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Playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show: Feminist acts in usability study work

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ABSTRACT

As a feminist HCI agenda develops, feminist analyses of behaviour must venture beyond the dominant liberal feminist approach to include other feminist approaches. Using the personal narrative or auto-ethnographic method, this article explores the role of gender in usability work, a common research practice in HCI. In this article, the author interprets three gendered behaviours that occur in usability work – playing stupid, caring for and about users, and putting on a good show – demonstrating that while these behaviours appear anti-feminist in a liberal feminist framework, they appear feminist in alternative feminist frameworks, such as relational/care-giving, sex-positive, multicultural, post-colonial and Third Wave. The article demonstrates how a feminist HCI agenda that embraces the multiplicity of feminisms necessarily forces a re-examination of usability work's relationship to both feminism and HCI research methods.

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1. Introduction

The field of HCI's embarkation on an exploration of feminist HCI undertaken in this special issue offers a unique opportunity to examine the salience of gender in HCI research methods. Whether in formal lab studies, pre-design interviews, online discussion groups, customer panels, or remote usability studies, HCI practitioners interact regularly with potential and actual users in the quest to design usable systems. Simply juxtaposing feminism and HCI forces an acknowledgement that HCI's research methods are indeed gendered. The recent call for a feminist HCI agenda looks to practitioners and researchers to “incorporate feminism in user research, iterative design, and evaluation methodologies to broaden their repertoire for different contexts and situations” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1305). An engagement between feminism and HCI immediately begs the question: which kind of feminism. This question is not simply rhetorical. Rather, exploring which feminisms are relevant to HCI provides a way to better analyze and address the role of gender in HCI research methods, and, ultimately, in HCI itself.

The choice of a feminist approach influences how we interpret behaviour in HCI research contexts. My analysis identifies three behaviours in usability work, a common HCI research method – playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show. All three are recognizable forms of doing (West and Zimmerman, 1987) or performing (Butler, 1990) gender that resonate with

traditional notions of femininity. While the three behaviours themselves are, of course, available to both genders, women more readily engage in and are associated with them.

Discussing gender and sexuality's role in research methods is challenging. The potential for embarrassment, misunderstandings, political missteps, and even legal repercussions feels high, and the topics themselves are ever open to context and subjective interpretation. In academic fields such as anthropology and sociology, the relevance of gender, sex and, more recently, sexual orientation and sexuality's role in qualitative data collection is fairly common. In the field of HCI, sex and sexuality, however, are more rarely addressed. As the organizers of a 2006 CHI workshop noted “it is not that such issues are actively covered up, but rather politely ignored, despite their role in technology use and development.” (Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1696). We, as researchers and practitioners, have an obligation to acknowledge and explore gender and sexuality in our work.

This article is intended to be a step in the exploration of how different feminist approaches allow for alternative interpretations of behaviour related to gender and sexuality in HCI research settings. First, I provide a very brief sketch of academic work on feminism, with an emphasis on illustrating the import of the plurality of feminism. Second, I discuss the context of usability work in HCI and its relation to gender. Third, through a reflexive, personal narrative method, I identify three gendered behaviours – playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show—that mainstream feminism would easily portray as anti-feminist and demonstrate how other feminist approaches offer alternative explanations. I

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conclude by encouraging participants in the feminist agenda to take heed of the dangers of embracing only one kind of feminism and applying it uniformly to the practice and field of HCI.

2. A question of feminism

2.1. Feminism defined

From the complex debate of what constitutes feminism, a productive definition of feminist projects is that of Janet Halley (Halley, 2006). In the context of the United States, and I would argue in Western mainstream cultures, Halley (Halley, 2006) describes feminist projects as having three characteristics. First, they make a distinction between m and f, for example, male and female, masculine and feminine, or men and women. Second, feminist positions posit “some kind of subordination as between m and f, in which the f is the disadvantaged or subordinated element” (Halley, 2006, p. 18). The subordination is descriptive, not prescriptive. Third, feminism opposes the subordination of f. While this formulation of feminism intentionally blurs and downplays the complexity of the fuller intellectual debate – notably differences among women – it highlights what are, for the purpose of this article, the most crucial elements of feminism: a focus on gender and an acknowledgement of its role in relationships of power.

