What Shall Cordelia Speak? Privilege and the Ethics of Speech About HCI in Marginalised Communities

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ABSTRACT
The cornerstone of human-computer interaction (HCI) research is improving lives. Whether by simple usability or novel technology design the promise of our work is to make the lives of our potential users somehow easier or better. This is relatively easy when the users in question are similar to us: when they have similar access to education, technology and money; when they have the same social and legal protections as we do, and when they are able in the fullest sense of the word to access the opportunities we can. When there is inequality, however, we run the risk of doing more harm than good by introducing inappropriate technologies or by patronising and othering our users. In this paper we address the relative privilege of HCI researchers in comparison with many of our subject groups; the politics of speaking for these groups, and the ethical standards to which we must hold ourselves when we do and speak about this research. This paper does not purport to have all (or even many) of the answers; it is instead intended as a discussion piece.

Content warnings
Marginalisation, sexism, racism, sexual violence, medical procedures, ageism

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Social justice; HCI; Marginalisation; Ethics

CCS Concepts
• Human Centred Computing– Human Computer Interaction

INTRODUCTION
‘Othering’ occurs when we identify an individual or group as being inherently alien to ourselves, usually with the consequence of marginalising or stigmatising their values or worth. Yvonne Rogers and Gary Marsden identified the risk of HCI research othering marginalised participants—and unnecessarily interfering in their lives—in 2013 (Rogers 2013). They termed this behaviour ‘sugar thinking’, after observing an interaction where someone asked ‘does he take sugar in his tea?’ about a man who was present and able to answer for himself, but physically disabled. This type of thinking means human-computer interaction (HCI) and technology development is something we do to or for other groups, rather than doing them with these groups or—even better—supporting groups in meeting their own needs. As we expand our practice into new domains, for example the politically persecuted, the elderly, indigenous communities, the risk of this type of thinking increases, particularly where none of the researchers involved are members of the marginalised group.

Some of the risks of sugar thinking are clear and have been addressed in other work on ethics; interventions we impose, for example, have limited lifespans and we must plan for our exit from the picture if research is to be conducted ethically (Siek et al. 2014). Some risks are, however, more subtle: for an already disempowered individual or group, intervention by imposition can further disempower, such interventions may well be ignored (Bianco et al. 2015). It is this understanding that has led to (for example) the ‘nothing about us without us’ model of disability activism (Charlton 1998).

The usual ethical checks that are applied within HCI emphasise the importance of avoiding harm to research respondents and participants. This is clearly an important, valid and necessary process. However, when groups are marginalised, is the principle of ‘no harm’ sufficient? While identifying at the margins can be a conscious and defended choice, in many cases it is set and enforced by others (Chainey 2014). Do we, given that marginalisation can reduce agency, set the bar high enough with ‘do no harm’ or do we need to be more careful still?

These concerns may make it appear impossible or unethical to conduct research with marginalised groups; arguably if we do so heedlessly it is. There is also an opportunity here, to come back to the central tenet of HCI, though: by conducting this research carefully and sensitively, we can make the world a better place.

This paper will address four aspects of that care and sensitivity. First the paper will define the social justice concept of privilege, and describe the privilege we have as HCI researchers over many of our participants. Next we will address speech, and how HCI research can serve as a mouthpiece for groups who are not in a position to speak for themselves—no matter how much they might like to. Thirdly we will address the ethics of that speech, particularly with respect to writing about users in a way they can understand. Finally we will issue a caution about study design, and how it can entrench divides and barriers rather than reducing them.

AN HONOUR AND A PRIVILEGE
The concept of privilege is relatively well-established in social justice circles, and seemingly difficult to
understand outside them. The seminal work on privilege is ‘The Invisible Knapsack’ (McIntosh 1989), which outlines many of the ways in which people benefit from their privilege. It was originally intended to address racial privilege, but has since been expanded to include other kinds. Perhaps more relevant (and topical) for the HCI community is Scalzi’s ‘Straight, white male’ piece (Scalzi 2012), which analogises the intersection of a number of privileges to difficulty settings in a video game. It is this intersectional definition of privilege we must consider when we do HCI research.

We each come to research with our own cluster of privileges and marginalisations: many HCI researchers are women; some have disabilities, many are non-white. Each of these things affects not just who we are in the world, but how we do research.

