

# Ethical Encounters: HCI Research in Sensitive and Complex Settings

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## ABSTRACT

Ethics is emerging as a key issue for HCI researchers working in increasingly sensitive and complex settings. New technologies are now designed and evaluated in settings with vulnerable or marginalised participants, which can be emotionally challenging for researchers and give rise to complex ethical dilemmas that are highly contextualized and difficult to plan for. Further, discrepancies may arise between the structured processes of formal ethics approval in universities and other organisations and the realities of HCI fieldwork ‘in the wild’. This workshop builds on our CHI 2015 workshop, providing an opportunity for HCI researchers and others to communally reflect on ethical encounters in HCI research. We particularly focus on situational ethics, researcher wellbeing, maintaining boundaries around the research, issues of consent and participation, and ethical issues arising from the disruption that new technologies cause. We aim to develop a handbook of practical lessons arising from ethical issues encountered in HCI research in sensitive and complex settings.

## Author Keywords

Ethics, sensitive and complex settings, researcher wellbeing, boundaries, consent, disruptive technologies

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## BACKGROUND

### Workshop Topic and Rationale

HCI researchers are now designing and evaluating technologies in increasingly sensitive and challenging settings. It is crucial to consider and plan for ethical issues when conducting any research involving people, but this becomes even more important when the research is conducted in sensitive settings. Research that involves vulnerable or marginalized participants or that is emotionally challenging for researchers can produce complex ethical dilemmas where there are no clear ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. These ethical issues are often

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emergent, diverse, and embedded in the context in which the research takes place.

This workshop aims to provide a forum for researchers to discuss, share experiences, and learn from, ethical challenges that they have encountered as part of their research practice. The workshop discussions will be used to develop a handbook that will communicate practical lessons to share with the HCI community.

## Workshop Themes

This workshop builds on a successful workshop run at CHI in 2015 (Waycott et al., 2015) and will further explore and expand upon the following themes:

### *Situational ethics*

Many of the ethical concerns for HCI researchers working in sensitive and emerging areas cannot be fully predicted and planned for at the outset of the research and are often not covered or are difficult to navigate in formal ethical approval documents. Munteanu et al (2015) termed these challenges ‘situational ethics’. Researchers working in other disciplines have similarly described the tension between formal ethics processes (or ‘procedural ethics’) and ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In this workshop, we will explore tensions between procedural ethics requirements and the ethical issues that emerge in the doing of research, as well as opportunities to improve ethics review processes by incorporating understandings of situational ethics.

### *Researcher wellbeing*

Researchers working in sensitive settings may need to develop strategies to protect their emotional wellbeing, particularly when working with the seriously ill or bereaved (Massimi, 2014, Moncur, 2013). Moncur (2013) reported a study that investigated the emotional support HCI researchers use when working in sensitive settings. She found that HCI researchers are often unprepared for the emotional challenges they face, and typically receive insufficient institutional support. In this workshop we invite participants to describe dilemmas they have faced in their role as researchers and to reflect on how they have responded to emotionally challenging situations in their research.

### *Blurred boundaries*

It can be difficult to maintain boundaries and non-bias in research conducted in sensitive settings – particularly when the research takes place in field settings and involves considerable time spent with participants (e.g., Davis and Waycott, 2015; Waycott et al., 2015). Setting

and maintaining boundaries can also be challenging when working with small communities where researchers might encounter participants outside the research setting (Munteanu et al., 2014) We invite participants to reflect on how they maintain boundaries around their research and to consider situations where it might be more ethically appropriate for the boundaries to become blurred – such as when it becomes necessary to intervene in a difficult situation.

#### *Consent and participation*

When working with some vulnerable populations it can be challenging to ensure that research participants are fully informed about the process and voluntarily provide consent to take part in the research. This can be particularly problematic in public settings where large numbers of people are interacting with technology, such as public displays. Consent is also problematic for research conducted using data obtained freely from social media and other online sources (Henderson et al., 2013). This workshop will consider different strategies for obtaining informed consent and ensuring voluntary participation, particularly when designing or using new technologies that might have unanticipated consequences.

