

Exploring the Tensions between Disability Justice and Human-Computer Interaction Research

Frank Elavsky, Carnegie Mellon University

This paper, if you can call it that, is structured intentionally for a workshop setting. It is designed as a series of provocations to stimulate meaningful discussion and knowledge sharing around the topic of DJ in HCI research.

Introduction: Is DJ in HCI even possible?

Can human-computer interaction (HCI) research ever meaningfully and honestly say it does the work of disability justice (DJ)? In order to begin to engage this question, we first need to establish a working definition of DJ and center our conversation on DJ both in theory and practice. For the sake of introducing this short series of provocations, I am arguing that if we look to the 10 principles of DJ outlined by Berne et al.[1] 7 of the principles have great promise in the HCI community and 3 may not be possible. I am arguing that within the constraints of HCI-centered research, DJ work may not have a place. Now what?

Can HCI appropriate practices from DJ? Should it?

Our discussions could arise from an attempt to appropriate the most-compatible DJ practices into HCI research (an attempt to “learn from” what HCI finds useful in DJ). But due to the necessarily holistic framing of disability justice, both intellectually and in practice, to appropriate part but not all of its practices for HCI’s purpose would no longer be “disability justice” but something else entirely.

Can HCI change in order to fully accommodate DJ?

Our discussions could also engage what areas of HCI research would need to change in order to accommodate a full unity with DJ thought and practice. But again, the centering of HCI and not DJ in this way would fundamentally cause significant risk to the DJ community (and of course may have significant resistance from within already resistant HCI sub-communities).

What about DJ works well with HCI?

Before we explore what in DJ works well in HCI, it is imperative to understand that DJ cannot be adopted or appropriated in-part. It must be practiced in totality, or else it is not DJ but something else. HCI is welcome to attempt DJ-lite™ (and likely already does) but it is our job to insist that this is not holistic DJ work at all and probably isn’t really worth referring to as DJ.

What do we call non-holistic DJ-adjacent work already being done in HCI?

In some cases, there is significant work already explored in HCI across the other 7 principles of DJ that would perhaps be worth calling something. (We could use a meaningful word to refer to this research that uses aspects of DJ in part.) How do we refer to work that perhaps upholds one or more of DJ’s principles, but not all of them, without prematurely calling it DJ?

What about DJ absolutely does not work with HCI?

In this specific provocation, I am arguing that there are three principles in DJ that would require such significant, radical, revolutionary change within HCI research that it is reasonable to believe that DJ may

never have a place in HCI without being appropriated in some way. Those three principles are “Leadership of those most impacted,” “Anti-capitalist politic,” and “Collective liberation.”

Why doesn’t HCI research work well with “Leadership of those most impacted?”

Well, researchers love to put their names on papers they contributed to intellectually. But what if the entire model and motivation for a project was driven by a community, even a potentially anonymous one? In what situation is it appropriate for an HCI researcher to claim any author position in research that is genuinely led by those most impacted? Is the answer to have more diverse recruiting into our research programs?

But more fundamentally: Is authoring a paper the same as leadership on a project? How much do funding bodies, departments, colleges, universities and other bodies of power that academics participate in “leadership” of research projects? Are the authors of a paper the only ones in positions of leadership? I doubt this. (If they were, academics would be capable of much more policy change than they are.) And would our current structures of funding and the hierarchies of academia ever allow HCI to be “led” by those most impacted? Is the answer to get more crips in these hierarchical positions of power? What if the real framing problem here then is that HCI research, situated within capitalistic hierarchies, may fundamentally never be capable of leadership by those most impacted. Leadership in academia is so highly oppositional to DJ work that no academic can take a leadership role in DJ without necessarily introducing significant structural, sustainability, and political risks.

Why doesn’t HCI research work well with “Anti-capitalist politic?”

I don’t think I even need to devote space to this particular provocation. I’ll let the discussion take the lead.

Why doesn’t HCI research work well with “Collective liberation?”

“I am not free until we are all free” means that HCI researchers would be expected to fight battles at courthouses, protest policy on the steps of a legislator’s office, unionize, abolish the police, abolish tenure, and so much more. Collective liberation is both a hopeful and also incredibly grim call to fight for the whole course of one’s entire life. Can we expect researchers, who exist within the illusions and incentives of individualistic bootstrapping, to fight for collective liberation if it costs them tenure? Will these HCI researchers not fundamentally risk their careers over this aspect of DJ work? Can we expect HCI researchers to pursue collective liberation without all academics also joining in?

What about HCI in DJ? Can DJ involve aspects of HCI?

Perhaps bringing DJ into HCI then isn’t possible without sacrificing necessary pieces of DJ, risking the integrity and communities of DJ. My proposed idea and hopeful area for discussion is that it might be worth exploring models of research that start *within* DJ communities and are led by DJ communities. Can DJ work involve aspects of HCI? This is a more fruitful area to explore if HCI really hopes to build a relationship with DJ without jeopardizing or damaging DJ work.

What would HCI researchers need to do to work with DJ communities?

How can HCI researchers contribute to DJ communities without risking imperialistic, colonial, or extractive practices? How can HCI avoid damaging DJ spaces? How can HCI avoid solutioning or exploiting DJ while still producing research papers and “knowledge” for their own communities? Is it even possible to write a research paper and not also be extracting value from DJ spaces? And what additional work would HCI researchers be expected to do that may not look as good on tenure applications but would be important in maintaining a healthy, ethical relationship with DJ communities? Is it worth the risk for HCI researchers to collaborate with DJ communities even if it turns out that DJ has no need for the C in HCI? And are some DJ spaces *already* doing HCI work? Could researchers assist with this?

[1] Berne, Patricia, et al. "Ten Principles of Disability Justice." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 46 no. 1, 2018, p. 227-230. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/wsq.2018.0003.