
Questioning the User-Researcher Dualism: Premises of the Situatedness of Knowledge in HCI

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ABSTRACT

With the third wave of HCI, awareness of considering the social context of individuals – in short, the situatedness of knowledge (SoK) – started to establish. Building on Donna Haraway’s SoK and feminist HCI research, we argue that hierarchies are reflected in the supposed dualism user-researcher, and, consequently, have to be deconstructed to enable implementation of epistemological premises of the situatedness of knowledge. We aim to contribute by introducing the concept of ‘user-researcher’.

CCS CONCEPTS

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

KEYWORDS

HCI; feminist epistemology; situated knowledge; user involvement

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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SITUATEDNESS AND PRACTICES IN HCI

With the beginning of the third wave of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research, awareness of the importance to consider the social context of individuals established [2, 9]. In line, researchers started to pay attention to the construction of meaning [9] and to make use of the influence on scientific processes and outcomes [6]. In fact, Harrison et al. [9] called the third wave “situated perspective”. Even though since then several authors have recognized the potential of feminist epistemology and the idea of the situatedness of knowledge (SoK) (e.g. [1, 12, 13]), the discussion on situatedness is centered around *users*. Introducing the concept to HCI, Harrison and colleagues state:

”Following Haraway’s definition (1988), [...] interaction is strongly informed by their [i.e. the users’] varying physical and social situations. Designing interaction, then, moves from attempting to establish one correct understanding and set of metrics of interaction to studying the local, situated practices of users, taking into account but not adjudicating the varying and perhaps conflicting perspectives of users.” [9]

Throughout the article, the focus lies on the situatedness of users in contrast to researchers or, in general, knowledge. With the further evolution of the research field, limited diversity of researchers was made to a subject of discussion (e.g. at CHI [15, 16], or initiatives such as [11]). These approaches often make use of feminist and/or intersectional approaches but apply such theories practically and goal-oriented, not epistemologically, to strive for social justice, inclusion or facilitating collaborations.

In research publications, respective information is usually framed as self-disclosure (see [14]). Being an important first step towards intersubjective traceability of the meaning construction processes, such a framing lacks epistemological grounding. Transparency alone is not enough, as situatedness is never completely knowable and reportable [5] and an epistemological approach goes beyond the individual positions recognizing scientific practices from a meta perspective.

However, the situatedness of the users seems not only to be the problem to which Harrison et al. [9] draw our attention, it also seems to be the solution. User involvement aims at gathering insights into experiences not available to the researcher. Thus, it also acts as a *corrective* for the inevitably restricted perspectives but also limited diversity within the scientific community. Nevertheless, research practices do not account for this aim. Recent analyses demonstrated that only a limited set of diversity dimensions have been considered in CHI publications [10], and that research often does not address the complexity of social identities [14]. More importantly, such arguments suggest that one’s situatedness is not seen as an essential part of the scientific process, but rather an aspect to be corrected.

Thus, implications for scientific knowledges are an emerging issue and challenge. So far, user involvement was conceptualized as a corrective. Donna Haraway's SoK has much greater potential for a philosophically informed future agenda for HCI and enables a new premise of embodied objectivity if applied rigorously. Hence, we want to ask what situatedness of *knowledges* could mean in an epistemological way and want to suggest the introduction of the concept 'user-researcher'.

POTENTIAL OF SITUATEDNESS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR HCI: DUALISMS & HIERARCHIES

Feminist epistemology [7, 8] puts the focus on the embeddedness of science in society and the fact that scientific knowledge is dependent on its (individual) holder, as well as her personal, political and scientific background, gender, institutional, societal, and geographical context etc. In HCI, important work has been done in terms of questioning the idea of objective knowledge, which is often understood as a 'virtue' [1]. It is such a definition of objectivity, which requires "a scientist's bracketing of the self, that is, excluding from scientific analysis [...] one's perspective as a living individual." [1] (see also [5]). There is no "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" [7]; yet, remains of such thinking still exist.

