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Navigating gender dynamics: a male researcher's experiences on conducting feminist HCI research

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In this perspective article, I invite readers to accompany me on a personal journey of self-discovery and transformation as a male researcher within the field of feminist Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). I will delve into the specific topic of gender-opposite research in socio-technical environments and reflect on my experiences, especially the associated challenges and opportunities. My journey exposed me to critical literature and engaged me in long-term fieldwork simultaneously, expanding my understanding of the dynamics that shape our society. My perspectives, sensitization, and awareness of gender-related issues evolved significantly over the course of more than 3 years of being dedicated to a feminist research project. By sharing this narrative, I hope to promote critical discussions about the significance of both, personal growth, and transformation as well as the need for reflexivity in the pursuit of feminist research (with a focus on the specific context of gender-opposite research in socio-technical environments). I will dive into the complexities that I encountered in the settings and compromises I felt obliged to make which were influenced by the embodied nature of my research. As I will furthermore show, there had been an impact on my research practices in terms of planning, observation, analysis, and writing.

KEYWORDS

feminist research, feminist HCI, feminism, gender-opposite research, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Feminist research (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Webb, 1993; Campbell and Wasco, 2000) historically developed out of the feminist movement as a “concern with the conventional social sciences, which reflected the male values, knowledge, and experience” (Gurung, 2020, p. 106). It offers implications on epistemology and methodology and proposes a more humanist approach to research, influencing all stages of the research process by taking feminist principles into account. Feminist researchers (...) have advocated a more engaged research praxis that might overcome some of the inequalities in doing social research” (Levinson, 1998, p. 337–339). The same holds true for the field of feminist human computer interaction (HCI): Masculinity influences technology cultures, may it be practical or academic work, perpetually reinforcing gender stereotypes. Feminist HCI (Bardzell, 2010; Rode, 2011) as a theoretical orientation to HCI research sensitizes researchers regarding questions such as whose concerns and interests are considered in socio-technical environments, whose voices are heard, and how stereotypes are inscribed into technology artifacts.

In the field of feminist HCI, feminist standpoint theory seems to be the predominant feminist perspective. Standpoint theory privileges marginal voices, seeing an epistemic advantage and a reduction of power relations in this approach (Gurung, 2020). It claims that women's experiences are different from men's, thus deserving special attention in analysis. These differences go largely unrecognized by "conventional" scientific inquiry, meaning that women hold a different type of valuable knowledge—something which Harding calls "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1992b)—which is in contrast to scientific objectivity. In this context, feminist scholars (e.g., Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988) argued the need to address the power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production (and elsewhere) and to pay attention to the researcher's "situated knowledge" as well. Originally, feminist standpoint theory argued for putting women into the center and conducting research explicitly for and with women. More generally speaking, it is important to note that while feminist research historically originated from the study of women—which is why the term is potentially misleading—this type of epistemology can be applied to research with any marginalized group. The common understanding today is that feminist epistemology is inclusive in its nature. It is not limited to excluding research about and with men, but rather on scrutinizing their experiences as gendered beings. Thus, feminist research dedicates to eliminate all forms of discrimination (Agozino, 1995). Applying such a view can contribute to an enhanced sensitivity regarding the potential harm created for anyone included in the research process.

Among other factors, feminist research also explicitly emphasizes value commitments and aims for emancipatory ends. Building trustful relationships and valuing emotionality as an important resource (a trait commonly labeled as feminine and in contradiction to the rationalist, masculine approaches of traditional sciences) is another commitment in this context. For this reason, feminist research in general and feminist standpoint theory in particular advocate an activist, action-driven stance and lean toward qualitative methods that emphasize the everyday, subjective experiences of women (Acker et al., 1983; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; Bardzell, 2010). In this vein, scholars suggested that an ethnographic approach to the field (Levinson, 1998; Kaur and Nagaich, 2019) and participatory methods (Maguire, 1996) have the potential to address the explicit aim of not only empowering participants but also the need for reflexivity regarding the relationship between researchers and research participants (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992), seeking "to undercut the distance between the researcher and the research subject" (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2011, p. 681).

