
Researchers at the Margins: Othering and Community Solidarity

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Abstract

This paper discusses researcher marginalization based on three individual vignettes, drawn out from personal experiences. The goal is to extend discussions of marginalization of research to the researchers themselves, how they are *othered* [5] and how we can draw on methods to address these issues. We discuss implications and ways forward, namely (1) the kinds of data we can/should collect, (2) organizing inclusive conferences and (3) how to start a wider dialogue without furthering the *othering* of these researchers.

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Introduction

Issues of research marginalization tend to focus on participant inclusion and visibility. However, as we are all aware, researchers are themselves the subjects of marginalization. I have myself worked sparsely within ICT4D, particularly reflecting on the role of playfulness in ICTD and its implications for participant inclusion or exclusion [2]. More recently I have worked with data and visualizations in the context of the ETHOS Lab¹ in Copenhagen, on different projects that relate to marginalization, such as Colonial Copenhagen². Furthermore, I am a European Union (EU) citizen and working in a wealthy EU country, and as such speaking from a position of relative. I have however found discussion on these issues to be lacking.

I draw here on three vignettes: (1) the relocation of CSCW'17 from Brazil to the United States (US) and (2)

¹ <https://ethos.itu.dk/>

² <https://blogit.itu.dk/mappingacolonyen/>

Figure 1: CSCW'18 Registration form, pertaining to issues where "country" is brought to bear

Figure 2: CSCW'18 Registration form, pertaining to issues of gender and age

Figure 3: CHI'18 Registration form, pertaining to issues of gender

the initial address at CHI'12, in Austin, by then ACM SIGCHI president Gerrit van der Veer. Additionally, I (3) discuss the CHI'18 and CSCW'18 registration forms and the data logics of inclusion. I draw on these events to discuss issues of (1) centers and peripheries in research, (2) the othering of researchers and (3) implications on data gathering for inclusivity. The goal of this paper is not to be gratuitously critical of different events out of their complex contexts, but rather to show solidarity to the silenced voices I have heard over the years and which, as we will discuss, have conflicting interests about making these issues public.

Relocation of CSCW'17: Where is the center?

Following international concerns regarding the spread of the Zika virus in South America, CSCW was relocated to the US. Some discussions occurred at semi-private forums, which I do not have access to or permission to use. We draw here on the Facebook post announcing the possible move³. I highlight the following excerpts (emphasis mine). The first one where the hosting of the Olympics in Rio would accelerate combating the spread of Zika: *"The Zika virus is expected to spread across the Americas, so will **likely be in the US by the time of the conference** and, with the Olympics in Rio this summer, **Brazil has mobilized resources to battle this disease**. The situation may, therefore be quite different in a year"*.

The second one reflects on representativeness: *"we anticipate that if we continued with plans to host CSCW in Brazil, **we would likely see a drop in attendance,***

³<https://web.archive.org/web/20180926124848/https://www.facebook.com/acmCSCW/posts/cscw-community-members-as-many-of-you-likely-know-the-centers-for-disease-control/892888830832758/>

*which disproportionately affects the younger members of our communities, including Ph.D. students. In addition to potentially serious health risks, proceeding with our current plans **would likely result in a smaller and less representative conference** and, as a result, financial losses."*

My intention is not to criticize the organizers, who have been dealt a difficult hand. I would like to highlight two premises here: The first being the centrality of the US as a location, and the second one implicitly assuming a hierarchy in representation, with geography largely ignored in relation to, in this case, age.

CHI'12 initial address: How do we count?

CHI 2012 is about to be. ACM SIGCHI President Gerrit van der Veer addresses the audience and shows a world map where countries are color-coded by amounts of participants at the conference. The main message was that while most participants were from North America and Europe, that other countries were more represented than in previous years, and that this was a sign that they were "catching up". I knew at the time of colleagues who had papers accepted and got their VISA requests refused for the US after months of uncertainty and waiting. Without going into specifics, which I was not authorized to divulge, this raises both issues of how we judge participation and non-participation of researchers as a matter of *other* countries temporal positionality (behind others or catching up), but also how those data were obtained and treated as accounting for participation by country. I would like to note here that I have made attempts to engage with registration data, and there seemed to be an interest in collaborating which did not materialize in

the end, most likely because there was no infrastructure to support such approaches.

