Why You Being WEIRD to Me?

Reflections of a Black Researcher on WEIRD-ness in HCI

HCI researchers and practitioners of all backgrounds need to consider the role WEIRD-ness plays in HCI methods, research, and communities and the impact that has on marginalized communities.

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S tarting my doctoral studies at the University of Washington (UW) as a Black woman from a low-income, south suburb of Chicago, Illinois was one of the largest culture shocks I've ever experienced in my life. I come from a computer science background where I was not too fond of programming or interacting with technology exclusively. So, when I learned about the field of human-computer interaction (HCI), I immediately fell in love. Centering humans in design and engineering processes almost seems obvious, but in my first quarter in the Human Centered Design and Engineering (HCDE) department engaging with literature and discourse among peers, professors, and other academic scholars caused me to question which humans are being centered and who is doing the centering.

WEIRD stands for western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. The acronym was coined by three psychologists, Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, when they realized 96% of psychological samples were only representative of 12% of the world's population. In 2010 the psychologists noted the acronym is used to reference the excep-

tional nature of this sample and is not intended to hold "negative connotations or moral judgment" [1]. Tackling this question of "WEIRD-ness" as a minority researcher has caused me to be reflective of my own journey into this space—revealing how WEIRD-ness or whiteness is perpetuated throughout the HCI community's research, systems, and methodologies.

**USING THE BIRTH PERSPECTIVE TO REFLECT ON WEIRD-NESS IN HCI**
At the beginning of the Fall 2021 quarter, my cohort was tasked with creating a perspective to frame a course discussion. Considering my interest in Black maternal health, I decided to explore the birth perspective. This perspective reflects a lifecycle of experiences—whether personal, profes-

Figure 1. The author created a framework from the birth perspective to reflect on her lifecycle of personal, professional, or intellectual experiences.
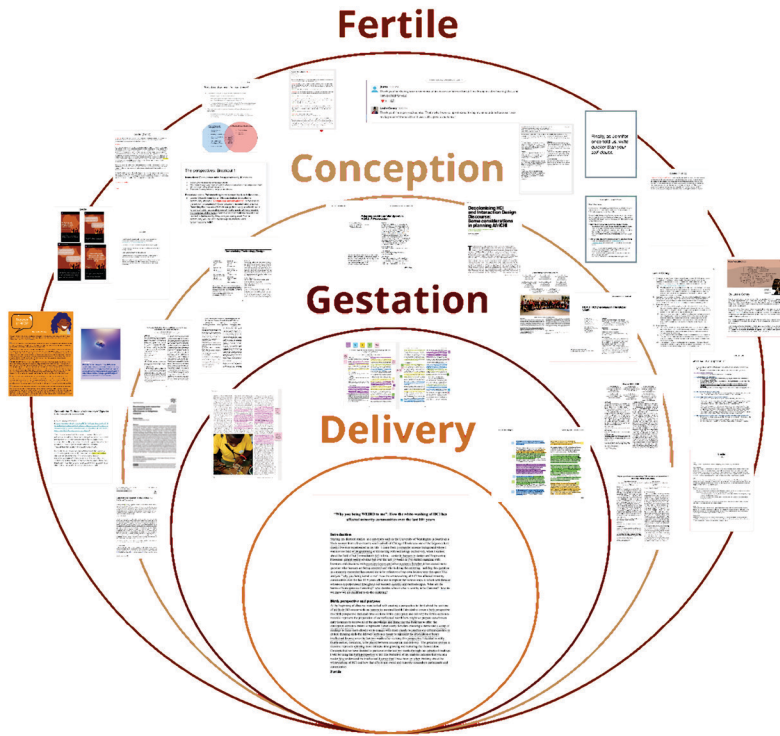
The Fertile ring depicts all her class reflections, assignments, and activities. The Conception ring depicts the list of 11 readings she initially started out with. The Gestation ring depicts the annotations of three out of five papers used for deep analysis. The Delivery ring depicts a draft of this final analysis.

sional, or intellectual—and includes three stages: Fertile, Conception, and Delivery. The Fertile stage is meant to represent the preparation of what I call an "intellectual womb." I thought to myself, how might I prepare myself, as an early scholar, to receive and know when to reject all of the knowledge and opportunity that this field has to offer. The Conception stage is meant to represent me having to define a theme I wanted to explore for this writing and a list of readings to engage more closely with my chosen theme. The Delivery stage is meant to represent the articulation of my intellectual journey over the course of my first quarter. After revisiting this perspective, I decided to add a fourth stage, Gestation, to be placed between Conception and Delivery. The Gestation stage is meant to represent spending more intimate time growing and nurturing the themes, ideas, and concepts that I have decided to pursue during my first quarter through a subset of my reading list. I

will be using this birth perspective to tell the narrative of my reflections in hopes that you, as a reader, may understand the intellectual journey that I have been on when thinking about the WEIRD-ness of HCI and how it affects non-WEIRD and minority researchers, participants, and communities. (See Figure 1).