2.2. Plurality of feminism

The mere existence of more than one kind of feminism – both as a theoretical approach and as a social orientation – may come as a surprise to audiences unfamiliar with the topic. The plurality of feminisms reflects the complexity of taking gender seriously conceptually and practically. The struggle to elaborate feminism’s different forms can be understood as competing fields of thought, but also as definitions with political consequences. Each feminist approach carries with it views of the current and ideal world, determining what issues are worthy of its attention. While some issues implicated in this debate – reproductive control, motherhood, domestic labour, violence – appear more distant from the core work of HCI, others appear central, such as work environments free from informal or formal discrimination, the role of care, parity in pay, and value of work.

2.2.1. Liberal feminism

The liberal feminist approach is what most commonly comes to mind in mainstream discussions of feminism. Rooted in the rational framework of the Enlightenment, it focuses on the attainment of social and legal equality for women and men (Wollstonecraft, 2004; Mill, 2007) and is “characterized by a view that women and men are, for all legitimate purposes, the same; equality is its central and social legal goal” (Halley, 2006, p. 79). In the United States, the United Kingdom and some Western European democracies, it is the feminist approach most readily associated with women’s liberation movements of the 1970s and nurtured by the United Nations’ decade of focus on women (1975–1985). This feminist approach recognizes gender inequity, but views individualized agency – particularly women’s agency – as the locus for productive change toward gender equality.

The liberal approach characterizes much of the sparse existing work in HCI on gender and feminism. With the goal of formal equality in mind, many policy initiatives in HCI and its related fields focus, for example, on narrowing the gender gap in computer science education or honouring the contribution of women to the field. The starting assumption that a lack of gender equality is a problem that needs to be solved for the sake of women and for the betterment of society yields academic research on issues such

as the gender digital divide, for example, in Internet use or digital gaming. Many of the characteristics that Bardzell describes as the central commitments to feminism “agency, fulfilment, identity and the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1301) belong firmly in the liberal feminist approach.

2.2.2. Alternative (non-liberal) feminisms

The cultural, relational or care-focused feminist approach emphasizes that the characteristics traditionally seen as female – such as care-giving, communal awareness and intimacy with nature – are and should be regarded as a source of strength. While the liberal feminist approach stresses the import of equality, independence, autonomy and liberty in legal, social and economic terms, the cultural feminist approach “stress[es] the role of non-rational, the intuitive, and often collective side of life” (Donovan, 1985, p. 31). Cultural feminist approaches maintain different stances about the role of biology in the propensity for care-giving behaviour, but they agree on the positive value of care and relationships, not only in personal relationships and motherhood, but also to the public sphere. This approach centres feminism around “an ethic of care [that] has as its core a central mandate to care for the relationships that sustain life and... this ethic both grounds and is expressive of the care-giving work women distinctively perform (West, 1997, p. 8). The argument is that moral justice, both informally and as coded in law, has prioritized men’s prioritization of autonomy and individualization, while devaluing women’s prioritization of relationships and care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

Other feminist approaches have challenged the assumption inherent in liberal and cultural-relational feminism that women belong to a single category, particularly one that has been defined by situationally privileged women. Multicultural (Shohat, 1998; Hooks, 1999; Collins, 1990; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1984; Kim and Villanueva, 1997; Minh-ha, 1989), post-colonial (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988; McClintock, 1995), ‘Third World’ (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Narayan, 1987) feminist approaches resist the idea that women, simply by the fact of being women, can always be conceptualized as sharing a common experience of the world. These approaches argue that identities are complex, and, that many women’s “woman-ness” intersects with other structural realities of their position, such as nationality, ethnicity, wealth, religion and race. Feminist approaches popular among privileged women often ignore the degree to which complex intersections of identity make different issues more or less important. As Spelman writes, “Any attempts to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice versa” (Spelman, 1988, p. 3).

