
Giving in the Short Term: Putting Research in Action Alongside Marginalized Groups

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ABSTRACT

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has a significant history of working alongside communities to identify, address, and design for specific needs and desires. However, in this position paper, we argue that we can and should go beyond participatory research in prioritizing *in-action impact*. We draw from our experience in studying political activism and mental health to propose a concrete discussion of possible research methods that pose an immediate benefit to the populations we work with.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models**; *User studies*.

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CHI'19, May 2019, Glasgow, UK

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ACM ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x/YY/MM...\$15.00

<https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn>

KEYWORDS

in-action impact, interventions, sensitive HCI, activist HCI

ACM Reference Format:

Divya Siddarth, Sachin R. Pendse, Amit Sharma, and Joyojeet Pal. 2019. Giving in the Short Term: Putting Research in Action Alongside Marginalized Groups. In *CHI '19: ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, May 04–09, 2019, Glasgow, UK*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 5 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn>

CONTRIBUTING TOWARD HUMAN NEED

Unlike many other research fields, the validation of work in HCI can often be based on the work's **direct** contribution towards meeting some tangible human need [7]. It is clear that the field of HCI has immense potential to use research funding and methods to do immediate and tangible good by working alongside different communities to methodically understand how technology can meet a specific human need. However, working alongside sensitive populations presents both a new set of important challenges, but proportionally important opportunities to elevate marginalized voices and meet unmet needs.

GIVING, TAKING, AND GIVING BACK – PRIORITIZING IMMEDIATE IMPACT

While uniquely positioned in having contributions that are measured by direct impact on a population [7], we still see latent issues in this HCI research paradigm as it relates to our work, particularly when thinking about doing research alongside sensitive populations. As HCI researchers, we often view our research as being some part of a systematic process: understanding the needs of a population, understanding the context in which those needs occur, and then designing an intervention that addresses a specific, identified need.

If this process did not often involve intense and sustained interaction with the community in question, we could leave our work at that – the generation of an intervention with impact, the creation of new knowledge, or some combination of the two. However, during the course of conducting this process, we regularly find ourselves taking from the communities we work with – in the form of time, energy, information, data, and even the potential reliving of traumatic experiences. This burden may be felt by both researchers and participants, such as in the case of “researchers as vulnerable populations” [1], but when thinking about sensitive populations, this taking process exacerbates an already unequal relationship. As funded researchers from elite institutions, we often enter the community in question from positions of privilege, and even of power.

All of this can be, and has been, justified through the notion that we are giving back to these communities – not only via the typical paradigm of knowledge and understanding, but also in tangible ways through tried and tested interventions suited to the identified needs of a community. There have

been many instances of such success in HCI research, such as addressing food insecurity [4] or actively supporting community activists [2] and we hope this work continues. The imbalanced relationship between researchers and communities has also been addressed through processes like participatory action research, in which researchers do collaborative work alongside community partners [6].

We hold, however, that **though involving communities in the research process may be empowering, it does not go far enough**, particularly in correcting the imbalanced relationship between HCI researchers and sensitive populations.

Along these lines, we argue that the scope of the impact of our work can be both too narrow and too late in appropriately addressing this imbalance. We would like to prioritize taking more effort to ensure that insights and information gathered during the research process are given to the communities and populations we work with, in a form that is genuinely useful to them. As often discussed with regards to the design of interventions in sustainable HCI [3, 8], the collaborative creation of research must extend past the publication of papers. However, this impact must also be extended into ***in-action impact***: accessible insights while research is done, as opposed to after publication of results or beyond. The idea of research processes actively benefiting participants is particularly important because it is often the case that interventions do not materialize for years, during which time we continue to benefit in a research sense from the generosity of these communities, without providing any tangible benefit in turn.

If the insights we find continue to remain within the research community, we will have failed in our role as researchers with sensitive populations — particularly in light of the generosity of these populations in sharing their time and space with us.

OUR EXPERIENCE

As researchers and practitioners, we encounter the issue of giving back in meaningful and broadly impactful ways through our work with political activists and people experiencing mental illness.

Divya Siddarth (advised by Joyojeet M. Pal): My research involves working with activists in India: digital campaigners, grassroots activists, organizers, and strategists. All of these activists are either working on behalf of systemically oppressed communities, identify with these communities themselves, or both. Often the simple fact of speaking to me about their work puts them at risk, so I and my research benefit directly from their sacrifice. Yet, in the midst of under-resourced and over-burdened campaigns, they have given me their time, energy, and insight, in the hopes that my work will eventually produce something that they can take back to their organizations and implement. During this process, I often notice the dichotomy between the pace of their work and the timeline of my own. It may take months to years to crystallize methodology, analysis, and findings from my interviews and observation. However, the issues being tackled by the activists I work with are present

and urgent. They work on a timeline of days and weeks, not months and years. My work in developing an understanding of the space, of organizing processes, and of unmet needs is not helpful, in the immediate term, in its present form. I wonder if it would be possible to develop frameworks to bring this type of longer-term, qualitative research into the sphere of immediacy, distilling insights that are accessible and actionable for these politically and societally vulnerable populations.

Sachin Pendse (advised by Amit Sharma): Through doing quantitative work and survey work (via Mechanical Turk) to understand cultural differences in conceptualizations of mental health and technology use, I spend a lot of time thinking about how (unlike in more qualitative forms of HCI research), it is easy for participants in these studies to remain nameless and faceless while we read some of their deepest admissions and their narratives of their darkest moments. While it is true that users consent to these studies, quantitative work done to successfully analyze and predict future recurrence of illness often feels like more of a unequal benefit to the researcher than to the participant due to the understandable amount of time necessary to ethically put a mental health intervention into use. That said, as work around computing and mental health begins to delve deeper into designing interventions, I wonder what design processes can be used to ensure that study participants (including those who may not be participating remotely or anonymously) receive some benefit or relief from suffering during participation in a study, or alternatively, that the work itself has some impact on the structural and societal barriers that keep individuals from receiving quality mental health care.

GOALS

Through participating in this workshop, we hope to operationalize frameworks that can co-prioritize long-term and short-term impact in our work with sensitive populations, similar to Frauenberger's work with in-action ethics [5]. As young researchers, we especially look forward to incorporating the experience and expertise of more seasoned researchers into our understanding of this space, as we consider the appropriate path forward. By raising a discussion of the dilemmas raised in this paper, we will hopefully become better placed as researchers to more concretely explore how to truly work alongside and do justice to the populations we work with.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the incredible people we have gotten the chance to work with over the course of our research. We would also like to thank the organizers of this workshop for creating a space for researchers who do work with sensitive populations, work that involves a high level of vulnerability and empathy, to connect with and support one another in doing meaningful work.

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