Registration: Who is the researcher?

The conference registration form is an interesting site for exploring issues of inclusion and identity. CHI and CSCW collect only ambiguous information on origin (Figure 1). It is unclear upon filling the registration form what the field "Country" is (it seems to refer to the institution, but could also refer to nationality, which can in itself be multiple). In the past I have questioned the registration of gender, which used to be binary and mandatory. I was told at the time this was required to assess gender equity. This year both registration forms include more inclusive questions on gender (Figure 2), with the CHI registration adding a question of the pronoun one would like to be addressed by (Figure 3). We can ask here whether similar efforts for counting would be required with regards to, for instance country of origin. But also, how we account for involuntary forms of non-participation. Where can that be counted?

Discussion

The default researcher?

The first issue that I would like to raise is the question of centers and peripheries. It is clear that the US is taken as the "default", or center. This raises issues many issues such as the absorption of difference [1]. It is interesting to note that basing the decision on Center for Disease Control travel advice, emphasizes that state of 'default', since the assumption is that one is "traveling" with the departing point being the US. The question raised (i.e. disproportionately affecting certain demographics) could easily be turned around. This is particularly timely given the current hostile immigration policies in the US, mass shootings, concerns around

racially motivated police violence or widespread gun ownership. Western and non-Western countries alike have issued travel warnings to the US around such issues [6]. The acknowledgement that Zika might spread to the US and that Brazil was going above and beyond to control the outbreak, seemed to have little impact in reconsidering the US as the natural center.

What data?

As mentioned, I have made attempts to engage with ACM registration data. The initial momentum it got, slowly subsided. It seems that rather than a lack of desire to engage with these questions there is a lack in the necessary infrastructure to do so [4]. I would like to raise the following questions: How can we access participation data in a reasonable and privacy respectful way to engage with these important questions? What kind of data do we need? What kind of questions should we be asking in the registration forms? How can we visualize and map these? Finally, what are the alternative sites where we could be asking these questions (e.g. those who decided not to submit since obtaining a VISA seems unlikely or those who did not participate because they got their VISAs denied).

Research(er/ed) participation

Perhaps the overarching issue here is whether this kind of researcher marginalization impacts the kinds of research done, and the inclusion/exclusion of those researched. This raises two important issues from my (limited) experience: (1) Researchers do not want to be furthered *othered* into becoming the objects of research in this area. This came up time and time again in my conversations. Researchers want to do their research and not become the object of research themselves, particularly due to their identity. (2) Challenges in

researcher inclusion is likely to influence the inclusion of certain topics and research participants. And (3) how can we show solidarity towards colleagues and improve their abilities to participate?

There is a lot to be learned from ICTD and work with vulnerable populations with regards to inclusion. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect participant and topical variety otherwise. This is further complicated since researchers want to become part of a community, and not be furthered *othered*. What is clear is that marginalization of researchers occurs not just at the moment of conference participation but spills into other facets of research life, such as, for reasons beyond their control, they become seen as often backing down from commitments, thus become increasingly invisible.

Finally, as has been critiqued already, HCI and ICT4D can embody certain forms of colonial relations between researcher/researched and peripheries as a site for knowledge extraction and the center as a recipient of representation [3]. We should ask how this same pattern plays out in how we infrastructure and design our own conferences⁴.

Conclusion

I draw on a few informal examples here to illustrate challenges to solidarity across researchers in our wide communities. These can benefit from more focused and formal empirical work, which is the main challenge I

⁴ A colleague pointed out, when reading this, that it reminded her of discussions at CSCW'16 when significant work had been done to accommodate the 'othered' participants, embodied as robots, while giving less infrastructural investment to those with reduced mobility at the conference. robot participation at CSCW/CHI could also be an interesting point for discussion.

would like to raise here. ICTD and CSCW work with vulnerable populations can likely help address some of these issues. This is also largely done as a 'side project' for which I do not have specific funding or formal support, and as such I would like to think of it as a form of community service. I would also like to reflect on whether ACM, and particularly CSCW should support, encourage and incorporate this line of research into the community.

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