Issues of power and representation: adapting positionality and reflexivity in community-based design

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Abstract:	Increasingly designers from an array of different disciplinary backgrounds work in international and community development, yet design education rarely prepares them for the challenges and roles in this context. The article reflects on issues of power and representation during design research in The Gambia by adapting reflexivity and positionality which are key concepts established in development studies. Reflections are based on research carried out in The Gambia since 2010 which is comprised of phases of immersion, mapping and co-design. They provide in-depth insights currently lacking in literature that demonstrate the value of reflexivity and positionality to iterate design roles and methods in community-based design. Whilst not suggesting particular teaching methods, the article proposes the integration of these concepts into existing structures to better prepare students for increasingly common futures in the workplace. Broader themes that emerge and can be adapted to different design contexts include building trust, entanglement in power dynamics between different actors, personal vulnerability as well as the need to challenge problems as starting points for design interventions.

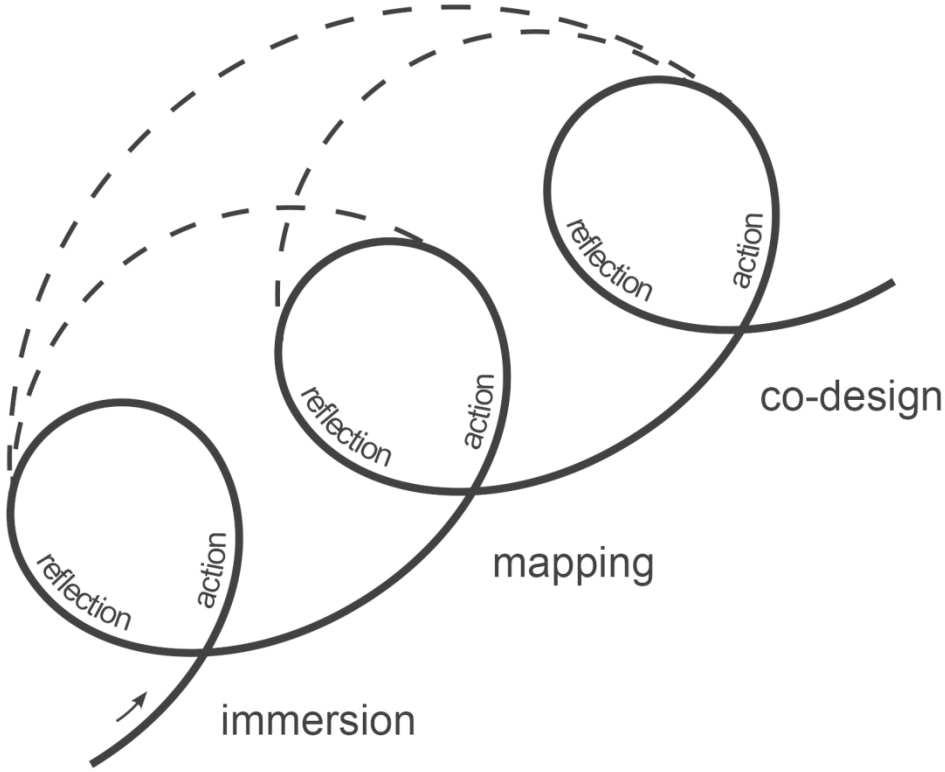

Fig. 1: Schematic of action-research framework

146x117mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Fig 2: Workshop participants produce an asset map of individuals, institutions and places

509x338mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Fig. 3 Local women envisioning energy futures during co-design workshop

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1 Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing number of designers working in international and local community development (AfH 2006 and 2012; Pilloton 2009; Aquilino 2011; Smith 2007, 2011 and 2017). Higher education produces graduates that will ultimately work in these contexts as practitioners and researchers, but does not adequately prepare students for the particular challenges and roles, as their degrees are focused on specific areas such as product design or architecture. As a result, 'there's still a huge number of working mid-career designers and design educators […] who don't understand the role of power,' and 'this gap in understanding may be getting passed on in our classrooms and in our studios' (Aye 2017). The danger is that designers are left to learn by trial and error, experimenting in vulnerable communities and designing well-intended but inappropriate outcomes. The unintended consequence is that work which sets out to *design for the real world* (Papanek 1985) fails, and instead turns into a form of design imperialism (Nussbaum 2010).

