

# HOW CAN WE CRITICALLY & CREATIVELY ENGAGE WITH POWER RELATIONS IN COLLABORATIVE DESIGN RESEARCH?

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## ABSTRACT

This workshop explores power relations in collaborative design research. As co-creation is becoming more established and even something of a holy grail, it is important to revisit and further understandings of, for example, the limits to democracy in collaborative research and conflicting agendas. The workshop draws on ongoing research that explores housing needs and solutions at the intersection of an ageing population, students and migrants, and that engages multiple stakeholder groups in collaborative processes. The proposed workshop will stage an enactment of the research design, from invitation to analysis, with the workshop participants playing the different roles in the process. This will enable us, collaboratively, to critically and creatively engage with some concrete interfaces to power negotiations as well as the meta level of power dynamics in collaborative research. We will enrich our understandings of power relations by engaging with indigenous thinking, expressed as decolonizing methodologies.

## INTRODUCTION

As we, with the best of intentions, try to open up for more voices in design research, are we making promises we can't keep, cementing power hierarchies we sought to break, or even creating new abuses of power?

This workshop answers to the call for presentation of proposed tools and methods that are in need of comments and experimental uptake by participants.

The workshop explores power relations that are produced during collaborative design research processes and, at a meta level, power relations that enable and may be a result of collaborative design research. Concretely, this concerns the power relations between the humans involved, such as the researchers/facilitators and the co-investigators. These relations are connected to another level, concerning the power relations between different understandings and practices of world-making and knowledge making.

We ask: how can design research methods and social science methods, and the world-making relations they are part of producing, generatively be troubled through actively engaging with indigenous thinking expressed, for example, as decolonizing methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012)?

The aim of the workshop is to, in hands-on ways, as outlined below, explore, discuss and reflect with our design research colleagues on concerns that have emerged around the distribution of power in the planning and initial inquiries of a specific research and development project. Our more overarching aim is to explore a process for creatively and critically, retrospectively and prospectively, engaging with power relations in collaborative design research.

## DESIGN RESEARCH POSITIONING

This research is situated in the field of metadesign, an overarching design, design to prompt synergy in transdisciplinary collaboration, and design of seeds for change. (See e.g. Giaccardi 2005; Wood 2007; Tham et al 2016). Ontologically and epistemologically the work is much indebted to action research, and particularly the notions of conducting research *with* rather than *on* people, and of an extended epistemology where knowing takes place through theory, practice, experience and articulation. (See e.g. Heron 1996) Naturally, the work follows the rich tradition of participatory design and design research (e.g. Robertson and Simonsen 2012; Ehn et al 2014; Binder et al 2015; Lindström and Ståhl 2016). The particular need for engaging a plurality of voices in futures narratives draws on work by futurist and Islamic scholar Sardar (Sardar 1999; Tham 2014). The researchers are also practitioners of design/architecture.

## THE SPECIFIC PROJECT

The research and development project BOOST explores housing needs and solutions at the intersection of students, an ageing population and migrants, in the context of sustainability. The project constitutes a three-year collaboration between researchers in the realms of design and sustainability, architecture, business model innovation, and wood and glass technology. Our specific part, which has run for six months, is to generate nuanced understandings of the different audiences' respective needs of housing; identify challenges and opportunities at the intersection of needs; and to develop scenarios and guidelines for use by citizens, building sector and policy makers. In order to achieve this, we are using qualitative interviews with representatives for the different audiences and other relevant stakeholders; smaller focus groups with one section of the audiences at a time; and collaborative workshops with the mixed audiences: ageing population, students, migrants, as well as representatives of the building sector, such as architects. It is these collaborative workshops that we use as a point of departure when we critically and creatively engage with power relations of collaborative design research in the workshop proposed here. Here follow two examples of areas of tensions in power relations that we have identified in the research process to date.

### THE IDENTIFICATION OF TARGET AUDIENCES

The focus on an ageing population, students and migrants came out of early discussions in the preparation for the bid for external funding. Corresponding with needs identified at international and regional/local levels, this seemed uncontroversial, beneficial and sound. Yet, in practice both the naming of the respective groups, and creating a cluster of them has raised a series of power related questions for us.