Importantly, though, we as HCI researchers by definition have significant privilege over many of those whose lives we study or seek to affect, particularly those who might be termed ‘marginalised’. The first privilege we have is that of education: assuming that HCI researchers have at least a bachelors level education, we are better educated than 93% of the world’s population (Barro et al. 2013), and 52% of Australia’s. If we assume a master’s or higher degree, we are better educated than 94% (ABS 2015a) of Australians. Our affiliations with universities and research institutions give us access to a wealth of information we may not otherwise have. Similarly university salaries, while not as lucrative as high-end private salaries, are higher than the average Australian salary (ABS 2015b). Whatever marginalisation we may experience HCI researchers in Australia have the triple privileges of being well educated, well paid, and having extensive access to information. In addition, there can be associated relative privileges, such as forms of ‘cultural capital’ gained through professional status and in parallel with the social gains associated with university education.

We cannot will our privilege away, but there are things we can do to mitigate its impact. The first step to managing privilege is acknowledging it: the authors of this article are well educated and white, one male and one female. Between them they have a cluster of marginalisations, none of which are relevant here.

Acknowledging privilege alone is not enough, though; there are several other ways in which we can (and should) be good allies (Bishop 2002). One of the most important of these is believing what our participants tell us about their own lives, and recognising that they—are individuals. Another important factor is understanding that their decisions may not be the same decisions we make about our own lives; examples of the ways in which people make different decisions than we might expect include Bianco’s work on fall prevention (Bianco et al. 2015) and the now famous treatise ‘Why I make terrible decisions’ about poverty (KillerGibsons 2013).

There is a particular risk for us as HCI professionals here: we may become technocrats; the technical knowledge that can make us invaluable allies (more on this in a moment) can also strongly negatively colour our picture of participant behaviour in relation to technology.

Where possible, as Rogers and Marsden pointed out (Rogers 2013), we should be supporting marginalised participants in doing for themselves (rather than doing for them), a strategy that has demonstrably been effective in broader social justice (Hough et al. 2010). Finally, we can amplify the voices of such participants, particularly in spaces occupied by other privileged people.

**MY BEST WEAPON IS MY MOUTH (AND I’VE GOT A MICROPHONE)**

One of the core components of allyship is working on behalf of our participants with other privileged folks. Ideally this means creating opportunities for marginalised groups to speak for themselves, as Marsden did with the San people (Marsden et al. 2010).

Sometimes though, marginalised groups may not feel able to speak for themselves. This may be because sharing their knowledge is risky for ethico-legal reasons, such as the body modification practices studied by Lingel and Heffernan (Lingel et al. 2013; Heffernan et al. 2016). Equally, members of marginalised groups can find it difficult or impossible to speak for themselves for reasons specifically related to their marginalisation. This difficulty may be due to several factors including disability and safety. We will provide a salient example of the latter here, discussing GamerGate and women, particularly women who have survived violence.

We will not address all the nuances of GamerGate, should the reader be interested they can find a potted summary online1. Relevant aspects of the controversy are that one ‘side’ is comprised primarily of men, the other of women and their supporters. Many of the women who spoke up about the controversy were issu ed rape and death threats, ‘doxxed’ (had their personal details made available online) and forced to flee their homes (2014). This, of course, was the point: the men behaving in this way wanted to make it difficult for women to speak up, and created a disparity of access to technology with their activities. This disparity is further entrenched by women’s experience of violence: many women will not have spoken because they did not want to be re-traumatised by threats of violence. Technology had a role to play in all this; much of GamerGate played out on Twitter, which has historical poor form for taking women’s concerns seriously (West 2014). Furthermore Wikipedia banned a number of female—and feminist—editors from commenting on or changing a number of articles related to GamerGate, further reducing their access to both technology and speech (Williams 2015). These issues do not occur in a vacuum: women are grossly underrepresented in IT. Kayla Heffernan has an excellent discussion on how this impacts design (Heffernan 2016), but it also influences culture and the perception of women as ‘other’ within the industry.

What would our roles as HCI professionals have been, had we been studying the women of GamerGate, though?

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1http://www.abc.net.au/technology/articles/2014/10/28/4116140.htm
First and foremost our role would have been to speak out on their behalf, both on their experiences of the scandal, and their experiences of the technology. We could both have spoken up about the practices of Twitter and Wikipedia (perhaps we could and should have anyway), and potentially spoken to those organisations as well. Our voices can both be used to change practice, and to bear witness where practice is entrenched in the hope that we can change it in the future.

HCI professionals have several advantages when it comes to speech. Our technology focused profession gives us both a clearer idea what technological solutions are possible and better access to tech firms than our participants. Our affiliations with academic institutions afford us privileges and protections our participants do not have, and lend weight to our voices. We must be cautious to use our voices in ways that empower and support our marginalised participants, rather than patronising them or minimising their experiences.

