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Heroic Journeys: on design for empowerment and narratives of social change

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Abstract

Can empowerment be designed? Designers often claim to empower the people and communities they work with, yet there is little critical discourse on how empowerment is defined, facilitated and achieved in social design projects. This paper draws on social and political theories to redefine empowerment within design for social change, positioning it as a political activity to address power imbalances and foster individual and collective potential. To guide best practices in design-led interventions, we present four Design for Empowerment (DfE) principles grounded in Empowerment Theory and introduce Heroic Journeys, a conceptual framework co-created with community organisers and social designers through participatory design workshops. This approach facilitates the implementation of power analysis and narrative techniques to uncover diverse stories of change, advocating for design practices that are transformative, inclusive, and responsive to the contextual complexities of design for social change projects.

Keywords: Design for empowerment, Power analysis, Change narratives, Design projects

Introduction

Empowerment is a foundational concept in design for social change, where projects aim to co-create solutions to social issues, reduce inequalities, and enhance quality of life. These projects are often considered vehicles for individual and collective empowerment, fostering civic leadership and broader participation in public life (Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2010; Noel, 2023; DiSalvo, 2012).

However, while all social change work is inherently political, not all is genuinely empowering. The design literature reflects this disparity, with some instances where empowerment is grounded in political theories of change, particularly those centred on emancipation and social justice (Rezai & Erlhoff 2021), contrasted with others where the term ‘empowerment’ is used superficially (Lundmark & Jonsson 2021; Volpi et al. 2024), lacking thorough analysis of its achievement (Zamenopoulos et al., 2021; Avelino, 2021), or where underlying design assumptions and biases, such as those related to gender norms, social practices and the interconnected dimensions of power and tensions that emerge with ‘expert design’ in community settings are not openly addressed (Mazé, 2019; Costanza-Chock, 2020). When these factors are overlooked, we risk unintended consequences such as the reinforcement of existing power structures – including designers’ privilege and power to shape society (Santamaria, 2023) – that stem from well-meaning but flawed social design interventions, and, at its worst, resulting in project failure (Avelino & Wittmayer 2016).

Moreover, the planning and reporting of empowerment often fail to reflect its complex developmental and political nature (Avelino, 2021). For instance, frameworks like the Theory of Change, widely adopted in design for social change (Simeone et al., 2023), tend to perpetuate hegemonic positions by fixing agreements, expectations, and outcomes rather than functioning as adaptive tools for ongoing reflection. As Mulgan (2023) highlights, the term ‘theory’ itself can be alienating in specific social design contexts, evidencing issues of control and exclusion. While such tools favoured in design projects may satisfy management and funders’ metrics, they are frequently disconnected from empowerment’s core

principles and language (Avelino, 2021). There is a critical need for greater awareness, transparency, and accountability regarding how empowerment agendas are assumed in social design projects, what kind of empowerment is being supported, and how the strategies to facilitate design-led empowerment have emerged.

In this paper, we revitalise the discourse on empowerment in design for social change, placing its inherently political nature at the forefront. We advocate for a deliberate, open and strategic positioning when projects aim to foster and articulate empowerment through design, emphasising the importance of adopting empowerment constructs and language when planning, evaluating, and reporting on empowerment within and across disciplines and practices.

First, we briefly present the historical roots of empowerment theory and its fundamental principles. We review foundational social and political theory concepts, which are being adopted for empowerment research and practice in community development and organising. Second, we explore various manifestations of empowerment in design, using examples from seminal politically engaged design literature. The purpose is to problematise understandings and practices of empowerment in design and discuss correlations to broader literature. Third, we propose four 'design for empowerment' principles for our literature analysis. Last, we present 'Heroic Journeys', a conceptual framework for implementing these principles within social design projects. The framework was co-developed with designers and community organisers through three participatory workshops to create common ground between design and other disciplines focused on social transformation and change.

In sum, we propose a novel design for empowerment approach that positions social design as a form of *political activity focused on empowerment processes*, understood as journeys of transcendence (of the psychological and systemic barriers) implied in human development, the process of expanding people's freedoms and opportunities, improving their well-being, and enabling them to lead fulfilling lives.

On power and empowerment

The broader literature from community psychology, political theory and psychology offers conceptualisations and language on empowerment that can inform social design.

Empowerment theory

The concept of empowerment has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly within discourses of oppression and emancipation (e.g. Alinsky 1971; Freire 1971). Seen as vital to social justice, empowerment enhances autonomy and self-determination by fostering self-efficacy, supportive relationships and advocacy for individual and collective interests. This made it a focal point for rights and environmental activists, policymakers and the helping professions as a post-modern approach to challenging the status quo. These conceptualisations and ideas also influenced design (e.g., Papanek, 1971). In the 1980s, Julian Rappaport (1987) formalised the concept, defining empowerment as a process by which individuals, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their lives. Community psychology adopted it as a central tenet, emphasising power distribution and gaining control through collective action and community engagement. The 1990s and 2000s saw the concept broadened by scholars like John Friedmann and Robert Chambers, who incorporated political and economic dimensions, highlighting the role of structural changes and participatory methods (1992). Feminist scholars, including Patricia Hill Collins (2000), introduced intersectionality, exploring how overlapping systems of oppression (e.g., race, gender, class) impact individuals' experiences of power and empowerment. Marc Zimmerman (2000) further advanced the

understanding of empowerment as a values-based, structured approach with the formulation of Empowerment Theory, comprising the following fundamental principles:

