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Conversation: Reflective narratives in social design: Towards an autoethnographic approach

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Abstract: Applying design in the context of communities of practices has emerged as a field that aims to address global challenges in a local and distributed context. Through this conversation we aim to raise interest, to valorise and to celebrate the people who daily practice design in social contexts, and to offer a platform to engage in introspection as a tool of design research. In addition, we aim to explore the methodological implications of adopting Autoethnography as a method of scholarly inquiry in the context of design. The adoption of autoethnographic perspectives enables designers and communities to be situated within their context instead of being outside observers. This type of scholarship emphasises a deeper understanding of individuals, groups, and localities, prioritising creative forces such as intuition, imagination, and tacit knowledge over the divergence of generalist principles.

Keywords: social design, participatory design, design practice, autoethnography

1. Introduction

Applying design in the context of communities of practices has emerged as a field that aims to address global challenges in a local and distributed context. Design and designers contribute to the creation of context-specific, 'sticky' (VonHippel, 2006), tacit (Akama & Prendiville, 2013) or situated knowledge by applying their expertise through collaborative practices to foster the growth of the distributed design capacity (Manzini, 2015).

Through this conversation we aimed to raise interest, to valorise and to celebrate the people who daily practice design in social contexts, and to offer a platform to engage in introspection (Xue and Desmett 2019) as a tool of design research. In addition, the conversation aimed to explore the methodological implications of adopting Autoethnography as a method of scholarly inquiry in the context of design.



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Autoethnography is “a genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues.”(Poulos 2021) The adoption of autoethnographic perspectives enables designers and communities to be situated within their context instead of being outside observers. This type of scholarship emphasises a deeper understanding of individuals, groups, and localities, prioritising creative forces such as intuition, imagination, and tacit knowledge over the divergence of generalist principles. Autoethnography is a method often associated with anthropology and the social sciences, unlike ethnography, where researchers analyse a culture as participant observers, autoethnography centres on explicit and reflective self-observation. This approach incorporates subjectivity and emotionality into the research, acknowledging the significant influence of the researcher's personal experiences on the research process (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2010; Anderson, 2006).

Autoethnography has emerged as a significant qualitative research method, particularly within the realm of design research, where introspection and personal narrative can yield profound insights into the design process and its implications. This methodology intertwines the personal experiences of the researcher with broader cultural and social contexts, allowing for a nuanced exploration of phenomena that traditional research methods may overlook (Denshire 2014). By situating the researcher as both the subject and the analyst, autoethnography fosters a deep reflexivity that can illuminate the complexities of design practices, the lived experiences of designers, the tacit knowledge emerging through social interactions.

A key characteristic of autoethnography is its emphasis on a reflective methodology, requiring the researcher to conduct a narrative analysis of a phenomenon to which they have a close personal connection (Mcilveen, 2014). Autoethnography serves as both a method and an outcome (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2010). The outcomes of autoethnographic research can emerge from a variety of interdisciplinary documentation practices, including reflective writing, interviews, photography, and the collection of documents and artifacts (Duncan, 2004; Spry, 2001). This interrelationship between the researcher, the subject, and the context provides a perspective that navigates between personal experience and scientific inquiry. Additionally, this method emphasizes the role of theory in informing practice, even in ways that may not be immediately apparent.

At its core, autoethnography is defined as an autobiographical genre of writing that connects the personal to the cultural, thereby revealing multiple layers of consciousness (Maseti, 2018). This methodological approach encourages researchers to draw upon their own experiences to better understand and interpret the social realities surrounding them. Autoethnography leverages written narratives where researchers recount their lived experiences, facilitating a deeper understanding of their emotions and identities (Kessler, 2023). This reflective practice is particularly relevant in design research as many times theory converges from applying design in different settings.

