the little book of Designer's Existential Crises in 2022

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The Little Book of Designer's Existential Crises in 2022

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Acknowledgements

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What this little book tells you

By Lesley-Ann Noel

This Little Book began as a conversation between four Special Interest Groups (SIG) of the Design Research Society: the Pluriversal Design SIG, Global Health SIG, Sustainability SIG, SIGWELL and Education.

During our planning for the 2021 Festival of Emergence, in response to the many epistemolpgical, ontological and methodological changes of the profession over the last few decades, I jokingly said to my colleagues, 'well if you're not in existential crisis as a designer in 2021, maybe you're not doing it right'. This became the prompt for our rich conversation at the Festival, and later we extended the invitation to all the SIGs to respond to this provocation.

We wanted to know what were the existential crises of designers today? Was it the shift away from objects and artifacts? Was it the changing evaluation standards for design researchers and academics? Was it the complex social problems that designers were being asked to play a role in addressing? Was it the growing awareness of a misalignment between the theoretical grounding of design and one's personal philosophies? How are designers working through their crises? In this Little Book we share five reflections that responded to our prompt.

Leitão and Noel, from the Pluriversal Design SIG, reflect on their own existential crises in the field of social design, when they realised that the 'old ways of working were ineffective.' They share how they have moved beyond the crisis.

Jones, from the Education SIG, proposes a modification to the prompt that focuses on the awareness of existential crises, and the importance as educators of supporting students through these destabilizing crises that lead to transformation.

Boehnert, Dewberry, and Wilson, of the Sustainability SIG commit to expanding the scope of design for sustainability to ensure that there is a focus on social and climate justice and the wellbeing of both the human

and non-human alongside the more traditional ecological questions.

Petermans, Ozkaramanli, Tonetto and Poldma of SIGWELL look at design for wellbeing and address the critiques of happiness theories as being elitist. This SIG proposes that design can contribute to wellbeing across a wide range of populations.

Finally, Tsekleves, writes from the perspective of the Global Health SIG cautioning readers to consider inequality that is being created by the digital divide and asking them to reexamine the role that design can play in closing global health and wellbeing gaps in light of this inequity.

As you read, what are the existential crises that you recognize for designers?

How are the designers that you know reframing their practice?

If you’re not in an existential crisis as a designer in Social Design, you’re not doing it right!

By Renata Marques Leitao & Lesley-Ann Noel

Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group

And if you are in social design, we think you should be in an existential crisis right about now! If you’re not in an existential crisis as a designer in Social Change in 2021, you’re not doing it right!

Depending on when you first became a designer, the profession you are currently in may look radically different from the profession that you entered. What has changed around you?

Background

We are Lesley-Ann Noel and Renata Marques Leitao, co-chairs of the Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group. Our paths overlap in so many places, that it is no wonder that we are close friends. We were both educated in Brazil, in particular in the city of Curitiba in the mid-late 90s—by then an internationally recognised innovative city. We both went to graduate school in North America. We both came from design practice—Lesley is a product designer and Renata is a graphic designer. By the 2000s, we

both ended up in an area of design that professes to focus on Social Impact or Social Change, we can name it Social Design. We both had experience working in our local contexts, as well as outsiders in North America. We both worked for several years on collaborative projects with local craftspeople before entering our existential crisis. A crisis that led us to become design researchers focused on transforming design mindsets, assumptions, theories, and practices. A crisis that nudged us to our current work in the Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group.

Social Design and Prometheus complex

The 2000s was a time when initiatives to put designers' talent and skills into worthwhile use, instead of feeding consumerism, were gaining momentum. For instance, in 1999-2000, the manifesto of graphic designers "First Things First" was republished, in 2001, Design without Borders was founded, and in 2004, the d.school at Stanford University was founded. The widespread message was that design and designers could change the world. We have all heard that design could address intractable social problems, improve the quality of life of impoverished communities, lead to the empowerment of marginalised communities, increase equity and resilience, and possibly a whole host of other claims. Social design methods—such as Design Thinking, Human-Centered Design (HCD), and Double Diamond toolkits—have become widely popular not only with designers but with communities and non-profit organizations, public institutions, graduate programs in several academic fields, and so on (Akama, Hagen & Whaanga-Schollum 2019, Heller 2018; Shea 2012).

