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# Practicing Solidarity in Multi-Sited Ethnography: Reflections on Fieldwork

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**Abstract**

Issues of equity and inclusion are central to scholarship concerned with the implications of digital technologies. As researchers, this must shape not only the objects of our research, but how we engage in the research process. This is no easy task, however, particularly given the position of relative privilege researchers are placed in. In this position paper, I reflect on how these issues have surfaced in the course of my recent work, and articulate several questions for discussion at the workshop.

**Author Keywords**

Infrastructure; data; privacy; cryptography; feminism; historical research; ethnographic research.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

Social and professional topics; Professional Topics; History of computing

**Introduction**

Issues of equity and inclusion are central to scholarship concerned with the implications of digital technologies. As researchers, this must shape not only the objects of our research, but how we engage in the research process. This is no easy task, however, particularly given the position of relative privilege researchers are placed in.

In this position paper, I reflect on how these issues have surfaced in the course of my recent work. My research program aims to interrogate data infrastructures, examining how power flows on and through them and how they might be reconfigured toward more equitable and just ends [1,2]. Much of this work is thus multi-sited, relying on a combination of historical and ethnographic research. I've found questions about power and marginality surfacing in both archives and in the field in distinct ways: here I try to articulate a few that have particularly challenged me, in the hopes that they might be useful examples for thinking through these issues together at the workshop.

### **Project Background**

I recently completed my PhD, where I wrote a feminist history of cryptography for my dissertation project. I did not set out to write a feminist history at the outset: I was initially driven in the wake of the Snowden revelations to seek to understand how the internet so easily facilitated mass surveillance, despite the existence of encryption technologies that could be incorporated into networked infrastructures to protect our privacy.

Over time, however, I found the lens of feminism deeply shaping my work. This took place at multiple points of intervention: in pursuit of the question of how 'things may have been otherwise', I conducted work in archives that examined discourses among the mathematicians and technologists who developed cryptographic infrastructures.

I was frustrated by the obvious absence of women in much of this history – as many others have found, women's contributions to this space have largely not been made as legible as those of men [3,4]. As I sought to make sense of how the technologists' ideas about cryptography shaped their choices about where and how to incorporate cryptography into networked infrastructures, I found feminist theory to be useful in how it challenges the drawing of strict distinctions between private and public space. I argued that technology makers opted to use cryptography in places where it could enable e-commerce, but diminished its potential use for the protection of privacy. Moreover, these choices were not self-evident, but reflected ideas about privacy grounded in individualized rights that are a poor fit for our contemporary communicative space – and feminist theory pointed to alternative ways of thinking.

Drawing on multi-site ethnography as my methodological framework [5], I also engaged in field work within the digital rights community to explore how activists were engaged in cryptographic projects in the present day. I found that many members of this community challenged the views of their predecessors, developing new ideas about cryptography not as a protector of individualized privacy, but as a mechanism for secure communication among marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by surveillance.

### **Challenges During and After Fieldwork**

Fieldwork is a challenging exercise for many ethnographic researchers, and I'd be particularly keen to reflect with others at the workshop on how to

navigate issues of equity and solidarity as I move out of the field and toward publication of my findings.

Though gender was only one of many forms of identity implicated in this work, it was particularly salient during my time in the field because the communities I was engaged with also began at this time to grapple with abuses of power among their membership. These abuses manifested in especially troubling ways: harassment, discrimination, and in several instances violent sexual assault, which disproportionately impacted the (relatively few) female, queer and of color members of the community.

It felt clear to me that it was not possible nor desirable to think of myself as an outsider, even though most knew of me as a researcher. I felt that at a bare minimum it required the expression of support for those coming forward and condemnation of the perpetuation of abuse. I'm less sure of how to address these dynamics in the work I hope to publish; I'm particularly concerned about downstream effects for those involved and have opted to take this slowly and purposefully.

### **Future Work and Questions for Consideration**

This experience had a profound impact not only on my scholarship, but my orientation toward research as a whole. For one, it made me reflect on the normative role historical research can play. There are a number of histories of computing, and particularly of hacking, that laud the accomplishments of innovative individuals. But many of the same dynamics that make these individuals so path-breaking also characterize the kinds of behaviors that lead to abuse: this led me to question

the work that these kinds of histories perform, as well as how they mask the contributions of community members that go unseen. I sought, at least in my dissertation, to tell a more complex story about the development of cryptography.

In preparation for the next stage of this work, there are a number of questions I feel it is important to raise: how do we do research that is in solidarity with communities working toward social justice goals and is not exploitative of them? On a more personal level, this has led me to also reflect on how best I can acknowledge my position of relative privilege as a researcher and a cisgendered, able-bodied, hetero white woman without reifying that privilege. I feel that it's important that all the work not be left to people who are in positions of marginality, but am also conscious that my own views of the world are only partial and contingent.

This questioning is particularly salient to my next phase of work as a postdoctoral researcher: my position is focused on developing a new research agenda at the nexus of artificial intelligence, gender, and intersectionality. This work is very much in its early stages, but as I craft my research agenda, I am particularly interested in engaging questions about how best to practice solidarity by doing more than just observing events 'in the field' and going on to publish in academic venues, though I continue to see rigorous scholarly work as important. What are ways that we as researchers can ensure that our projects are designed in ways that bolster the work of the communities we engage with? I very much appreciate the opportunity to reflect on this question with this thoughtful group.

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