Regarding reflexivity, while it is essential to embrace this perspective, it is equally important to delve into the mechanisms and reasons that lead feminist research to manifest as "strong objectivity" or "a higher standard of objectivity." Critical reflexivity, and this is important to note in this context, does not mean "criticizing" but "critiquing." A critique, in the Kantian sense, involves exposing the assumptions behind concepts, theories, etc. In this context, feminist theorists have diligently explored these dimensions, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how reflexivity contributes to the development of "strong objectivity" within feminist research practices. They have been heavily involved

in increasing and developing the sensitivity to standpointism with and to each other (Wylie, 2012; Chunn and Menzies, 2014). Such a critical perspective on "doing research" confronts researchers with a variety of challenges, as they, among other things, must take responsibility for their roles and make their ambitions clear. Feminist theories can serve as guiding principles for adopting a critical reflexive stance, as mentioned above: Showing empathy (Wright and McCarthy, 2008), dedication, and care for subjects' concerns are as important as communicating ambitions and values from the very beginning, which also requires a certain degree of self-disclosure. Some argue that the researchers' standpoints, backgrounds, and experiences can "become both a powerful tool of inquiry" (Borning and Muller, 2012, p. 1,130) and have a beneficial impact on the approach to the fieldwork, concerning methods and beyond (Alsheikh et al., 2011).

The matter becomes potentially more complicated when gender-opposite is at play in a feminist research project. Early notions of feminist research denied men an entry to feminist truths and the possibility of contributing to feminist research (for a discussion, see e.g., Webb, 1993; Liddle, 1996; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Manohar et al., 2017). However, such argumentations became increasingly contested as being essentialist in their own way (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991). Both, female and male feminist academics (Cain, 1986; Harding, 1992a; Agozino, 1995; Digby, 1998b; Hearn, 1998; Levinson, 1998; Stacey, 1998; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Jardine and Smith, 2013; Bird, 2019) have argued that ideology and not biology determines the outcome of research. In this vein, a feminist standpoint is, in principle, not barred from men (Liddle, 1996). For this reason, "although it is true that men cannot experience women's problems and concerns in the same way as women, it does not restrict men to make a contribution to feminist research" (Manohar et al., 2017, p. 5). As others have described (Levinson, 1998; Manohar et al., 2017; Bird, 2019), there can be opportunities (e.g., female participants potentially appreciating the ambitions of male researchers) and challenges (e.g., regarding topics of body experiences or sexuality) to gender opposite research, especially regarding sensitive topics.

In this perspective article, I will share my personal narrative as a cisgender, heterosexual man who conducted feminist HCI research that required deep immersion in the field, because "reflexivity must then be a part of our commitment. It must become a duty of every researcher to reveal and share these reflexivities, not only for learning purposes but toward enhancing theory building how (Palaganas et al., 2017, p. 428)." By sharing my story, I hope to contribute to critical discussions about the significance of men's experiences in elevating feminist theory, including the requirement for a sensitization regarding traditional notions of manhood and masculinity in academic research and beyond (Digby, 1998b).

2. Project setting

A detailed description of the project setting is provided in my PhD thesis (Ahmadi, 2023) but I will give a brief overview for the sake of context: The research took place in a gender and IT project (2017–2019) in the research field of HCI that was a joint initiative consisting of two universities and a non-profit organization located

in Germany. Our research was guided by approaches that intend to shed light (with a transformative stance) on the taken-for-granted gendered social practices and the daily experiences of women in technology environments. They served as a means to translate an otherwise abstract feminist epistemology into an iterative and cyclic research approach. Our ethnographic approach to the fieldwork was guided by feminist ambitions of giving marginalized groups a voice; our inquiry was thus especially informed by notions of feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) (Maguire, 2001) and “institutional ethnography” (Smith, 2005). In this vein, we established a research infrastructure with the aim of gaining access to organizational technology environments and “real-life data” on gender issues regarding technology usage and development. Working closely with six tech-related organizations, we were thus able to dive deep into the fieldwork. Method-wise, we collected mainly qualitative data via interviews, focus groups, and workshops.

As Harding (e.g., 1992a) argues, a feminist standpoint can involve studying men. Despite a women-centric stance, and although we wanted to work from and for “the margins,” we thus rejected a misandric perspective and deliberately decided to work with female *and* male stakeholders alike. Although we lacked, apart from rare exceptions, a level of participation from different intersectional interests (which means that, perforce, our focus was thus on the gender binary), we understood gender as not being anchored in binary gender schemes and as socially constructed, or “performed,” respectively, via continuous repetitions (Butler, 1993) anyway. Participation in the project confronted men with critical topics regarding the gendered nature of their life in general and workplaces in particular. This potentially allowed them to understand themselves as gendered beings and liberate themselves from gendered restrictions and gender role expectations by adopting a more critical mindset (Digby, 1998b; Hearn, 1998; Maguire, 2001).

A powerful mechanism for regular feedback for our project team were biannual meetings with a “steering committee,” which consisted of a network of additional company representatives and gender researchers, who accompanied the project. Aside from our regular internal meetings, regular updates on the project’s progress as well as our activities to and group conversations with these experts allowed continuous reflection to avoid bias regarding our progress, our roles as organizers of our infrastructure, and the methodology we applied.