Despite our hubris, can design really change the world? After two decades of bold claims, we have to recognize that design's impact was limited at best —even if there are success stories. Moreover, significant social changes in the last two decades were not initiated by designers (in the conventional sense, trained in Eurocentric design schools).

Both of us started to practice social design thinking we would change the world. We were trained to think that focusing on the design of handicrafts and products for touristic or faraway export markets could lead to major changes in impoverished communities. We were encouraged to believe

that leading handicraft design and production processes would suddenly transform the lives of the people that we were working with.

The moment of crisis came with the realization that some of the old ways of working were ineffective. Moreover, they usually do not recognise the power, innovation, and agency of the partners and stakeholders. If you, as a designer were educated to think that you were the one with god-like control over a situation, the existential crisis can loom from the recognition that the people that you work with have as much power, creativity, and agency as you do. Despite all of your talk about facilitating community development, maybe this community does not actually need you to develop. What could be your role, if you are not dictating the process?

It seems that Social Designers have imagined themselves as Prometheus, the Greek God of Fire who stole the fire from the gods to gift it to humanity. Using our fabulous toolkits, designers were givers of enlightening fire to poor, oppressed, and marginalized people. We were also trained to address the wicked problems (Buchanan 1992, Irwin 2015). Nonetheless, some "wicked problems" social designers were addressing are manifestations of structural aspects of society (exclusion, oppression, assimilation, etc.) that were created by Design (or, at least, design helped shape them). In order words, instead of addressing the structural features, there was a tendency to frame the problem in terms of people's or communities' deficits or flaws that could be mitigated with design's enlightening fire.

But designers are not Prometheus. We are all fallible human beings. One aspect of design's existential crisis is acknowledging our shortcomings and understanding the importance of humility. Moreover, the "Prometheus" mindset fuels disempowerment and passivity, as it propagates a theory of change that only "experts" (aka people from the dominant group) have the power to create any change (Freire 2005; Leitão 2020; Tuck 2009). Furthermore, it might create a feeling of 'cultural inferiority' — the belief that the knowledge and skills of external experts are more valuable than what is produced within the community (Douglas 2004; Santos 2016).

We both have always believed in the value of non-Modern knowledge systems and the power of people to innovate and create solutions to the problems they are facing. Contrary to the widespread assumption that abundant resources foster innovation, we believe that, frequently, a lack

of resources triggers creativity. Because we came from the Global South, we witnessed that local innovation is often stifled by the influence of external experts that undermines the creative confidence of local (lay) designers. But how to know what people at the margins are producing? It is not necessary to be in crisis to understand that we are not always right.

The methodologies and methods we learned at the beginning of our careers did not respect difference and localisation. We are not talking about superficial (or cosmetic) cultural differences, but fundamental differences in value, meaning and knowledge systems, in the ways of making and interacting with our surroundings. How could we harness ontological differences as catalysts for design solutions?

Moving beyond the crisis

Moving beyond the crisis required the humility to see that the process can happen without us. We moved out of our crisis by recognizing that:

- we don't save a community by peddling more handicrafts.
- we can lean into our identities and those of the people that we work with, and these identities can influence and change the design process.
- the world-building capabilities that are inherent in the people that we work with.
- we can use our design abilities to lead generative conversations and not just to offer "solutions".
- That people at the margins have the power to generate their own social change, even if it does not look like what we might have envisioned.
- we needed to embrace people — their knowledges and our knowledges — and ways of constructing worlds instead of fixing people's (perceived) flaws.

Moving beyond our crisis took us to a much more creative and experimental place where we focus on self-determination, the autonomy of the communities, change from below, and radically adapting and remixing

methods. Yes, we still believe the tools of design can be very effective to catalyse agency and life projects—if they are used in a mindset of self-determination that recognises and engages with multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world.

Since the movement to decolonise design gained traction (Ansari 2019; Onafuwa 2018; Schultz et al. 2018; Tunstall 2013), many designers became more aware of the intimate connection between design, capitalism, oppression, and coloniality. And yet, how to move beyond criticism to a substantial transformation in our practices? Our existential crisis should lead to the brave and humble endeavour to design otherwise.

