhere by others) of more inclusive technologies and systems for populations that go beyond the local concerns of PAR.

Our approach has introduced some challenges. For example, *How do you train participants to be qualitative researchers?* Our participants range from student volunteers to people who responded to flyers we posted in various community centers, and represent a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The challenge will be to help direct their curiosity and empathy. We have strategized ways to augment the learning process, such as practice interview sessions and shadowing. Another example is the possibility that even though PRs have "membership" status, consenting people to research creates obstacles and introduces power relationships that are difficult to overcome. To that end, we are attempting to work with PRs to design

a protocol that is sensitive to the values and realities of our constituents in ways that we, as white, privileged, female academics are not.

Conclusions

Our proposed approach to participant research is aimed at sharpening the critical lens of intersectionality as it is broadly applied in HCI. We hope that it inspires others to consider and build on similar models of full participation in studies of marginalized groups, not just when pursuing activism or social justice, but simply in the design of better technologies.

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