Fertile. This stage allowed me to prepare my intellectual womb

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through a series of reflections, dialogues, assignments, and activities. These interactions allowed me to exercise my critical thinking muscle when it came to the understandability, believability/trustworthiness, significance, and ethics/responsibility (UBaSE) of literature produced in HCI. (To learn more about the UBaSE framework, please see Dr. Jennifer Turns' work.) During this stage, I experienced a lot of imposter syndrome as a minority early scholar. It was very difficult for me to be confident in my critiques of literature and the trustworthiness of research being conducted in the field. By the end of this process, I grew to understand that my new and diverse perspective brings a fresh lens to the field and allows me to explore not only unanswered questions, but also unquestioned answers. This stage gave me the skills I needed to engage more intimately with HCI literature and form critical thoughts and opinions around the knowledge I received.

Conception. Choosing the readings I wanted to focus on more closely in this stage was very difficult. This was my first time searching for readings involving this theme, and at one point in the quarter, it felt like I had way more readings that I was interested in than time to read them. I appreciate the opportunity to have both a large list and a smaller subset to focus on for the purposes of this analysis. For the papers that I did not engage with for this analysis, I plan to do a deep dive into them in the future now that I have thought more critically about how WEIRD HCI is and how that affects minority communities, and even myself as a minority researcher.

Gestation. In this stage, I had the opportunity to engage with my subset of readings more intimately. I not only learned to think critically about research, but also to think critically about my own intentions and actions as a researcher in HCI. I decided to code each of the five papers in my subset using UBaSE. I found it was a lot easier to digest the papers in this manner. As an exercise, I highlighted sentences in the paper based on what UBaSE category they fell in and made

comments using sticky notes in the margins. A lot of these comments caused me to pause and reflect on questions that I have about the field, about research practices, and about how I plan to conduct myself as a scholar in this space moving forward. This intimacy made me feel like I was not only a student, but a critical part in absorbing and disseminating research in the field. I also realized my positionality plays a huge role in what I decided to focus on, question, or be more critical about while reading. This stage also caused me to think more deeply about the part my positionality plays in my role as a student, in my work as a researcher, and in my life as a person.

Delivery. As I was connecting more deeply with my five chosen readings, I posed a lot of questions that were either meant to serve as reflection questions or as conversation starters when discussing the body of work I engaged with throughout the quarter. I decided that sharing these questions and my personal answers were the most fitting way to show my growth as an academic scholar in my first quarter. I've had some time to think deeply about these questions and in no way, shape, or form are my answers today my answers forever. I would hope that with any body of work, including this one, my thoughts, comments, and responses to these questions will grow and evolve as I grow and evolve as a person and researcher. Here are 11 questions, categorized by UBaSE, around my current thoughts and feelings that display my critical engagement with my chosen five readings [2–6].

UNDERSTANDABILITY

Q1: How might I be mindful of the power relations embedded in ways of knowing when conducting my own research?

A: After learning more about epistemology in my first quarter, I have gained a deep interest in understanding how HCI values Indigenous and non-WEIRD ways of knowing or knowledge production. In order to be mindful of the power relations embedded in epistemology, I must continue to read literature and engage

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with scholars who are more familiar with the theory. It is important to acknowledge there are non-WEIRD and Indigenous ways of knowing that are not recognized as valid or reliable when conducting research. My goal is to make invisible ways of knowing visible through my work with minority and Indigenous communities. I also have to check my own privilege as an educated person when creating and cultivating spaces for knowledge production to ensure I do not sustain existing power relations in research.

BELIEVABILITY/TRUSTWORTHINESS

Q2: How does the plurality of people involved in research (researchers and participants) affect the trustworthiness of research?