While there are examples of higher education institutions providing guided experiences for students to work in international and/or community development (e.g. Mitchell, Patwari and Tang

2010), it is disproportionate to suggest a complete refocus of higher education design curricula which are first and foremost intended to deliver on learning outcomes of specific courses. Instead, there is an opportunity to adopt key concepts already established in other disciplines into existing module structures and student learning experiences such as live projects and reflective practice.

Social sciences, in particular development studies, have a long history of working in international development contexts and offer important lessons for situated practice and research. This paper adapts the feminist development concepts of positionality and reflexivity to reflect on design research in The Gambia and in turn demonstrate the value of these concepts to design education.

Since what is known as 'the reflexive turn,' feminist development researchers have used 'the self to generate insights, establish patterns, and bring the voice of their research subjects to light' (Venkatesh 2012). To be reflexive, the researcher or practitioner reflects for example on personal attitudes, values or belief systems and how these influence the way we interpret and experience reality (Chambers 2012, 8). Interrogating the self, the design processes we employ and what and how we are represented in turn enable us to critically examine 'power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation' (Sultana 2007).

In doing so, the designer rejects the paradigm of objectivity in knowledge production and instead recognizes and takes responsibility for the 'I' in research and practice (Shacklock and Smyth 1998).

Closely linked to reflexivity are considerations of positionality. This term is used to describe people's social standing or representation as influenced by personal characteristics such as gender, marital status, age, level of education, ethnicity and even personality (Berger 2015; England 1994; Moser 2008). Positionality is based on fluid relationships and changes over time depending on who we engage with and to what end (Ateljevic et al. 2005).

Different design disciplines are slowly beginning to recognise the importance to critically self-reflect on issues of power and representation in participatory and co-design (Kettley, Kettley, and Lucas 2017). As Akama (2017, 272) points out: 'design expresses social priorities and values' that in turn shape the impact designers have on the world. Therefore, designers ought to reflect on the values, attitudes and assumptions they have to carefully negotiate power relations and methods during the design process. However, to date, the field of design lacks in-depth examples to demonstrate the value of these concepts and why they should be covered in design education. To help close this gap, this article provides a personal reflection on issues of power and representation encountered during design research in The Gambia.

It thereby offers concrete examples from the field whilst extracting broader lessons that are applicable in other community-based design contexts.

2 Methodology

As a researcher I have been conducting fieldwork in the Gambian community of Kartong since 2010 using design methods to explore energy transitions and the role of the designer in this international development context.

Field expeditions have ranged from one week to three months and included visits during different times of the year (dry/ rainy season, Ramadan, etc.) to avoid so-called 'season blindness' (Chambers 2012). My fieldwork is based on a flexible design action research framework, which is comprised of immersion, mapping and co-design phases and corresponding reflections (Fig. 1).:

The objective of immersion is to gain empathy, in-depth understanding of the local context and ultimately what can be described as 'actionable insight' (Brown 2009, 45). Laurel ed. (2003, 166) talks of 'intense immersion' where 'spending time observing, interviewing and participating in the multi facets of a subject's life' help the designer gain empathy. Here, immersion is understood as living with and participating in the life of local people, who are not 'subjects' but potential collaborators in later co-design stages. While I have been able to immerse myself regularly for the past decade, profound insight can also be

gathered through much shorter immersive experiences where the challenges described below remain much the same (Chambers 2012, 52).

Mapping refers to both spatial maps and visual abstractions of otherwise unseen information (Brook and Dunn 2013). In this research, mapping has also played a role in building relationships, especially in the early stages of the research (see section 3.1).

Finally, co-design is understood as a partnership between design professionals and members of the community, where the latter also take on the role of designers. To date this has included co-design workshops on energy futures and the facilitation of learning from other initiatives through visits to established energy projects in different parts of The Gambia. Most recently I facilitated a number of design workshops in July 2019, which were aimed at women and young men typically less represented in local decision-making processes.

Reflecting on immersion, mapping and co-design, this paper specifically explores emerging issues of power and representation. As such, it shares important insights gained from fieldwork in The Gambia and highlights the value of understanding power relations and using a reflexive approach when designing in both international (and local community) development contexts.

3.1 Building trust and moving towards insider status

Whenever I visit The Gambia now, I am hosted by a family in Kartong, a community located on the country's southern border with Senegal. Immersion enables me, as well as accompanying students and colleagues, to participate in local life and so gain empathy of changing practices, such as the way people consume energy. Immersion has been crucial to understand how wider socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political and socio-ecological dimensions have and continue to shape everyday life and therefore how design proposals fit into or challenge existing structures.

