



SITUATEDNESS

Hannah Guo, Jenny Yuan



Lucy Suchman

- Professor Emeritus of Anthropology of Science and Technology at Lancaster University. Now based in Canada
- Known for her work at Xerox PARC in 1980's & 1990's, where she was the Principal Scientist and manager of the *Work Practice and Technology* group
- At Xerox PARC, she conducted an influential study on her peers struggling to use a copy machine

Situated Actions – Key Points

Thomas Gladwin (1964) has written a brilliant article contrasting the method by which the Trukese navigate the open sea, with that by which Europeans navigate. He points out that the European navigator begins with a plan – a course – which he has charted according to certain universal principles, and he carries out his voyage by relating his every move to that plan. His effort throughout his voyage is directed to remaining “on course.” If unexpected events occur, he must first alter the plan, then respond accordingly. The Trukese navigator begins with an objective rather than a plan. He sets off toward the objective and responds to conditions as they arise in an *ad hoc* fashion. He utilizes information provided by the wind, the waves, the tide and current, the fauna, the stars, the clouds, the sound of the water on the side of the boat, and he steers accordingly. His effort is directed to doing whatever is necessary to reach the objective. If asked, he can point to his objective at any moment, but he cannot describe his course. (Berreman 1966, p. 347)

- Explores the nature of purposeful human action (situated actions vs plans)
- All actions, while seemingly planned, are actually situated = dependent on and shaped by circumstances. Ad hoc and rely on contextual info.
- Traditional cognitive science & social science models rely on plans to understand human action
- Calls for a shift in focus from our current structures of considering action to situated action

Situated Actions

Question 1

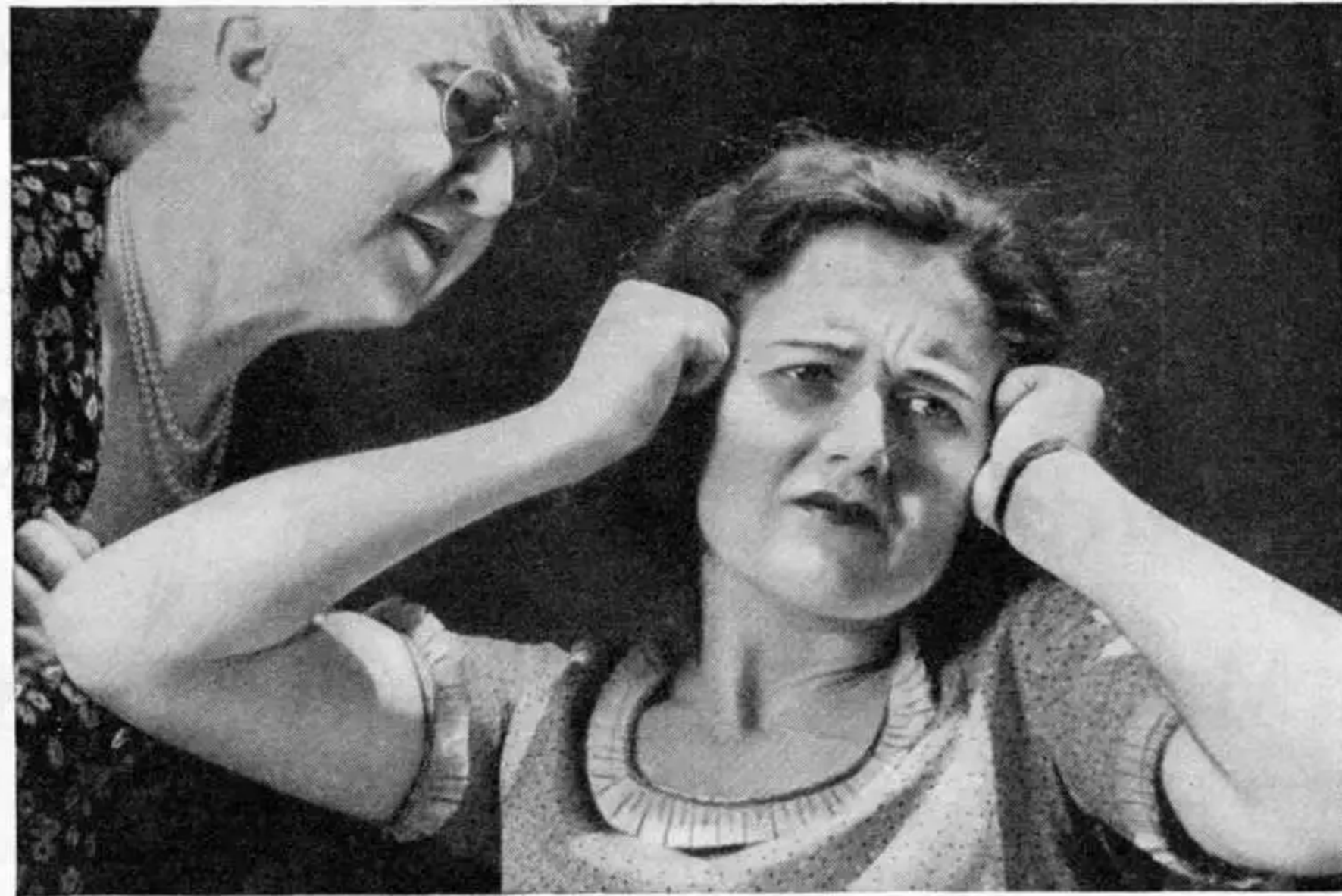
How do you feel the concept of situated actions relate to HCI? In what ways can we challenge for the better our assumptions for how computers and programs are built?