Women’s sex and sexuality also play a more central role in non-liberal feminisms. For example, the sex-positivist approach, which arose in the 1980s largely as a response to anti-pornography feminist projects, emphasizes that sex and sexuality could be a site of pleasure for women rather than solely one of danger and declares that “Like gender, sexuality is political” (Rubin, 1989, p. 309). Sex-positive feminists emphasize the diversity of women’s sexual experiences (Vance, 1989) – notably that not women did not need men to experience their sexuality – and encourage women to embrace and assert their sexuality, rather than fearing it or letting it be defined by men. Lesbian and some radical feminists, in line with Adrienne Rich’s classic essay (Rich, 1981), argue for the centrality of “woman-identified experience” in women’s lives and sexuality. Similarly, the Third-Wave feminist approach (Walker, 1992; Baumgardner, 2000; Hernandez, 2002; Jervis, 2006) takes the diversity of women’s sexual experiences and their agency over their own sexuality as a given. This feminist approach

acknowledges the complexity of women's engagement with society's norms of female attractiveness, but compared to previous feminists is "less prescriptive about what counts as good sex for women. They are also more comfortable about women enhancing their bodies to suit social norms and cultural expectations about what counts as beautiful" (Tong, 2008).

The brief discussion above of the plurality of feminism is by no means exhaustive, nor can this article do justice to the nuanced complexity of scholarship on feminism across a variety of disciplines.¹ What I have presented thus far is a crude extraction for our purposes from the intellectually rich and politically crucial work of many scholars on the assumptions and implications of different forms of feminism. The feminist approaches highlighted above, however, engage most directly with the issues that raised in the rest of the article: how different feminist approaches interpret the gendered nature of usability work.

3. Usability work

3.1. The field

Dating back to the birth of the usability profession in the mid-1980s (Dumas, 2007), usability is understood in the field and practice of HCI as "the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use" (VDTs, 1998). Usability work, of course, comes in many forms. Maguire (2001) usefully categorizes usability evaluations into three levels: participative, assisted and controlled, ranging from least to most formal. In a participative evaluation, a usability practitioner prioritizes what the user is thinking and may ask users for their impressions, suggestions and expectations. In an assisted evaluation the usability practitioner prioritizes maintaining a realistic operational environment, but attempts to maximize the amount of feedback by asking users to think aloud as they complete tasks. In a controlled evaluation, usability practitioners remove themselves as much as possible from the sessions, trying to replicate the users' real world circumstance as much as possible.

3.2. Contexts of usability work

Though rarely discussed explicitly in HCI, usability work is fraught with sociality, with the complexities of people's identities and interactions. Clemmensen et al., for example, comment on the prevailing trend in usability work to presuppose that the cultural issues do not influence research: "For example, the cultural background of experimental participants is rarely reported, task scenarios are assumed to be culturally unbiased, interface heuristics are presented as universals, and disagreements between studies are rarely discussed in terms of cultural effects" (Clemmensen et al., 2009, p. 212). Similarly other research shows that the cultural and organizational contexts influence the shape and effectiveness of usability work (Yammiyavar et al., 2008; Iivari, 2006). Yet other research draws attention to the complexity and variation of what actually occurs in the think-aloud protocol that prevails in usability work (Boren and Ramey, 2000).

Despite this burgeoning attention to culture, the field thus far has remained startlingly silent about gender and the role of women in usability work. According to the limited data available about usability specialists, women comprise, for example, 38% of them in the United Kingdom and 58% of them in the United States

(Payscale, 2010), making it one of the few occupations in the information technology industry in which both genders are equally or somewhat equally represented. The implication, therefore, is that despite the visibility of a few prominent men in the usability field, women execute a significant amount of the day-to-day, hands-on usability work.

The apparent gender parity in the usability profession is neither happenstance nor innocuous. Women are more represented in the usability profession than in other information technology professions, in part, because the positions generally do not require degrees in computer science or engineering, fields in which women lag far behind men. Similarly, as Gulliksen et al. note while usability work requires research skills first and foremost, it also requires "social skills to manage contacts with users as well as developers" (Gulliksen et al., 2006, p. 590); these social skills are often attributed to women. The association of women and usability work is not innocuous because, despite its relevance in HCI, usability work has relatively low status in the design and development process. The position of usability professionals "is often weak, their credibility is questioned and their work undervalued" (Iivari, 2006, p. 637). Women are, therefore, associated with a profession that, within information technology, at least, is less desirable.