Furthermore, immersion itself has also become an important strategy in building and maintaining trust over a long period of time and moving towards what is sometimes referred as '*insider status*' (Roberts 2014). On the one hand, physical participation or 'embodiment' in daily chores such as watering gardens or pounding rice is akin to designers acting out scenarios during prototyping (Coffey 1999). On the other hand, being observed by local people whilst physically participating in these chores has also positively challenged their perceptions of working with a *toubab* (white person) and associated power relations (Schiffer 2016).

However, being invited into people's lives and being able to participate in the first place, initially relied on a process of establishing personal connections. As an 'outsider' I was introduced to The Gambia through white British academics and

expatriates (Merriam et al. 2001. During brief visits to the country both prior to and at the beginning of the research I stayed in various hotels, followed by three months where I lived in a holiday home owned by a British national in the community of Madina Salam located several kilometers north of Kartong. I saw this as a practical step towards being closer to local Gambians whom I did not yet have a relationship with. Unfortunately, it resulted in myself, a white Westerner, being seen as a stereotypical toubab who could provide financial and material wealth. I found almost daily encounters with local children and adults (as well as the occasional Westerner) asking for money or material goods challenging. I realized that the perceived distance created by my living arrangements unintentionally played to the 'us' and 'them' divide I had started to observe between the network of Western expatriate I refer to as *toubabia* and Gambians or other west Africans residing in the country. Living in a toubab's house was equivalent to staying in a tourist hotel or specially provided accommodation to staff of an international non-governmental organisation. Similarly, Vakil et al. (2016) describe the barrier a researcher's positionalities based on race can pose to gaining access to people, which is crucial for human insight to inform the design process. In my case I had to overcome this by distancing myself from toubabia and living 'with', not just 'in' a local community.

While I stayed in Madina Salam I cycled to Kartong most days and got to know Kartonkas through social activities and initial data collection. In particular, I started mapping the physical environment by moving through the settlement on foot, marking points of interest on a printout of a Google satellite image. Physically holding a map served as a kind of safety blanket as I visibly stood out in this rural West African community. In contrast, the walking or 'wondering around' in urban contexts described by Pierce and Lawhon (2015) is arguably more anonymous.

Walking and mapping enabled me to make sense of the physical place. Yet, it also gave me a reason to be present in Kartong, engage with the space and its people and repeatedly led to informal conversations and invitations to drink tea or visit local homes. This notion of building 'mutual trust' between different actors is discussed in wider participatory design literature (Kang and Chang, 2019). Krüger et al. (2019) describe a member of their research team living in a Moroccan village for a year to 'build deeper trust and personal relationships within the community.' As such, walking became an important method for starting to build relationships that ultimately enabled me to stay with a family on subsequent visits who now act as my hosts and gatekeepers. To this day, I frequently walk the streets of Kartong, mapping physical changes whilst engaging with the wider community through informal conversations.

3.2 Entanglement in power dynamics

Unexpectedly, the biggest challenge in moving towards insider status and building mutual trust with local Gambians was to distance myself from being an insider in the expatriate community which from a Kartong perspective made me an outsider by association. Due to the way I was introduced to The Gambia I fell into the toubabia network which I initially saw as beneficial and which for example led to accommodation in Madina Salam. It also enabled my participation in a volunteering project organizes by my university in the UK and a foreign-managed resort. The project aimed to teach a group of people from Kartong how to build small wind turbines back in 2010 and was a good opportunity to get to know locals. However, as I became increasingly critical of my role as a designer in international development and witnessed problematic dynamics between particular expatriates and Gambians, I felt I had to cut out foreign intermediaries to be able to work in partnership with local people and avoid design imperialism (Nussbaum, 2010). In other words, I began to critically reflect on my positionality by association with toubabia and its potential impact on my ability to carry out meaningful and ethical design. The volunteering project was subsequently transformed into a direct partnership between the university and the community of Kartong. However, in response I was met with emotional blackmail from parts of toubabia, suggesting that I had not honoured personal and professional relationships and failed to act with professional conduct or competence. A particular thread that ran through these criticisms was that I refused to offer up levels of influencing power regarding this new volunteering partnership

which sought to benefit a group of local women gardeners. There was an expectation that decisions should be run past the toubabs in question as gratitude for having introduced me to Kartong:

'The way you acted left us, who had made the connection with Kartong for you in the first place, feeling excluded and unacknowledged for our personal contribution to the development of your programme [university volunteering partnership],' and 'it was personally upsetting and professionally I am disappointed that we were not considered important enough to be given the professional courtesy of being consulted.'

