

In this forum we explore different perspectives for how to apply intersectionality as a critical framework for design across multiple contexts. — Yolanda A. Rankin and Jakita O. Thomas, Editors

Intersectionality in HCI: Lost in Translation

Yolanda A. Rankin, Florida State University, Jakita O. Thomas, Auburn University, Nicole M. Joseph, Vanderbilt University

The annual 2015 Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing (GHC) featured 11,702 attendees from over 60 countries [1]. Manuela Veloso, Janet George, and Clara Shih honored the stage as plenary speakers, affirming the message that women of color have made significant contributions in artificial intelligence, data science, machine learning, and other important technological areas. Also powerful, GHC 2015 designated restrooms to accommodate those attendees identifying as nonbinary, transgender, and other fluid identities throughout the conference venue. These combined actions suggested a sense of caring about issues of diversity, especially since the attendees were 42 percent Asian, 40 percent white, 5 percent African American or Latinx, and 1 percent Native American. Despite the diversity of attendees, including a male keynote speaker, some of the Black women noticed that none of the keynote speakers represented Black women in the field of computing. Since the inception of GHC, Black women have rarely been keynote speakers, sending an implicit message that they do not matter, which subsequently renders them invisible. To further exacerbate the feelings of isolation and exclusion, registered attendees walked into the Black Women in Computing Reception only to be greeted with no refreshments, since none of the 100-plus corporate sponsors were willing to provide financial support to host the reception. Those of us in attendance wondered, *How could this have happened?* The

decision made by corporate sponsors to not support the Black Women in Computer Reception reveals much about power hierarchies in GHC; it says that no one at the decision-making table took into account the Black women attendees. Black women felt rejected, ignored, and, again, relegated to the outer fringes of the computing community.

This vignette in the context of a conference that celebrates the diversity of women within the field of computing is not shocking to Black women, as we have experienced this exclusion many times before. The annual GHC represents an example of good intentions and serious attempts to promote diversity and inclusion while developing programming that appeals to thousands and thousands of women worldwide. Given the example above, well-defined agendas and initiatives are great, but bad things still happen when people are not willing to examine

the underlying issues attributed to how power works in the computing field. Power comes into play when we scrutinize why specific groups of attendees (e.g., Asian Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Native Americans, and others) were being relegated to the outer fringes of the GHC community. Were there no Black women who had made significant contributions to the field of computing or who served in leadership positions at technology-based companies? Was the lack of Black women represented on the center stage during this well-attended, socially conscious celebration of women simply a matter of oversight? How were the keynote speakers selected? Asking these types of questions demonstrates the power of intersectionality, a critical framework for wrestling with the complexity of overlapping socially constructed identities that shape the lived experiences of people while interrogating the very systems of oppression that negatively impact their everyday realities [2,3,4]. For some of the Black women attendees, these questions deserved answers and motivated a discussion with the GHC Leadership to understand Black women's perspectives of their conference experiences, especially when other women of color were being embraced and welcomed into the community. We return to this example later in this discussion.

In the spirit of scholarly discourse, debate, and critique, this article poses a series of questions and commentary that reflect the tensions of applying intersectionality as a critical framework in HCI. It serves as a call to action

Insights

- Computing has historically and contemporarily been a space where Black women have been marginalized and erased, and intersectionality helps us make this erasure and marginalization visible.
- Intersectionality has the capacity to bring about solidarity within the HCI community.
- Using intersectionality with fidelity requires that HCI becomes and stays in community with Black women and the critical literature around intersectionality, holding each other accountable.

to those who are authentically and tirelessly committed to social justice and liberation [3,4]. We invite deeper thought and conversations about the significance of intersectionality to the larger HCI community, a global community that can no longer turn a blind eye to the social injustices manifested in society. We conclude this article with a charge to the field of HCI, specifically how to leverage intersectionality to both a) reveal how power operates in the HCI field to marginalize, oppress, and erase Black women; and b) think at the various intersections of oppression to innovate, design, and assess intersectional interventions that can disrupt systems of oppression and social inequalities in the fight for social justice and liberation.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge [3] describe intersectionality as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.” Informed by critical race theory [5], intersectionality posits that “when it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” [3]. *Thus, there is no pure racism or pure sexism.*

Intersectionality works toward social justice and raises additional critical questions such as: What intentional misconceptions and fallacies have been upheld when we simply accept the dominant culture’s historical perspective of events? When we apply intersectionality as a critical praxis to shed light on those dark moments in history that reveal the misuse of power at the expense of humanity, we finally see white supremacy in the flesh and how whiteness overshadows the conversations needed to unpack how marginalized communities in computing have been erased [6]. This is the work that intersectionality does, making visible what is invisible to those who are privileged while also requiring them to be in community with Black women [7]. We see the need to hold the HCI community accountable for



its inability to instigate much-needed change because of the disciplinary and structural domains of power at work in the field.

By *disciplinary power*, we refer to the phenomenon of how “different people find themselves encountering different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented” [3]. Harrington et al. [8] explicitly describe the tensions at play when white researchers in HCI, who do not belong to the community they are researching, fail to “check their privilege” at the door. They deconstruct this idea poignantly in the following quote:

Many community residents perceive research engagements within their communities to be more about concepts of “white gaze” (in which Black and Brown bodies are a spectacle of performance)... where individuals are fixated on “saving” the disenfranchised due to guilt of privilege

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or even ways of policing in which their personal narratives are not safe from future consequence... Researchers must acknowledge the (unintentional) harm that may occur simply by their presence in these research environments... [R]esearchers should look to focus more on the fullness of engagement... Supporting community residents to engage on their own terms and share narratives that they deem important in a comfortable environment may push us closer to design engagements where these individuals feel empowered rather than further marginalized [8].

This quote speaks to the vicious cycle of entering into communities without understanding the sociocultural and political environment associated with the historical injustices of doing research in these communities. This often leads to perceptions in the community that the research engagement is more about centering the white gaze rather than the community being engaged, and can appear to call for marginalized people to assume performative identities for the sake of the research project. Moreover, when outcomes are not as predicted, researchers resort to explanations and conclusions that point to deficits in the participants rather than looking at how the study was motivated or conducted, how the researchers themselves were