The gendered nature of usability work, even if unremarked upon thus far, makes it an excellent place within HCI to apply a feminist agenda. Examining a set of gendered behaviours in usability work through more than one feminist lens illuminates the complexity of usability work. As feminists of science have long argued, much of what is portrayed as objective, positivist science is riddled with gender and culture (Keller, 1996; Harding, 1986, 1998; Creager et al., 2001; Haraway, 1988). Abandoning the illusion that most usability evaluations are neutral laboratory experiments allows for a frank discussion of the elements that disrupt the supposed neutrality and what implications, if any, ensue for research in HCI. I suspect that the field's unwillingness to blatantly claim that usability work involves people – and, therefore, introduces myriad social variables into research – partially explains the devaluation and de-prioritization of usability work in the design and development process. When it comes to usability work, the field needs to start from the assumption, for example, that "the overall relationship between user and evaluator may be affected by a host of psychological, social, cultural, and other contextual factors" (Clemmensen et al., 2009, p. 217).

4. Feminist acts in usability work?

This article is essentially a reflexive narrative based on my decade of practice, observation, instruction, and professional immersion in usability work. As such, it is a departure from the methods more typically represented in the field of HCI, but it draws from a history of methodological practice in other fields such as anthropology, sociology, and communication, in the form of auto- or reflexive ethnography (Hayano, 1979; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Anderson, 2006) and reflexive or personal narrative in communication and social science (Bochner and Ellis, 2001; Stivers, 1993). Indirectly, it also draws from feminist of science and technology's challenges to prevailing understandings of objectivity and rationality in the science and social science (Keller, 1996; Harding, 1986, 1998; Haraway, 1988; Stivers, 1993). A personal narrative provides an individual contextual account that does constitute real knowledge, and in doing so "models a way of knowing for social science by blending the subjective with the system-wide" (Stivers, 1993, p. 424).

The personal narrative method, like all methods, has strengths and weaknesses. Its strength is that it surfaces issues that are challenging to discuss, much less study empirically on a scale that is

¹ Psychoanalytic, Lacanian, radical, Marxist, socialist, postmodern feminisms, as well as ecofeminism and feminism of science and technology, are but a few of the feminist approaches not directly addressed in this article. For a recent excellent overview of the different schools of feminist thought, see Tong (2008).

scientifically persuasive. For this reason, this kind of method has often been used in studying contexts with explicit power disparities, such as studies of physical disability (Howe, 2009) or of teachers' experience of race in education (Grant, 1998). Its weakness is that it bears little resemblance to the positivism characteristic of the HCI field. However, I do not claim to be engaged in the exercise of proof; rather, I view this article as a way to start a conversation about a set of neglected topics that are ripe for investigation with choices from the array of methods at our disposal.

The personal narrative or auto-ethnographic method requires that the author is a "complete member of the social world under study" (Anderson, 2006, p. 379), in order for the author to describe her subjective experience. I draw on my own experience for examples of the identified behaviours and, while I suspect that my experience will resonate with those of others, or, at the very least, provoke contrast and comparison, I do not assume it will across all contexts. From 1999 to 2009, I worked as a user researcher in Silicon Valley, primarily for a large systems company, but also, as a freelancer in various design agencies, for other large and medium-sized companies. Over that time period, I conducted approximately 80 formal usability studies, and many more informal, impromptu studies. At large companies in software development teams, I was often the only regular team member who was a woman, with the exception of the occasional QA (quality assurance) engineer or technical writer, and I was almost always the only person in the room without a technical degree.

In this article, I analyze three behaviours identify in usability work: playing stupid, caring for users, and putting on a good show. These three behaviours are by no means the only ones that are used in usability work, nor do they necessarily occur in every usability context. However, my decade of practice and observation in usability work lead me to believe that these behaviours are common enough in usability work to be recognized, particularly in male-dominated software engineering environments. These three behaviours are gendered not simply in the sense that women exhibit them, but also in that they are behaviours that are traditionally ascribed to women. They resonate with a very traditional way of performing femininity (Butler, 1990). Of course, this claim does not exclude the possibility that men also exhibit this behaviour, but when they do so it is in the context of their masculinity, which gives it a different meaning. Furthermore, these behaviours are particularly suited to feminist analysis because they draw heavily on familiar and recognizable ways of doing or performing gender, ways that might easily be dismissed as anti-feminist in the liberal feminist framework that characterizes much of HCI's approach to gender and feminism. However, the quest for a feminist agenda in HCI must build upon the lessons learned from feminism, and these lessons include avoiding the pitfalls of assuming that one feminism fits all situations and provides a singular interpretation. In the rest of this section I analyze three gendered behaviours from several feminist approaches, with the intent of sparking a productive consideration of gender in HCI research methods.