The analytical dimension of autoethnography, as articulated by Anderson, emphasizes the importance of characterizing social realities through the integration of personal narratives with diverse sources of data (Hill, 2024). This approach not only enriches the research findings but also fosters innovative research questions and hypotheses, as highlighted by (Adams & Manning, 2015). In design research, this can manifest in the exploration of how personal biases, cultural backgrounds, and emotional responses shape design decisions and outcomes. The method's accessibility allows for a more inclusive research environment, encouraging the incorporation of multiple perspectives and methodologies (ibid.).

Moreover, autoethnography's capacity for reflexivity is particularly valuable in the context of design research. Reflexivity involves a critical examination of one's own biases and assumptions, which is crucial for understanding how these factors influence the design process (Schön 1975). Autoethnography serves as a methodological tool that connects the lived experiences of researchers to larger social and cultural frameworks (Grenier, 2016). This connection is essential in design research, where the implications of design decisions extend beyond individual projects to impact broader societal contexts. Autoethnography is a method that facilitates Research through Design (Frayling 1994; Stappers & Giacardi 2017) by illuminating personal practice, thoughts, and emotions. It seeks to identify the subconscious mental connections that influence the design process. In this way, autoethnography has the potential to enhance the rigor of practice-based design research. The iterative analysis inherent in autoethnographic work functions as a tool for articulating critical reflexivity, which is essential for both research through design and theoretically informed creative practices.

As an approach, autoethnography transcends disciplinary boundaries, providing a framework that supports an ontological and epistemological understanding of emerging theories as socially constructed and dynamically engaged with practice. This method bridges the gap between theory and practice by fostering the development of critical discourse and the self-reflection that naturally arises from it.

The collaborative aspect of autoethnography further enhances its applicability in design research. Collaborative autoethnography allows multiple researchers to engage in shared storytelling, thereby enriching the narrative with diverse perspectives (Lowenstein & Jones, 2020). This method aligns well with the collaborative nature of design practices, where teamwork and collective insights often lead to more innovative solutions. By sharing personal stories and interpretations, researchers can uncover deeper insights into the design process and its cultural implications, as demonstrated in the work of (Warren-Gordon & Jackson-Brown, 2021).

In addition to its methodological strengths, autoethnography also raises important ethical considerations. The intimate nature of personal storytelling necessitates a careful approach to issues of privacy and representation. Collaborative autoethnography can address some of these ethical challenges by fostering a collective agency that prioritizes non-exploitative research practices (Lapadat, 2017). This ethical framework is particularly relevant in design

research, where the impact of design decisions can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities.

Furthermore, the integration of visual methodologies within autoethnography can enhance the richness of the research findings (Paryente, 2024). In design research, where visual communication is paramount, employing visual elements alongside narrative accounts can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the design process and its outcomes. This multimodal approach allows researchers to convey complex ideas and emotions that may be difficult to articulate through text alone.

In conclusion, autoethnography has the capacity to serve as a powerful methodological approach for rigorous introspection in design research. By intertwining personal narratives with broader cultural contexts, this method fosters a deep reflexivity that can illuminate the complexities of the design process. The collaborative and ethical dimensions of autoethnography further enhance its relevance, making it a valuable tool for researchers seeking to explore the intricate relationships between personal experiences and design practices. As the field of design research continues to evolve, the integration of autoethnographic methods will likely play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the multifaceted nature of design.

With all this in mind we set up this conversation to address the following research question: “How can autoethnographic approaches be effectively employed within an academic context to critically examine and reflect upon social design practices, thereby contributing to the generation of novel scholarship?”. To better facilitate the conversation we also developed six sub questions:

- How can introspective research methods inform design theory?
- How is the management of tensions, conflicts, and differences among stakeholders in community-based design achieved?
- What do the notions of authorship and ownership signify in the context of distributed design activities?
- How are the dimensions of a locality, such as its material and cognitive resources or culture, integrated into collaborative design practices in action?
- How can the burden of designing within challenging environments be managed?
- How can care practices lead to a comprehensive exit strategy for designers embedded in communities?