SAY IT LOUD, SAY IT CLEAR

Not only do we have the obligation to speak up for marginalised participants when they can’t speak for themselves, we need to consider the ways in which we speak. ‘Nothing about us without us’ applies to all marginalised groups; and—if we work with them—to the ways in which we speak about them.

Determining the ethical right of how we speak about participants can be tricky; some participants would prefer to be named and institutional ethics policies will get in the way, for example (Bruckman 2014). Equally sometimes we will make discoveries that feed into stereotypes; it would be unethical not to report these but we must be cautious about how we report them.

There are two areas in which we can always consider the way we speak, though: the language in which we write, and the ways in which results are made available.

The language and tone we use is referred to in sociolinguistics as ‘register’ (Trudgill 1992). We use register to signal our membership in certain social groups, and to a certain extent to exclude others. Academic register is one example of exactly this—we use longer words and sentences and make our work generally harder to read. When publishing—in particular when publishing about marginalised groups who have lesser access to the academic community—we should consider whether the language we use allows us to be more precise or merely more academic. We have an obligation to all participants to write about them in ways they can understand.

Not only must we speak about our participants in ways that they can understand, we must also make our learnings available to participants and their communities; this is one of the cornerstones of the open access movement (Herb 2010). As noted above, we as HCI researchers have access to considerably more information than most of the people we study; it would be morally wrong for our work to further entrench this inequity.

Engineers Without Borders addresses exactly these issues (Kinglsey 2013): to be accessible and inclusive we must consider language, distribution and publishing models. Even when working ‘within borders’, HCI professionals and researchers could learn from the engineers’ approach.

WHO AM I AND WHO ARE YOU AND WHO ARE WE?

Typical HCI research with marginalised groups examines how their marginalisations affect their access to services, technologies, and information (see for example (Bianco et al. 2015) on age and (Duncker 2002) or (Awori et al. 2015) on culture). These studies are valuable; we need to hold our privilege up and examine—and where possible quantify—the ways in which our unearned advantages play out.

Studies with marginalised groups must be carefully constructed, however, so avoid further marginalisation of participants. We have recently seen two examples of further marginalisation, both of which were accepted for publication; we hold these examples up not to ridicule them or as particularly specious, but instead to highlight how easily we can make mistakes.

The first example (Walsh et al. 2014) looked at the impact of culture on interpretation of usability studies, and used images as part of the test study. There were two cultural groups involved in the study, and the images used with the non-dominant group were tested with that group for relevance as part of the study protocol, while the dominant group’s images were not tested. This sets up the non-dominant group as ‘strange’ or other where the dominant group’s images were normal or ‘like us’. This disparity in this instance also negatively affected the researchers’ ability to compare data between groups resulting in a less effective study.

The second example (undisclosed 2017) again aimed to achieve something valuable for marginalised groups, measuring the impact of having English as a second language on the group’s ability to find government information documents. In contrast to the first, this study did not compare its participants with locally raised English speakers who share a dialect with the publishers of the documents, nor did it compare participants with higher English language test scores to those with lower scores. The authors nevertheless ascribed the difficulties their participants had in finding information to their English capabilities, without addressing whether the information was in fact merely hard to find. This approach essentially entrenches preconceptions of a marginalisation thereby stigmatising participants it set out to help.

To do good, culturally safe, ethical work with marginalised participants we need to ensure that we do not ascribe anything—abilities, characteristics, differences—to their diversities without a clear causal link and solid evidence. Every time we consider treating a participant group as anything other than ‘like us’ we need to be very clear why, and make sure this changed treatment benefits participants and understanding, rather than further entrenching division and othering.

DO NOT BE SILENT

The challenge of this paper, of course, is that it is written by two relatively privileged academics who do not...
routinely work with marginalised people. Arguably, we are speaking in a space where we have no right to speak. We each have a long and little-publicised interest in social justice, however, that affects both our approach to research generally and our interest in HCI specifically.

It may seem like this paper is arguing against working with marginalised groups; that is simply not the case. Like most professionals in our field, we believe passionately in the potential of our work to improve lives. Like Rogers and Marsden (Rogers et al. 2013), we believe the best way to do that is to support each individual user, and each user group to be creative and empowered within their own lives.

One of the primary tools we reach for to solve problems in HCI is technology; this paper argues for another tool: speech. When working with marginalised groups the power differential between us and our participants goes up, making who speaks, to whom, how and about what a more fraught and important question than usual. We as a profession have the privilege of having large platforms, and we must use them judiciously, wisely, and ethically.

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