

WHICH WORLDS ARE HELD TOGETHER WITH CARE?

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ABSTRACT

Care has typically been associated with undervalued and gendered labour. When doing design research in the name of care, I want to consider the stickiness of these associations, and what may be unintentionally held together through the approaches I have used in the production of work. Using a case study of an event that was set up to care for issues of sexism in design, I will discuss how ‘care work’, in this instance, assumed the reproduction of hetero-normative care paradigms. Using feminist voices from techno-science, I suggest that in order to use critical and careful processes in design research we need to consider what making with care might maintain or reproduce.

INTRODUCTION

Care has historically been associated with undervalued and taken-for-granted labour; often understood as a practice of maintenance and repair that is feminized and predominantly gendered (Peace, 2017; 21). In this position paper I want to explore the stickiness of certain associations of care, through a discussion of what ‘making with care’ might reproduce. When making work in the name of care, I want to think through what may be unintentionally brought forward or maintained, and how easily making with care can slip into reproducing systems of gender, or to promote a notion of care as a positive, affirmative feeling.

To do this, here I use an example that is a personal and self-reflexive account of a collaborative work – ‘Sexism in Design: assembling a community of care’, an event I set up with two other female design researchers to explore the issue of sexism in the University. The event

was framed using scholarship from feminist techno-science that questions care, and adopted an interactional style to participation that was supportive and affirmative.

I will describe the plans for this event, and the action that unfolded. My intention here is not to simply critique the attempts to align care and design in this event, but to add some vexation around care, and reflect on the world-making effects of caring narratives. In committing to doing design research with care I am interested here in understanding certain traps that making with care might bring forward.

To think through these questions, I will draw on the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2010, 2012, 2017) and Michelle Murphy (2015) amongst others from feminist techno-science, and their unsettling and questioning of care, in order to create this interference of the case study. If, as Bellacasa describes, care ‘holds worlds together’, perpetuating certain relationships whilst neglecting others (2012, p.198), then *which* worlds are held together? I suggest that this question relates to understanding careful practices in design research.

This case study is one facet of a wider set of research that I am engaged with during my PhD. Through my studies, I am exploring the notion of care that has arisen in the work of feminist scholarship in techno-science and Science and Technology Studies as an analytic and a set of sensitivities to take to my practice-based research (see also Pennington, 2018).

CARE PLANS

‘Sexism in Design: assembling a community of care’ was a designed conversation (Janssens, 2017) that took place at a Design Research Society conference in Limerick, Ireland in June 2018. We (myself and two other female design researchers) proposed this event to care for the issue of sexism for a number of reasons. Despite an ever-growing body of feminist design practitioners and educators (Schalk, Kristiansson & Mazé 2017), gender inequalities persist in design education (Morley 2016); and at the time, the conversation around gender inequality was a dominant issue of public concern, where campaigns including *The Everyday Sexism Project* exposed how sexist practices operate across different groups in society. We followed Sara Ahmed, who argues “if feminism is to have a

future in the academy, we need to name sexism, we need to give this problem its name” (Ahmed, 2015). Consequently, the conversation took as a starting point the need to further interrogate and expose practical manifestations of sexism, and the epistemological biases and structural hierarchies that interplay in perpetuating gender inequality in design.

How was care figured in the proposal? We wanted to motivate the theories of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa of matters of care in feminist techno-science towards design research (2017). In her writing, Bellacasa’s aim is to describe how care in techno-science and nature-cultures means more than “the responsible maintenance of technology”; and more than a “feel-good attitude” or “a moral value added to the thinking of things” (2017:5). She describes caring as comprised three connected elements: an affective, embodied phenomenon; a practical labour of maintenance and repair; and an ethico-political commitment that affects the way we produce knowledge about things (2011; 90). We wanted to ask, what happens when we think of the issue of sexism as a ‘matter of care’?; and where ‘how to care’ for this issue could be speculated on by participants as the conversation progressed.

Care was used in the sense of ‘in need of our urgent attention’, where thinking-with-care could extend to the lives of the people doing design research. Care was also figured in the sense of steering the conversation beyond a ‘name and blame’ culture to instead reach and expose deeply rooted structures and gender scripts. What is often neglected from narratives around gender inequality in design and technological related fields are the existing relations between women and workplace hierarchies and structures, and how technologies are not gender-neutral (Harding, 1986; Wajcman, 1991; Kaygan 2016). We therefore wanted to enquire into the situations, products, processes, resources, procedures, practices and languages that could point to the gender scripts that highlight sexism in design. To do this, we used a set of printed materials of existing practices, that we hoped would open up the conversation; including a reading list (‘Women Write Architecture’ reading list, 2017), a course time-table, data around the gender pay gap in universities and the design industry, and images of studio practice in fashion design and architecture. It was hoped that these materials would act as a provocation to elicit concrete experiences in the context of sexism and design, for situated and nuanced narratives.

