Questioning boundaries and binaries: Hybridity theory and CSCW research

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Abstract
Hybridity theory (or third-space theory) may provide a heuristic approach that suggests where to find ideas, data, or inspiration for theorizing. In this view, there is often an area of overlap where two distinct domains, cultures, or perspectives meet at a boundary - i.e., a "third space" that occurs between the two formally distinguished domains. The overlap partakes of topics, concepts, phenomena, and even persons from both "sides" of the boundary. In these regions of overlap, ideas are often fluid and potentially ambiguous, and opportunities for deeper dialogues and new learnings abound. In this position paper, I consider hybridity as a strategy for CSCW inquiry, for design, and for community-building.

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CSCW; Hybridity; Third space; Binary; Boundary; Translation.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.3 Group and organizational interfaces.

Introduction
The concept of hybridity or “third space” has been explored and debated within cultural studies for a while [6, 20]. More rarely, it has appeared in HCI and CSCW discussions [12, 24, 26]. In this position paper, I
review the concepts in terms of their potential to help generate or develop theory in CSCW, and I propose several strategies based on those concepts.

Hybridity in Cultural Studies

Bhabha made an influential argument that the border or boundary region between two domains – two spaces – is often a region of overlap or hybridity [6]. This region is sometimes called a “third space” because it appears along the border between a “first space” of one culture, and a “second space” of another culture. References to the concept of “third” or even “thirdness” are frequent in the multicultural arts world [9, 23, 31, 32]. Hybrid or third spaces are potentially important to CSCW, because they call into question the assumptions of each of the two more formal spaces, cultures, or disciplines. Bhabha’s area of concern was colonization, in which some native people find themselves caught between their own traditional culture and the imposed culture of the colonizers (see also [13, 18]). Their continual negotiation and creation of their identities, as efforts of survival, creates a new hybrid or third culture ([6]; see also [21]) and even a third language [2, 3]. The majority culture may also move to engage with the subordinated or subaltern culture, as explored in Krupat’s work on ethnocriticism [20].

In such a hybrid space, enhanced knowledge exchange is possible, precisely because of those questions, challenges, reinterpretations, and renegotiations [3]. According to Gutierrez et al., these “zones of development” can lead to new learnings for individuals, dyads, and communities [15]. Dialogues across differences and – more importantly – within differences – may be stronger when engaged in by groups, emphasizing not only a shift from assumptions to reflections, but also from individuals to collectives [10].

Hybridity in CSCW

Ethnocritical heuristics

Based on Krupat’s work on constructive inter-cultural criticism [20], I applied selected concepts to understand the organizational power-context of HCI analysts, who are often caught between a powerful software development culture and a subordinate work-culture of their users [24]. I suggested several “ethnocritical heuristics” that might be helpful to people who were trying to find a position from which to advocate for the users, while carrying out their formal responsibilities to their organizations, and their informal obligations to their work teams.

I suggested that the analyst’s verbal privilege (i.e., speaking for the users) was a core problem in HCI, as it is in cultural studies [1, 29]. As we struggle with the responsibility to speak (imperfectly) someone else’s truth, we analysts may want to consider how we position ourselves, our teams, and our work, in terms of the boundaries between users and developers. How “wide” can we make the boundary region? How rich can we make the exchange between users and developers? To what extent can we create opportunities for users to advocate in their own voices, without our mediation?

If direct exchange between users and developers is not possible, then the analyst takes on the role of translator and/or interpreter [25]. In this role, the HCI analyst does at least two things: (1) S/he transports

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1 Some of the text in this section is based on [26].
information from the users’ work to the developers’ work; and (2) S/he transforms the report of that work from the users’ language to the developers’ language [4]. Translation theory teaches us that there are exquisitely difficult decisions involved in acts of translation and interpretation [4, 5, 33], leading to a description of translation as “the impossible necessity” [11].