3. Experiences of conducting feminist HCI research

Turning toward a position on research influenced by critical theory, I generally believe that “knowledge” is not “pure fact” (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Instead, social factors, including gender, can shape how we construct our visions of the world. Hence, I follow the perspective of Harding (1992b), who argues that recognition of the gendered nature of reality confers a higher standard of objectivity in research than so-called value-neutral research. In this sense, the process of knowledge creation is situated (Haraway, 1988) and influenced by the social context the research

takes place in, including the assumptions, background knowledge, values etc., of researchers (and participants). Identifying as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, and pro-feminist man, I acknowledge that I might be privileged because of the statuses granted to men in a patriarchal society and that many research initiatives still tend to have an androcentric bias. It is important to note that this positionality is not fixed and that a reflexive approach is transformative, as researchers learn throughout their studies and should adapt their own assumptions as well as their processes. Throughout the project, my critical and pro-feminist stance increasingly developed with time, the more I was challenged by engaging with critical literature and through the long-term fieldwork.

In this context, I find it important to note that I had no specific intention to join a gender-related research initiative or to engage with feminist research in the first place. Frankly, it was more by pure chance that I got involved in a feminist research project. On the one hand, with my previous academic experiences (M.A. in media management), I did neither feel particularly well prepared nor qualified to engage with this kind of work. On the other hand, in retrospect I can state that I felt intuitively drawn to the project as it seemed to suit my personal views, although, at this point of time, I was lacking the intellectual apparatus to understand the exact reasons. Thus, I quickly gained similar experiences to those of Bird (2019, p. 67) in terms that my research activities “forced me to confront my own memories and desires about home, family and agency and of how those are gendered and become embodied within everyday acts. (...) In this way the research was emancipatory for me as well as for the participants.” Ergo, thanks to getting knowledgeable about feminist literature and conducting feminist research for more than 3 years, my way of thinking and my sensitization regarding the dynamics in our society—and how I potentially contribute to them—have changed my life forever. To put it in the words of Digby (1998a, p. 5): “I still consider feminism to be the most important defining characteristic of my philosophical and personal life.” Still, I regarded my sensitization for the matter as a process, as I continually developed my gender expertise (Attia and Edge, 2017)—and will continue to do so in the future.

In this context, it was interesting to see reactions from the research community at academic gatherings, where my gender became salient. I remember a happening at a conference when I explained my research topic to a male participant. He responded in a refreshingly self-aware manner, acknowledging his lack of familiarity with the subject matter and, because of this, expressing the importance of research like mine. This made me remember that some years prior I probably would have given a similar answer. Furthermore, at a poster session I once received the comment by a woman who stated “I expected a woman to stand here.” On another occasion, a woman asked me “Wouldn’t it be better if you were gay?” Such instances prompted me to deeper reflect on my own transition, the role of male researchers in contributing to feminist theory, and the interplay between gender, sexuality, and research practices. In this context, it can be rewarding to scrutinize the nuanced dynamics surrounding insider/outsider positionalities in qualitative, ethnographic research. Indeed, qualitative, ethnographic researchers frequently regard themselves as “insiders” or “outsiders” in relation to their research settings

and the groups they are studying practice (Weiner-Levy and Abu Rabia Queder, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The insider-outsider dichotomy has been criticized as a constant shift of researchers between “spaces” instead of fixed boundaries is arguably the case in research practice (Manohar et al., 2017; Darwin Holmes, 2020). However, it might still be helpful to shed light on my role and experiences as a man conducting feminist research: I generally considered myself a curious outsider to the “lived familiarity” to female experiences (in IT organizations). The argument given by Safdar and Yasmin (2020, p. 4) helps to frame my perspective: A male researcher has “to be more reflective and empathetic to understand the women participants’ sensibilities; however, this sexual opposition of the author enables him to be more interested and curious to explore the experiences of the women.” The central goal of an ethnographer is to obtain an insider’s or “native’s” point of view via immersing in the field. At one point in time, ethnographers are able to understand and explicate the reasoning of the people they are working with. In the case of a male researcher, he is an outsider as a man but becomes, over time, an insider to women’s experiences (Gurung, 2020).

In this regard, I am very grateful for the openness that I received in the field and am confident that I was able to establish trustful relations over time with female participants, addressing their perspectives thoroughly (for similar experiences of male researchers conducting feminist research, see e.g., Bruni and Gherardi, 2001; Bird, 2019). I saw no reluctance of (female) participants to express their viewpoints, as they have been forthcoming and reflective about their various concerns, especially after establishing trustful relationships over time. Arriving at this point required a degree of empathy and honest commitment. This way, I was possibly also making modest steps toward becoming an insider to their unique experiences, which, admittedly, required time. In this sense, I cannot stress the importance of the long-term character of our research project enough, as it was tremendously beneficial for establishing these relationships—at least in organizations that showed enough commitment to the research project and assisted in nurturing long-term relationships.

