Balancing Advocacy and Equity Research in Computing: Notes from the Field

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ABSTRACT

In this account I present my reflections as an early-career researcher in HCI and CSCW with a focus on equity in computing. Using ethnography and action-oriented methods I am studying my own organization, the Computer Science department of a Danish university. In this essay I start by situating my research in the wider socio-political context, touching upon a recent resolution passed by the Danish government to regulate "excessive activism in certain research environments". I then briefly introduce my PhD project and provide an example from the empirical material I have collected. Combining inquiry and advocacy is not uncommon in equity-focused research, and it comes with challenges. My goal in attending this workshop is sharing reflections and gaining an understanding of how to best structure my research. I would also like to address these questions: What is the best strategy to support the long-term collaborative and transformative potential of equity work in academia? And how can we as researchers advocate for and catalyze change so it becomes imbedded into the structure of the institution?

"It is through the effort to transform institutions that we generate knowledge about them"
- Ahmed (2017, p. 93)

INTRODUCTION

In June 2021, seven months into my PhD program, the Danish Parliament passes the motion "On excessive activism in certain research environments", adopted by a majority of 72 votes to 24 [12]. The motion does not clearly define activism, but universities are called to ensure that "there should be no standardisation of research in order to produce politics disguised as science and that it is not possible to systematically avoid legitimate academic critique" (ibid). The vote in the Parliament is quickly followed by an open letter signed by thousands of academics – Danish and international - criticizing the motion as the culmination of an intense political lobbying targeting specific research environments, in particular gender and ethnic studies, post-colonial studies and migration studies [15].

When academic research focuses on themes related to social justice and is critical of systems of inequity, it might be devalued by some ("politics disguised as science"). On the other hand, members of minoritized groups in academia might be expected to do unpaid work for inclusion and equity in their institutions [7, 9], while others – often students - might just not have a choice but to activate themselves for changes that accommodate their needs (accessibility, or asking for accountability in areas like sexual harassment prevention and handling and other forms of discrimination).

FROM WHAC-A-MOLE TO STRUCTURAL CHANGE?

Bridging Advocacy and Equity-Focused Research

As a first-year computer science PhD student studying systems of inequity in computing, who uses action-oriented methods focused on my own institution, I hope that my work will inform some social change. The main goal of my PhD research study is to map out and critically analyze the socio-technical infrastructure of constraints and opportunities for equity and inclusion in Computer Science higher education in Denmark. This means scrutinizing power relations and examining cultural and institutional bias embedded in practices, spaces and artefacts in the department where I work. I draw on recent theoretical approaches to gender in Feminist and Queer HCI which focus on intersectionality, multiplicity and inclusion [2, 3, 5, 11, 16, 17], and recent concrete applications of Feminist HCI in practice [4, 6, 13, 14]. My approach is also influenced by other emerging strands of theory and practice in related disciplines.

I am inspired by conceptual frameworks such as Design Justice, which critically examines the sociotechnical configuration of gender normativity from an intersectional perspective [8] and data feminism, which strives to understand both how standard practices in data science reinforce inequalities and how data science can be deployed to challenge inequity [10].

I use ethnography and the Research through Design approach [19] to collaborate with my institution's students and staff, bringing them into the research as part of the design process where relevant. My hope is to generate interventions and critical design artefacts that will engage students and staff in reflecting on and improving current practices.

As I am also appointed Diversity Chair for my department, my (paid) duty hours are used to provide advisory service with an equity focus. I have previous work experience as a D&I consultant at a local university, and my past experience as a practicioner informs my research. Both my research work and my service work will inevitably result in creating dialogue, friction, frustration, but also opening up new possibilities for collaborations across students, teachers and administrators. Equity work is cross-functional and transdisciplinary, which makes it both exciting and complex. My role as Diversity Chair is institutionalized – rather than seeing myself as an activist, I think of myself more as an advocate, supporting and suggesting specific courses of action or even policies, cooperating with researchers and administrative professionals.

Studying my institution with a focus on equity means inevitably highlighting a series of structural barriers: the inaccessibility of policies and systems of support for cases of discrimination, missing datasets to track equity issues, inaccessible spaces, to quote some of the examples that I am currently mapping in the field. My goal in attending the workshop is sharing reflections and concerns on being a CSCW and HCI researcher focusing on social justice and studying my own institution. I would especially like to discuss these questions: how do I scale down my work and sharpen my scope? But also: What is the best strategy to support the long-term collaborative and transformative potential of equity work in academia? And how can we as researchers advocate for and catalyze change so it becomes imbedded into the structure of the institution?

Not on the Menu: A Socio-Technical Issue

One of the areas I am exploring are the classifications and categories of data produced and utilized by faculty and administrators in CS education - what are the residual categories?

When I applied for my PhD, I noticed that the drop-down menu of the HR management IT System used by the university only presented two (mandatory) options in the gender field: "male" and "female" (Fig 1). This socio-technical configuration of gender normativity is…the norm: most universities in Denmark operate with the same configuration of their job application system.
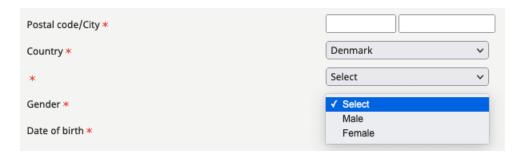
Figure 1: An excerpt of the drop-down menu in my university's job application form. In the Gender category, only two options (Male and Female) are available.

One Danish university has configured their system with a drop-down menu with more gender inclusive options, and the possibility to not disclose one's identity (Fig 2). However, the menu design does not present an option to self-determine one's gender identity.

Figure 2: An excerpt of the drop-down menu in another Danish university's job application form. In the Gender category, the options listed are Male, Female, Non-binary, Other gender identity, Do not wish to answer.

My university's HR management system presents something more than a technical issue: as Katta Spiel reminds us, misgendering in digital infrastructures is a socio-technical issue [18]. And it is wider than my own organization. Shouldn't all universities adopt one standard and allow all applicants to register their gender, since they are public institutions? For now, in the absence of an adequate policy framework, it seems to be up to the researcher, the advocate, or simply the job applicant, to make the institution aware. Socio-technical issues often require both advocacy and research to push for wider policy interventions.

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