#### *Managing the disruption of new technologies*

HCI research often aims to not only understand participants and the worlds they live in, but to also intervene in those worlds through the design, implementation, and evaluation of new technologies. We can never be certain about how new technologies will be used and the disruption they might create in people's lives, nor can we fully plan for and mitigate the effect of technology that does not work as expected (see for example, McNaney and Vines, 2015). While we aim to have a positive impact, sometimes new technologies can have unforeseen negative effects. The impact this can have may be particularly pronounced in sensitive and complex settings. How can HCI researchers anticipate and respond to the disruption technologies may cause?

### **WORKSHOP AIMS AND OUTCOMES**

This workshop invites contributions from researchers working in diverse settings and using a range of methodologies. The workshop aims to:

- Build on the discussions generated at the CHI 2015 workshop on Ethical Encounters in HCI.
- Provide a forum for researchers to share experiences of ethical encounters in HCI research.
- Identify common issues researchers have faced, both within HCI and in related social science fields, and explore how these have been addressed.
- Identify the unresolved challenges that researchers continue to grapple with and explore options for responding to these challenges.
- Discuss how ethical encounters will grow and change as emerging (and disruptive) technologies continue to be introduced into sensitive settings.
- Contribute to an edited collection that reflects the breadth and depth of ethical issues emerging in HCI research in difficult and sensitive settings.

The workshop will provide opportunities for researchers to learn from each other and from related disciplines to develop practical strategies to respond to ethical issues in HCI research. These strategies will be communicated to the HCI community through an edited collection showcasing ethical HCI research in sensitive settings.

### **ABOUT THE ORGANISERS**

The workshop is organised by local human-computer interaction researchers with extensive experience conducting research in sensitive and complex settings.

*Hilary Davis* is a Research Fellow in the Department of Computing and Information Systems at the University of Melbourne. She conducts research in complex and sensitive settings, including large hospitals and intimate environments such as the family home. She has worked with a variety of participant groups including pregnant women living with chronic illness, young cancer patients, housebound people and distributed intergenerational family groups.

*Jenny Waycott* is a Lecturer in the Department of Computing and Information Systems at the University of Melbourne. Her current work focuses on the design and use of new technologies to support older adults who are socially isolated.

The workshop will be supported by Dr Bjorn Nansen a lecturer in Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne and Dr. Stefan Schutt, Research program leader in Cultural Diversity, Technologies and Creativity at Victoria University. A larger team of researchers with relevant expertise will assist in reviewing submitted position papers.

### **WEBSITE**

The workshop activities are supported by a dedicated website: <https://ethicalencountershci.wordpress.com/>

Accepted position papers are available on this website prior to the workshop.

### **WORKSHOP STRUCTURE**

This full-day workshop will be interactive, involving a mix of focused small-group discussions and whole-group brainstorming.

#### **Prior to the Workshop**

Potential participants will be asked to submit a 4-page position paper describing ethical encounters that have emerged in their HCI research. These will be reviewed by the organisers and selected on the basis of their contribution to the workshop. All accepted position papers will be pre-published on the workshop website. Small reading groups will be created and participants will be asked to prepare for the workshop by reading each other's position paper. We aim to bring together a group of 10-20 researchers working in diverse and sensitive settings and using a range of methodologies in HCI research.

#### **Activities**

Following introductions from the facilitators, the workshop will begin with three-minute introductions from participants. In this session, participants will be asked to give a brief presentation (e.g. 3 slides, 1 minute

per slide) introducing themselves and their work; outlining the research context of their paper; and describing an ethical dilemma they have encountered in their research.

The workshop will include two breakout sessions. In the first session, participants will be divided into groups based on research topic or domain and engage in discussion identifying common ethical issues arising from papers within that domain. In the second (afternoon) breakout session, small groups will identify lessons learnt based on responses to ethical dilemmas. Following each breakout session the whole group will discuss the key themes that emerged from the sessions; and outline guidance for the HCI community based on findings from the workshop.

#### **Workshop day 7 December 2014**

##### **Timetable**

09:00-09:15	Welcome
09:15-10:30	Participant introductions
10:30-11:00	Coffee break
11:00-11:45	Breakout session: Research Domains
11:45-12:30	Whole group discussion: Key themes from breakout session
12:30-13:30	Lunch
13:30- 14:00	Whole group discussion: Primary ethical issues
14:00-15:00	Breakout sessions: Lessons learnt
15:00-15:30	Coffee break
15:30-16:30	Final group discussion: Guidance for HCI community
16:30-17:00	Workshop close: Planning next steps
19:00	Workshop dinner and drinks (optional)

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