Design humility

Experimenting with a new practice means that we all are going to be clumsy and awkward at the beginning. Nobody can be fluent in a new practice from the start. Speaking a new language demands humility because we need a long way to reach fluency. The same is valid for other epistemologies, ways of being, ways of making, etc. Experimenting with alternatives means that we might look ridiculous sometimes. And that is exactly the work. Nobody can be (and look like) an expert on a real new path. Creating the new demands humility.

So we believe that we should welcome the existential crisis. Sit with the discomfort, and be open to new modes of design practice, moving away from modernist, normative, dominant culture methods of design practice. Design's existential crisis is also a crisis of control (or having to look like we are in control most times). We believe the new design that is emerging will be more humble and, because of this, much more transformational.

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If you’re not in an existential crisis as a designer in Design Education, you’re not doing it right!

By Derek Jones

Education Special Interest Group

The following text is based on a short presentation given during the DRS 2021 Festival of Emergence on the provocation: “If you’re not in an existential crisis as a designer in Design Education in 2021, you’re not doing it right!”

Stable state

“*A passive organism does not learn.*” (Dehaene, 2020).

I’d like to extend Donald Schön’s idea of a person as a learning system and apply it to individuals learning design or operating in design contexts. Schön first outlined the striking similarities between an organisation as a system and an individual as a learning system (Ramage, 2017; Schön, 1971). To summarise the idea, complex feedback (learning) systems have two states of operating. Firstly, normal operation, where conditions rarely challenge the system and it continues without change. Secondly, when a stable system encounters something abnormal (unknown variables, unsolvable problems or other settings where prior knowledge is of little

use) it destabilises in order to respond to the context / problem / prompt etc. and then adapt to a new stable state.

In cognitive neuroscience and learning this has a direct parallel in contemporary understandings of how we learn as complex cognition systems (Dehaene, 2020). Cognitively, we optimise our attention, thinking, and cognitive states in certain ways and in response to a variety of contextually constructed criteria – but always with a view to optimising our thinking wherever possible. That is, we like find the easiest way to do something and, the more we do something, the more we optimise and the better we get at taking lots of little shortcuts to make it even easier.

Over time, doing and thinking the same things gets easier and easier. When we come across a new thing, we engage in different cognition, increasing our energy use, until we find a way of dealing with the new thing in a more efficient way. We try to turn the new thing into a normal (optimised) thing.

Destabilised state

This helps explain why learning something really new (or very challenging in a familiar subject) is so difficult – it takes a lot of energy to overcome the preferred thinking habits because the system is looking for a new normal and trying to avoid a destabilised state. I'd also argue that a similar cognitive response happens in design cognition, where designers place themselves in deliberately destabilised states if they require new thinking.

As educators we have all experienced destabilised states – either as design students ourselves or seeing it in the students we teach. At some point in any learning journey in design a student comes across a personally challenging and unfamiliar moment that causes a genuine destabilisation of their thinking. Some destabilisations are stronger than others and for those that challenge our beliefs, assumptions and identity, can equate to an existential crisis. That is, some destabilisations are so fundamental in terms of changing our thinking that they change our being.

The need for transformation

Transformation and change are often argued to be a necessary part of any education in design. Wilson (2016) discuss transformations in students' as individual; and Hoskanson and McCluske (Hokanson and McCluske, 2016) refer to the changes to students thinking and creativity, a similar thing observed in distance design education (Jones, 2014), and Pable (2016) refers to the necessity of 'high pressure' transformative courses. Lanig summarises this well in his longitudinal study of distance design students, referring to their design curriculum as a series of crises (Lanig, 2019).

Unfortunately, some curricula valorise this process using a deficit position, where 'not being up to it' is still a threshold learning assessment criterion (Brown, 2012; Morrow, 2007). This may be because most framings of transformation relate to 'students' or 'design students' and not to people, persons, identities, or even being. Indeed, many educators will take their experiences and memories of transformation and assume that these are necessary conditions for design education – simply a thing to be replicated how it was presented to them.

But transformation and existential crisis does not have to be a negative experience or framed using a deficit model. Transformation can be a positive, albeit difficult, learning experience. Supporting students through such transformations is entirely possible and what some tutors do as part of their engagement with students (Webster, 2004, 2005). If transformation is the goal, I argue that destabilisation should be expected, meaning we must take responsibility for the consequences of this as part of the curriculum.

