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## Reconfiguring the Social Scientist: Shifting From Telling Designers What to Do to Getting More Involved

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The development of computer systems may be viewed as a struggle to configure the user. For example, Woolgar (1993) described an ethnographic study of a computer company, where the architects of a new computer system (i.e., the hardware and product engineers, project managers, salespersons, technical support, and others) spent considerable time discussing and arguing over who the new user of the system would be and what kinds of functionality would be appropriate for them. Moreover, Woolgar pointed out that it was the decisions made about the hypothetical user that subsequently became embodied in the new system. In this sense, the user has a *configured* relationship with the system, whereby only certain types of interaction are possible.

This chapter aims to extend the notion of the struggle to configure the user by presenting a critique of the struggle by the social scientist to contribute to the process of system design and use. In contrast to the various company architects, who are directly involved in developing computer systems that configure the user, social scientists (and others)<sup>1</sup> have largely channeled their efforts through more indirect means. In particular, a vast body of prescriptive knowledge has been constructed that is intended to equip designers more appropriately so they can better configure the user than through their existing repertoire of means. The main kinds of knowledge that have been offered include a melee of

<sup>1</sup>The term *social scientist* is used loosely here, and refers to academic researchers, ranging from cognitive psychologists to ethnomethodologists, who are involved in applying theories and methods, from their respective fields, to system design.