4.1. *Playing stupid*

In the mid-2000s in Silicon Valley, I moderated a participative usability study as part of a product team testing a feature in an integrated development environment (IDE). We were looking for feedback about how the feature might play a role in the participants' development process and use of the IDE. The first study participant, a Silicon Valley-dwelling male participant recently emigrated from mainland China, proved reluctant – whether from nervousness or temperament – to provide more than short, terse answers to the usability protocol questions. It quickly became apparent that if the session continued as it had started, we would not elicit the necessary data and the session would be wasted. Part-

way through the session I decided to deviate from the usability protocol (which had tested well in the pilot session) and played stupid. I pretended to the participant that I knew almost nothing about the programming, development or the IDE. The participant immediately began to lecture me in monologic bursts about the development process he used, its ideal type, how IDEs should be designed, how the feature being tested would address his needs, and how the feature should ideally be implemented. I played stupid for the remainder of the study, which was a resounding success, yielding a wealth of useful data for the team.

Playing stupid or feigned ignorance refers to pretending to know or understand less than one does in order to achieve some ulterior goal. It is distinct from projecting objectivity or suspending judgement. Instead it belongs to the category of what Scott has termed "weapons of the weak," the "ordinary weapons of powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott, 1985, p. xvi). Peasants pretending not to understand the instructions of landowners, children playing stupid as a defence mechanism against parents or teachers, or patients in psychoanalysis attempting not to understand the significance of events are all examples in which playing stupid helps the disempowered achieve their own goals in the face of resistance. In everyday situations, it often behoves people to pretend that they know less than they do in order to accomplish their own goals, such as learning something that they needed to know or normalizing an awkward situation.

In the context of the usability study, playing stupid was an effective way to elicit as much data as possible from the participant, and the technique was available to me, in part, because of the gendered nature of the interaction. Despite having been told that I worked with the product team in a technology company and that I was conducting a series of usability studies on the topic, male study participants accepted with ease that I had no or limited understanding of the technology being tested or the principles underlying it. The success of the behaviour of playing stupid was available to me because of my femaleness, maybe my youth at the time, and, perhaps, because of the perceived low and nontechnical status of my job within the software development hierarchy.

Playing stupid, however, is not without consequence. From the liberal feminist perspective aiming for equality between the sexes, a woman in a male-dominated field intentionally playing stupid and masking expertise as part of the job is far from a feminist act, perhaps is even anti-feminist. Liberal feminism encourages women to express that their competence is on par with that of men and to ensure its recognition as such. Wilfully making oneself look less able, from this perspective, can only be seen as demeaning and as contrary to the goals of feminism. It projects and reinforces, not only with the study participant, but also with my product team and any other study observers from the company, the already existing stereotype of women as technologically ignorant and incompetent.

Another interpretation of this gendered technique might be that playing stupid is a way to co-opt the expectations of traditional femininity and use them to one's purposes. Third-Wave feminists (Walker, 1992; Baumgardner, 2000; Hernandez, 2002; Heywood and Drake, 1997), having reaped the benefits of earlier success of feminisms, might focus on the ability to appropriate the traditional forms of femininity, which earlier feminisms had rejected. From the Third-Wave feminist approach, the very intentionality of playing stupid – the desire to elicit data – counters its contribution to a negative stereotype. The consciousness of playing or feigning is what allows playing stupid to be considered feminist, rather than anti-feminist, behaviour. Playing stupid, from this feminist perspective, remains feminist as long as women are aware of the play and choose to do it in service of another goal.

Similarly, feminisms more attentive to cultural contexts might also draw attention to the possibility that contrasting national and cultural identities were also present and relevant in the usability session. The fact that both the participant (male, mainland Chinese origin) and the evaluator (I: female, brown-skinned, “foreign” named) might have created a low-level camaraderie, in which once I expressed my ignorance, the participant felt comfortable sharing his thoughts and opinions with me because we both share the experience of the US as a non-White person. These feminist approaches do not erase the significance of gender in the interaction, but they highlight the possibility that other identity-driven characteristics are also present.