This was part of a long drawn out and at times emotionally difficult reaction which played out behind the scenes for several years but ultimately validated the decision to distance myself from toubabia. As 'development brokers' the particular foreign expatriates attempted to assert control over local development issues not just the aforementioned volunteering partnership (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Understanding my entanglement in the power dynamics between these different community development actors proved an important lesson in the complexity of relationships in this context. I did not merely reflect on my positionality but actively work against being associated with a particular 'group of social actors who specialize in the acquisition, control, and redistribution of development "revenue"' (Lewis and Mosse 2006, 12). I needed time to build connections with people from Kartong in order to gain human insight and co-design with local Gambians,

but I also needed time to get over the break up with toubabia. Here, reflexivity 'propelled to doing differently' (Pihkala and Karasti 2016, 27). In other words, instead of self-indulgent 'naval gazing' I used the reflection on power dynamics to change my positionality in this Gambian context (Sultana 2007). However, that did not change the fact that this was an emotionally difficult time.

3.3 Understanding personal vulnerability

Roberts (2014, 455) suggests that discussions on power in qualitative research tend to assume that the researcher is more powerful. Arguably this is even more emphasized where a person of white and western privilege operates in post-colonial contexts (Lira et al. 2019). Subsequently, institutional ethics procedures often focus on the risk to participants rather than risks to researchers. However, Jafari et al. (2013, 1194) 'catalogue the effects of researcher vulnerability which include threats to physical safety as well as emotional responses such as fear, guilt, and isolation.' As a design researcher there have been instances when I have felt not just less powerful but outright vulnerable:

Institutionally I received little support to deal with the aforementioned break up with toubabia but there were also other issues I was ill-prepared for. For instance, I did not anticipate that being a

white woman would lead to assumptions by some locals of me seeking a Gambian husband, sexual encounters with Gambian men and repeated as well as persistent propositions of this kind. This includes advances made by married men (polygamy is common in The Gambia), men who know me to be a researcher, as well as encounters with strangers. It turns out that The Gambia is known for 'sex tourism', which usually sees European women looking for encounters with young Gambian men (Bauer 2014; Nyanzi 2005). The fact that I am often seen talking or walking with men - because they tend to be more engaged with energy infrastructure related decisions, are more likely to speak English and have spare time - has likely exaggerated this.

Similarly, I draw attention traveling through armed checkpoints along Gambian roads including a military post in Kartong. I expect to be engaged in a lengthy conversation with armed personnel: what is my name, where am I from, what am I doing, where am I staying, can I arrange for another plane ticket to the UK? It took me nearly a decade of visiting The Gambia before feeling 'surprisingly comfortable' being stopped and being questioned by someone carrying a large firearm.

It is clear that due to my positionality as white female I will always retain a degree of outsider status in The Gambia which brings with it certain expectations and vulnerabilities. I recently chatted with an older Gambian woman traveling on a bushtaxi to Kartong who unequivocally observed: '*Yiri kunto meta bakono, nya wo nya a ta kela no bambo ti*' – 'No matter how long a stick stays in a river, it can

never turn into a crocodile.' It means that in the end people remain who they are – a white woman looking in.

3.4 Challenging professional values

Design is often described and taught as a process to innovate and solve problems. Hence the designer has to be presented with or seek a problem as a starting point. The main motivation for designers to engage with (international) community development could simply be to solve problems that are perceived as more worthwhile, such as providing clean water or sanitation. I, too, started by identifying problems I viewed as particularly important to be solved, focusing on social and environmental implications of energy systems. I did not want my professional time to simply feed the orthodox economic growth machine, in which I would design 'stuff' to be sold for the sake of profit generation (Barry 2015). I wanted to 'design for the real world'. However, using problems as a starting point can arguably lead to an excessively negative image of a community, both by external people as well as the residents themselves. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, 4) observe that a focus on deficiencies and needs in lower income neighbourhoods may lead to residents accepting this as the reality of their lives: 'They think of themselves and their neighbours as fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community's future.' Freire (1996, 45) refers to the self-depreciation of the oppressed who 'hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything ... they are sick, lazy and unproductive...

