Moving Towards Epistemic Autonomy: A Paradigm Shift for Centering Participant Knowledge

Presented by Leah Ajmani @ CHI 25
🏆honorable mention

Ajmani, et al | ajman004@umn.edu | CHI 2025

Collaborators



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⚠️ Disclaimer: I only have 10 minutes

We need to shift viewing participants' contributions from **data** to **knowledge**

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⋮

Human-centered research is a **knowledge translation** effort

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Human-centered research is a **knowledge translation** effort

⋮

This shift leads to better research **ethically** and **epistemically**

Experience as a Member of Feminist Slack Group



Talia Bhatt

While I did not have official mod power in this Slack space, I was looked to as an authority on several matters.

Experience as a Member of Feminist Slack Group



Talia Bhatt

There was an unspoken policy of ***“POC moderating POC”***

Experience as a Member of Feminist Slack Group



Talia Bhatt

Our authority was afforded and taken away by the white members of the community so that the ***people of color were acting against each other.***

Implications of data > knowledge

Experience as a Trans HCI Researcher

At one point we noticed something:
the results about trans women, specifically, kept getting left out of the evolving narrative.



Michael Ann Devito

Experience as a Trans HCI Researcher

The other authors argued that there just was not a clear narrative around the transfeminine results



Michael Ann Devito

Epistemic Autonomy

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One’s ability to govern how they are known

Epistemic Autonomy

One's ability to govern how they are known

Epistemic injustice
One's due right to contribute to knowledge
(Fricker, 2007)

Epistemic Autonomy

One's ability to govern how they are known

Epistemic injustice
One's due right to contribute to knowledge
(Fricker, 2024)

Autonomy
One's ability to self-govern

Core principle of transfeminism

Epistemic Autonomy

One's ability to govern how they are known



Moving Towards Epistemic Autonomy

Achieving Epistemic Autonomy as a Paradigm

Ontological Commitments

1. Decoupling of scientific and objective
2. Other-conscious reality
3. “Being With” empathy

Epistemological Commitments

1. Reckoning of current epistemology
2. Researcher non-neutrality
3. Vocabulary of the community

Methodological Commitments

1. Research as a safe space
2. Sites of research as community centers
3. Margins-first work

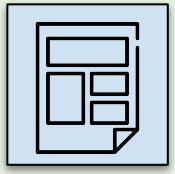
Achieving Epistemic Autonomy with Methods

1. Scaffolded Autoethnography
2. Member Checked ARCs

Scaffolded Autoethnography

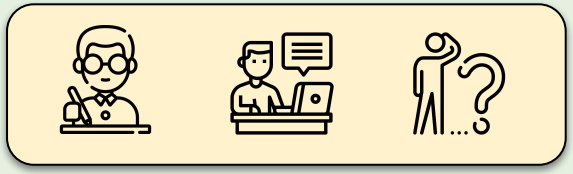
A flavor of collaborative autoethnography where participants are trained to contribute materials, analyses, and findings

