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## Editorial:

# Practice research in social design as a form of inquiry

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## 1. Introduction

People learn from practice research in design but how and what is the nature of knowledge they acquire?

In this track we look at knowledge claims generated through practice research in the context of and in relation to social design. In other words, the focus is on knowing and how knowledge is produced and acquired through practice research in social design. The basic assumption, as well as the proposition being tested, is: because the knowing in question is acquired in a certain way, it makes certain things known; or maybe even going further, it makes certain - some but not all - things happen. Accordingly, all of the papers submitted to the track speak to – refine and elaborate – the process through which knowledge is produced and, perhaps more speculatively, suggest what outcomes follow from this: what becomes known through practice research in social design and what difference it makes. They don't arrive at a uniform conclusion but present a range of considerations, together with the vocabulary, to take this line of research forward.

Before we introduce the papers, and as a way of solidifying the commonalities between them, we want to explain why we thought that asking about knowledge claims in social design is interesting and worth doing at this point in time.

## 2. Background and Context

The focus of this track reflects a long-brewing dissatisfaction with the dominant epistemological model in the West. Of course, to stipulate such a unitary model is to construct a strawman but a 'common enemy' is useful in this context as a way of pulling together the most pronounced dissenting voices that have become more audible over the last fifty years



or so when it comes to thinking about what knowledge is and what it should be. We are living through a growing frustration with the forms of knowledge based on symbol manipulation, theoretical model construction and, simply put, the privileging of representation over intervention (Lyotard, 1987; Law and Benschop, 1997). This is not unrelated to the critique of the mastery of nature and the colonialising of racial and cultural differences said to characterise Modernity (Bernstein et al., 2004; Bahambra, 2021). What is at issue here is reacting to what has made 'Modernity so uncaring', to use Andy Stirling's expression (Stirling, 2019, p.4).

Significantly, what is happening presently is different from the moment of postmodernism (Rorty, 1989) - rather than relativizing or deconstructing, what seems to drive these contemporary orientations is a desire for finding a new kind of grounding (Habermas, 2015). Now, this search for the new kind of grounding can be and has been variously referred to as: the material turn (Haraway, 2004), the affective turn (Clough and Halley, 2007), the decentering turn (Pickering, 1993), the need to turn away from the forms of neo-liberal governance and toward values-based approaches can too be mentioned in this context (Greaber, 2001; Klamer, 2017). What these new orientations have in common is that they want to move away from the logic of justification to the logic of discovery or 'invention' (Barry et al., 2008; Lury and Wakeford, 2012; Marres et al., 2018) as well as re-activating the 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1995). In this, they see knowing as entangled with acting (Dewey, 1938) and often as related to making (Ingold, 2013). This comes with the need to understand the material consequences of knowing and to analyse knowing as making changes in socio-cultural contexts, and not just information systems (Marres et al., 2018). This, in a nutshell, is what drives the interest in practice research as an alternative mode of knowledge acquisition and what motivates us to ask about knowledge claims in relation to practice research in social design specifically.

Now, there are good reasons to turn to design here as design has been claimed more generally to be the antithesis of, or at least an alternative to the reified, abstract and 'uncaring' ways of knowing (Buchanan, 2001; Frayling, 1993; Biggs and Buchler, 2007). An interesting articulation of what is at issue can be found in the context of philosophy of science and philosophy of information. Here Sabine Ammon claims that design is a form of an independent epistemic praxis and that 'designing serves not only to develop artefacts but is also a means of acquiring genuine knowledge' (Ammon, 2017, p.1). In a similar vein, Luciano Floridi argues that 'designing is not an empirical kind of experimenting (contrary to widespread methodological claims) but more an independent epistemic praxis through which one can acquire genuine *ab anteriori* knowledge' (Floridi, 2017, p.508). Here he coins the term 'the maker's knowledge'. This is of course not the first attempt to conceive of knowledge in terms alternative to Modern representationalism: one could only mention Aristotle's practical knowledge (2004), Husserl's phenomenological critique of scientific knowledge acquisition (1970), Dreyfuss's embedded and embodied cognition (2014) or Dewey's situational inquiry (1938).

Arguments concerning the need to think of knowledge differently are pronounced too in discussions within design research. Yet, interestingly, looking more closely at these discussions reveals a rift. On the one hand, there is a 'school' working within a positivist and scientific paradigm with an ambition to achieve theoretical and generalisable (if not universalisable) knowledge (Simon, 1996; Hatchuel and Weil, 2009; Haynes and Carroll, 2010). For instance, Haynes and Carroll's notion of the 'artifacts-theory nexus' refers to the idea of prototypes presumably materialising propositional forms of knowledge (e.g. psychological claims, hypotheses) to be tested and validated in the design research lab. On the other hand, Donald Schön (1995), Archer (1979), Cross (2001), Frayling (1993) and others explicitly challenge the idea that there can be a 'science of the artificial' and, by extension, of design. Cross's *designerly ways of knowing* is a well-known early attempt to establish design research as a third research culture not being reducible to either natural science or the humanities.

This epistemological split is continuously echoed in more recent discussions on practice-based design research and research through design. While there is consensus that research through design is about appreciating that the processes of designing and making is a legitimate method of inquiry, disagreement exists as to what should be regarded as the primary outcome of the approach. Zimmerman et al. (2010) have argued that research through design may lead to various forms of what they call 'nascent theory' valuable for design practice, but that formal accounts of this kind of theory construction are lacking. Examples of nascent theory would be conceptual frameworks, guidelines and implications for design. Their proposal, however, have spurred a counter-argument from Gaver (2012) and Bowers (2012) who warn against scientising the approach. For Gaver and Bowers, theory cannot but underspecify the ultimate particularity of artistic experiments and design work (cf. Nelson and Stolterman, 2003). In their view, design work is the main achievement and knowledge acquisition may consist in the design researcher annotating his or her portfolio thereby unravelling aesthetic qualities or sensitizing concepts to design practice.