Consequences

I propose that one useful way to consider the consequences of destabilisation is through the DRS SIG themes brought together in the 2021 Festival of Emergence event and to use these as a mini-framework to introduce the scope of challenge. This is necessarily an outline sketch of the sort of issues that we should be considering as educators and is not presented as a complete list – merely a possible starting point. It's

also worth noting that Care as a concept in education has a number of parallels to some of these ideas (and a better researched body of work through feminist theory).

Mental and physical health (Global Health SIG)

There is an obvious, but rarely acknowledge, mental and physical aspect to any kind of destabilisation. A destabilised system operates at high states of activity and in learning and design, this is a form of cognitive arousal. Our brains use between 20-40% of our body's energy (Engl and Attwell, 2015), just to give a sense of the scale of activity, something that can be challenging to manage. Yet we rarely talk about these matters in design curricula – or, when we do, it's perhaps too late, addressing the symptoms of a problem. Designers regularly enter destabilised states of mind to engage in creative thinking and to do this efficiently and effectively takes practise and experience, hence why so much of design education remains grounded in experiential and constructed learning. Like an athlete, training through embodied and experiential methods is essential.

Even in practice, looking after the health of the organs and systems our design thinking relies on seems like it should be just as important as taking care of any other tool. I would argue that talking about, and taking seriously, topics such as cognitive stamina, mental health, embodied and affective states, should be something we do in any design curriculum. At the very least, we have to move away from deficit models of dealing with embodied health and especially existential crisis (e.g. such as survival of the fittest), and, ideally, moving to a care model that builds resilience and stamina, hence a more sustainable and diverse design community.

Wellbeing and personhood (SIGWell)

One interesting consequence of destabilisation is the extent to which personhood is challenged and changed. Sometimes such changes are necessary in a subject area. For example, in physics, how the world 'works' is often different to how we believe it does, and the shift in conception of reality required can be exceptionally difficult for students. This is also true in design, where there can be many moments of personal change because

of significant shifts in personal belief or challenges to conceptions of our world.

These destabilisations will not necessarily be consistent across students: one student's attitude toward wicked problems, for example, is likely to be very different to another's, hence the learning and change for both may be quite different. Hence, it is critical to acknowledge the effort and difficulty that such transformative learning involves to personhood: the time and adjustments needed and how these might vary from student to student. And, of course, care must be taken when pursuing a transformation that we ourselves believe to be needed –particularly when this belief is based on our own learning experiences without any critical reflexivity (or evidence!).

Plurality and identity (PluriSIG)

As already suggested, an easy way to deal with destabilisation is to give students a very stable alternative – to destabilise and then provide an alternative stable state to students. Many indoctrination and enculturation practices in design education work in this way and can give confidence to students that they are doing the 'right' things. When done well, this can support students in what can be a difficult learning experience.

Taking on some extrinsic stable state may be easy for some students but far harder for others depending on the prior conditions and assumptions behind the enculturation. Any dominant culture will have those students who will come to their learning more aligned and more prepared than others, whether this is across economic and social class structures, or across different cultures. But when taken too far, some indoctrination can dominate a student's thinking to such a degree that it is alienating or introduces high levels of cognitive dissonance – and that's before we consider what is lost when a dominant position replaces individual, contextualised ones.

I argue that where enculturation attempts to dominate and replaces a student's own cultures and values, without any reference to this happening, then, at the very least, there are questions to be asked about that curriculum. It may well be that for some extreme learning situations this is

somehow necessary, but the ethical, moral, and cultural consequences of this must be central to its design.

The above suggestions relate to what might be included in curricula and I end with a final suggestion on the spaces that should be left. As was noted in the discussion around this paper at the SIG event, not all students have the luxury of time and space to reflect on their learning, never mind recovering from the effort and consequences of learning crises. Having time and space in the curriculum for students to engage in change (an even crises) is an important, but often overlooked, part of their learning.

Hence, I would advocate a slight change to the starting proposition to reflect what we might need to consider in future design curricula:

If you're not aware that there are existential crises in design education, then you're not doing it right.

If you are aware of this and are not doing anything to support students in such crises, then you might want to look at that too.

