

Commentary

For alt.chi Paper
Meaning Reconstruction as an Approach to Analyze Critical Dimensions of HCI Research

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In motivating their new-to-HCI method, the authors argue that contemporary HCI – “marked by criticality, sociality, and power” – lacks sufficiently rigorous methods. In contrast to first and second paradigm HCI, which “operated in an experimental scientific mode, using measures that were easily quantified and compared,” third paradigm methods “have been more diffuse, drawing on numerous social science and humanistic traditions.” Such work “is often a ‘black box,’ lacking clear description of how critical insights are drawn from data in a rigorous way.” Yet, it seems to me that much HCI research – regardless of criticality – often appears on the scene in the same symptomatic “black box.” Yet, criteria for evaluating “contributions” generally hinge on the performance of novelty – a new system, design, or insight – not the performance of ‘rigor,’ good science, or good research; methods are allotted a minimal amount of space in papers – in favor of featuring novel results. Meanwhile, alt.chi – a zone on the fringes of the discipline – is not an uncommon venue for methods papers. Is an apparent lack of rigor a problem specific to third paradigm HCI, or symptomatic of a general lack of care about methods in the first place? And, what does rigor mean, anyway?

Notably, the explication of a rigorous method in this paper appears to transform social discourse into something that looks like discursive *data*. The analysis appears quite traditionally empiricist: it has a set of clear steps, and even involves the production of diagrams and tables. Is this what it means to be rigorous? Is rigor the result of a specific practice, following ‘properly’ a set of steps? Must it result in the data-fication of evidence? Can a more multiple and diffuse approach not also be rigorous?

When starting my PhD, I took a series of classes in the anthropology department, hoping to learn how the real ethnographers did fieldwork. Disappointingly, at the time, I found few methodological prescriptions. Rather, I would be referred to such illuminatingly clear explications of method as Hugh Gusterson's essay on “polymorphous engagement,” which says, roughly: ‘Go out and talk to some people! Can't get access to the place where you should do participant observation? No big deal, go somewhere else! Socialize! Read the newspaper! Think about it. Write.’ Such an anthropology can appear free-wheeling – to say the least – and yet, I also learned that *not* just anything goes. Method and rigor still mattered.

For myself, I have come to think of rigor as bound up in the orientation and commitment with which one approaches the craft of spinning a story out of a set of empirical evidences; more personal and political than stepwise or scientific; involving a vulnerability to research participants, aspirations to tell truths that resonate with local understandings, and attention to one's location within the power structures of research, writing, and authority-making. Thus, while I still find much “ethnographic” work within CHI to appear quite shallow and less-than-thick, I am also skeptical that specifying a regimented method (be it meaning reconstruction or a form of the perennial favorite, grounded theory) will help. Thus, while I value the introduction of meaning reconstruction and can see its usefulness for my own and others' work, I'm less certain that it addresses the problem of rigor that the authors raise. However, this question of rigor – what constitutes it, how to assess it, why it might be important – seems a crucial issue for the field to discuss, and not just on its alt/fringes.