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# A Feminist Challenge: Resisting the Success Narrative

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Thinking about this workshop over the recent winter holidays put me in mind of the following story.

When I was a sophomore in college (um, back in the Stone Age...well, before the Web anyway), I took a class ("Humanities 90") that emphasized the historicity of interpretation. One of our introductory readings was Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, which uses analysis of mundane elements of modern life (margarine, wrestling) to examine cultural specificities. Our teaching assistant encouraged us to apply Barthes' methods to our own lives, to rip away the veil of common sense from various everyday activities, revealing the historical and particular in what might seem obvious and normal. He had an example: how strange it was that women tended to do most of the cooking in American families, but men took over when grilling on a barbecue was involved, or when some large piece of meat needed to be carved. It was, he remarked, as if men needed to protect women from knives and fire, when of course most cooking activities involve knives and fire. It was absurd, and irrational, for men to carve and grill, and yet also totally, boringly, normal. Culturally specific practices such as patriarchal gender roles, our TA concluded, are perpetuated through such pervasive banalities.

This example struck me, because I had thought my own family rather enlightened. My mother financially supported us; my father was a better cook than she

was. They were, all things considered, exceedingly liberal and egalitarian, and they had raised me and my twin sister accordingly. And yet my father did do all carving (and grilling, of which there was a lot; we lived in southern California). For larger occasions, my grandfather (a butcher) carved. (He also grilled, and had even won awards for his shish kabobs! But he never did any other cooking. My grandparents were traditional in terms of gender roles.) I couldn't remember a single time when a woman had carved a damn thing.

That Thanksgiving, I used my new understanding to take action. I asked if I might learn to carve the turkey. My parents thought this was weird—you want to what?—but they complied. My grandfather was also fine with it; it was clear that my male cousins would never have the interest or patience to master such duties. Eventually, I became the designated family carver of meats, the inheritor of my grandfather's mantle when he died.

It's a good story, right? In this simple narrative, one dose of information—the extent to which a common, banal situation reflects entrenched patriarchal values—is sufficient to open my eyes, inspire action, and lead to positive change in the world. I had challenged and changed restrictive social norms. Problem solved! On to the next challenge!

But the real story is not so simple, and not a clear narrative of progress. The scope of my success was narrow, limited to me, personally. I had transcended a social barrier, but my victory didn't change anyone else's situation, even within my own family or social circle. My sister didn't start carving turkeys, and neither

did my mother, my female cousins, or my female friends. It became conceivable that *I* might carve a turkey, but not that *anyone* might do so.

Too, the circumstances under which I was able to identify and cross this barrier were particular. Although I didn't realize it then, my years of fancy education had given me the confidence of class privilege in addition to critical thinking skills. There was no risk to my action: my family would never have refused my request, once I asked. I got to have my weird ideas indulged because I went to an elite university. I didn't change anyone's thinking. If my cousin Maureen, who had dropped out of high school, had asked to carve the turkey, she would not have been given the same courtesy. But she never would have asked. She knew her role in the family hierarchy. Moreover, were any of my male cousins volunteering to help in the kitchen, and did anyone expect them to? Of course not. So what had changed? Nothing, really. I, who had been already been powerful without realizing it, used my power to become slightly more so.

This is a mundane tale, but it illustrates a challenge regarding the meaningful recognition of intersectionality within the CSCW and HCI community. The allure of the simple narrative remains strong in our scholarship. The story of my teenage turkey carving as a feminist success is attractive and tractable, and it aligns well with a focus on individual empowerment as a means toward social change. Through knowledge, take action. It is easy to imagine straightforward interventions to facilitate these kinds of victories. It is much more difficult to examine the systemic forces that enable actions for some people (me) and constrain actions for others (my cousin Maureen), and to focus

that examination toward envisioning new kinds of actions. To me, the notion of intersectional futures rejects the simple narrative and its vision of easy success. Nonetheless, I was drawn to the broader HCI discipline because of its pragmatic idealism and its focus on agency and empowerment.

This tension is an area I hope to explore in the workshop. To do so, I am looking forward to initiating dialogue and fellowship with others who are committed to feminist perspectives in CSCW and HCI work. I hope to listen to the hopes and concerns of others who share similar values, to hear the diversity of ways that others imagine intersectional futures. It is through such interaction that we can better resist the allure of the success narrative.

I am also interested in exploring the disciplinary challenges that make a truly intersectional perspective difficult to adopt in CSCW and HCI scholarship, and in collaboratively envisioning ways to address those challenges. For example, recent changes to the CSCW conference submission process—eliminating length restrictions and adopting a revise-and-resubmit structure—help to enable the acceptance of more complex scholarship. I feel, however, that field still favors research that can be conceptualized in the form of a discrete “study,” constrained to a set of answerable research questions, and articulated with a pithy “takeaway.” While some research that transcends these norms does find an audience, this can lead to situations like that in my turkey-carving story: continuing systemic barriers are dismissed because of individual success. I am interested to hear how others perceive these challenges and to hear their strategies for surmounting them.