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If you’re not in an existential crisis as a designer in Sustainable Design, you’re not doing it right!

Design for Sustainment

By Joanna Boehnert, Emma Dewberry, Garrath Wilson

Despite over 50 years of calls for action on ecological concerns, the design industry has not yet enacted a substantial response to the accelerating climate and ecological emergencies. Design institutions are slowly responding with attempts to bridge the gap between current design priorities and those that will enable the design of sustainable ways of living on the planet. The Design Research Society Sustainability Special Interest Group (DRS SUS-SIG) aims to facilitate responsive actions on a scale that could make a difference.

In the shadow of COP26, the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, the UK Design Council hosted ‘Design for Planet’ as a response to accelerating climate and ecological emergencies. Statements of support for sustainable agendas are being drafted across many design institutions. But the redesign of contemporary ways of living to meet ecological imperatives will not happen without the

active engagement of global design communities and the necessary structural support to enable large scale transformation action. Massive changes will be necessary within industry and education, creating new visions and objectives in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and more ambitious ecological work.

The DRS SUS-SIG is committed to expanding the remit of design for sustainability to be inclusive of issues of social and climate justice while working for transitions across domains and scales. Sustainability discourses in design have grown and diversified. Originally preoccupied with the remediation of industry processes and practices to drive resource efficiencies, doing more with less, the field has broadened to recognise a much wider range of ways that design theory and practice can generate ecological value and social justice. This period of history has also witnessed alarming decreases in planetary health, evidenced through the overshoot of many ecological 'planetary boundaries' such as a warming climate, ocean acidification, high levels of biodiversity loss and extinctions, and the erosion and loss of critical habitats. Alongside and equal to these physical impacts are a series of cultural ones found in the under-representation of voices from people with economic, health, security, and habitat poverties.

The position and power of design education and design research for sustainability in creating both strategic and practical positive impact is fractured. The definition of 'sustainability' is a case in point. Shifting the language and activity of sustainability from responses favouring amelioration, ecoservice logics and resource efficiencies, to one instead revealed through critical ecological and social value, proves challenging.

Misappropriation of the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' further complicate ways in which new knowledge and understanding can be adequately authenticated against pervasive green-washing, techno-fix reliance and oversimplifications of complex transition imperatives. We now face a critical, ecological turn. The crux of this shift for design research is the need to redefine this discipline space in transitionary times to create the ecological imagination of, and ways for design, as this century progresses.

The distinction between rigorous approaches to sustainable transitions and greenwashing discourses is a battleground in many design institutions. Outdated priorities, ideas and structures need to be challenged. The ways

of thinking and doing that led to our current crises are not fit for purpose. Yet ecologically engaged perspectives are still poorly understood by many.

Design activities are among those historically predicated on the linear resource throughput embedded in many products, services, and systems; all created to signify economic development and progress, where progress is valued for a privileged minority. How we create new ways of living - moving away from extractive and exploitative relationships between people and planet - is now a fundamental necessity.

Sustainability scholars describe ecologically engaged ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics. Here, the relational and ecological are emergent. We describe new structures of governance as rooted in the understanding that wellbeing and safety as a collective condition. The DRS SUS-SIG builds upon this scholarly work and reframes Design for Sustainability to engage with the fundamental questioning of how we use ecologically and critically engaged ideas to promote the wellbeing of both the human, the non-human, and the ecological.

The effects of climate warming and biodiversity loss uproot the traditional 'design for industry' proposition from its established knowledge and practice. This displacement enables an exploration of how the design of future sustainable ways of living could emerge from the transformation and reorganisation of human relationships within ecological systems. Design, in its multiple disciplines, must be transformed by ecological literacies and capacities to think strategically about the development of generative entanglements. New ecologically engaged design knowledge and practices must sit alongside both mature and other emerging areas of design research such as behaviour change, pluriversal design, wellbeing, and global health.

Knowledge systems as well as design practices are in transition to create possibilities for radical social change. Ecological, systemic, and transdisciplinary knowledge are a foundation for this transformation. Ways of knowing that viewed the only function of 'the environment' as a resource to be utilised (exploited) are the legacy of an intellectual tradition that dismissed both the environment (the biosphere and other species) and the interests of particular groups of people. These assumptions have also been embedded into traditional conceptions of 'good' design – often design devoid of considerations for ecological

and social justice boundaries. For this reason, standards, priorities, and practices must all engage in a process of transition to make viable future ways of living – what some design theorists now call sustainment.