We were also aware that the subject matter had ethical implications around sensitivities and consent – and consequently aimed to create an atmosphere of support and respect. An interactional style of affective engagement was used to perform care: the conversation began with short, intimate discussions in pairs, offering and/or listening to experiences of everyday sexism, and then the conversation was gradually ‘grown’, moving from intimate to larger groups; participants collectively developed the ethical guidelines for the session as a way

of ‘caring for the conversation’ at both the beginning and the end of the session; and we enquired into the emotions or ‘current mood’ of participants (e.g. Roe, 2018).

CARE ACTIONS

The conversation lasted around 90 minutes, and twenty-four participants, who were predominantly women, attended.

The common theme running through the discussions of the larger groups was the issue of discrimination based on gender. Sensitivities were raised around practices in design education and learning environments, including unequal treatment of female students and tutors. Speculations on how to care for this issue were made, such as proposals for female-only time in the workshop, and ambitions to develop ‘women write design research’ reading lists. Whilst these examples were dominantly located in a hetero-normative paradigm of sexism, they nonetheless highlighted the myriad ways in which systems and structures in design practices and teaching contribute to sexism.

However, a core question in the planning of this conversation had been how to engage a group discussion focused on sexism outside of a binary conception? A verbal reminder was given to participants to recognise a broader notion of gender outside of a binary construct, but it was clear how deeply embedded the hetero-normative conception of male/female is in society. This impacted on discussions as many participants, using the printed materials, struggled to move beyond the binary, reinforcing and reproducing societal norms; thus raising questions about what is ‘maintained’ or cared for in this instance.

WHICH WORLDS ARE HELD TOGETHER?

If we, as design researchers, acknowledge that the ways in which we study and represent things can have world-making effects then we need to be aware of what kinds of frames orient our caring acts. (Bellacasa, 2011;100). Care is often described in relation to practical acts of ‘maintenance’ of the world, of ourselves and others (Tronto and Fisher, 1993) and therefore, as I suggested earlier, it is important to ask *which* worlds are being maintained here?

I suggest that this case study leads me to ask questions around making with care, and I have two points to raise here for further discussion: what care paradigms might be unintentionally maintained or reproduced through 1) ‘slipping’ into normative notions of the gender binary and 2) by using certain affective or positive tropes of interactional style to attempt a supportive atmosphere. What seemed to be ‘maintained’ through the unfolding action of this event was a hetero-normative paradigm of sexism. In this paradigm, sexism often associates women to a care-giving role, or to the idea that self-less care-giving is somehow intrinsic to being female.

To unsettle this, future iterations of a conversation

around sexism would seek to complicate the gender binary by adopting a critical intersectional approach (such as Davis, 2014); where participants would ask ‘the other’ question of the materials presented to search for additional differences, such as broader notions of gender, race, ethnicity, age and class. This is also a sort of planning that needs to be improvised during an event, in response to participants and arising needs. During the ‘care of the conversation’ phase, participants also proposed requirements for a wider variety of positions to be represented in similar future conversations.

Furthermore, mindful of Askins and Blazek (2017) call to ‘be careful about care’; I suggest that the *ambition* for care in the example of this conversation on sexism, was not about maintenance, because the preservation of gender inequality is not desirable; and instead it was about working towards fair gender relations. ‘Caring for sexism’ may therefore bring a useful question back to an ethos of care, to unsettle the ‘maintenance’ of care, as found in Tronto and Fisher’s much used definition of care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (1993, p.40).

Then, in the assembling of sexism as an issue of care, I wonder if the interactional styles adopted around the conversation might have promoted a sense of care as empathic relations, or as the ‘feel-good attitude’ that Bellacasa warns about. Feminist STS scholar Michelle Murphy cautions against the conflation of care with affection. In her discussion around feminist self-help groups in the 1970’s she argues that “there is an ongoing temptation within feminist scholarship to view positive affect and care as a route to emancipated science and alternative knowledge-making without critically examining the ways positive feelings, sympathy, and other forms of attachment can work with and through the grain of hegemonic structures, rather than against them” (2015, 719). To take this forward, I would like to suggest that the ‘positive-feeling’ of interaction might have served to reproduce the very systems that this event was set up to interrogate. A counter-example is useful to bring in to support this argument: if I posit the work of feminist art group *The Guerilla Girls* as successfully ‘caring for sexism in art’, the interactional approach used by these artists is through “in-your-face visuals and in-your-face headlines,” and attacking sexist institutions (McNay, 2016), not a feel-good atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

The issues raised by the participants of this conversation exposed systems of sexism in the university. In addition, to think ‘with care’ also suggests that we need to acknowledge that care holds some worlds together, and neglects others. In this paper, I have used a case study to suggest that the design of modes of engagement may have unintentionally reproduced certain associations of care, where care is the work of women and/or is a ‘feel-good attitude’. Even though I take a critical perspective

that questions care, I suggest that ‘care-work’ in the making can easily slip to assume such gendered positions. This is something that I will pay closer attention to in the planning and action of future design research.

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