An ecumenical attempt at embracing the divergent notions of practice-based design research can be found in Koskinen et al. (2011) who stipulate three dominant knowledge regimes referred to as Lab, Field and Showroom. However, these knowledge regimes are moulded respectively upon natural science, ethnography/sociology and arts/humanities, i.e. incumbent regimes outside design, some of which rely on the exact same epistemological models that has been brought up in the critique of Modernity. One could therefore argue that the Lab, Field and Showroom distinctions not only lead to oversimplifying the details and constituencies of practice research in design but also leaves largely unanswered the fundamental question: how knowledge production and acquisition can be characterised from *inside* design.

### 3. Contributions

The papers invited to this track should be considered in this context and as a way of ‘getting under the skin’ of what is at issue in knowledge production and knowledge acquisition in social design. The nature of knowledge claims made through practice research in design is here considered from the *inside* and through the prism of practice research as well as from the *outside*, by bringing in concepts and approaches from philosophy, anthropology and sociology, to name just some.

Pedro Alvarez Caselli’s ‘Repair as a Social Design Practice: Three Case Studies in Vulnerable Households in Chile’ looks at the repair of essential objects for everyday use. The paper examines the socio-material implications and spontaneous design actions that arise through these repair practices in low-income housing. The author considers the knowledge and understanding that arises in these situations using the notions of Latour’s ‘matters of concern’ and Puig De La Bellacasa’s ‘care ethics’ and points to the possibility of a less instrumental, ‘ready at hand’ relationships with everyday objects and thus a less Anthropocene epistemology.

‘Talking about food: reflecting on transitions of practice in people with lived experience of food poverty’ by David Perez, Roger Whitham, Gemma Coupe, Leon Cruickshank looks at co-design activities and the use of co-design tools in the context of a national network of organisations addressing food poverty in the UK. The authors argue that the use of co-design enabled agency in relation to advocacy, engagement and inquiry practices. They use the lens of practice theory to articulate their argument thereby contextualising the use of design tools in lived experiences and as a relationship between materials, skills and meanings thereby stressing the situated nature of knowledge production and acquisition in design and in social design.

‘Artifacts in the Co-production of Knowledge in Social Design’ co-authored by Eva Knutz and Thomas Markussen examines how artefacts are used in knowledge co-production in relation to social design research. In this context, the paper argues, different forms of knowledge emerge: practical knowledge, or the know how gained through activity; experiential knowledge gained through direct exposure; social knowledge resulting from social reflexivity in relation to oneself and in relation to others. Perhaps an interesting question presenting itself is whether these forms of knowledge are unique to design and how they interact. If these can be shown as interacting across different examples of practice research, the paper’s argument might be presented as a general claim about knowledge production and acquisition in social design.

The key question of Shivani Prakash’s ‘Preparing for the pluriverse: Embracing critical self-reflection in service design practice’ is how to enable service designers to build up their critical self-reflection in order to promote more plurality: of voices, agendas and stakeholders. Insofar as the suggestion is that the use of design approaches can reproduce dominant ideologies, the paper asks about the blind spots and hegemony in design. The context is the use

of service design approaches in public sector design, where the spread of particular methods can reproduce dominant ways of knowing and bias. Building on Schon, the paper focuses on the development of heightened cultural awareness and reflexivity in relation to the knowing produced. In doing this, it raises interesting question about what can be known and whether outcomes can be anticipated in the context of complex systems.

Sitting at the intersection of performance studies, design anthropology and social design, Maria Foverskov's 'Performative modes of inquiry as everyday theatre' builds an argument about relationships between different modes of 'being in the world' and performative praxis. In this context the paper explicitly identifies performative modes of inquiry related to different forms of 'world making': rehearsing by trickstering, performing by wayfaring and re-enacting by bartering. Although different in the enactment mode, these three modes share a common understanding of knowledge production as distributed, bodily co-produced and performed through multiple partners co-scripting the performance of an everyday theatre.

Patrycja Kaszynska's 'Social design as normative inquiry' considers social design as a form of cognitive pursuit that is normative in character. Taking the model of the Deweyan situational inquiry as a starting point, the author argues that in the context of social design, the means-goals adjustment characterising inquiry is a fundamentally normative endeavour. This means that the setting of the goal orientation – across socio-cultural-material systems – is underpinned by the assumption that there are norms of criticisms and standards of justification that can be applied to judge whether the practice research through design is heading in the right or wrong direction. This explicit consideration of normativity gives a way of defining social design as a distinctive form of designing.

'Evaluating Social Innovations (SI), how Creative Evaluation (CE) can help articulate their values and impacts' by Violet Owen, Pinar Ceyhan, Leon Cruickshank and Elisavet Christou argues in favour of using a Creative Evaluation (CE) approach for the purposes of impact assessment and valuation in the context of Social Innovation. In contrast to the dominant approaches, CE - it is claimed - presents an alternative approach that allows for the articulation of different conceptions of value amongst various stakeholders that is more adaptive, responsive and contextually sensitive. The application of CE to Social Innovation projects is presumed to lead to richer accounts of these project and therefore, an improved understanding of design practice research in this context.

Collectively, these papers interrogate the outcomes together with the process of knowledge production and acquisition in practice research in social design and indeed, the relationship between them.

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