

Where are all the queers?

A research blind spot in Gender & HCI

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That the significance, and relevance of gender in the field of HCI is increasingly acknowledged is in itself a laudable development that owes it dues to the efforts of a small but increasing number of researchers and practitioners. With the advent of the third wave HCI and the shift in focus towards the experiential aspects of designing technology in today's world of ubiquitous computing, the need to address and engage with gender in a rigorous manner is felt more urgent and inevitable than ever. The quality, concerns, motives and impacts of these existing works can be best characterized as varied and span over several internal topics within the field such as domestic computing, aesthetics, CSCW, online and virtual environments, and feminist HCI to name a few. Such a spread-out is a testimony in itself to the prevalence of gender and it permeating all facets of experienced life. Yet, works on gender tend to remain marginal and fragmented inside HCI that might lead to potential blind spots in the research space. In this abstract, I point out one such blind spot, the advantages of addressing this issue and the ramifications if omitted.

One of the common research framings in works that deal with gender is 'how do men differ from women in doing X'. It is important to note that such works are primarily the product of difference between the two binary genders and in such works the gender categories themselves remain intact. For example, [3] sets out to explore "how differences in gender should influence the design of problem-solving software" (emphasis mine). Another example is [6] which states, "[i]f men's transitions to domestic work are to be encouraged then home appliances must be made to connote masculine cultural themes." Such framing is problematic for two reasons. First, it forecloses the possibility of introducing intentional changes since it primarily focuses on finding out what the existing patterns of difference are and repeating them. Observing existing patterns and using them to inform design choices which in turn reinforces those patterns forms a vicious self-feeding cycle and leads to "inadvertently reproducing cultural norms because they seem so "natural"" [8]. A fine counter example to this stance can be found in [4] where the authors discuss the opinion of a man doing domestic work. The subject mentions that he would like to get some sort of immediate visual feedback while Hoovering the carpet the same way one can see improvement while mowing a lawn. From this example, it is evident that for this subject to enjoy Hoovering, a domestic activity, what was needed was an immediate visual feedback and not the introduction of 'masculine cultural themes'. Second, as [8] points out "[d]esigners should think about gender at a level of sophistication beyond color and shape." If the works attend to

gender issues through the lens of difference, such level of sophistication is not completely realized since the works primarily deal with reinforcing existing patterns thus deterring existing works from maturing and make research on gender in general, both frustrating and stale. I propose that one of the ways of realizing such sophistication is to think about gender beyond the realms of binary categories since it forces us to rethink the existing categories of gender, how such categories get established, and what that entails.

As demonstrated, viewing gender in terms of difference between the binary genders is not necessarily fruitful and can actually be detrimental to the cause in some cases. More importantly, such works do not address the various structures and hierarchies of power that help establish gender inequalities in the first place since the categories themselves remain unquestioned. In other words, questions such as what does masculinity/femininity mean in terms of designing technology, how designs become gendered and how power hierarchies are established are never raised. Such questions cannot be deemed as ‘beyond the scope of HCI’ if we are serious about addressing gender related issues. I argue that paying attention to non-binary gendered subjectivities ‘defamiliarizes’ our thinking structures and practices through which gendered identities are reified while designing technologies. Such an analysis will promote a critical and reflective understanding of the language we use to talk and think about gendered identities and help shed light to the inner workings of power hierarchies in the gender arena. By introducing non-binary genders into the conversation, we are not just simply adding another category of gender but actively engaging with and understanding the meaning of the already existing binary genders with respect to non-binary genders. In other words, male and female have been understood and made sense of only with respect with each other till now and addressing non-binary genders would help us understand these binary genders in new light.

Having said this, with the exception of a handful of works such as [9, 5, 10], the conversation on gender inside HCI maintains a pronounced silence with respect to non-binary gender conceptions. Even works such as [2] that propose an epistemic shift in terms of addressing gender inside our field does not explicitly address non-binary gendered conceptions. Non-binary genders such as transgender, and genderqueer are systematically left out of the equation on all levels. Research questions regarding gender, the design, recruitment and execution of user studies, the actual language used to describe the project (e.g., s/he), the resulting design concepts that get created are all framed with respect to the binary genders. Any issue or observation that does not fit into this framework is either treated as an anomaly or at best annexed into the margins of the binary framework. For example, [7] addresses the issue of ‘gender swapping’ in online spaces primarily with respect to binary genders. Another example is [1], which frames the phenomenon of ‘gender bending’ as a “misrepresentation of gender identities.” In other words, the terms of discussion is always set with respect to the ‘two primary genders’ and “all those “other genders” are... strung out between them, like laundry drying on the line” [11]. This shows us two things. First, there are less than a handful of works inside HCI that deal with non-binary

gendered subjects. Second, the epistemic orientations, theoretical framings and language that most of these works use are still predominantly with respect to the binary genders. In essence, non-binary genders are largely ignored and **our understanding of gender itself is binaried** i.e. gender is understood and engaged with only in terms of binary genders. Actively paying attention to and engaging with non-binary gendered subjects will help the works on gender related issues inside HCI by:

- Forcing us to reexamine our understanding of both gender itself and what constitutes the individual binary categories.
- Advancing the discussion of gender to a level of sophistication beyond differences between binary genders.
- Exposing the language and thinking structures that help establish and maintain hierarchies and inequalities with respect to gender.
- Promoting a more nuanced and deeper understanding of gender thereby increasing an overall awareness about gender related issues throughout the field.
- Empower a highly marginalized minority group that has been largely ignored in HCI.

To conclude, paying attention to non-binary gendered subjectivities is a much needed intellectual stoke to addressing gender in HCI to move forward with scholastic rigor and help operationalize the critical qualities listed in [2]. Such an endeavor would also help empower a highly marginalized minority group that has been consistently and systematically left out of the equation. As we reach out for social justice, empowerment and betterment of the quality of life, it becomes both our professional and ethical duty and responsibility to extend these noble goals for all.

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