Many alternatives to liberal feminism recognize that even if one believes that women and men should have gender-neutral tools available to them, in practice they do not, and, therefore, women must act accordingly. Given that women and men are differentially situated, even in the supposedly neutral setting of the usability lab, these feminist approaches might argue that women should appropriate gender stereotypes for their own ends. Women playing stupid could easily be seen as anti-feminist in the sense of reinforcing pernicious stereotypes in society and within one’s work environment of women as technologically incompetent, but it also is effective.

4.2. Caring for users

Caring for users and users’ experience of technology is a second behaviour that occurs regularly in usability work. Usability specialists and other HCI practitioners with “user” in their job title often view themselves as advocates for users. As Light has noted, “the rhetoric of much user-centred design and usability exemplifies the occasionally militant, oppositional culture of interaction design, where ‘advocates’ and ‘zealots’ are sought as part of the job description” (Light, 2010, p. 4). Light’s characterization highlights how usability professionals’ concern for and about the user often extends beyond a formal responsibility to an implied personal investment in representing the users’ needs in the design process. The premise underlying this perspective is that the practitioners represent users during the system design and development because users, though arguably the most affected by the system, are not always integral to the process.

Properly done, moderating usability sessions, much like in-depth interviewing (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001), requires emotional labour when properly done. Despite the claim that usability evaluations are akin to carefully controlled scientific experiments that minimize human interaction or bias, on the ground, many usability evaluations involve a great deal of messy human interaction. Usability participants do not function like faucets that can be turned on to spout useful data. Usability professionals spend hours engaged in the hard work of actively listening to participants. Moderating studies requires usability professionals to take care to keep the participants comfortable enough to relax and perform their assigned tasks as they normally would and to divulge their pet peeves or real opinions.

Caring, of course, forms the backbone of many jobs and particularly those performed by women. Usability work requires a great deal of emotional labour, the “management of feeling to create a publicly facial and bodily display” (Hochschild, 1985, p. 7). Hochschild uses the concept of emotional labour to describe how employees in certain professions such as flight attendants or secretaries, actively manage their emotions as part of the routine performance of their jobs. She provides an example of such commercialization of emotion in the workplace in the following example: “The airline passenger may choose not to smile, but the flight attendant is obliged not only to smile but to try to work up some warmth behind it” (Hochschild, 1985, p. 19). Part of moder-

ating a usability session is also making the study participant believe that the moderator cares about the participant’s design needs and making sure that they are recorded and communicated back to the designers and developers.

The act of caring for users, according to the traditional liberal feminist approach, has little place in paid work. First, care-giving, even when it occurs in the domestic sphere, is an activity that liberal feminism would like to see equitably shared between women and men. Many of the policies liberal feminism espouses address this kind of equality, such as equal division of household chores and childcare, as well as and work-life balance. Second, liberal feminism would take issue with the incorporation of what is akin to domestic care-giving into the job description of what is a non-care-giving profession. Doing so reinforces the stereotype of women as emotional and mothering, rather than on an equal footing as men.

Relational or cultural feminism, however, values women’s association with care and connection in society. Relational feminism “focused attention on the possibility that an ‘ethic of care’ embedded in the female labour of attending to intimate relations is a principled moral stance, rather than an affective emotional response, and therefore might express a moral ‘point of view’ of importance in all areas of life, and not just the familial” (West, 1997, p. 6). The care that usability professionals give to study participants, in this approach, is not an outpouring of emotion, but a fulfilment of a moral stance. This attitude could well echo the zeal to represent or advocate the user that comprises the usability profession’s job description. Caring for users, who do not often occupy as central role in the design and the development process as they should, is an important task.

However, the act of caring for users needs to be dissected to determine whether it can be disentangled from its association with women. It is unclear whether such a separation between caring and women possible or even desirable. First, the act of caring may be a reflection of the devaluation of usability work. Merkel, in her account of care work in nursing as cited by Epstein, argues that when women lack other resources, they “make a resource out of feeling... this strategy is especially effective since gender stereotypes in our culture largely dictate that men ignore the affective realm” (Epstein, 1993, p. 247). Second, the danger inherent in the relational feminist approach is that care becomes female self-sacrifice, in which women are trapped, through gendered, socialization into being giving selves (McClain, 1999). Arguing that women conducting usability studies should be tasked with caring for the study participants is somewhat problematic. Third, it is worth considering what caring in the context of usability work might look like if performed mainly by men for men, whether it would resemble homosociality, the same-sex bonds that Sedgwick (Sedgwick, 1985) argues are intrinsically linked to women and the gender system.