Feminist and queer methods of HCI [1, 12, 13], focusing on participatory methods empowering research subjects and including the researcher 'as a person', bear the potential for an epistemological rethinking of HCI. Understanding one's position as situated and consequently embracing the subjective position allows revealing those underlying power structures. This goes "way beyond showing bias in science", towards unmasking the "doctrine of objectivity" [7]. (Embodied) objectivity is achieved when a scientist seeks the subject position; it is *positioned* rationality [7]. However, situated knowledges are about communities, not individuals. Thus, we argue we have to shed light to the *concepts* of the actors involved, i.e. the user and the researcher, to situatedness of *knowledges*, not individuals.

The relationship between user and researcher constitutes itself as inseparable because the researcher needs the user for her actor identity, even if she aims at bracketing of the user. The user as a 'research object' is always present, always an explicit or implicit part of the research aspirations and, thus, process. This relationship is not neutral: Haraway reveals the *charged* dualisms that are inherent in Western cultural narratives about objectivity – mind-body, distance-responsibility, subject-object [7].

We believe, in line with Haraway, that said hierarchies and power structures are reflected in the seeming dualism user-researcher. Hearing the voice of the user(s) [13] is a first step, but it still carries a hierarchy of knowledge and power. Thus, the power of interpretation lies with the researching subject, who is always hierarchically above the researched.

When [4] ask "How can we negotiate ethically the relations of power which separate 'the researcher' from 'the researched'?", our answer lies in avoiding those "binary oppositions" [7], dissolving the border between user and researcher. This, then, also allows avoiding focusing on what Haraway calls "subjugated", and, thus, innocent standpoints, which cherish the illusion of objectivity. Consequently, we argue to deconstruct the opposition between users and researchers, because it's an *imagined*

opposition to transport hierarchy, and because this categorization falls short to grasp the multitude of categories that influence a specific position – from gender to race to society.

TOWARDS 'USER-RESEARCHER' AS AN INSEPARABLE ELEMENT OF HCI

Based on the epistemological premises of the SoK, we argue to overcome the binary opposition between researcher and user in HCI, exploring an even more radical approach that deconstructs those categories on an epistemological level, and plays with ambiguity [3]. We believe that the adherence to this supposed dualism is a reason for the shortcomings of research practices which aim to correct the implications of the situatedness of researchers. In addition to concrete methodological considerations and actions towards inclusion, taking a meta perspective on epistemological processes beyond individual positions offers epistemological re-thinking of future philosophically informed HCI. We aim to contribute by introducing the concept of 'user-researcher'.

The combination of the two terms in the tradition of Donna Haraway makes visible that the two concepts cannot be thought separately. Naming the user first should break with the inherent hierarchy on a linguistic level. From our perspective, this concept must meet three premises: First, we have to acknowledge the *conceptuality* of the actors involved, i.e. the user and the researcher, which is always charged. Second, we argue that we should conceptualize user-researcher as an *inseparable unit* which is always present. Third, we should move towards a SoK, which goes always *beyond the individual*.

We aim at reflecting how the concepts of the researcher in relation to the user unfolds in the research process shaping our understanding of both. We have to reveal the obvious and simultaneously hidden hierarchical dualism in order to dissolve it. Re-interpreting existing knowledge based on the concept and its premises, we gain a new understanding of HCI, allowing a rethinking of – as of yet still unavoidable – power structures from the start, thus avoiding "binary oppositions". The user is not only co-researcher and the researcher may also be user; both actor identities have elements of each other, constitute mutually and yet are one. This also means not to hide behind the concept of user involvement but aiming towards an understanding of 'user-researcher' as an integral element of HCI involved in all stages regardless if the user is the focus of investigations and beyond methodological considerations of empirical user studies. User involvement, then, is not just a corrective but a fundamental and – more importantly – epistemological part of research. Applying the concept of 'user-researcher' could help us to understand and even explain practices of HCI in the past and inform future design and research activities.

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