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Researcher's relocations “in her own terms”: repositioning meta-perspectives in the realm of (design for) ageing.

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Abstract. This paper offers a meta-reflection on what can be meant to do participatory design for an ageing society. Ageing is a personal matter, and when ageing meets design, many dynamics unearth, from ageing stereotypes in the actors involved (researchers, seniors themselves, stakeholders, institutional narratives of funding agencies) to critical reactions and reflexive processes. I argue then that repositioning the actors from their own constellations of meanings (perspectives) is beneficial for a critical participatory design. I articulate this reflexive process as part of Design Anthropology. Hence, I provide an account of my experience as a participatory designer with an anthropological background that conducts ethnographic field study among seniors, elaborating design interventions together with them.

1 Introduction

Ageing is a personal matter. Studying ageing is a personal activity.

I admit that I was a bit scared of approaching elderly in an academic way, at the beginning of my PhD – I have blurring memories of my grandparents since they passed away when I was a child. In addition, in the Anthropology literature elders are usually considered guardians of traditional knowledge, expert

politicians, matchmakers, peace-keepers for their community (Sokolovsky 2009). The first image of seniors I got from Computer Science worried me: a frail, mental-impaired, vulnerable person. The Computer Science interpretation of ageing did not match at all with the Anthropology one, thus I started doubting. Nevertheless, what kind of tribes was I going to study? On one side “the elderly” on the other side “the computer scientists”. Thus, I did not know what to expect. I was intimately missing that experience – interacting with someone that has a much broader experience about life than my parents have – but fearing it at the same time. According to the stereotypical image of elderly, what if they were bored, or what if I would have been not patient enough? I was secretly blaming myself for this reaction: what hidden prejudices was I incorporating? As for many PhD students, my research topic was defined in a PhD call. Mine was indeed part of a national project. Since my background is in Social Anthropology and Philosophy and my perspective department was focusing on “hard” sciences with very little space for interdisciplinarity, if I wanted to move to Participatory Design and HCI, I had to commit and adapt to what the research market offers. Therefore, my perspective supervisor suggested me to apply to a project on ageing. It was called: “Ageing in place: a respectful approach”. Whatever it meant, the project was related to AAL technologies, a novel concept for my background, an umbrella term that refers to controlling and monitoring people at their own homes. It did not pass too much time from when I started having strong ethical issues. The project abstract argued a critical position to AAL technologies, explaining that computer scientists and engineers are missing the elderly users' needs, producing technologies that are not being used. For this reason a “respectful approach” was needed. Ageing is becoming a major problem for EU politics and global society. Therefore, “activating” elderly people is prescribed as an action line to take urgently, maintaining them active in order to postpone the transfer to nursing homes and consequently provoking rapid psycho-physical decline. Therefore, a social scientist might provide, according to the call, methods and sensibility to address this global problem. At the time I did not have a clue that the targeted so-called “older adults” were already active.

2 Reflexive repositions trough an anthropological gaze. Approaching Design Anthropology.

Researcher's relocations. Ageing is a personal, inner phenomenon. For this reason, in doing research on and with ageing it is convening taking a reflexive and self-reflexive stance to the phenomenon. Anthropology can offer useful teachings on how methodically pursuing the research with a reflexive approach, usually embedded in its core method, ethnography – considered a method as well as a writing style. An anthropological gaze allows to make what is familiar to the

researcher, unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar, familiar, reconfiguring the “otherness” through an incremental process of qualitative and quantitative data. So, when I came to “study” ageing – something that is considered understood by everyone as familiar because it is an experience common to everyone – I had to take a step back, approaching ageing as a social phenomenon, which determines certain ageing stereotypes (ageism).

Going from familiar to unfamiliar allows to unfold new horizons of interpretations, experience of ageing and meanings. The added value to an anthropological gaze is that the research is conducted by the anthropologist with the collaboration of the “indigenous tribe” involved: it is a co-research. This implies multiple consequences: reflexivity as a process involves informants too, shaping a co-research style which is analogue to the style of Participatory Design, in which the participants are considered expert in their field, and the encounter with the designer is characterized by the mutual learning of each other competencies. As a provocation, should we aim for publications co-authored by designers and participants?

In my research I aim at developing a Design Anthropology (DA) perspective to Participatory Design. DA improves the design with an anthropological gaze, characterized by a reflexive approach of the participants as well as of the researchers (Gunn et al. 2013, Tonolli et al 2015).

Seniors' relocations. One of my field studies takes place in a Senior Community Centre, in a city of north-east Italy. This case study consists in a weekly-based workshop on the use of digital technologies (i.e. personal computers, cameras, smartphones) organized every year since 2014 by prof. Vincenzo D'Andrea and 2-3 PhD students (computer and social scientists) from the InterAction and Life Participation research groups of the University of Trento. I supported my colleagues in the 2015 edition, while I organized the 2016 one with two colleagues (a sociologist and a computer scientist). I had the chance to adopt ethnographic methods (e.g.: participatory observation, informal interviews, group discussions) for engaging the participants in interactive activities.

We observed during the workshop that seniors' approach to ICT often produces a stressful and anxious condition rather than a state of well-being. Through a self-reflexive exercise (a collage session) we explored senior's fascination for ICT and the Internet: their interest is not always supported by personal needs, rather by induced ones. Therefore, we engaged seniors in critically reflecting on the use and usefulness of digital technologies. The result was the making of a multimedia project for sharing their expertise (<http://fucinaperta.wordpress.com/>, ongoing, a new version can be found here: www.fucinaperta.it). A reflexive process in-the-making has been articulated: making sense of ICT and ageing in seniors' own terms, activating a participatory deconstruction of ageism, in contrast with the normative narratives articulated under the label “active ageing” (narratives that

are present also in the stakeholders, represented by the Senior Community Centre).