Having said that, the impact of my intervention as a male researcher when conducting gender opposite research can only be speculative, although it is helpful to be at least reflective about it. Firstly, the potential impact of social desirability bias, e.g., interview partners not wanting to be perceived as sexist with their interview statements (Williams and Heikes, 1993), has to remain hypothetical to a degree. Secondly, with research projects usually being conducted with project partners and within teams, the exchange with a mixed-gender group of critical colleagues (Smith and McGannon, 2018) in the form of regular formal team/project meetings (Weibert et al., 2017) and informal exchanges was also beneficial to reflect on the fieldwork, analysis of the data, and writing processes. The steering committee meetings were another instrument for regular reflection and input from gender experts. Adopting a triangulation strategy (Webb, 1993; Williams and Heikes, 1993) to foster different researcher perspectives during the fieldwork and beyond, we conducted activities in mixed-gender teams whenever possible. Sharing my findings and analysis with mixed-gender colleagues who have provided a source of potential critique helped in identifying if I have inadvertently fallen

into gendered assumptions. Said that, internal discussions often revealed that the impressions and the openness that I received did not significantly differ from my female colleagues.

Despite all of this, I accept that there have been occasions when I engaged with men and women differently, despite my efforts to be as neutral as possible-sometimes, also because of what seemed to me “for the sake of the project.” Nonetheless, I tried to stay reflexive about these issues (see Levinson, 1998 for a similar case). While my research was politically engaged, I aimed at being mindful of the view that an activist stance “seems to privilege the social values of the designer” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1,304). Still, I recognized that I had to take certain sides (Becker, 1967) and embrace the “underdog perspective.” For example, I occasionally felt the need to adjust my stance depending on different contexts and groups I was interacting with. For instance, during a focus group consisting solely of men, with the exception of one women, I felt the need to communicate in a way that I was not entirely comfortable with in order to establish a relationship with said men and get them “on board” to ensure the project’s success: On one occasion, a male participant proclaimed to “*stop this ‘diverse’ nonsense!*” during a focus group. Though put off by such a statement, I did not respond to keep the discussion going. Also, I “relented” in discussions about gender-sensitive language or made “male” jokes on rare occasions to gain sympathy for our matter. This shift in behavior, for instance, happened during a focus group discussion and was reflected afterwards to me by the only woman in the room, our trustworthy contact point in this organization during the project period.

Eventually, I also arrived at a “point of no return” where I felt that the planning of research projects, the way I approached data collection as well as analysis and my writing have been significantly influenced. For instance, in projects that did not have an explicit feminist stance, I nonetheless kept feminist research principles in mind and embedded gender-related questions in the interview guidelines as a result of my constant sensitization over the years.

4. Conclusion

Agozino (1995) argues that while sympathy, empathy, and rapport are vital requirements concerning a feminist research approach, a general commitment to ending sexism, racism, and class exploitation is arguably the most essential prerequisite. Following this perspective, the gender of a researcher should, in theory, not have an impact on the outcome of the research. At the same time, gender as a social construct does very much matter in everyday interactions and it does so in research. As both feminist (e.g., Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988) as well as (feminist) HCI (Alsheikh et al., 2011; Borning and Muller, 2012) scholars propose, while our vision of the world is based on an embodied perspective which makes us personally responsible for it, the researchers’ standpoints, backgrounds, and experiences can have a beneficial impact on the research process. The personal, emotional involvement of the researcher, as argued above, is arguably significant when researching sensitive subjects “because of the often intimate nature of the research topics and the resulting subjectivity of the research process” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, p. 5). However, this does not release researchers from adopting

a reflexive mindset to avoid bias and ensure that the research outcome does not privilege their social values (Bardzell, 2010).

Embracing feminist principles does not necessarily mean that a project needs to follow an articulated feminist ambition: As Campbell and Wasco (2000) argue, “more ‘traditional topics’ can also be researched from a feminist perspective” (p. 778) as “feminist methodologists challenge all social scientists to explore the process of research in more depth, to locate all facets of researchers’ identities—values, beliefs, and emotions—within the research context” (p. 788). In the same vein, Agozino (1995, p. 287) advocates that “feminist research has very useful insights which should be adopted by all researchers whether or not they are feminists especially because such insights often derive from more conventional approaches with which feminist writers do not fully agree.” Based on my experiences, I cannot support this view enough. I hope that the narrative of my personal journey of self-discovery and transformation as a male researcher and my experiences in the field made the potential for personal growth clear, which has eventually had a lasting impact on how I conduct research.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data contains personal and sensitive information from participants, which is subject to strict confidentiality and anonymity. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to MA.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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