A: This is a question that I have struggled with throughout the quarter. I think it is very difficult to account for the plurality of people, but in my opinion, that is the beauty of this experience. Having the opportunity to learn more about the different experiences and identities of your research colleagues and communities, can not only be beneficial in your research but also transformative in your personal life. I believe this intersectionality is difficult to account for when thinking about bias. How can we truly be sure that we have checked all of our biases if our identities and experiences are ever evolving? I would love to read more literature that explores this theme. The plurality of people causes me to think that

we as a field should be focusing on how the centering of people can and should be heterogeneous. When we subconsciously or consciously focus on homogeneous human centeredness, it leaves room for mistrust in research work and/or findings.

Q3: How might we be more intentional about including local experts/community partners as a part of research teams?

A: It is crucial to include local experts/community partners when conducting research in minority communities. These local experts and community partners have preexisting relationships and understandings of the community in which you wish to engage with. Having someone in their position could be beneficial to understanding how your research questions, study design, and methodologies must be adjusted to accommodate the people you are working with. I've found doing your own research on local leaders, partners, and grassroot organizers who are already doing work in the community could be helpful in your process of connecting with local people for your research team and project. One thing I want to make clear is that this relationship with local community members should always be mutually beneficial. This should not be a relationship that embodies research's extractive nature. Just as much as these community members may be able to help you, you as a researcher should be thinking critically about how you may also help these people with the work they are doing in the community.

Q4: What does it mean to be intentional when collaborating with minority communities in research?

A: First, "when collaborating with" is a very intentional choice of words rather than saying "when conducting research for." "When collaborating with" suggests participants should be thought of as not only participants, but collaborators, co-creators, and even stakeholders. Even the intentionality in the way researchers talk about working with minority communities is extremely important. We must practice "forward thoughtfulness," which is a concept that was created in our Empirical Traditions

course fall quarter. Forward thoughtfulness, to me, is the idea that we should not only be ethical because we have to be as researchers, but we should also be hospitable and empathetic because we all are humans first and all deserve to be treated with respect and understanding.

SIGNIFICANCE

Q5: How might we encourage eclectic epistemology when working with minority populations?

A: I think of eclectic epistemology as heterogeneous, embracive knowledge production. In order to encourage this very comprehensive way of knowledge production, we must be open to ways of knowing that are not as customary in HCI or even customary in our own personal lives. Our job as researchers is not to control the narrative, but to gather the words for the narrative from the people and construct that narrative in a way that is representative of the people. When we release control over how a research study or data is "supposed to be," we allow our research to emerge in its most natural form. Another way to think about eclectic epistemology is the creation of non-conventional translational artifacts. If we want to translate research for minority communities, we have to create artifacts that will disseminate successfully within these communities using familiar language/jargon, platforms/media, and people.

ETHICS/RESPONSIBILITY

Q6: As minority researchers, how might we be responsible in our relatedness?

A: Before my readings, I hadn't thought about how I could conduct myself irresponsibly when working with a minority group, which I believe I relate to as a minority myself. There was a good point in one of the papers [3] about acknowledging the fact that identity is socially and culturally constructed, meaning the way I feel related to a person may not be mutual. I understand how that could affect the relationship between researcher and participant or community and moving forward I want to practice thinking about relatedness in a holistic

and responsible manner. Taking the time to understand people as they see themselves will be crucial to my work as a researcher. I hope other minority researchers who come across this question also give thought to how they can be responsible in their relatedness.

Q7: What are the harms of failing to consider the sustainability of research interventions and artifacts, specifically for HCI4D (development) work?

A: One of the papers I read [2] talked about the adverse effects that a community faced when an intervention was removed from the community due to the study ending. I believe it is very irresponsible to introduce interventions or artifacts to a community, especially a minority or underserved one, with the sole intention of producing knowledge for the academic realm. Sustainability should be considered and incorporated into our study design if we want to uphold our responsibilities as ethical researchers.

Q8: What can we, those already in HCI, do to ensure we are prepared to welcome and sustain non-WEIRD and minority researchers and participants?

A: "How WEIRD is CHI" [5] is one of the first papers I was able to engage with throughout this process. I really enjoyed reading the paper and I appreciate its sentiment. But it caused me to wonder if this call to action for diversifying HCI is premature in nature and even irresponsible. Before

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we consider diversifying our field through non-WEIRD and minority researchers, participants, and research, we must first prepare our people, systems, methodologies, and ways of knowing for welcoming non-WEIRD and minority perspectives, experiences, and understandings. There is much work to be done to successfully and intentionally integrate diverse people and research into our field, and I think the first step is challenging our preparedness for this change as a field. (Check out this interactive vignette[1] I created as a response to this question for an assignment.)

