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## ABSTRACT

*Immigration gives rise to global and local changes that challenge social norms and affect our lives. While the phenomenon of immigration has begun to attract the attention of design researchers, the actual input of immigrants on setting the design agenda is marginal. By involving immigrants in design processes, we emphasise designers' responsibility for social inclusion. In this context, the research question that we aim address here is how to engage immigrants in participatory design research.*

*To answer this question, we present a comparative study of two research approaches we applied in Helsinki (Finland) while collaborating with immigrants on two design projects. Pursuant to this study, it is our view that design researchers working with immigrants must take into account the question of emotional involvement. As design researchers, we often tackle issues of social responsibility, too often ineffectively; with the necessary support, the contribution of design researchers could be more socially relevant.*

*Keywords: design methods, immigration, participatory design, co-design*

## INTRODUCTION

Immigration gives rise to global and local changes that challenge social norms and affect our lives. Issues of migration are an increasingly important part of the political agenda and of the changing landscape of cities. With a few exceptions (see e.g. Clarke & Wright, 2012, Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2012; Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013, Bobeth et al, 2013), design researchers fail to engage immigrants in design processes. This paper is based on the premise that design can be "understood as a form of intervention in which a particular social order may be confronted with others" (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013). If we intend to undertake transformative action and to include people from different backgrounds, it is necessary to find ways to involve immigrants in design processes. In this paper, which is framed by the notion of social design, we emphasise the need for designers to take responsibility for social inclusion (Kimbell and Julier, 2012).

One of the underlying assumptions of this paper is that, by involving immigrants in design processes, designers further social inclusion. Our intention here is not to explain the benefits of including immigrants in design projects, but rather to outline participatory design processes that foster collaboration. More specifically, we present two cases and describe the situations and the techniques we used in relation to factors like emotions that are pertinent to the process itself. Lammers (2005) suggests ways to be attentive and self-revelatory listeners in order to create feelings of reciprocity and empathy. In the two cases we present, we

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analyse our interactions with immigrants and propose ideas that could have a positive influence on the collaboration between design researchers and immigrant communities.

## **MIGRATION STORIES FROM EAST HELSINKI: OURCITY**

Under the auspices of World Design Capital Helsinki 2012, a group of independent architects and designers undertook the OurCity project. The project took place in Meri-Rastila, a multicultural suburb of East Helsinki. The aim of OurCity was to democratise design processes and to empower local residents to influence the redevelopment of their area (Salgado & Galanakis, 2014; Rizzo & Galanakis, 2014). In order to develop a grassroots planning method as an alternative to the top-down method used by the city planning office, a team from the OurCity group conducted a series of workshops and other events in which different immigrant communities were explicitly invited to take part. The specific goal of this exploratory workshop presented here was to establish a relationship with the area's Kurdish community and to learn about their relationship to the neighbourhood.

The workshop was conducted by Dina Fuad-Luke who is a community worker, Michail Galanakis who is an architect and researcher, and Mariana Salgado who is a design researcher. The languages used in the event were Kurdish, Finnish, and English. The three-hour workshop was held at the Kurdish association in Meri-Rastila on April 28, 2012. Participants in the workshop were fifteen women of different ages who knew each other well; some were even related. Food was an integral part of the workshop's planning, and the women had prepared traditional Kurdish food. After the introductions, we presented the idea of the tree-of-life and offered personal examples. By introducing ourselves not only as members of the OurCity project but also as individuals and by including information about our family life and immigration backgrounds, we were able to create a reciprocal understanding and a sense of trust.

The tree-of-life is a longstanding tool in narrative therapy and community work. It is a way to enable vulnerable people to speak about their lives in order to feel stronger. In the process, participants draw their own trees-of-life and speak of their roots, skills and knowledge, as well as their hopes and dreams and the people and places that have been important to their lives (Denborough, 2008). Our literature research revealed no precedent for the use of the tree-of-life in the field of design research.

In presenting the trees-of-life they had drawn (Fig. 1), participants told evocative stories. Discussions grew serious at times despite small children running about and music clips showing on the TV. There were affinities between the testimonies. One seemed particularly representative: "In my home country, I had to escape from the police. In Finland, you are not free even though you are not in prison. When I came here I got a new life and I smiled at everyone. But Finnish people keep their distance and so I do not feel free. Real freedom for me is in Kurdistan. Freedom is in the mind and in the feelings".

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After this first part of the workshop, we set the table together and enjoyed the food our participants had prepared. We then proceeded with the second task which made use of the illustrated cards from Dixit, a popular board game. All the cards were placed on the table and each participant had to pick two. The first card would describe the person's current situation in Meri-Rastila or in Finland, while the second would describe how the person sees herself in the future. Participants attached their cards to blank pieces of paper and used colored papers to write stories connecting the cards to their lives (Fig.2).



*Fig. 1. Sukran Vahbiye and her tree-of-life. (left-hand side image)*

*Fig. 2. Presenting the stories and the cards.<sup>1</sup> (right hand side image)*

After the workshop, the three organisers conducted a session that revolved around the drawings, the posters with the cards, and the stories told by participants. We had no predefined hypothesis or fixed perspective on this material and, as we went through it, we wrote down our own reactions on post-it notes. Later, we placed the post-it notes in groups to create what Beyer and Holtzblatt (1999) call "an affinity diagram". We took notes based on these clusters.