Central to the concept of designing for sustainment is the need to challenge and extend current design knowledge and practice. We can see these changes in other disciplines. In economics for example, we see the rise in interest in ideas which position transactional life in ecological terms and ensure ecological externalities are fully costed and the needs of all protected, in how ideas of wealth and wellbeing are defined and nurtured.

In times of emergency, we often seek to rebuild what is familiar and tested. The overshoot of ecological boundaries means that this is no longer a viable approach. The appropriation of the sustainability agenda by those who will not enact urgently needed transformative change is a danger in design research, education and practice. The DRS SUS-SIG is part of a process of connection and reconstruction that promotes the value of creative, academic rigour in developing transformative new narratives, material, and infrastructures for the sustainment of human and non-human co-existence on our beautiful planet.

If you're not in an existential crisis as a designer focused on wellbeing, you're not doing it right!

By Deger Ozkaramanli, Tiiu Poldma, Leandro Tonetto, Ann Petermans

Introduction

Wellbeing has become a salient issue, often on many countries' political agendas as a priority to stimulate prosperity while safeguarding the pro-tection of the planet. The creation of the UN 2030 Sustainable Develop-ment Goals (SDGs) involves 17 goals for health and prosperity[1]. And yet, emerging natural and social threats such as public health crises, wars, floods, and famine are disproportionately affecting poorer populations. These circumstances are an existential threat to the capacity of vulner-able people in their quest to live well. Based on current research and experiences at DRS SIGWELL, we argue that happiness is a fundamental human value (as opposed to a privilege) for wellbeing, and that Design for Wellbeing (DfW) can contribute to the happiness of vulnerable people and their communities in supportive ways that work for them. At the same time, we are painfully aware of the critique that DfW could be considered 'elitist'. In this short piece, we respond to this critique and outline research insights that might expand the impact of DfW on vulnerable people and their communities.

Critique

As the concept of 'happiness' becomes increasingly contested in popular culture (e.g. a soft drink commercial promising 'happiness in a bottle'), happiness theories have also attracted scholarly criticism for being elitist[2]. Associated fields, such as positive psychology, offer an alternative view on the potential and prerequisites of happiness based on rigorously studying how satisfied people feel about their life and how they measure their own wellbeing[3]. This view goes beyond understanding distress and disorder. While positive psychology does not deny the need to address the happiness of vulnerable populations, it has so far refrained from discussing the feasibility of implementing happiness theories in settings where basic life needs are threatened. This scientific gap is further exposed by the criticism that most positive psychology researchers are affluent, white, middle-aged scholars. Consequently, this might cast doubts on the applicability of this research across gender, class, and culture divides, although a number of cross-cultural studies do exist[4].

Design for wellbeing with vulnerable communities

The 'elitism' critique has so far attracted little scholarly discussion in DfW research. Therefore, the question of 'how to promote the happiness of vulnerable communities' remains largely unaddressed. The challenges involved in designing with such communities are undeniable. Their immediate needs are about fundamental issues such as dealing with highly infectious environments, creating spaces to be called 'home', finding employment, or enduring recurrent violence. Under such circumstances, positive psychology[5] and positive design[6] could be seen as elitist approaches by some researchers, possibly because the theory commonly discusses how to foster excellence in life, as opposed discussing how to promote happiness of those whose basic life needs are unmet. Although some approaches mention and cite societal issues and contextual variables, we argue that DfW methods are yet to be (re-)shaped to explain 'how to' embrace and respond to design questions involving vulnerable communities.

In fact, DfW research in practice shows both the need and the value of doing research with people in vulnerable contexts. In such research pro-

jects, we see an opportunity for designers to draw more heavily from participatory design approaches that consider subjective social contexts. Without trying to be exhaustive in what follows, we highlight three insights distilled from working in close collaboration with vulnerable communities.

