

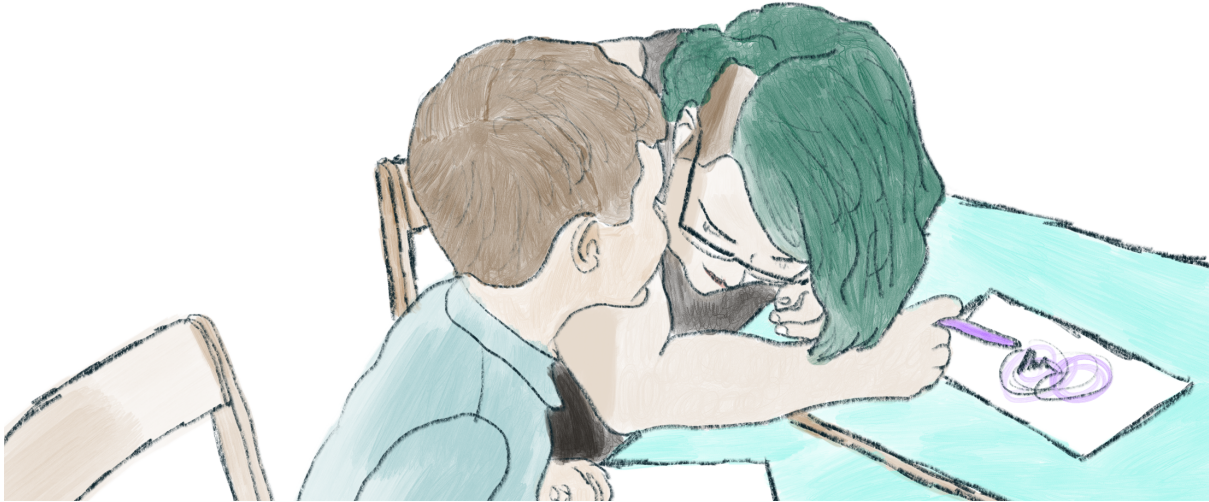
Thinking around Humility as a Stance for Participatory Design

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CCS CONCEPTS

- **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**.

KEYWORDS

participatory design, participatory research, humility, loving epistemology, radical enthusiasm

1 ACKNOWLEDGING POWER IN RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Participatory Design has a power problem [3]. Fundamentally, this is the case as we as designers and researchers do not share the intricacies of the life worlds of people we have identified as potential participants. This is amplified in cases where we might additionally not share modes of how we make sense of the world, e.g., when working with disabled participants, particularly the Deaf, blind and neurodivergent communities¹ [5]. I recently delineated how technological design for autistic children is in many cases mainly driven by researchers goals and approaches — often with a focus on parents' and teachers' or carers' perspectives [10]. In this context, autistic people are often deemed 'incapable' of being involved meaningfully

¹Though even if we share such characteristics with participants, we need to remain cautious [4].

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in participatory design (and research more generally [9]). Hence, even in the rare cases, where autistic children were involved in the works I analysed, the involvement was somewhat questionable and reduced to defining the aesthetic of a pre-defined product. Within *OutsideTheBox*, the project in which I conducted my PhD, we were interested in collaboratively designing technologies with children that supported their holistic well-being (see also, [8]). To do this appropriately and assess whether we were successful, we needed to know whether and how they are meaningful to them. Empathy is a vital skill and prominent concept in this context, though, I argue, it is also fundamentally limited in providing us with the stance we require to do participants justice.

2 TROUBLING EMPATHY IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Wright & McCarthy state that “[i]n an empathic relationship the ‘designer’ does not relinquish [their] position to ‘become the user’, a position from which nothing new can be created, rather the designer responds to what they see as the user’s world from their own perspective as designer.” [11, p639]. Their pragmatist concept of empathy is decidedly dialectic, requiring designers and ‘users’—or rather ‘participants’ our context—to engage in a **dialogue**, which can be somewhat problematic in participatory engagements with marginalised groups. For example, there is a widespread and pervasive assumption that autistic people and, among them, children even less so, are even able to enter a dialogue at all [9]. Though, within *OutsideTheBox*, we needed to know whether and how the technologies we co-created are meaningful to the children. This means we needed to actively participate in how they make sense about the technologies they co-created with us.