4.3. Putting on a good show

In the question-and-answer session at an international corporate user research conference in Europe, a conference attendee voiced frustration that she often felt like she was expected to be a female entertainer during her research presentations at company meetings, rather than a researcher communicating data findings. Her comment elicited rueful laughter from the audience, some of whom, myself included, clearly commiserated. The ability to “put on a good show” is an important aspect of usability work and, in the demographic circumstances of HCI, the audience is almost always male.

The data collection phase of usability receives a great deal of attention but reporting the data is arguably equally, if not more, important. As Maguire noted, all of the “effort devoted to careful

user analysis, usability design and testing can be wasted by poor delivery to end-users” (Maguire, 2001, p. 619). Sometimes, usability findings are converted into entries in “bug” or “feature request” databases, articulated in top-line findings shortly after data collection is completed (Dray, 2009), written up in lengthy formats or increasingly showcased in short movie clips. More often, however, usability findings are communicated in the form of a Powerpoint-driven presentation to stakeholders, which may include development teams, marketing teams, clients and invested executives.

Usability work’s devalued or de-prioritized status exerts an added pressure for captivating presentations. In several large companies in which I worked, software development team members valued the usability researcher’s data analysis (both mine and others’) very little, preferring to base their conclusions and future decisions on the few sessions or usually snippets of sessions they witnessed and their own expertise. Others discounted results due to small sample sizes, equating studies to quaint, occasionally inspirational anecdotes rather than data that could be used to move design and development forward. Still others appreciated the analysis, but simply could not incorporate the changes required into the already cramped product schedule.

A good performance requires maintaining a high level of energy and deploying a host of communication skills, such as using humour, transmitting enthusiasm and looking one’s best. Performing well in this context is not a gender-neutral event. Much as gender and identity influence what happens in a usability study, so too do they influence what happens when the usability study data is communicated to others. What people perceive as worth paying attention to is dependent on many factors (Derber, 2000), including the gender of the presenter and how favourably they rate presenters; and the quality and value of the presented content is influenced, as summarized well by Kwan and Trautner (Kwan and Trautner, 2009), by numerous factors such as the gender and attractiveness of the presenter.

In these circumstances putting on a good show matters, in terms of ensuring that the study’s findings are incorporated into the product and of securing professional respect. Putting on a good show, particularly for an ambivalent audience of software engineers simultaneously multi-tasking on other electronic devices, means more than crafting a polished Powerpoint presentation. Rather, on presentation days, I found myself preparing for a broader performance. I shed my uniform of jeans and a T-shirt and wore a skirt (short, but not too short) and delivered my findings with a level of animation and enthusiasm more typical of a cheerleader, which is quite a departure from my otherwise impassive, occasionally sarcastic demeanour. I, lacking technical skills recognized by software engineers and convinced of the importance of the usability findings, engaged in behaviour that, at its extreme, felt analogous to a stripper who constantly strives to capture and maintain the attention of a distracted male audience for her professional gain.

The liberal feminist approach equates feminism with taking women seriously, so much so that it is popularly associated with the caricature of feminists as “grumpy, man-hating, deliberately unattractive, humorless whiners” (Douglas, 2010, p. 305). Taking women seriously implies taking women just as seriously one takes men. From this perspective, usability study presentations should be professional, but women should not feel any need to make them more entertaining than would men. Acknowledging that attractiveness, or even sexual appeal, might play a positive role in presenting usability findings also seems to negate the progress earlier feminists had made on the issue of the pressure to conform to standards of feminine beauty in order to be attractive to men. Such a feminist approach would consider the need to use feminine charms as demeaning and regressive.

However, other feminist approaches demonstrate a willingness to engage with and play with different formulations of femininity. A sex-positive feminist approach (Vance, 1989) encourages women to embrace and celebrate their sexuality. From this perspective “feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents” (Vance, 1989, p. 24) and putting on a good show might be cast a way for women to utilize their sexuality as an effective tool in the achievement of their goal. Similarly, the Third-Wave feminist approach, which has comfortably re-appropriated standards of female sexuality and beauty, might recognize the necessity of putting on a good show, even a sexualized show, as expedient and not detrimental to the feminist cause. As Zeisler, one of the co-founders of *Bitch* magazine, a mainstay of Third-Wave feminism, writes “we not only no longer have to shun lipstick but can actually turn the act of wearing it into a feminist statement” (Zeisler, 2006, p. 259).