The techniques employed during and after our workshop were not the only factors that encouraged the fluency of the conversation and the data gathered. Even though we were three "outsiders" with video cameras and sound recorders, we managed to create a comfortable atmosphere for participants. Indeed, the process of creating trust had started before the workshop when Fuad-Luke negotiated with Fatma Yasa, a Kurdish woman central to organising the group of

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<sup>1</sup> We publish the two photos from our workshop after we obtained permission to do so.

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participants. Yasa acted as a facilitator during the workshop, translating from and into Kurdish. Because participants knew each other from before, they felt free to talk about their personal immigration stories, frustrations and feelings. Furthermore, since none of the members of the OurCity group was originally from Finland, it was easier to criticise the host society. Finally, and crucially, the workshop was held on *their* turf; we were the guests. All of these factors created a sense of joint creation and of reciprocity.

This workshop had a direct impact on OurCity's design agenda. Participants expressed their frustrations regarding social services, ranging from healthcare to employment agencies. The workshop results were taken into account in the design of a survey that the community worker on our team conducted afterwards, a survey regarding immigrants' access to social services (Fuad-Luke, 2012). After the workshop, participants collaborated on other activities organised by the OurCity project, specifically a multicultural fashion show and culture festival and the OurCity exhibition held at the project's close at a cultural centre in East Helsinki.

## **MIGRATION JOURNEYS TO HELSINKI: STANDING IN SOMEONE'S SHOES**

This case study focuses on mapping and visualising immigrants' experiences through service journeys by means of touch-point cards and emoticons. This preliminary study was geared to collecting information on the state of public services for immigrants' relocation experiences in the host country, services like, for example concerning obtaining a residence permit, registering at the local police station, finding a job, and learning the language. The visualisation of the service journeys included services that interviewees used before and after coming to Finland and to Helsinki. The study revolved around four themes: experiences before moving to the country, experiences upon arrival, interaction with services, and integration. The main focus was services after interviewees' arrival in Finland and their degree of satisfaction with those services at the different physical locations (e.g. registration office) and touchpoints (e.g. websites, information materials) encountered.

Helena Sustar an immigrant researcher with a design background, conducted the interviews—mostly at the university campus—in English. The study lasted from January to April, 2014. In total, seven immigrants (two men and five women) were interviewed. All of the interviewees, who ranged in age from twenty-seven to forty-one, held university degrees. Their cultural backgrounds and countries of origin varied, with interviewees from Russia, Slovenia, Japan, Afghanistan, China, as well as two individuals of Finnish/Swedish descent who were born outside Finland. The interviewees were recruited by means of the researcher's contacts and acquaintances.

Sustar asked each participant to think of a favourite object before the interview, an object evocative of the person's home country. Telling the story about the object selected served as an icebreaker. In many cases, participants became nostalgic. Participants were then asked to map out their service journeys by placing touch-point cards and emoticons on a blank sheet of paper. A set of touch-point cards (some of them blank) represented the image and name of a



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interviewee said "I am foreign everywhere. It is really hard to settle down because as soon as people know me they don't consider me part of their group".

## 1. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

For this paper, we selected these two cases because their similarities allow us to reflect on the practice of conducting participatory activities. In both cases, we engaged participants in the act of making or building something. Rather than present interviewees with a set of predetermined questions, we provided them with certain materials in order to inspire conversation. This process is rooted in the participatory design tradition of what Brand et al (2013, 155) call "making together": "[W]hen making we use our hands for externalising and embodying thoughts and ideas in the form of (physical) artifacts. Such artifacts might describe future objects or provide views on future ways of living". The open-ended techniques employed in this participatory process challenge design researchers to be sensitive and to reflect. A degree of improvisation is required as the researcher must be aware of the process underway. We agree with Light and Akama (2012, 61) when they state that participatory methods cannot be seen in isolation from the person or people engaged in them. They are "[m]ethods and techniques [that] require embodiment".

In both cases, we communicated by making. The process of enquiry was bound to reflections on building together formulated during the process itself. The first case entailed not only drawing the trees-of-life and selecting cards, but also eating together. The second case revolved around an intimate discussion through the process of building a customer journey, a visual representation of participants' experience immigrating to Finland. In both cases, the methods were implemented at the beginning of the design process, that is, at the stage of enquiry into what mattered to participants. Props, images, and open questions triggered a wide range of emotional responses, which in turn, created a space of intimacy that facilitated deep reflection.

## 2. DISCUSSION

On the basis of these cases, it appears that our mindset, as researchers, and the way the meetings were staged were more important to determining the effectiveness of the design research than the tools and techniques per se. Critical to the success of the projects were recruitment efforts, group dynamics, facilitators' attitudes, and the choice of venue for the meetings. In fact, many decisions regarding the design of a participatory research evade strict instructions on techniques and implementation, and define the research context and therefore, the type of discussions that eventually do or don't take place. In both cases, participants were asked about their migration stories in settings that were either familiar to them or neutral. As design researchers, we listened to participants' voices, opinions, and reflections on their migration experiences. The techniques we used demonstrated to us that working with people from different cultural backgrounds is not straightforward and that the atmosphere created influences results, perhaps even more than the techniques themselves.