[and] in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness'. In The Gambia, I have been confronted with white Westerners who look down on Gambians as unable to help themselves and Gambians who expect toubabs to be on a 'mission' to provide 'help'.

Both sides are guilty of a limited narrative of people and places, or what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns against as The Danger Of A Single Story (2009). Adichie states that a single story of a people leads to stereotypes that are not necessarily untrue but incomplete. If you 'show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, [...] that is what they become.' That is true for 'rich and privileged' Europeans as it is for 'poor and unable' Gambians.

When taking students to The Gambia, I have noticed occasionally what can only be described as a sense of surprise and disappointment that the country is not more deprived, especially when we have traveled through the tourist area to pick up supplies. I am ashamed to admit that I felt a similar sensation when I first went on a university volunteering trip to Indonesia as an undergraduate student. Of course, I did not wish for people to be worse off, but was left to wonder what was the point of me being there, if we were here to 'help poor people' who turn out to have capabilities in their own right. Only in hindsight did it occur to me that no university in its right mind would send student volunteers that lack experience and relevant skills to an area struck by devastating poverty. Unfortunately, the experience did not stop me from having ample preconceptions of what it would

be like to work in 'Africa'. Like students who have come with me to The Gambia, my colleagues and I have gone through reflexive enlightenment by being immersed in The Gambia, which is illustrated by the following comment a Western research collaborator made in 2018:

'Before I came [to Kartong] I was very excited but I was also a little bit nervous about how different life would be. Being a Westerner I obviously had some pre-conceptions about Africa and what it was like […] Despite teaching on development geographies […] and highlighting against this fear of Africa as a place that is not able to provide for itself and lacking in a certain agency […] I guess part of my socialisation and the cultural images of what Africa is, had affected me […]. But when I came here I was just so enlightened in terms of how much agency the people here have […] the interest they have in politics and the development of their own communities and the intelligence that they hold together in terms of what's right for them, in terms of pathways for development forward'.

Freire talks of 'false generosity' that is based on power inequalities and an 'unjust social order' between oppressors and oppressed, for without it the oppressor can no longer offer generosity. In other words, we need to question the 'single story' where only problems form the justification for our engagement. This is not to suggest that one should ignore the conditions of social, environmental or political injustice, or that indeed they do not exist. This, too, would simply offer a singular narrative.

Rather, I agree with Kretzman and McKnight (1993) as well as those who build on their work (Greger 2017; Mathie and Cunningham 2005) and propose that designers, too, re-think the notion of problems as starting points. The move from a needs to an asset based approach will help challenge the perception of poor communities as victims dependent on outside saviours and foster co-design approaches instead (Fig. 2).

Finally enlightened and having become conscious of my positionality, I have wanted to avoid the role of design imperialist or saviour. As such my various roles in the co-design phase of the research have been driven by the need to generate a sense of local ownership and move between facilitator, participant and observer. Kettley, Kettley and Lucas (2017, 181) point out that participatory design emphasises 'the reflexivity of the designer and the exploration of their relationship with the participant', demanding 'critical thinking about the design process and the roles within it.' My intention is to be a designer and expert on tap, at hand to facilitate processes but not on top, designing for or imposing particular solutions (Fig. 3).

4 Conclusion

Methods and toolkits for participatory design are readily available. However, to be effective, designers also need tools to navigate the power relations in community-based design which are shaped by complex social dynamics, personal characteristics, histories as well as professional values. This paper advocates the

adaptation of positionality and reflexivity as conceptual tools established in other disciplines to help designers do just that.

Themes that have emerged from reflecting on ongoing design research in The Gambia include the need to build mutual trust with members of the community, entanglement in power dynamics between different actors and the notion of personal vulnerabilities. Furthermore, a reflexive approach is key in challenging preconceptions of particular communities and established approaches to design such as using problems as starting points. In turn, this help to iterate the design process itself, including the role of the designer within it.

It is important that students are exposed to personal insights like the ones shared above to introduce positionality and reflexivity concepts and reflect on situated learning which occurs for example during live briefs. Broader themes that emerge here around gender, race and positionality by association can easily be adapted to understand and negotiate power relations in other projects and help students to be prepared for less conventional but increasingly common futures in the workplace.

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