And in that work, I realised that empathy is bullshit, in a way that “[t]he bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that [they] necessarily [get] them wrong” [7, p12]. Relying on empathy means drawing mainly on the researcher relating the experience of their participants to their own and inherently contrasting, interpreting, judging and valuing it. That is fundamentally prone to create fake. Cynthia Bennett illustrates the issue that comes with formalised “empathy” exercises very well: “The empathy-building exercises [...] do a type of preparatory work that contrasts with disability activism and related forms of partnership-development” [2, p9]. If our aim is to understand the other from our perspective, we fundamentally override the situatedness of their lived experiences and expertise. As an approach, this is still oriented on the researchers’ agenda and interest, they claim the space of participants, they enroach and risk misrepresentation through their interpretation. Instead, I suggest drawing on love as an epistemological component.

3 DRAWING ON LOVING EPISTEMOLOGY

Mostly, I base these thoughts on De Jaegher’s development of a loving epistemology. In her words: “I bring loving to bear on epistemology because I think there is something in the basic structure of knowing that is easy to forget about, but that we may find again by studying the basic structure of loving. I think loving and knowing share a core, and that they entail each other” [6, p14]. She draws on ‘letting be; as a stance that allows loving and subsequently knowing. I am intrigued by this approach to epistemology as it uses love as a decisive stance that is consciously evoked. And I think it can be tremendously helpful for participatory design. When we love another, we want the other to be happy, we don’t want to change them, we bask in their presence. When we love another, we let each other be. We marvel at what they do, how they think. And we recognise a distance. We recognise that we are not the other in an appreciative manner. We make space for them in our life. We take ourselves and our desires back for them to have space in our life – and, subsequently, our research.

I know how this sounds. But bear with me. I do not mean you have to emotionally commit entirely to participants in participatory design to make space, rather, I suggest taking this approach to knowing as loving and apply it to participatory design in the form of radical enthusiasm, a concept, I am actively developing currently. Radical enthusiasm entails a reorientation towards being of service instead of ‘gathering knowledge’. This is not to be naive about the constraints we have in our research funding and academic structures. But I encourage us to take participants’ perspectives, recognise how they are different and assign them with enthusiastic validity. Beyond bringing different perspectives in and attending to them, I think this is core for a critical practice; to be critical towards what we do and how, to even challenge participants in a constructive dialogue, but also to fundamentally validate their perspective.

4 THINKING AROUND HUMILITY

I argue that we could use humility as a concept². Humility means embracing imperfection.

²The irony of how not humble it is to suggest humility to others is not lost on me, but I am trying to work with that tension.

It involves **making space** in many kinds of ways: Being careful when entering other spaces, making sure that the spaces of research are comfortable and safe for participants, taking oneself back and not overriding their positions with our interpretation (i.e., even if something does not make sense, researchers would prioritise participants’ perspectives over their own).

It involves **listening** and not just to words. We might attend to body language, to tacit interactions, to oppressive frames acting on our participants. We need to attend to the silences (see [1]), the things that are not said, the things that will never be said to us (e.g., because we likely hold a privileged position as a researcher and/or there might be risks involved for our participant to share certain information with us).

And it also involves **shared agency**. This entails letting participants lead with us deliberately following, while we also have to offer options to go to. Concretely, while we structure sessions and come with questions, we need to be prepared to abandon them (and also have several options prepared). We should be prepared to enter a shared space with the intent to ‘let be’ without judgement.

By not claiming our privileged position and deliberately being humble on what we might bring to the table, we might create the space to attend to our participants with an interest to epistemic justice instead of overriding their statements and experiences by filtering them through ours. The thoughts I share here are raw and in development, they are meant to invite a conversation. I’d love to know your thoughts.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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