1. *Enhancing possibilities*: Empowerment expands individuals' and communities' capacity to take action and effect change. An increase in personal, interpersonal, and political power.
2. *Community focus*: Where mediating structures, like community organisations, play a critical role in facilitating empowerment.
3. *Reflexivity*: Developing a critical awareness of personal values and the socio-political environment, understanding and shifting power dynamics to gain equity and justice.
4. *Emphasis on language and narratives*: Personal and communal narratives are potent resources. Empowerment-oriented language can shift perspectives, revealing fresh solutions.
5. *Operative principle*: Fostering self-efficacy and community change, promoting environments where individuals feel capable and supported in action.

Further, Zimmerman (2000) usefully organised empowerment processes and outcomes at three levels: individual, organisational and community (Table 1). Thus, Empowerment Theory provides a robust framework for organising knowledge, ensuring its relevance beyond temporary trends (Rappaport, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). Consequently, it has been widely adopted across many disciplines, including community organising (Speer & Hughey, 1995), due to its flexibility for application (Joseph 2020).

Table 1: Empowerment levels of analysis (Zimmerman, 2000).

Levels of analysis	Process (“empowering”)	Outcome (“empowered”)
Individual	Learning decision-making skills	Sense of control
	Managing resources	Critical awareness
	Working with others	Participatory behaviours
Organisational	Opportunities to take part in decision-making	Effectively compete for resources
	Shared responsibilities	Networking with other organisations
	Shared leadership	Policy influence
Community	Access to resources	Organisational coalitions
	Open government structure	Pluralistic leadership
	Tolerance for diversity	Residents’ participatory skills

Power analysis

Empowerment Theory holds that power is dynamic and expandable (Rappaport, 1987). Therefore, identifying power dynamics within a specific context is essential both before and during interventions aimed at redistributing or shifting power. In this section, we review and synthesise key theoretical concepts adopted by disciplines focused on social change as a foundation for conducting effective power analysis.

Power, a complex and historically contested concept, is difficult to define. More recently, political theorists such as Lukes (2005), Haugaard (2021) and Gaventa (2021) have argued that it is more beneficial to integrate theories into ‘dimensions’ through which to momentarily focus on various aspects of power such as agency, structures, systems of thought and social ontology.

For example, the literature shows that conceptualisations such as ‘power over’, ‘power to’, ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ developed and refined by scholars in the fields of social and political theory are increasingly being adopted by various disciplines concerned with social transformation and justice (Pansardi & Bindi 2021), including design (Zamenopoulos et al., 2021). ‘Power over’ – often associated with domination – can manifest in many ways, such as influencing others’ beliefs about their abilities and shaping self-perception, rights, and capabilities. ‘Power to’ (Arendt 1958) involves the ability to act, beginning with the awareness of the possibility of acting and developing skills and capacities for change. ‘Power with’ refers to collective action or agency; this concept relates to how individuals facing domination can collaborate, build shared understanding, and take collective action. Mary Parker Follett is often credited with its early conceptualisation; she contrasted it with ‘power over,’ emphasising the psychological and political power derived from unity (Eylon, 1998). ‘Power within’ (Starhawk, 1987) represents the confidence, dignity and self-esteem that comes from recognising one’s situation and potential to address it. Individual empowerment allows people to represent their interests responsibly and self-determinedly, cultivating self-knowledge, self-confidence, and the ability to understand and claim their rights.

Lukes’ ‘three dimensions of power’ – visible, hidden and invisible – is a helpful typology for analysing power in political decision-making and democratic participation (Lukes, 2005; Gaventa, 2006). Visible power refers to the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions, and procedures of political decision-making, including how those in positions of power use these procedures and structures to maintain control. Hidden power controls who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda. These dynamics often exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of less powerful groups. Invisible power shapes meaning and defines what is acceptable, setting psychological and ideological boundaries of participation by subtly influencing how individuals think about themselves and their place in the world. It defines what is expected, acceptable and safe, perpetuating exclusion and inequality through socialisation, culture, and ideology processes. Empowerment, therefore, involves identifying mechanisms of oppression and control embedded within established social norms, roles and narratives and building our abilities to challenge these assumptions (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008).