1. Doing design 'on the ground'

Subjective well-being denotes the extent to which people themselves believe or feel that their lives are going well[7]. Consequently it is often assessed based on self-reports[8]. Inspired by that, there is an opportunity for designers to design with people, to understand their needs and to avoid adopting biased takes on design. Indeed, for DfW to be relevant for populations at risk, designing solutions "on the ground" with the community provides both solutions for people and awareness of the valuable role that design plays in solution-finding and collaborative practices that empower people within their particular situation.

> For example, in a parallel design studio (Belgium and Canada), students of interior architecture were introduced to a practical design problem: designing for innovative housing and providing spaces for social connection for older persons living in a busy city center with the help of design strategies[9]. Throughout the semester, students worked in close collaboration with future end users so they could integrate their concerns, wishes and needs in their design programs. The end jury was hosted at the future living site, in the presence of the end users themselves.

2. Focusing on the immaterial – experiences, activities, and strengths

Research supports the idea that happiness is more a matter of pleasurable and meaningful experiences than a matter of material products[10]. Design can still contribute in this respect, i.e. by fostering happiness-enhancing activities and designing for experiences[11]. Active user involvement is considered a key characteristic of designing for wellbeing[12] and should ideally already be taken into consideration in the design process. This holds particularly true when designing for groups who might be faced with ad-

ditional socio-demographic challenges in order to truly understand their needs, (manifestation of) goals and nature of promising interventions.

For example, a group of graduate students received the task of designing to promote a person's wellbeing by reinforcing her main character strengths. She is a 25-year-old information technology professional, diversity activist, and transgender woman who reports being socially challenged by a trans-phobic society. She responded to the questionnaire 'VIA Character Strengths'[13] which indicated that creativity, honesty, humor, and kindness are her main forces. Throughout the design process, she interacted with the designers to envision ways to foster such strengths in everyday life. The resulting design is a service (including a personal brand and a digital platform) that would help empower underprivileged minorities by teaching them how to use technology at work. The design facilitates the use of creativity, as the platform enables her to develop authorial content; honesty, as her personal branding translates transparently her motives in teaching; humor, as her services promote a positive, uplifting perspective on diversity; and kindness, as she works towards social inclusion[14].

3. Focusing on dilemmas (vs. problems)

From the perspective of subjective wellbeing, experiencing recurrent dilemmas have been associated with, among other symptoms, high levels of negative affect and psychosomatic complaints[15]. Talking about dilemmas can be a valuable starting point to get to know a vulnerable target group. As everybody experiences dilemmas in daily life, people often open up effortlessly when talking about what they want (one side of a dilemma), and why they couldn't/shouldn't/wouldn't achieve or obtain what they want (the other side of the dilemma)[16]. This forms a common language among research participants to express needs, goals and perceived obstacles. In this co-creative process, it is crucial to immerse into the environment, e.g. by working with organizations such as community groups or foundations, who can facilitate a collaboration between the target group and the design research team.

For example, in an ongoing community project in collaboration with

a local non-governmental organization, we experiment with various techniques to help low socio-economic status families to explore and help reveal each other's dilemmas in a participatory session (e.g. trying a new job vs. continuing to receive unemployment benefits). Unpacking daily struggles through the lens of recurring personal dilemmas reveals need patterns such as social belonging, confidence, and (self-)compassion. This guides addressing the root causes of problems rather than the problems themselves (e.g. finding a job for a single mother can help only in the short term, whereas, addressing dilemmas regarding her insecurities during job-search might be a better strategy)[17].

As per these insights and examples discussed above there is a need to design in close collaboration with concerned users in particular contexts where they are both active and involved. Focusing on immaterial aspects and dilemmas are promising avenues to design for wellbeing.

Conclusion

Looking at the challenges faced by our societies today, it is clear that much remains to be done when designing for wellbeing. In the end, both designers and researchers are interested in making life better for the people they're designing with and for. Based on the above projects, we argue that DfW can contribute to living well across a wide range of populations, including vulnerable communities. Methodologically speaking, this might require a mindset-shift from all people involved: it is important to give vulnerable individuals a voice by decentralizing the role of the designer / researcher, while simultaneously challenging and reframing one's research and design questions from the perspective of the community.

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If you're not in an existential crisis as a designer in Health, you're not doing it right!

By Emmanuel Tsekleves

We are now, more than ever, aware of the social challenges that face us globally, keeping healthy is at the top of the list.