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Huybrechts et al (2012, 31) suggest that the hybrid nature of mapping workshops is due to diversity on two levels: 1) the composition of the groups that participate in the workshop (homogeneous or heterogeneous) and 2) the differences in viewpoints on the topics addressed. This hybridity must be considered in organising design research workshops or interviews not only by including people from different cultural background, but also by taking into account other demographic parameters such as age, gender, educational level, language skills, and social status. In both cases, we worked solely with immigrants which, on the one hand, afforded greater intimacy and ease in openly criticising the host society. On the other hand, we failed to foster intercultural understanding. In both our cases, participants were rather homogeneous. As a result, though the scope of our research and its results may be limited, they do represent participants and, as such, merit consideration.

In both cases, strong emotions were triggered due to several factors: the visualisations, the relationships within participants, the overall atmosphere, the open-ended nature of the questions, and the content of the discussion, namely migration stories. As design researchers, we are not trained in dealing with emotionally charged situations during research or in analysing data that considers emotional factors. While it is positive for people to reflect on their life stories and to talk about their aspirations, it is, in our view, ethically questionable to incite the resurfacing of painful events. Rigorous thinking about ethical issues can make our research more reflexive and make us more proactive regarding the emotions our research may stir up in both participants and ourselves.

While the techniques and context of our fieldwork encouraged reflection on the personal lives of participants, we are not sure how to utilise these reflections for the benefit of the participants themselves. We do know, however, how to use these reflections as input in the design process to the benefit of participants and society as a whole. In Crossley's (2003, 44) words, "developing deep personal insight into people's experiences and communicating emotionally charged design visions broadens the role of the designer in the possibilities of developing a product, service or brand".

It was exhausting and often overwhelming to be keenly aware of the emotions of participants. Susan McDonald (2003) is a researcher who studied the legal needs of abused immigrant women. She concluded that issues of empathy are unavoidable in participatory research that empowers women insofar as the boundaries between the researcher and the researched are blurred in the process of building emotional and intellectual connections. Dealing with emotions in participatory research is never straightforward. In researching marginalised people, feelings can't but run high. It is the researchers' responsibility to be able to tackle emotional issues of inter-subjectivity, empathy, self-disclosure, and vulnerability pertinent to all stakeholders, including themselves. This holds true for participatory design research involving—in this case—immigrants: emotions, even when they are controversial, are unavoidable, and design researchers must look into other fields to learn how to deal with and report on emotions, rather than "push them under the carpet".

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Dindler and Iversen (2014) claim that personal and professional relationships are crucial to design outcomes and that designers' responsibilities include awareness of this dynamic. This is the *relational* expertise of designers. As designers, we often pay more attention to games, props and "the tangible design objects" used to support participatory activities than to the factors discussed here. This "designer" bias may be due to designers' longstanding concern with visual artifacts. In the context of research on immigrant experience, Hynes (2013:13) asserts that "[i]nequalities of political rights, economic positions, psychosocial positions, gender and other social and cultural factors between the researcher and the researched all required attention". In these cases, methodological decisions are only one part of the process; another consists of the contextual factors and the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Significantly, we didn't offer monetary compensation to participants or interviewees, though, in the case of the workshop, we did pay for the meal we shared. This "non-compensation" policy —popular in Finnish academia— is in keeping with the findings of anthropologists that providing payment may distort the research process and generate bias among participants. Nonetheless, we agree with Lammers (2005) that the issue of "giving" needs to be revisited, especially in the cases of long-term relationships with immigrants in an ongoing design or participatory research project. We were not comfortable not paying participants for their time, their stories, and their commitment. Indeed, "non-compensation" ultimately reproduces some of the social inequalities that our projects attempt to eliminate.

The participatory design activities reviewed in this article support the prospect of working with immigrants in the design of products and services. They are particularly useful in interaction with immigrants because they are largely visual, rather than language based. Non-language communication is key not only because participants are communicating in a language not their own, but also because of the emotional nature of the issue of immigration. Like Brand et al. (2013), we believe that there is room for further methodological research on "hard-to-reach" communities like immigrants. Such research would further understanding of the impact of cultural differences on participatory design processes.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

If we consider design a question of "problem-defining" rather than "problem solving" (Kalantidou & Fry, 2014, 5), including immigrants in participatory design processes is key to transformative actions capable of producing social change. Therefore, how we frame our research encounters with immigrants merits further analysis, as do issues of the generation and collection of field data and research outcomes.

The methodological concerns discussed here are tied to sensitive ethical issues that design researchers cannot avoid if they hope to design *with* immigrants. We agree with Lee Crossley (2003, 42) when he states that "[...] little attention is paid to the softer aspects of how we experience daily interaction of mood,



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emotion and feelings". Paying attention to issues of trust, empathy, personal and professional relationships and ethics are key to enriching design visions. Our research falls into the category of designing with "the other" and recognising design as a social practice.

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