Whether seen as feminist or not, putting on a good show in the usability context has advantages and disadvantages. Communicating research findings so that the audience can remember and incorporate them is crucial to effective usability work. However, turning usability study presentations into entertainment, even at a point in time when knowledge is increasingly packaged as entertainment, runs the risk of devaluing usability work. And, furthermore, as Douglas and other have argued (Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008), celebrating women’s sexuality and sexual agency is not without the risk of reinforcing sexism.

5. Conclusion

At first glance, usability work, in which women and men in wealthy countries seem to be roughly equally represented as practitioners, may not seem an obvious object for feminist inquiry. However, the practice of usability work – what gets done in and around the usability lab – is irrefutably gendered, and as such, worthy of feminist scrutiny. Using a reflexive, personal narrative method based on my experience as a practitioner, I identify three particularly gendered behaviours in usability work and explored whether those behaviours furthered or frustrated feminist aims. The necessarily incomplete answer is that the behaviours do both, depending on the feminist approach employed.

As Bardzell (Bardzell, 2010) noted, feminist HCI can be productive only as long as it leaves room for the plurality of feminist approaches to interpret gendered behaviour. Liberal feminism, with its roots in the rationality of the Enlightenment and consequent emphasis on equality and autonomy, is a natural complement to the scientific inquiry and the overall project of science. In many intellectual and colloquial conversations, liberal feminism is synonymous with feminism. However, liberal feminism – while dominant – is just one of many feminist approaches; the work of scholars and activists over the past 50 years have provided and argued for alternative approaches, only some of which have been discussed in this article. These different forms of feminisms can offer radically different interpretations of gendered behaviour.

The behaviours themselves identified in this article can thus be interpreted as lying at various points along the feminist/anti-feminist continuum. Usability researchers’ choice to play stupid for study participants can be viewed as complicit with negative stereotypes of technologically illiterate women or it can be interpreted as an effective way to elicit data from recalcitrant participants. Caring for users’ experiences might be interpreted as an unfortunate extension of the already feminized responsibility of care in the domestic realm or it can be viewed as part of relational feminism’s embrace of a broader ethic of care and beyond the public/private divide. And putting on a good show can be seen as a trivialization and sexualization of women’s role in the usability

field or as a powerful appropriation of heterosexual dynamics to ensure attention in an ambivalent environment.

This continuum reveals that any consideration of feminist HCI needs to carefully avoid privileging liberal feminism, with its emphasis on formal gender equality and individualized agency, to the exclusion of other feminisms that acknowledge and occasionally prize differences among women and between genders.

In the embrace of feminist plurality, however, we must not lose sight of the import of feminism itself. Plurality is not an excuse to interpret all possible behaviours as feminist in one sense or another. What could be characterized as feminist in the three behaviours identified above also risks obscuring situationally specific subordination of f to m. The short-term gains of playing stupid for effective data collection, for example, may frustrate the long-term goal of ending the subordination of f to m. Feminist HCI must keep this complexity in mind as we investigate how gender and sexuality shape our research methods and the field itself.

Indeed, such a plurality in the feminist HCI agenda provides a new platform to emphasize, as feminists of science have long argued, that many scientific research methods, such as usability work, in practice bear little resemblance to the positivist, scientific descriptions in textbooks. In addition to being gendered, usability work, is also scientific work, engaged in the production of fact. However, as scholar Mary Poovey argues, “facts can never be isolated from contexts, nor can they be immune from the assumptions that inform theories.” (Poovey, 1989, p. 1). The complexities of people – who they are and how they interact – inevitably shape the ways in which the field of HCI elicits, presents, and eventually integrates data into our work. Feminist approaches to HCI force us to seriously question to what degree research methods that involve human interaction can achieve the scientific, impossible-to-make-real ideal of objectivity between researchers and subjects. Instead, gender and sexuality – in concert with other axes of differences – play a diverse and complicated role in HCI research methods, calling for new understandings of usability work’s relationship to both feminism and traditional scientific research methods.

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