When we think of these conflicting pressures as applied to an HCI analyst, we may begin to see the value of Harding’s argument for strong objectivity, in which knowledge remains uncertain until we know the standpoint (perspective) of the knower [16]. Negotiating the multiple relationships, responsibilities, and fidelities among users, developers, and other stakeholders, is filled with contradictions and decisions. Some of these decisions touch on questions epistemology (how do I know what I know? from where do I know it?) and ethics (to whom am I responsible? who is trusting me to do what with their knowledge?), and collectively present perhaps an HCI version of an “impossible necessity.”

**Applying Hybridity Strategies to CSCW**

And yet, hybridity strategies may help us to move beyond the binaries of the oppositional account of translation and interpretation [22]. Binaries appear around boundaries, but part of the point of hybridity theory is crucially to blur those boundaries, and to find new spaces and new opportunities to remake meaning and power relations collaboratively. If we apply that kind of thinking to CSCW, then we can consider how hybridity theory can suggest research strategies, including collaborative and communal research strategies.

**Where to Find Out**

First, if we are observing or participating in users’ work, we can choose the site of our investigation. Participatory design (PD) might suggest that we embed ourselves in the users’ culture, language, and political realities (e.g., [7]). There is much to be said in favor of that stance – especially because so the majority of analyses are done from a position that is firmly within a managerial standpoint.

However, consideration of boundary phenomena suggests a characteristically third possibility, which is to position ourselves at the margin between users’ worlds and developers’ worlds [24]. This is likely to be a “zone” [15] in which people talk about boundary objects [12], and where they may find a need to construct new language and new meanings to collaborate across their differences. As people explain to one another, they will also be explaining to us. As noted above, a third space is a zone of learning, and we can learn there, too.

**How to Find Out and to Design Collectively**

Second, we may be able to create, adapt, or apply design methods that incorporate hybridity strategies. Druin and I catalogued a collection of participatory methods that construct a relatively unfamiliar space for collaborative design – a space that does not “belong” to users or to developers [26]. The goal of this kind of space is create a third space in which, because of ambiguities, people will need to communicate about their world-views, and in which they have the opportunity to create new knowledges, new meanings, and new understandings, and to inscribe those new shared perspectives into designs. We used hybridity theory to organize an initial analysis of these zones of
collaboration and mutual learning, but there is much more work to be done to theorize design spaces for creative collaboration.

For example, Friedman's value sensitive design (VSD) has offered a useful challenge (e.g., [28]) to the binarism of many approaches in PD, which seem to pit labor and management against one another in an inevitable struggle (e.g., [14, 19]). As a theory and as a description of practice, VSD proposes a greater diversity of "stakeholders" in a design, going well beyond the conventional binaries of users and developers, or of workers and management. How can these diverse voices be brought together into a hybrid space for meaningful communication and collaboration?

**Whom to Find Out with**

Finally, new and hybrid spaces can help diverse people find common ground and collective purpose. Von Hippel argues for "democratizing innovation" through diversifying the stakeholders who can contribute to design problems and solutions [34] under management's guidance, although his "innovation network" approach [35] seems to be open to less authority-driven processes. Nonetheless, Björgvinsson et al. have replied with a more bottom-up strategy toward the same goal [8]. What seems to be common across these approaches is a shared purpose of innovation.

There are several new methods that have recently been applied at scale in diverse organizations, creating new and unfamiliar collaboration environments. Examples include enormous three-day brainstorming events [17] and Intranet-based crowdfunding [27, 30]. A surprising attribute of these methods is that they seem to combine executive goal-setting and rank-and-file innovation, with very little conflict over direction or decision-making. Indeed, in the case of crowdfunding, executives explicitly remove themselves from the decision, trusting the employees as a "crowd" to choose the most valuable projects [27]. While these approaches were not designed with a hybridity strategy, it may be worthwhile to explore hybridity-based modifications that could increase communication and the discovery of common ground and common purposes.

**Conclusion**

Hybridity theory has been an important theme in cultural studies and cultural critique [2, 3, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 23]. Hybridity theory has also been applied, in preliminary ways, to CSCW problems, in areas of inquiry, design, and collaboration [12, 24, 25, 26]. This theory, along with the strategies that can be derived from it, has promise to inform CSCW research toward clarifying epistemological, ethical, and political issues.

**References**


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