The importance of narratives in empowerment and change

The psychology and political science literature underscores the critical link between narratives and empowerment. Narratives are essential for sensemaking, allowing us to internalise and externalise change experiences (Nardon & Hari, 2021). Sharing stories helps identify power dynamics, positions of power, and disempowerment. Firstly, disempowering narratives—shaped by cultural norms, upbringing, and religion—can be actively reimagined. By reshaping the stories we tell ourselves, we can foster personal transformation and build power through a strengthened self-concept (Wilson, 2011). This involves going through a (self)transcendence process: overcoming internal and external limitations and embracing vulnerabilities to reach one’s full potential. As Reed (2008) suggests, this journey leads to heightened self-awareness, inner power and more profound personal engagement. This perspective aligns with Foucault’s (1979) assertion that power restricts possibilities and acts productively, enabling self-development and resistance to dominant discourses. Hayward’s (1998) concept of “de-facing power,” inspired by Foucault, emphasises that freedom from oppression lies in redefining boundaries and shaping new possibilities for ourselves. Narratives of change, therefore, document the journey toward greater autonomy, inner strength, and improved social, cultural and environmental conditions (Zigler, 2004; Kawai et al., 2023).

Finally, storytelling’s impact surpasses intellectual arguments or theoretical transformation models (Alho, 2023). Narratives carry transformative power: to engage, mobilise, and spread alternative values and views that challenge the status quo discourses (Foucault, 1979). Stories foster solidarity and create pathways for

collective empowerment. By shifting mindsets and amplifying voices, stories of change hold the potential to drive meaningful and enduring transformation.

In Table 2, we summarise the dimensions of power discussed in this section, along with the corresponding pathways to empowerment proposed in the broader literature. These insights can inform and structure efforts toward empowerment in design for social change.

Table 2: Dimensions of power and practices towards empowerment.

References	Dimensions of power	Definition	Ways to empowerment
Wilson (2011) Hayward (1998) Starhawk (1987)	Power within	A person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge.	Raising consciousness and awareness of self. Enhancing capabilities and autonomy.
Arendt (1958)	Power to	The unique potential of every person to shape their life and world.	Becoming aware that it is possible to act and progress towards acting. Developing skills and capacities and realising that one can effect change.
Follett (1924) Boulding (1989)	Power with	Finding common ground among different interests to build collective strength.	Joining with others through building shared understandings, planning and taking collective action.
Follett (1924)	Power over	Influencing what others think they can do or even imagine as possible. It extends beyond physical or verbal domination to affect how people view themselves, their rights, and their capabilities.	Fostering collaboration and unity, where differences are openly acknowledged and reconciled through creating new, shared solutions that respect and interweave differing desires and perspectives.
Lukes (2005) Gaventa (2003)	Visible power	Making and enforcing the rules.	Trying to change policymaking's 'who, how and what' so the process is more democratic, accountable, and responsive to diverse needs. Visible power is countered with political advocacy strategies and seeking access to formal decision-making processes.
	Invisible power	Shaping meaning, values and what is 'normal'.	Reimagining social and political culture and raising consciousness to transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them and how they envisage future possibilities and alternatives.
	Hidden power	Setting the agenda.	Strengthening organisations and movements of marginalised people, building collective power and leadership to redefine political agendas, and raising the visibility and legitimacy of issues, voices and demands that have been silenced.

Frameworks such as *Just Associates' Power Matrix* (Miller et al., 2006), the *Powercube* (Gaventa, 2021) and Collins' (2000) *Matrix of Domination* are good examples of theory-informed tools that have adopted these concepts. They are used for power analysis, planning and assessment of empowerment projects.



Figure 1: Powercube.net, a resource for understanding power relations in social change.

Towards design for empowerment

We now discuss the dimensions of power and ways to empowerment derived from broader literature (Table 2) in correlation to the design for social change praxis focused on empowerment. Insights of our analysis are then presented as a set of Design for Empowerment principles for best practice.

Empowerment in design for social change

Seminal literature in design for social change discusses self-empowerment and the *professional assistance* that enables individuals and communities to overcome feelings of powerlessness and lack of influence. It helps them recognise, mobilise, and use their resources to accomplish their objectives (Schneider et al., 2018). It also reveals how these concepts are entangled with the broader political aims of the socially oriented design projects. For example, community-based projects have been conducted to enhance democratic participation in design, moving beyond traditional approaches and assisting individuals and communities in controlling design processes, solutions, and outcomes (Rezai & Erlhoff, 2021). The Design Justice Network's pivotal work (Costanza-Chock, 2020) centres marginalised communities in the design process by empowering them to lead projects in collaboration with activist groups rather than imposing designs on them. This approach draws on Collins' (2000) Matrix of Domination theory, recognising the hidden 'power over' within designed systems and the embodied experience of disempowerment. It views these experiences as crucial motivations for action, where empowerment is understood as the capacity to resist and challenge these hidden power hierarchies.

Another significant body of work examines how design fosters participation in agonistic pluralism (Di Salvo, 2012), a democratic approach emphasising dissensus over consensus (Mouffe, 2002). By facilitating 'lively agonistic encounters' among diverse stakeholders (DiSalvo & Meng 2021), this work advocates for building 'power to' by creating public spaces where multiple voices are heard and conflict is managed civilised (Kraff, 2019). This work acknowledges hidden power hierarchies, yet it does not seek to resist them but to reveal them by making them hierarchized, performed, and debated (Bjorngvisson et al., 2010).