The first concerns the potential homogenisation of a group, conceptually and pragmatically by giving it a

single label. In reality, of course, the groupings are artificial constructions, each defined group is heterogeneous, and there are many overlaps between the groups. The groups are an arbitrary demarcation, useful for the purpose of receiving funding, and perhaps for pointing out some specific needs to particular stakeholders, but possibly counter-productive in terms of setting up a genuinely open exploration. We have chosen to speak of the rationale for this cluster as that the groups share experience of transience in their housing paths, as well as having limited power over the next step of their housing journey. This has eliminated the, to us, problematic word 'vulnerable' from the rationale. We felt that any such judgement could hinder a genuine collaboration between us and the audiences, as well as the perception of the groups' power and agency by us, the individuals of the groups themselves, and by a surrounding society. Indeed, the interviews preceding the collaborative workshops immediately led to a further problematizing of the vocabulary, and to including participants' self-labelling in the continuous work. We also enter the collaborative research space as 'people who dwell' ourselves (with a degree of experience from transient accommodation and a limited power over the next step of our housing journey). The question of assuming pre-defined groups rather than studying relations that emerge, has alerted us to the challenges of drawing on other sciences (as in this case the social sciences' frequent employment of groups) and, certainly without full awareness of their ontologies and epistemologies, translating their methods and approaches into new contexts.

### SETTING AGENDAS FOR COLLABORATIVE WORK

In his work on peace building, Lederach (1997) has identified the problem of problem identification at the level of the issue over relationships and processes. (See also Tham 2014 for design contextualisation.) Cease fire is a significant point in time, but peace requires long term commitments to, for example, education, health, rebuilding of infrastructure, grieving process, the rebuilding of severed relationships. Designers will be very familiar with tension between concrete results and a proper exploration of needs in the collaboration between the designer and client. In this project we are negotiating a series of expectations. The technical and business model researchers are hoping for very concrete results to build into their respective work. The funders are, ultimately, hoping for impact in terms of economic growth and increased social and environmental sustainability. We ourselves, are hoping to extend our understanding of design research, to make good contributions to knowledge, and to sustainability, and to have an enjoyable time. Into this already diverse landscape of expectations and hopes, we invite students, pensioners, migrants. What are their hopes and expectations? How can we avoid raising hopes that are unrealistic? How can we work with the fact that we have more power over the agenda? What constitutes genuine informed consent in collaborative research that

also purports to be transformative? For us it has been helpful to draw on the notion of inventive problem making (Lury and Wakeford 2012), to (even in consideration of the funding body) build a certain resilience to conventional understandings of design as solutions oriented. Perspectives from indigenous people, particularly as framed in decolonising methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012), have supported our understandings of the many temporalities present in collaborative design research, and to evaluate the methods we use in more depth as regard what solutions or problems they help us to create. They have also helped us to presence the enormity of our paradigm blindness in, for example, the context of a Western hegemony.

#### DISCUSSION

The tensions that we have identified are by no means new or unique. A key foundation of action oriented research, doing research *with* rather than *on* people, and adjacent thinking and practice in design research, purports to break understood hierarchies between the researcher and the researched, but in practice much can go wrong. There is the risk of pseudo participation, where collaborative processes are used to legitimise top down decision making. There is the risk of raising hopes of changed lives, when actually the researchers have very limited scope, or even limited interest, to affect change. As co-creation as notion and practice is becoming more established and even something of a holy grail – to spur innovation, citizen engagement, sustainability; it is even more important to revisit, and further understandings of, for example, the limits to democracy in collaborative research, and of conflicting agendas.

We are convinced that “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of collaboration *is* essential in sustainability endeavours. This means that we need to bring critical and creative engagement with the awkwardness, messiness, complexity of power relations in collaborative work profoundly into the design research practice and agenda.

#### WORKSHOP OUTLINE

The proposed workshop is three hours long, and can fit a maximum of twenty-five participants.

#### PREPARATION

Participants are invited to read the introduction to Decolonizing Methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

#### WORKSHOP PHASE 1: INTRODUCTION (45 minutes)

Participants will be asked to make a postcard that introduces them and simultaneously shows an ‘itchy’ experience of power relations in collaborative research. Introduction to metadesign, decolonizing methodologies and the specific research project we are drawing on. Introduction to the session.

#### WORKSHOP PHASE 2: ENACTMENT (90 minutes)

Enactment of the research process, from planning collaborative workshops to post workshop analysis.

- a) Participants are given roles to play in this process and specific notes about their respective parts.
- b) The process is enacted during a period of twenty minutes, and filmed.
- c) We watch the film and discuss power relations first at the concrete level of the actual process, and secondly, the meta level, including wider ontological and epistemological conditions, temporalities and networks of stakeholders.
- d) We identify and map possible intervention points and actions to redistribute power.
- e) Participants are given new roles to play - perhaps the cast is extended.
- f) We reenact the process, using the new ‘script’.

#### WORKSHOP PHASE 3: DISCUSSION (45 minutes)

We discuss the experience of engaging with collaborative research in this way, and how insight can be fed into a larger design research community.

The approaches used in the enactment draw on constellation work (see e.g. Wade 2004) and understandings of dynamic scripting and rescripting of systems from actor network theory (Latour 2005).

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