Extended Abstract: Tensions and Dualities in Embedded HCI Research

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Abstract

Given the absence of any significant body of literature around the practicalities of conducting embedded HCI research with Third Sector Organizations and the author's lack of academic research experience, this position paper eschews the typical extended abstract format. Instead, this position paper describes the historical and current professional relationship between the author and a partner organization. The duality of the author's role as both an HCI Researcher and member of the partner organization is highlighted. The author discusses two current research projects. Both projects involve ethnography and co-design. Both projects involve practical challenges around working with vulnerable individuals and marginalized communities, hierarchical organizations, territoriality between competing actors, relationships of power and issues of agency. The author will be necessarily entangled with participants in the messy everyday reality of embedded research.

Author Keywords

Action Research; ethnography; reflexivity; Communities of Practice.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2. Social Issues
K.4.3. Organizational Impacts
K.4.1. Public Policy Issues

Introduction

I am a mature Postgraduate Researcher at Open Lab, University of Newcastle. I am working with the local franchise office of a national charity, the research partner for my PhD. This is consistent with my University's commitment to being a 'civic university' and with Open Lab's commitment to socially responsible projects embedded in the local community [11]. I am integrated within the partner organization as a Volunteer Consultant as a 'critical friend' for the CEO and executive decision-makers. I am also an HCI Researcher within the sub-field of Digital Civics. The ongoing nature of the relationship as an active participant within the organization means that my research will necessarily be subjective and entangled, but both roles position me as an outsider/expert and vary with context. Negotiating my dual role, in the sense of negotiating a challenging situation like a ship in dangerous waters [15], presents many challenges.

Research Partnership

The foundation for my partnership with Gateshead Citizens Advice Bureau (GCAB) is my previous experience. Following my undergraduate Degree in Law and Postgraduate Certificate in International Business, I worked as a Volunteer Generalist Adviser at an office of the Citizens Advice Bureau in my hometown. In this frontline role providing a service to users, I gave legal and practical advice to clients, supporting and empowering my clients to overcome the challenges they faced. The training for this role focused on active listening and minimizing verbal, non-verbal and physical barriers to an open exchange. The adviser role was an expert role, but the outcome of an interview was not a prescription or recommendation. Rather, the outcome was an agreed action plan that had to be realistic and achievable for the client in the context of the underlying causes, related issues and consequences identified through the interview process. This was a relational service [11] as it considered the user as a person with social relationships, rights and responsibilities and multiple, interacting needs that cut across sectors and service streams.

Research Project 1

The GCAB provide non-means-tested legal and practical advice to the people of Gateshead. This independent, non-discriminatory and free-at-point-of-use service is a poor fit with the values of efficiency and competition and the transactional framing of service provider, service user and quantitative outcome evaluation that are central to the New Public Management model of public service provision [7]. Securing public sector funding in the UK is challenging in the current socio-economic and political climate. Budgets continue to be capped or cut for reasons of austerity and the voluntary sector is increasingly compartmentalized due to competitive funding [10]. Establishing Communities of Practice [15] around public-sector funding is urgently required [7] to avoid duplication in an increasingly diverse ecosystem of territorial, defensive providers of services competing for limited resources. Research Project 1 will address this system level challenge with a rapid ethnography of early adopter communities of practice around public-sector funding, followed by the formation and development of local communities of practice. This will be an HCI infrastructuring [4] project that is intended to be sustainable and resilient beyond the life of the project [14]. Managing communications and open dialogue across social and cultural barriers from users to funders and funded organizations will be complex due to tensions such as power relationships and territoriality between competing service providers and the vulnerability of GCAB service users. Combined with time and resource constraints, the author's dual role as a Researcher and a Designer/Facilitator will raise issues of trust and agency with those involved. The author has a personal and professional interest in securing a sustainable, resilient, long-term positive outcome for GCAB as a partner organization and an activist agenda with regards to reforming public sector funding and service provision.

Research Project 2

Research Project 2 will initially take the form of an ethnographic study of GCAB operations. This is inspired by the work of Angelika Strohmeyer [13], studies of workplace HCI [3] and the work of Etienne Wenger around Communities of Practice [15]. This ethnography will focus on front line service provision, but will also include everyday work practices at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. This extensive ethnography will be a collaborative, reflexive process for the organization from the outset, with the outcome a report to the Trustees and staff that makes visible the everyday reality of the GCAB in addition to academic writing. The practicalities of developing and maintaining trust and open critical dialogue with users and the 80+ staff within a hierarchical and complex organizational structure will also be challenging.

The ethnography of the GCAB is intended as the starting point for the co-design of an evolutionary adaptation process that it is hoped will continue beyond the research period. Here, again, the author has an activist agenda with an interest in developing HCI solutions that expand the reach of the partner organization geographically, numerically and across categories such as age and culture, at negligible cost and with negligible maintenance requirements of technical skill/knowledge, time and cost. Several top-down ideas for potential changes to service provision have been discussed. For example, P2P advice via smartphone and web platforms could connect GCAB services with users in remote rural communities and culturally isolated communities both directly and via locally embedded advisers recruited from such communities and supported by GCAB coordinators. Balancing the ideals of co-design and next-generation design thinking [1,2,5,9,12] with the tradition of expert/top down organizational change and service design will present a further challenge [8].

Conclusion

The sheer diversity of users of GCAB's universal, free services includes a broad spectrum of vulnerable groups. Managing research to meet legal requirements and ethical demands of the GCAB and the Ethics Committee of Newcastle University and the needs of everyone who participates will be complex. My research will be situated Action Research and co-design involving users from many vulnerable and minority groups in a Third Sector Organization with limited, threatened resources. Though HCI will be central to both projects, conducting ethnography as an Action Research project may be difficult to frame within HCI [6].

Biography

Matthew is currently completing an MRes in the HCI sub-field of Digital Civics in preparation for his PhD as a Postgraduate Researcher at Open Lab, Newcastle University, UK. He holds bachelors degrees in Law and Marine Science and a Postgraduate Certificate in International Business with Foreign Languages. Matthew has worked in various industries in Australia, France, Luxembourg, Spain and the UK. Matthew's research interests include co-developing sustainable and resilient processes that enable communities to address the wicked social problems they face in the 21st Century. Having previously worked as a Volunteer Generalist Adviser with the Citizens Advice Bureau, an independent UK advice-giving charity, Matthew is now a Volunteer Consultant at Citizens Advice Gateshead.

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