Still, some social design studies question the transferability of the democratically driven approaches to power and empowerment in non-Western contexts (Kraff, 2019) or where it could threaten the survival of marginalised communities (Gautam & Tatar, 2022). Instead, these studies focus on particular attention to building 'power within', for example, by revealing the strengths and assets of the dependent marginalised communities (Gautam & Tatar, 2022) or cultivating a community's craft capabilities rather than aligning their making practices with the market system. In this way, those previously silenced gain voice and agency through creative acts that leave lasting impacts on the world (Marques Leitão & Marchand, 2018; von Busch & Pazarbasi, 2018). However, while design literature emphasises approaches to developing capabilities, the focus is often on building external (skills/material) rather than internal (cognitive/psychological) capabilities and resources. We argue that design empowerment focused on developing people's self-knowledge and (self)transcendence is overlooked.

Finally, social designers claim self-empowerment by reflecting on their practice, such as embracing an alternative view to the pre-established aim of building 'power with' in each project (Popplow, 2021) and frameworks to explore positionality (Noel, 2023). We observe how design work that draws on feminist (Place, 2023; Costanza-Chock, 2018), indigenous (Tunstall, 2020; Sheehan, 2011) and critical perspectives inherently situates itself in the concepts of domination, colonisation, and patriarchy. Social designers like Di Salvo (2012) and Gautam and Tatar (2022) propose new participation configurations, identifying central issues and developing processes and resources to facilitate this. In these instances, designers explicitly discuss power dynamics or setting empowerment goals (Schneider et al., 2018). They recognise that designers possess 'power over' other stakeholders, particularly at the outset of a project (which underlies and influences the different types of power relations that emerge throughout a project) and at the end stages of evaluation and reporting (when outcomes and impact accounts are produced).

Despite the undeniable intentions of 'designing for empowerment' being expressed in many ways within design for social change, such discussions remain rare. Notably, many claims of empowerment in design literature lack theoretical grounding and consistent language with the broader empowerment literature (Zamenopoulos et al., 2021; Avelino, 2021). Consequently, most designs for empowerment activity appear disconnected from the wider context of social change and transformation work, negatively affecting design interventions' credibility and limiting interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities (Avelino, 2021).

While recognising the various forms of power is crucial for understanding dynamics and guiding design interventions, the design literature lacks theory-based tools for comprehensive power analysis. The methodologies that are significantly lacking are those that expose invisible and hidden power and formulate strategies to address these complexities. Adopting empowerment language, conceptualisations, and analysis tools from broader literature would facilitate discussions on power and empowerment in design projects, structuring objectives and making these concepts accessible to designers and stakeholders.

Design for empowerment principles

Drawing from design and broader literature, we propose four principles that position Design for Empowerment as a political activity and provide guidelines for best practices. These principles are grounded in Empowerment Theory values—enhancing possibilities, community focus, reflexivity, operative principles, and emphasis on language and narratives—and informed by relevant constructs from political theory (in Table 2).

DfE 1. Implementing power analysis to inform strategies

There is a need to understand power distribution in the project context to set empowerment goals and report on the nature and level of change. This involves acknowledging our positionality and identifying the power dynamics at play through critical discussions of power manifestations (power within/to/with/over, visible/invisible/hidden power). Such power analysis is crucial to inform empowerment goals, strategies and tactics for change. It also helps to address the politics of participation by paying attention to the asymmetries between stakeholders based on formal authority/power, wealth, social status, gender, age, prior knowledge and self-confidence (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). This approach ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives, providing equal opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes.

DfE 2. Setting clear empowerment aims and goals

Empowerment approaches stress the importance of community focus, where mediating structures (like community organisations) play a critical role in facilitating empowerment (Rappaport, 1987). This means exercising transparency and accountability in setting agendas and acknowledging the work's positionalities and other political aspects. This implies engaging with those involved from the initial stages of the project to discuss and negotiate expectations openly, defining the designer and the institution's role in catalysing change, and co-developing empowerment goals and strategies together. There should be clarity about what these might look like at individual, organisational and community levels (Zimmerman, 2000). Evidence of the empowerment process should be captured throughout the project, ideally in narrative form in the voices of those involved.

DfE 3. Focusing on human development: the empowerment process is a journey of transcendence

We conceptualise the empowerment process as a journey of transcendence by which individuals and communities are supported to overcome physical and psychological obstacles. Developing 'power within' is prioritised as a necessary condition for building 'power to' and 'power with.' While internal and external dimensions of power interact dynamically, the focus should be on developing individuals' capacity as 'agents of change' by helping individuals and communities recognise their strengths, value their knowledge, and understand their capacity to address their own needs and create solutions (Just Associates, 2015). This involves fostering self-leadership, discovering personal meaning and purpose, and building strong community relationships.