Question 2

Suchman uses the example of language, being an indexical system, as example for situated actions in the real world. What are some other examples you can think of that are similarly situated? How do these relate to how we think about machines and code?

Question 3

How do you think we can learn from the Trukese way of navigation as it pertains to how and why we build products with code?

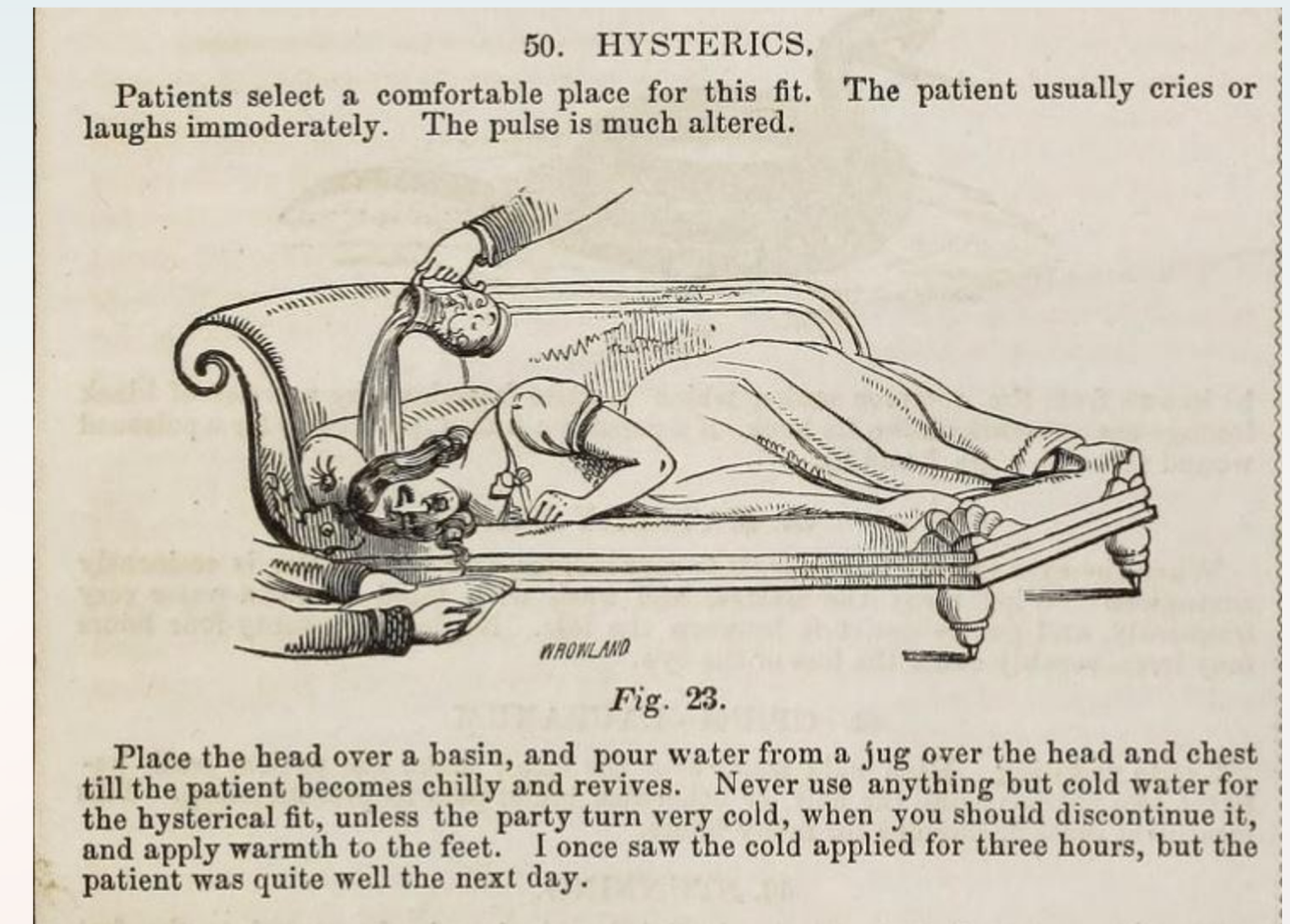


These Hysterical Women

- Can you think of a historical example of knowledge that was once considered “objective science,” but later turned out to be shaped by patriarchal or gender-biased perspectives?
- How does admitting the limits of our perspective makes science weaker or stronger?