2. Setting up the session

The session was planned with the objective of discussing and exploring the use of introspective autoethnographic methods within an academic context. The focus was on understanding how these methods could generate valuable insights for design research

while addressing the challenges posed by unconventional formats. The session was to be conducted in person, involving 30 participants over a duration of 90 minutes.

The session was scheduled to take place in a room that could accommodate 35 people, with walls suitable for placing sticky notes. The convenors were to provide markers and sticky notes as part of the necessary materials. Due to travel constraints only one of the two convenors was present the day of.

The session was set to begin with a 10-minute introduction to establish the context for the discussion. The facilitators were to welcome the participants, provide an overview of the research question, and outline the aims of the session. This was to be followed by a 20-minute segment where participants would engage in sharing their autoethnographic experiences related to social design practice. Participants, working in groups of five, were expected to reflect on experiences that might hold significant value for design research but did not conform to conventional academic formats. These reflections were to be documented on sticky notes and placed on the walls.

Following the sharing session, a live thematic analysis was planned for the next 20 minutes. The facilitators were to guide the group in identifying recurring themes, challenges, and opportunities emerging from the shared experiences. An open discussion was then to take place, focusing on the implications of these themes for the field of social design practices.

The conversation was then scheduled to shift towards exploring different formats, outputs, and channels that could be utilized within autoethnographic approaches. For 30 minutes, participants were expected to engage in an open discussion about the various forms of documentation and dissemination that autoethnography could offer. They were to reflect on how this method could contribute to social design practice and consider potential avenues, both existing and new, that could accommodate autoethnographic work within design research.

The session was to conclude with a 10-minute reflection on the main takeaways. Participants were to be encouraged to reflect on the key insights gained and were invited to contribute to a Special Issue of the *Co-Design Journal* focused on Autoethnography of Social Innovation, which was being edited by the session convenors. This final segment was intended to solidify the outcomes of the session and outline potential next steps for continued engagement with the topics discussed.

3. The discussion

The session did not unfold exactly as planned, primarily due to Spyros' inability to attend the conference. Consequently, David facilitated the session, following the outlined plan with minor adjustments. The room allocated for the session, designed to accommodate around twenty seated participants, was filled to capacity, with approximately forty attendees occupying every available space, including chairs, tables, and even the floor. This enthusiastic group of researchers was eager to share their experiences with reflective methods in design practice.

The session began with a pre-recorded video from Spyros, in which he outlined the session's purpose and rationale. Following this, David introduced the discussion from his unique perspective, emphasising the challenges associated with sharing experiences in design research through traditional academic channels. He highlighted how his positionality as a Chilean design researcher, dedicated to using academia to drive social impact, shapes his research practice. Additionally, David noted that his experiential knowledge from design research influences his approach to co-design facilitation and teaching.

David's personal account set the stage for a broader discussion on the need for diverse avenues of design research dissemination, beyond conventional formats like journal articles, books, or conference proceedings. The session continued with an activity where participants, grouped in teams of 5-8, discussed the question: "What introspective methods have you experienced or are aware of that hold significant value for design research?" Among the methods mentioned were reflective drawing, art-based activities, collective performance (such as dance), and journaling.

The discussion then continued with the question: "What types of outputs, formats, and channels could we explore to inform social design theory and practice?" This sparked a dialogue on the institutional constraints that shape academic production, particularly the emphasis on traditional scientific outputs. Participants voiced concerns about the challenges they face in meeting academic performance indicators that leave little room for alternative forms of knowledge dissemination. Some noted that their institutions or funders might not value introspective methods, discouraging them from exploring these approaches further. Additionally, the lack of established platforms for sharing and developing scholarship based on introspective methods was seen as a significant barrier, impacting their confidence in utilising these approaches.