DfE 4. Adopting empowerment language and narrative methods as catalysts of change

Communal narratives and personal stories are powerful resources that significantly impact human behaviour (Rappaport, 1995). Narratives provide valuable insights into how people understand unfolding events, enabling individuals and groups to articulate their experiences, identify negative assumptions and behaviours, and frame/reframe understandings (Rappaport, 1995). Narratives are also meant to contest and subvert dominant discourses by disseminating new knowledge, serving as sources of both power and resistance (Prilleltensky, 1994; Gaventa, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to create opportunities for diverse narratives to emerge, where individual and collective experiences of empowerment can be articulated as transformational journeys. It is also necessary to adopt empowerment language and accessible tools such

as metaphors to facilitate sensemaking, identify values and power dynamics, and spot available resources.

Heroic Journeys, a conceptual framework for empowerment by design

While the principles presented above help us to organise knowledge, we align with McGee and Pettit’s (2019) view that theory often remains inaccessible and of little practical use to those working on the frontlines of social change and the need to integrate academic theory with methodologies developed from the grassroots.

Accordingly, we engaged in participatory research through a series of workshops (Figure 2) to co-develop an accessible framework grounded in Design for Empowerment principles to support the empowerment process in social design projects in a manner that is both legitimate and democratic. Our research design is informed by the question: “What kind of framework can support the implementation of design for empowerment principles in social design projects?”

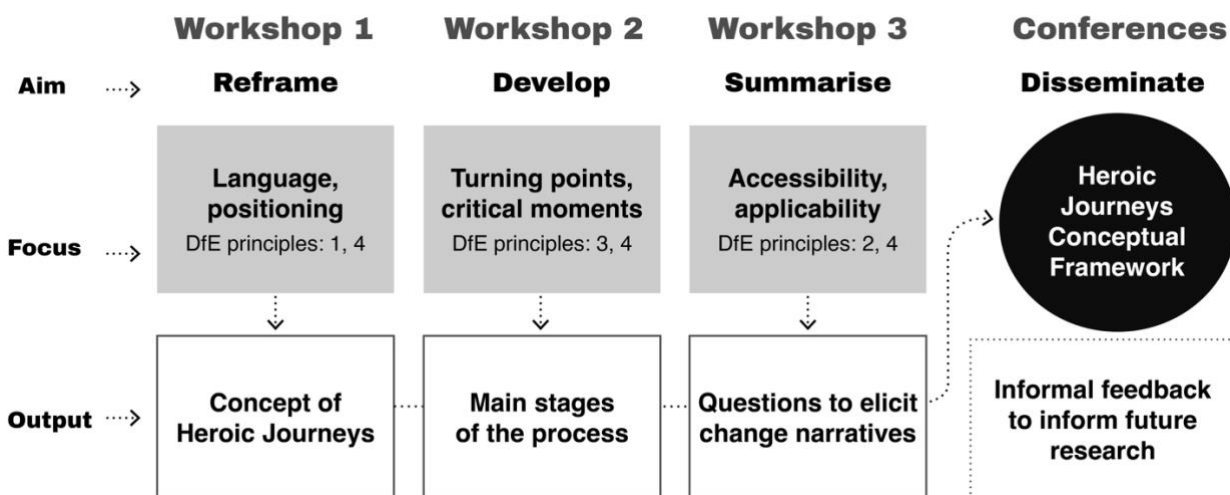


Figure 2: Heroic Journeys framework development.

Methodology

Abiding by DfE 4 (adopting narrative devices), our starting point was identifying a relevant narrative device reflecting the DfE principles and values. We were inspired by the familiar narrative structure of the Hero’s Journey, popularised by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). This archetypal story structure, derived from ancient myths from diverse cultures, has universal appeal because it captures the key themes in individual self-development and maturation. It comprises four phases: departure from the familiar, initiation through challenges and learning, unification symbolising transformation, and return with newfound wisdom or resources to benefit the community. As such, The Hero’s Journey parallels the empowerment process, where overcoming internal and external challenges leads to personal growth, self-knowledge and a sense of purpose.

The framework was developed through iterative co-creation workshops (Sanders & Strappers, 2008) to bridge research and practice for social change and empowerment through a collaborative inquiry. As such, we followed purposive sampling, inviting participants with experience in design for social change and community organisers from Citizens UK (see Table 3). These participants shared an interest in understanding the perspectives of the ‘other’. They had similar levels of experience in their respective fields of social change practice, which helped mitigate the potentially damaging effects of knowledge–

power relations (Moreno-Cely et al., 2021). Citizens UK organisers adopt a ‘broad-based’ approach to community organising, a political methodology rooted in civil society and based on the concept of power (Bunyan, 2018). They aim to identify and empower citizen leaders to mobilise their communities around issues they care about. Similarly, social design practitioners and researchers are committed to participatory principles and building stakeholder networks that co-create public value.

Table 3: Overview of research participants.