3min

- Medicine (the “defective male” model): For centuries, Western medicine followed Aristotle’s view that women were essentially “defective men.” Anatomy and physiology were studied primarily on male bodies, and women’s health was treated as a deviation rather than its own subject. Even into the 20th century, most clinical trials excluded women, meaning drugs were tested only on men but prescribed to everyone.
- Psychology: Freud’s diagnosis of “hysteria,” which pathologized women’s emotions, reflected patriarchal attitudes more than objective science.



Questions

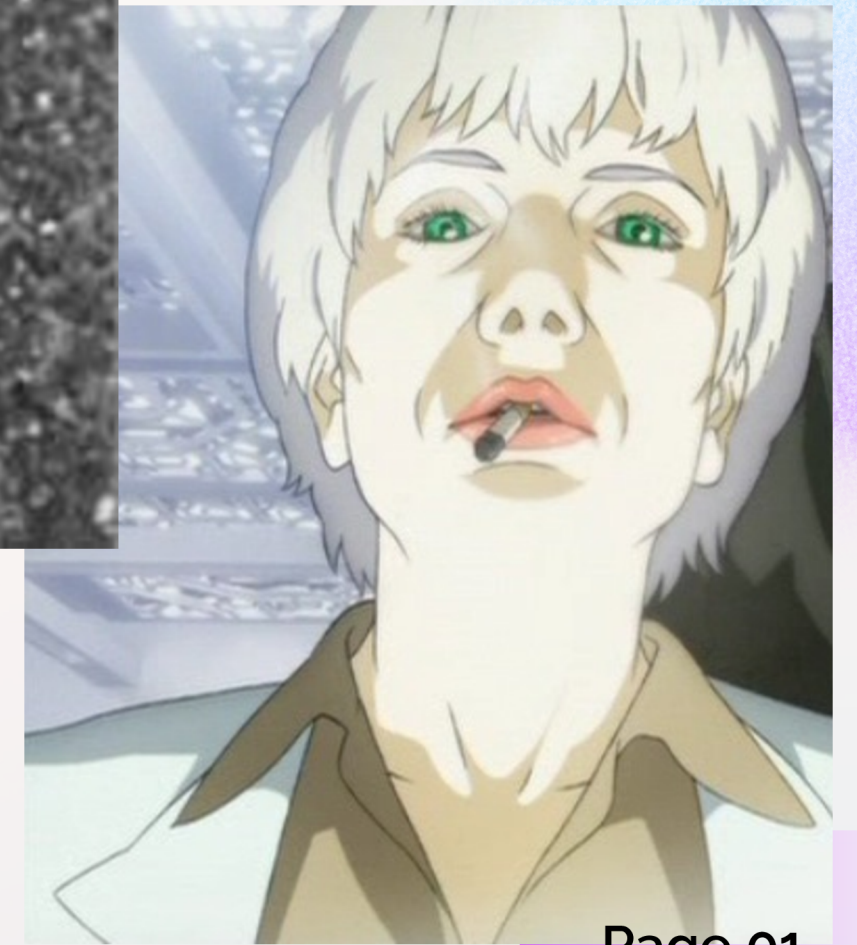
Donna Haraway

Born: 1944, Denver, CO

Ph.D.: Biology, Yale (1972)

Professor Emerita: History of
Consciousness & Feminist Studies,
UC Santa Cruz

Fields: Feminist theory, science &
technology studies (STS), animal
studies, cultural criticism



Situated Knowledges – Key Points

- Main Argument:
 - Argues that all knowledge is situated — it comes from a particular perspective, position, and context.
 - Moves beyond relativism: not “anything goes,” but knowledge is strong because it acknowledges its limits and accountability.
- Critique of Objectivity:
 - Traditional science claims to be detached and apolitical, but this “god trick” hides bias (race, gender, culture).
- Partial Perspective:
 - Emphasizes partial, located perspectives as more honest and reliable than false universality.
- Feminist Science Studies:
 - Feminism provides tools for critiquing bias and reclaiming accountability in science.
 - Calls for “feminist objectivity” → knowing from somewhere, not pretending to know from nowhere.
- Epistemology as Politics:
 - How we produce knowledge is always political and ethical. Advocates coalition across differences, building knowledge through dialogue of multiple situated perspectives.

Question 02

5 min

Beyond Relativism

- Haraway rejects both total relativism (“anything goes”) and universal objectivity.
- Question: Is there a risk that emphasizing partial perspectives could fragment knowledge too much? How can multiple perspectives come together to form something reliable?

Question 03

If all knowledge is partial and situated, how should that change the way we think about technologies that claim to be universal solutions — whether it's AI, medicine, or even everyday tools?

Questions

Q1

Where do you stand on the cognition vs situation debate, i.e. is human behaviour driven by cognition (stable traits) or situation (circumstances)?

Q2

Referring to Karen Hao's talk: the old paradigm saw rules-dominant programs; now, we see data&statistical-dominant programs. If rule-based programs aren't situated, do we find statistical models to be situated? Why or why not, and if not, what would a situated paradigm look like?

Q3

Oftentimes, it is difficult to convey the experience of "being human." How can we do this in our programs and paradigms without evoking racial, gender, and class, among other types of stereotypes?

Situatedness Questions

**THANK
YOU**