As the session drew to a close, participants posed the question, "What's next?" to David. In response, a participant quickly produced a piece of paper, initiating a sign-up sheet for names and email addresses. This spontaneous gesture led to the formation of a network, with one participant volunteering to send an email to everyone, ensuring that the conversation about creative and reflective methods in design research would continue beyond the session.

4. Conclusions and reflections

In summary, we were both thrilled and invigorated by the responses to this conversation, as well as to the special issue of *Codesign Journal* on "Autoethnography of Social Design Practices," for which we serve as guest editors. Numerous colleagues reached out, expressing their delight that a platform exists for this type of scholarship, especially given that such discussions have often been undervalued in the context of traditional research. The importance of introspection in design research cannot be overstated.

Design research as a field is increasingly grappling with the pressures of institutionalisation, particularly with regard to adopting scientific standards that may not fully align with design's

unique characteristics. These challenges are exacerbated by the demand for outputs that conform to traditional scientific frameworks. Such pressure often results in the "amputation" of essential elements of design knowledge, as researchers feel compelled to adhere to models that do not accommodate the complexities inherent to design practice.

A growing concern has emerged around the tendency to simulate scientific rigour within design research, leading to the production of what might be termed "bad science." This becomes especially problematic when design scholars, in a bid for academic legitimacy, adopt methodologies that fail to capture the richness and specificity of design knowledge. The outcome is frequently a diluted form of research, one that falls short in addressing the true nature of design inquiry.

Design, characterised as the "science of the specific" (Buchanan 1992), is fundamentally distinct from other scientific disciplines. It deals with the particular, the contextual, and the situated, making it challenging to apply the same standards used in more generalisable scientific inquiry. This poses critical questions about how we understand and evaluate design research, and what outputs should be regarded as valuable contributions to the field.

One promising avenue for addressing these challenges is the use of introspective methods in design research. Introspection enables researchers to access tacit knowledge, intuition, and the collective insights gained through collaborative thinking—factors often overlooked in conventional scientific approaches. By embracing these aspects, rather than amputating them to fit into a predetermined scientific mould, design researchers can generate practice-informed knowledge that provides deeper insights into design processes.

However, for introspection to gain recognition as a legitimate method within design research, there must be a shift in how academic outputs are valued. The current academic system often prioritises peer-reviewed journal articles—particularly those published in journals that adhere to scientific metrics such as the Web of Science or Scopus. These formats may not be the most suitable or meaningful for disseminating design knowledge. Such a narrow definition of valid research can discourage design scholars from pursuing introspective or practice-based methods, even when these approaches may yield the most relevant and impactful insights.

To overcome this obstacle, it is essential to build infrastructures that support and valorise alternative forms of scholarly output. This could include developing knowledge exchange networks to facilitate the sharing of practice-based research findings or creating new types of academic venues, such as conferences that acknowledge artefacts, prototypes, performances, and other non-traditional outputs as valid contributions to the field.

A significant step forward is the rise of initiatives like *Research through Design* (RtD), which demonstrate the potential for more inclusive definitions of valid research in design. These initiatives embrace introspective and practice-based methods that align more closely with the discipline's nature. Nevertheless, additional platforms like these are needed to encourage design researchers to explore and build scholarship grounded in introspective methods.

Embracing alternative academic outputs and recognising introspection as a valid research method could greatly enhance the impact of design research. By broadening the range of valued outputs and providing the necessary infrastructure, the design research community can create more opportunities for scholars to engage with introspective methods. This would lead to richer, more nuanced, and more relevant contributions to the field.

Furthermore, integrating introspective methods and alternative outputs could help cultivate the maturation of distributed design capacities within the very contexts where design practice occurs. This could open up new funding opportunities and foster more resilient and robust design practices, better equipped to address the complex challenges of contemporary society.

In conclusion, the value of introspection in design research is undeniable. By championing this approach and advocating for the recognition and support of alternative academic outputs, we can ensure that design research remains true to its roots as the "science of the specific," while contributing valuable insights that might otherwise be lost in the pursuit of conventional scientific legitimacy.

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