Participants Expertise of the participants		Workshops attended
P1	Community organising, leadership, child culture, design	WS1
P2	Designer, User researcher, services design, semiotics	WS1, WS2, WS3
P3	Designer, Senior Design Researcher, has training in community organising	WS1, WS2
P4	Senior Lecturer, Storytelling	WS1
P5	Senior service designer, community projects	WS1, WS2
P6	Design researcher, social innovation, community projects	WS1, WS2
P7	Senior Community Organiser, engaged in design projects	WS1, WS2, WS3
P8	Community Organiser	WS1, WS2
P9	Community Organiser	WS1, WS2
P10	Senior Community Organiser, engaged in design projects	WS1, WS2
P11	MSc Design Innovation student (with industry experience)	WS3
P12	MSc Design Innovation student (with industry experience)	WS3
P13	MSc Design Innovation student (with industry experience)	WS3
P14	Community Organising and design	WS1
P15	Designer, service design	WS1
P16	Designer and Community Lead	WS2

Over a year, we conducted three online co-creation workshops with 16 participants (Table 3). Each workshop, involving 5-10 participants (with some participants attending more than one workshop highlighting their investment in the topic), focused on identifying, discussing and finding relationships between vital elements in the empowerment process grounded on DfE principles whilst parting from the Hero’s Journey metaphor as a foundational structure. Creative activities – e.g. playing with metaphors, personas, mapping, and scenario building (Figure 3) incorporated into the workshops facilitated both ‘knowledge exchange’ and ‘knowledge creation’ between social designers, researchers and community organisers. This was done through dialogue, reflection (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and collective meaning-making in interaction (Bridges & McGee, 2011). The virtual setup of the workshops allowed easy access to the materials and interactive tools, including templates and Miro board, which enhanced participants’ engagement. Each workshop was video recorded and transcribed. Insights and outcomes from each workshop were synthesised by the researchers and shared back with the participants in the subsequent activity.

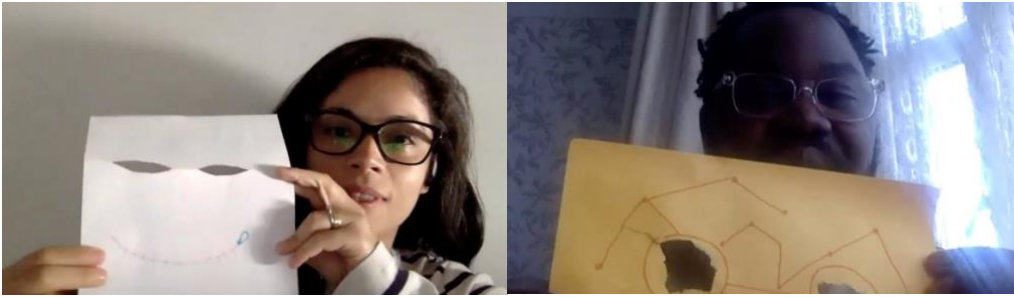


Figure 3: Workshop 1 – playing with metaphors of a 'superhero.'

Building on the participants' worldviews and lived experiences (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), each workshop attended to develop a particular aspect of the framework whilst contributing to its evolution.

In Workshop 1, we explored the use of language, expanding the meaning of heroes and heroism as it relates to the context of community work and social change. In Workshop 2, we built on the emerging concept of 'heroic journeys' by envisioning and capturing how it would facilitate a journey of 'obstacles transcendence' through a series of 'critical moments.' In Workshop 3, we developed a scenario to understand the framework's accessibility and applicability. We created probing questions as the best way to support each process stage. Finally, we synthesised and formalised the workshops' outputs into the *Heroic Journeys* conceptual framework (Figure 5).

Framework co-development process

The first workshop aimed to critically reflect on the Hero's Journey as the foundational structure and basic concepts concerning empowerment. The traditional notion of a 'hero' as patriarchal, male and characterised by physical strength and bravery was contested, but participants agreed on the notion of 'heroism' as a concept in its evolved understanding: emphasising selflessness, altruism, and service to others.

"The idea of a hero or superhero, such as a professional hero, can be damaging. Push people into this position to save the world. Still, at the same time, we are not protecting them because they are invincible... which they are not... this is different to an everyday hero doing something for their community with any resources they may have... there are also alternative journeys, such as the heroine journey, which usually is a quest for wholeness and overcoming stereotypes." (Participant WS1, community organiser)

The idea of collective heroism also emerged, highlighting 'the hero-ship of peer groups and the power of the collective and multiple heroes' (participant WS1, designer) such as movements, organisations or communities that collaborate to tackle challenging social or political issues. In this context, we defined heroism as an attitude to embody courage, compassion, and moral leadership in overcoming adversity.