We organized a writing collective session with the aim to unearth seniors' self-narratives. The purpose was to generate a collective definition of the group of participants to be displayed in the web-page "About us". Despite the initial seniors' skepticism that that could have worked, the result let them (and honestly, us too) amazed and delighted. They described themselves as:

"We are a group of people registered at the CSA xxx that has joined to a workshop on technologies performed in collaboration with the *University of Trento*. The goal is to share knowledge and experience through the contribution of all those are willing to join". [italics of the participants, original: <https://fucinaperta.wordpress.com/chi-siamo-3/>].

The word "senior" disappeared, as in the description of themselves as in the description of the association they belong to (the Senior Community Centre). Interestingly, the Community Centre disappeared from their narratives during the collective writing and popped up only lately when Ilenia¹ said: "... But we have to tell that we are from the Community Centre... Fabio [the social worker that represents our stakeholder] *is eager* for it...", raising a collective nodding and murmur in the group discussant. This creative writing activity contributed to develop among seniors an unexpected sense of attachment to the online platform, that from a simple project for the group it has started to become something more: a possible artefact to start a dialogue with a public, with "outsiders". At the same time, the group developed a sense of identity, defining itself as the "original group" that started the project (that in the platform has a specific area). Furthermore, they developed specific issues related to privacy and security of user identities, offering to become the "ambassadors" of the project and asking for moderator permissions to review the contents on the platform (comments and future articles).

In a group discussion it clearly emerged their awareness of their self-perception of ageing and the society's one:

"I don't feel old, I'm more active than many youths I know, I do many things (...). I've started feeling some ailments, but that's physical. But you know, when I turn 65 and I get free bus card, swimming pool discounts, and other discounts, the society is telling me that I'm old. And that's good, having all that discounts!" [Chiara]

"I tried to invite my sister to come to the Senior Community Centre. Do you know what she told me? 'Ah! You go to the *wrinklies* [dialect word]'. But she's always at

1 All the names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

home, doing housekeeping! She never goes out. (...) She's older than me, even if she's younger!" [Paola]

"I'm proud to be old, because this means I've been able to arrive until here. And you know which the alternative is...". [Valeria]

Self-reflexivity about ageing was elicited especially when the potential public of the online platform was discussed. The participants expressed mainly three positions, developed in sequence: 1) "I want to reach other seniors, because there aren't websites for seniors, those I found are very poor, and many of them are isolated" [Chiara]; 2) "I want to reach youths also, for this reason I don't want to display my seniority, otherwise youths wouldn't be attracted [Valeria]; 3) "Displaying my age is important to tell who we are, but it becomes secondary when people search in Internet how to use the online health service or what wild herbs can be found picked [these are two of the sharing projects they realized], they don't look for who wrote that page, but for the content of the page" [Ilenia].

These three positions remain open questions to be evaluated in the future. We are currently focusing on evaluating the restitution to the Senior Community Centre, understanding the evolution (if any) of the online platform and of our community of practice, when it will be presented to our stakeholders and other seniors.

Regarding the relationship built with the group participants, we are often described as "very patient", compared with their children. Seniors report to behave differently with us than with their children, for instance being more insistent with them or being more "diligent" with us. Reflecting on this, I recognized to be patient in a different way with them compared with my parents, since the circumstances are different: this is my work and there is not that familiar intimacy, although there are often moments of sympathy and empathy.

3 Tentative conclusion towards a critical participatory design anthropology

In conclusion, in order to develop a meta-perspective on ageing and design for ageing, it emerges from the discrepancies between fieldwork and institutional narratives that a reposition of the actors involved in the research is needed, starting from the researcher's reposition. Indeed, the researcher has to navigate between the academic constraints (e.g.: timing of a PhD research, academic hierarchies), the institution expectations (e.g.: what a EU project requires), stakeholders' expectations (e.g. the Senior Community Centre agenda), and finally the participants' expectations and motivations. In order to realize these repositioning, it seems promising looking at other disciplines, such as

Anthropology, that has made reflexivity a core practice of its methodology, developing for instance the method of autoethnography. Transferring the anthropological approach to Participatory Design permits to involve the participants in reflexive practices, establishing a process of mutual discovering and learning with themselves, among the participants and with the researchers. Therefore, the participatory design anthropology process overcomes the centrality of the outcome of the process itself: it is indeed *critical*. Criticism is subversive itself, in respect of any form of power (stakeholders, institutions, funding bodies). For this reason a “critical participatory design anthropology” is hardly institutionalise-able into the ethnocentric normative narratives on ageing, because the criticism is often moved also against the (political and economic) interests of these narratives. It is a tricky balance, since we (academics) depend on these narratives, from an economic and a career perspective, being critic to these narratives might look self-destructive. Nevertheless, to institutionalize a critical approach means risking to lose the critical part. An hypothesis for a possible solution might be: on the one hand push for realizing projects with a critical approach, to make these practices a praxis recognized by the (governmental, funding, academic) institutions, on the other hand, reflecting on alternative ways to sustain the research, the researchers and – if this would become a praxis – the academic system as well: thinking about a solution *beyond capital* (Hakken et al 2015), with the creation of commons that embrace ageing and the research on it.

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