Q9: How do you do your due diligence as a researcher to ensure your team's safety without perpetuating stereotypes in minority and developing communities?

A: As a minority, I understand what it means to be judged by outward appearances, stereotypes, and another person's unresolved internal conflicts. As we venture out into minority and developing communities, it is important that we stick with the facts when thinking about the safety considerations of a research study in specific communities. We do not need to further ostracize these groups by entering into relationships and/or their communities with fear or mistrust because of preconceived notions. Comfortability in research should be mutual. Not only should we be comfortable and safe in the spaces we decide to conduct research, but collaborators and research participants should also feel comfortable and safe when welcoming researchers into their mental, intellectual, emotional, and/or physical space for the purposes of research. The end goal should always be to treat people like people.

Q10: How do we rid HCI of the "master narrative" [4] when thinking about, exploring, and collaborating with minority communities?

A: Acknowledging that there is a "master narrative" ingrained in our practices, ways of knowing, education system, and so on is the first step to understanding the way in which society portrays and treats minority communities. As research-

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1 https://bit.ly/coneybeneaththesurface

ers eager to learn more about these communities, it is our responsibility to understand the history of these communities before any interaction to minimize, or hopefully completely avoid, unnecessary epistemic burden for minority researchers and participants. It is also important for us to be confident and steadfast in correcting language, thinking, and systems in HCI that further the agenda of a "master narrative."

Q11: How might the pressure of career advancement cause western researchers to miss out on valuable relationships with non-western researchers and communities?

A: If we want to truly call ourselves human-centered, the value of our research should be placed in the relationships and impact created and fostered through our work. I also think this is a great question to start reflecting on toxic work culture in western regions. Meaningful work takes time, patience, and grace. Why do milestones for "career advancement" completely contradict the very things needed to stay true to our human-centeredness? As an early scholar, I originally was caught up in the idea of pushing publications and stacking citations, but now what I personally want for my own research career is to create and co-create impactful research solutions, interventions, and relationships.

CALL TO REFLECT

Over the fall quarter, having the opportunity to engage deeply with five readings focused on this theme of WEIRD-ness and HCI has caused me to constantly be in modes of reflection. I invite you to also reflect not only on the 11 questions presented herein, but also on three other questions. Please feel free to connect with me to engage in dialogue around any of the questions or thoughts shared throughout this writing. My hope is to practice sharing my thoughts and opinions as well as practice articulating evolving thoughts and opinions as I continue to learn and grow in my doctoral program.

Reflection questions:

1. How does the believability of HCI pedagogies affect a student's

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learning experience? Have we questioned the believability of our pedagogies?

2. How might we include participants in the ethical framing of research in their community?

3. What are you doing or what can you be doing to prepare our field for the diversity it so desperately needs? What does preparation look like in your mind?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while I love the pivot I've made from computer science to human centered design and engineering, I understand there is critical work to be done. These readings, questions, and responses have forged a new way of thinking, understanding, and interaction for me. I appreciate the opportunity to not only think critically about the field and its literature, but to also think critically about how my space and time in this field will be spent and what impression it will have on my peers and communities globally. The fact that this specific intellectual journey is just the beginning makes me extremely excited about my pursuit of doctoral studies. This class and project have boosted my confidence immensely when it comes to engaging with, thinking critically about, and speaking on literature in HCI. I want this document to be an artifact of who I am at the end of quarter one and a precursor to who I have the potential to be by the time the world knows me as Dr. Leslie Coney. Again, I am more than excited to further engage in conversations regarding the themes, questions,

and opinions shared in this writing. I believe my community will be an integral part of my success in graduate school, and if you've made it this far in the article, you are now a part of that community.

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Biography

Leslie Coney is a first year Ph.D. student at the University of Washington in human centered design and engineering [HCDE]. She is a Chicago native and recent graduate of Howard University, a historically Black university [HBCU], with a B.S. in computer science. Coney's current research interests are in Black maternal health and health equity. She wants to use design and technology to support and uplift Black birthing people during pregnancy and postpartum through community and asset-based research. Her career aspirations are to own a non-profit or business as a furtherance of her dissertation work and teach human centered design at an HBCU.