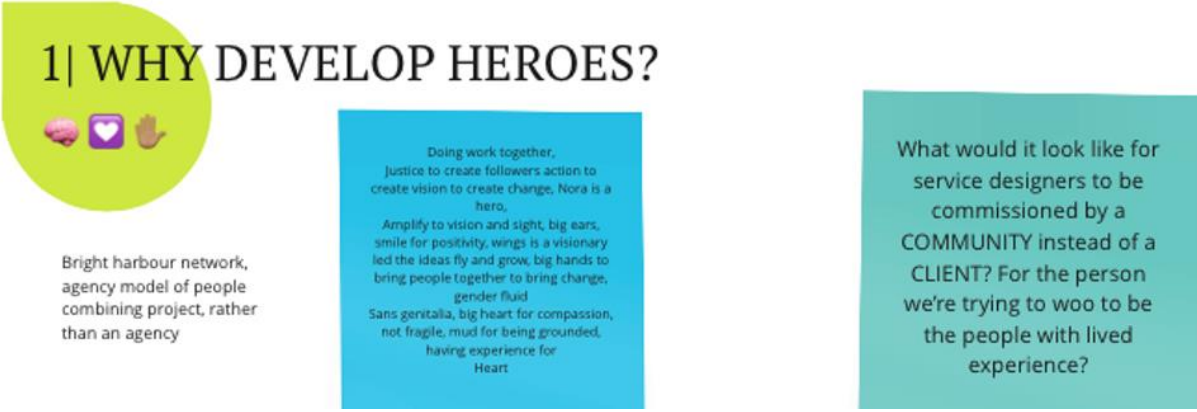


Figure 4: Workshop 1 Miro board

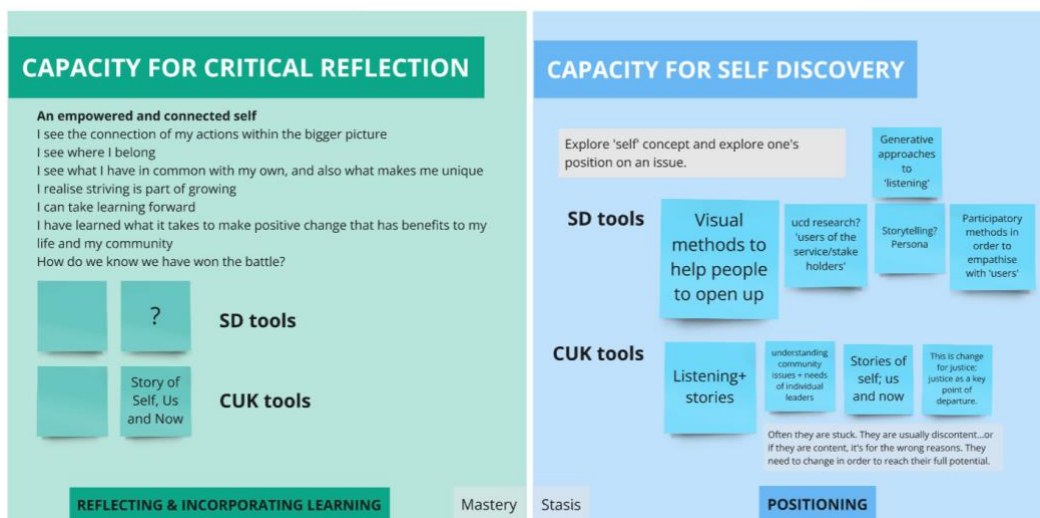
We discussed the process of transcendence and transformation. We conceptualised it as ‘heroic journeys,’ meaning that empowerment involves overcoming obstacles and limitations building inner and outer resources to gain greater self-determination and autonomy at individual and collective levels.

In Workshop 2, we discussed the ‘critical moments’ as they would structure the ‘heroic journeys’ from Workshop 1 – self-discovery, initiation, transformation, and reflection – concerning dimensions of power and ways to empowerment (Figure 4). The following insights arose:

- (1) *Self-discovery* – of one’s power. Creating the conditions to build Power within. Focus on gifts, difference, passion, and purpose. We are exploring dissonance with self and its relation to systemic conditions. It involves self-examining currently held beliefs about personal power, systemic circumstances, and our personal view on them, understanding our story and recognising our disempowerment.

- (2) *Initiation* – Validation of interdependency. Creating the conditions to build Power. Focus on overcoming internal challenges and attainable goals within the community. Testing and learning participatory and relational practices and exploring consensus and dissonance. It involves leaving the comfort zone, navigating the unfamiliar, taking small risks and understanding the value of collaboration: accepting guidance and valuing others who are different from us.
- (3) *Transformation* – Moving from will to action, creating the conditions to build Power. Having built inner power, we can face external challenges via collective mobilisation and action. As the most significant fears are exposed and confronted, a vision of life or revival emerges from the triumph. There is usually a reward gained through overcoming one’s fears. It feels like a rebirth that marks a clear separation between the old and new ways of being.
- (4) *Reflection* – Internalising effects of action and repositioning. Creating the conditions to build Power over. Evaluation of learning, methods, new positionality, and identification of personal and collective challenges. A period of reflection, recollection, and internalisation of events. This space is where hopes have materialised, evidencing those other ways.

