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Class and Gender Inclusion in CHI: A Newcomer’s Perspective

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ABSTRACT
Inclusivity is key to all research, but particularly that with as strong a human focus as HCI. It’s important for not only our research community but also to ensure the research we conduct is as inclusive as possible and considers all types of human and their interactions with technology. In particular, socio-economic status is a global aspect of inclusion that prevents people of low income backgrounds from getting involved in computer science and CHI. In countries like the UK that barrier disproportionately effects BME people, leading to higher education and academia to be predominantly white. Furthermore, gender is a well-known barrier in scientific disciplines. However, non-binary identities and unique challenges faced by trans researchers are important to consider when making a safe and inclusive community for everyone. Understanding gender and sex as different terms can also be beneficial in ensuring research is accurately measuring phenomena. These issues are discussed from the perspective of a new member of CHI community, with limited experience of global academia.

KEYWORDS
Computer-Human interaction, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity
INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is critical to the CHI community and to its research. Diversity within the research community provides a wider set of viewpoints regarding how research can be applied and how that differs in people of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities and ages. Collaboration between people with different lived experience can lead to discoveries and research that people with similar backgrounds may not have considered. However, the diversity of our research community is dependant on (at least) two key factors. Firstly, the diversity of the pools from which we draw, most notably computer science (CS) students, researchers and practitioners. Secondly, the success of the community in welcoming and retaining newcomers from diverse backgrounds.

In this short paper I briefly draw attention to two areas of personal concern: socio-economic status (SES) and gender. I summarise how both characteristics are currently seen to impact participation in CS activities, and where SIGCHI might act to provide a welcoming experience for people of diverse backgrounds and newcomers. My arguments are made from the perspective of a new PhD student engaging with SIGCHI for the first time.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Differences in SES are apparent in societies across the world. For example, data from 2013/2014 suggests that 500,000 children live in severe low income and material deprivation in the UK [4]. One obvious implication of poverty is the reduced potential for access to expensive computers, electronic devices and software. To tackle this issue, government initiatives aim to provide access to computers for all students, however, Harris, Straker and Pollock [5] suggest that despite this there are differences in how children of different SES use this technology. Their research suggests that students of a lower SES use computers for activities such as gaming or social media, while students of a higher SES are more likely to use computers for educational purposes. With technology constrained to a recreational or social role, students of lower SES may not consider CS as an area of study. Additionally, SES is known to influence progression to higher degrees generally [6], and those who are able and interested may struggle to fund their studies. Together, these differences mean people entering CHI as a field are from similar position of wealth. Further, those from low income backgrounds may also disproportionately include those from other underrepresented groups (e.g. those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds [4]). In non-western parts of the world, access to computers may be even lower and thus working to reduce finance as a barrier to CS and CHI would lead to the international community becoming more diverse.

I therefore think we can improve inclusion at CHI by encouraging participation in HCI in low income areas. CHI2019 already takes steps to support students interested in attending the conference [2], however, the CHI community could be improved by facilitating outreach to school students in low
SES areas, to encourage them to consider studying CHI at university. Being new to CHI, this position is based on my experiences of 5 years in UK higher education and thus may not be representative of the international CHI community. Nevertheless it is a perspective I feel is important to consider when making CHI more inclusive, as poverty is a global issue and by working to improve outreach and funding for people of lower SES, CHI can be made more accessible globally. While making CHI more diverse, we also need to make newcomers feel welcome. I believe it would be beneficial to have a guide for newcomers to provide general information that is applicable to every CHI conference. While the CHI 2019 website does have an ‘Intro to CHI’ section, four months prior to the conference it currently contains no information [3]. For people writing their workshop submissions in January, and for those with paper submissions made in September, there is little guidance on what to expect if we attend. Furthermore, it can be quite daunting for new students, who perhaps don’t know their supervisor or colleagues well, to ask questions that may seem rudimentary. Therefore, a general guide applicable to all CHI conferences, answering questions such as ‘Do I have to be accepted to a workshop to attend CHI?’, could help reduce anxiety in newcomers to CHI and make them feel more welcome.

GENDER

Gender differences are also an important consideration in improving inclusion at CHI. Studies have shown that CS is still considered a masculine subject and not something girls should/can pursue [7], and evidence suggests a gender gap still persists in CS as a discipline [8]. This is a problem present across many scientific fields [9] and thus is often prioritised as an aspect to improve inclusion. However, references [7–9] make the mistake of confusing sex and gender, and do not consider trans and non-binary students participation in CS. Acknowledging the difference between sex (biological) and gender (internal perception) is important in CHI research when considering gender differences in computer interaction, as trans and non-binary people may have different attitudes compared to their cis peers.

Furthermore, trans and non-binary people’s needs should be considered when arranging conference venues and workshops. The CHI2019 website has an FAQ section addressing the question of restroom facilities, however it is only in relation to those with accessibility issues [1] and doesn’t consider those who do not feel comfortable accessing gendered restrooms or feel it is not appropriate for them to use gendered facilities. Inclusion at CHI could be improved by ensuring there are non-gendered facilities available at conference venues and advertising these in advance. Raising awareness of this issue at CHI can also set an example to our own workplaces to make them more inclusive as well. Trans and non-binary identities could further be acknowledged at CHI by having pronoun indicators on everyone’s conference badge. This helps normalise the idea that an individual’s pronouns may be different to initial assumptions. This benefits trans people by reducing the chance of being misgendered, makes a more welcoming environment.
CONCLUSION

The above issues are important considerations to make in ensuring CHI is inclusive. Practical issues such as financial assistance and outreach to encourage poorer areas to participate in CHI are important to ensure those conducting research have a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. This can help improve the quality of our research and may lead to significant gains for CHI as a discipline. Ensuring conferences are accessible to people of all genders is important to allow all who attend to enjoy safe environments to collaborate in. For those new to CHI, creating a general guide will help put newcomers at ease when participating in CHI for the first time.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Madeleine Steeds is a genderfluid PhD student based at the School of Computer Science, University of Manchester. While new to the discipline of CHI, they are passionate about academic inclusion. They were an LGBTQ+ liberation co-ordinator at Leeds University Union and a member of the University of Leeds, School of Psychology Equality and Inclusivity Committee (2017/2018). They were an elected delegate to the NUS Women’s and NUS LGBTQ+ conferences (2017). In their free time Madeleine is an active socialist campaigner, with focus on campaigning for the reform of the 2004 UK gender recognition act.