Step 1. Create a Scaffold



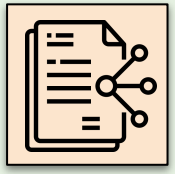
Template Document

Step 2. Collect Autoethnographic Materials

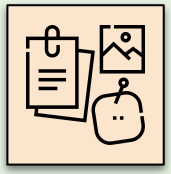


Testimony per participant

Step 3. Collaborative Analysis



Shared Document of Testimonies



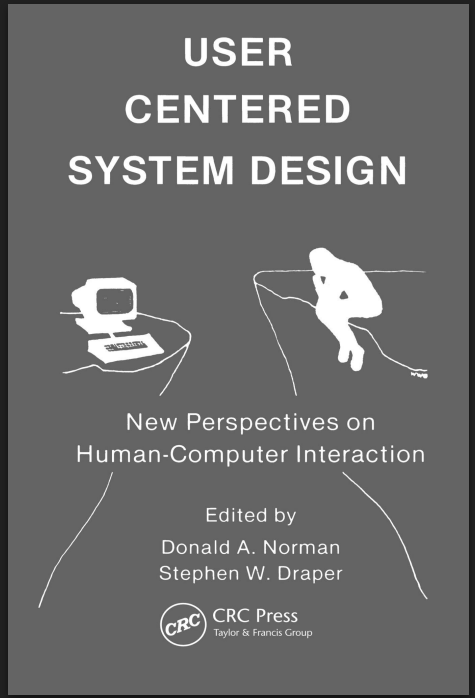
Shared Board

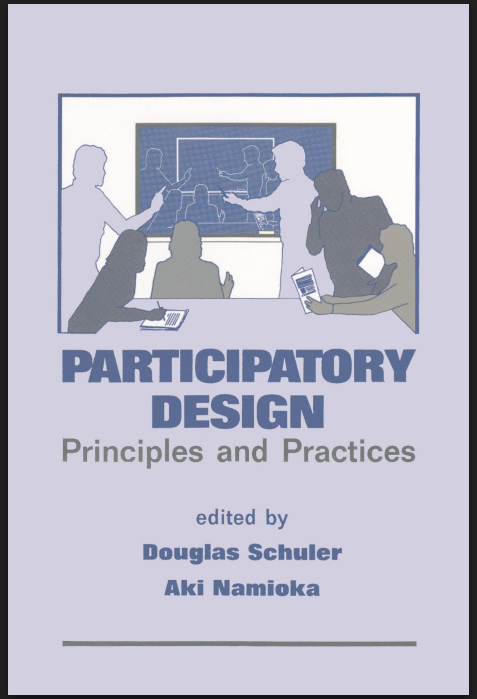
Why are we **gatekeeping** our knowledge formation processes when our goal is **human-centered inquiry**?

Why us?

User-Centered Design

How do we center the needs of the people we research and design for?





Participatory Design

Can we give users more say?

Epistemic autonomy asks once again can we empower participants more?

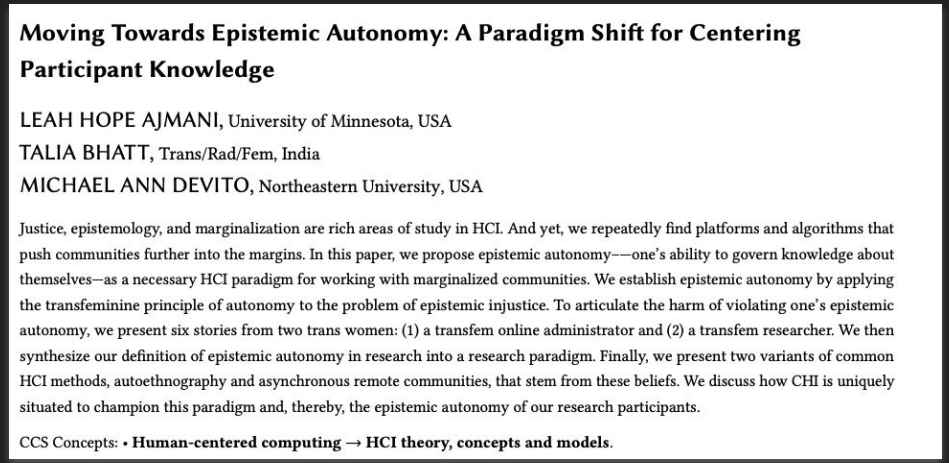
Thank you!

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Pdf of paper at
leahajmani.com

Epistemic autonomy asks once again can we empower participants more?

👩‍💻 I'm on the job market starting Sept 2025!



Moving Towards Epistemic Autonomy: A Paradigm Shift for Centering Participant Knowledge

LEAH HOPE AJMANI, University of Minnesota, USA
TALIA BHATT, Trans/Rad/Fem, India
MICHAEL ANN DEVITO, Northeastern University, USA

Justice, epistemology, and marginalization are rich areas of study in HCI. And yet, we repeatedly find platforms and algorithms that push communities further into the margins. In this paper, we propose epistemic autonomy––one's ability to govern knowledge about themselves—as a necessary HCI paradigm for working with marginalized communities. We establish epistemic autonomy by applying the transfeminine principle of autonomy to the problem of epistemic injustice. To articulate the harm of violating one's epistemic autonomy, we present six stories from two trans women: (1) a transfem online administrator and (2) a transfem researcher. We then synthesize our definition of epistemic autonomy in research into a research paradigm. Finally, we present two variants of common HCI methods, autoethnography and asynchronous remote communities, that stem from these beliefs. We discuss how CHI is uniquely situated to champion this paradigm and, thereby, the epistemic autonomy of our research participants.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models**.

Photos: NYTimes | Icons: Freepik