Over the past thirty years designers and design researchers have increasingly began to consider the wider implications of design. Designers began to recognise how what they designed could bring harm to people and the planet, thus design's social and moral responsibility becomes a discussion point. Alongside this heightened awareness of the role of design, the context in which we design and what is designed has changed rapidly. No longer is it products and material goods, designers design services and along the way the recognition that the user is central to the process, the rise in user centred design, in co-design and participatory design has broadened the responsibility of the design team to include all stakeholders.

Whilst internationalisation and globalisation has raised understanding of people in several countries, how they work (i.e. slave labour, child labour), levels of poverty, levels of resource use (Brazilian rainforests and sustainable food sources) and more. Design has to consider social, environmental as well as economic factors in the creative process of

creating all products and services. This extension of scope and of recognition of design responsibility, suggests that designers must find a way of determining their position and stance on many critical issues in the arenas in which we work. If, for instance designers do have a responsibility to design products and services for the common good, then how do they go about determining the principles and values by which they should work.

Unlike the medical profession designers do not have any form of ethical oath, such as the principle of Non-maleficence - to not be the cause of harm or to promote more good than harm. In the context of health and wellbeing what is good design, and to what degree is it the responsibility of designer to promote healthy behaviours and enhance wellbeing?

Responsibility shift: from state to person

The shift from patient-centred to person-centric healthcare is now evident in the literature and has been accelerated due to information access and personal health monitoring (McCormack et al, 2017). This, followed by the high financial healthcare costs associated with the management of chronic diseases has led to the emergence of self-management healthcare (Pulvirenti et al, 2014).

A shift of healthcare services from hospitals into people’s homes and the community. Although, on one hand, it can help empower individuals to take more control of their healthcare provision, one should question that the motivations behind this shift are not necessarily based on what is best for the individual person, but on the financial burden to healthcare systems (Russell et al, 2018). Furthermore, managing one’s condition through self-management requires digital skills, the relevant know-how and resources to do so effectively. Without appropriate training people, especially from the most vulnerable socio-economic groups (who are at higher risk of developing chronic health conditions) would be left at their own mercy.

Health Inequality, digital divide, gender equality

Researchers have reported that social inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in the way people live on a day-to-day basis, encouraging the development of disease and unhealthy behaviours (Woodward & Kawachi, 2002). Also, the environment where one lives and spends most of their time (for example at home, work, school, etc) play a major role in creating or maintaining health inequalities (Ghani et al, 2021). There are significant inequalities in health not only within but also between countries as well (Marmot, 2005).

Apart from socio-economic factors, health inequalities are also affected by gender inequalities (Ghani et al, 2021) as well as racial and ethnic inequalities (Mitchell, 2019) especially in South Africa, the UK and the USA (Evandrou et al, 2016). Although digital health systems are increasingly becoming part of the healthcare provision globally, still large parts of populations, especially in the Global South lack access to the Internet with mobile phones being often the only means of connecting to the Internet (Makri, 2019).

Furthermore, another inequality is being created by the digital divide between the young and the old. With older people being less likely to use the Internet and other digital technologies, so is the potential to benefit from the use of health apps, excluding them from accessing digital health services (Gitlow, 2014). This forms another barrier for seniors and minority groups, widening further the divide (Neter & Brainin, 2012).

Conclusion

Now that we have experienced a major global pandemic, we have looked at ways of living that have reduced pollution and use of natural resources, yet we have poor global health and declining wellbeing. How do we reframe the role of design for digital health globally to catch up on these and to act with total responsibility for the future of humans and the planet?

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Summary

By Emmanuel Tsekleves

Over the past thirty years designers and design researchers have increasingly began to consider the wider implications of design. Designers began to recognise how what they designed could bring harm to people and the planet, thus design's social and moral responsibility has become a discussion point.

Alongside this heightened awareness of the role of design, the context in which we design and what is designed has changed rapidly. It is within this context that this Little Book is situated.

This Little Book has outlined the the existential crises of designers today in social design, education design, sustainability design wellbeing design and health design research. It has provided reflections and raised questions that each design researcher and practitioner should begin to ask.

We hope and envisage that the Little book will inspire you to reflect on the existential crises that you recognize as a designer and provide a starting point for reframing your practice.

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The Little Book of Designer’s Existential Crises in 2022