“... it is important to understand what people will volunteer their time for and what their interests are, their stories and background, and what are their political narratives and how hero[sic] journey can help them unpack the political narrative that allows them to dissipate the public life.” (Participant WS2, community organiser)



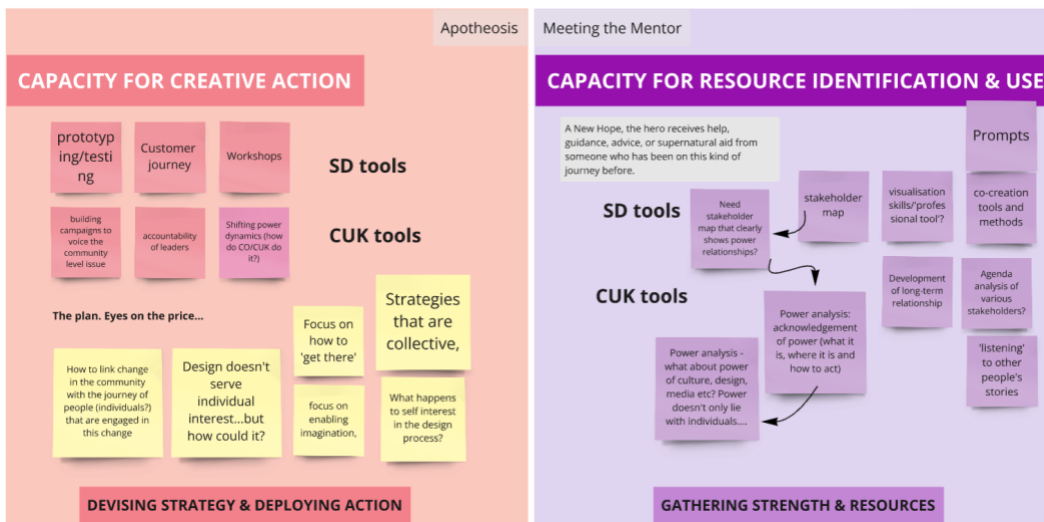


Figure 5: Workshop 2 – identifying ‘key moments’ of the Heroic Journeys framework.

In Workshop 3, we prototyped the framework as an accessible tool to organise and facilitate eliciting individual/community needs, values and stories through structured conversations (Figure 4).

“[As] we create the framework ... we need to look at the probing questions ... to start them on the journey of self-empowerment and transformation ... to think about the logic between the questions for someone who is trying to get to [their] higher-self alongside others, I think that is the work of us ... What probing questions can we sequentially ask to have them think about what matters to them, and also how they can create those powerful friendship groups that can help them along the way?” (Participant WS3, designer)

Avelino (2021) suggests that asking questions facilitates a critical analysis of power, allowing ‘inner stories’ of empowerment to surface, be acknowledged and externalised. Building on this approach, we generated empirical questions to systematically explore power dynamics in processes of social change, where each stage of the heroic journey becomes a lens to examine a specific aspect of power and empowerment. The final, refined outcome can be seen in Figure 6.

Heroic Journeys

DESIGN FOR EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK



Figure 6: Heroic Journeys, a Design for Empowerment conceptual framework.

Concluding remarks

This paper contributes to strengthening the approaches, language, and reporting structure of empowerment in design for social change. We argue that design-led social change projects that intentionally and openly engage in power redistribution are considered political activity towards enhancing individual and community agency (Jason et al., 2019). As such, our activity is not value-free. As we

collaborate with communities at the grassroots level, methods for planning and evaluating social design projects are necessary, particularly for reporting empowerment-focused interventions' impact on individuals and communities. Designers also collaborate with other disciplines – such as activists and community organisers – that share similar goals. Therefore, it is essential to establish a common ground to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration.

While empowerment cannot be designed, we can intentionally set the conditions and adopt best practices. To this end, we drew on principles, language and conceptualisations from relevant broader literature and summarised them to inform our proposed Design for Empowerment principles. To make these concepts actionable, we co-developed Heroic Journeys, a conceptual framework, through participatory and interdisciplinary knowledge sharing.

Limitations and future work

The framework development is rooted in practice (co-developed with social design practitioners and community organisers working on the 'frontlines'). Thus far, the framework has been shared with an international design community through a conference workshop (Santamaria, Kuzmina & Petersen, 2021) and the Service Design & Education Network Seminar (2022). The audience recognised that power can be one of the most uncomfortable and complex topics to address in social design projects. As a narrative, symbolic structure, The Heroic Journeys framework resonates with human experiences of growth, integration, and change. It can facilitate the exploration of complex and interrelated dimensions of power and empowerment. Participants identified its potential for mapping power dynamics, challenging the designer's role as a facilitator of pre-determined outcomes, eliciting diverse stories and supporting empowering vision-building within design practices. However, as the next step, it is essential to implement the framework across diverse live projects and contexts to evaluate its applicability, adaptability and impact on reporting design-led empowerment.

Future exploration includes integrating Design for Empowerment principles with other frameworks, such as the Theory of Change, to create a more comprehensive approach that leverages narrative, qualitative procedural, and logical methods while ensuring rigorous evaluation and impact measurement. The goal is to establish a community of practice dedicated to Design for Empowerment, fostering the exchange and development of methodologies, strategies, and experiences from diverse perspectives and paradigms.

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