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Power Signifiers: the subtle forms of power in design practice with marginalized craft communities

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Abstract: This paper discusses how craft practice may offer empowerment strategies for critically reflective spaces, that allow for social transformation, using the case of traditional textile communities of women in rural Pakistan where development opportunities are limited. It uses the reflective practice of its design researcher, to explore established power relations, and search for new dialogues that build meaningful relationships for creating new forms of power in interrelated social, development and design contexts. This practice-based discussion contends with the embedded layers of power arising from social constructs and those extending beyond. A combined methodology, 'Power Signifiers' is presented as a critically reflective approach for social and design practice, building on the social sciences discourse of power analysis and power relations frameworks through forms of non-obvious power in developing contexts. Theories of power and empowerment provide a platform that designers can build on in examining agencies of making in design collaborations.

Keywords: Textiles; Power; Craft; Collaborative Design Practice

1. Introduction

This paper discusses and situates the role of practice in design research in collaborative contexts in relation to power. Making practice has a lexicon, which through exchange and dialogue can further design research's empowerment narratives. The social sciences offer multiple conceptualizations of power relations as well as frameworks for understanding and analyzing power in empowerment/development project contexts. The field of design in contrast has struggled to define power in collaborative and educational terms when met with thriving material cultures in the global south. This paper's aim is two-fold. To question and provoke how we traditionally perceive power as collaborative design practitioners. To further thinking on a design practice-oriented methodology, 'Power Signifiers' for transforma-



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tive development focused empowerment, that was outlined in the author's PhD. This discussion helps to map where we stand as designers when working alongside others and the inevitable assimilation and perceptions we are tied to in such encounters. It also maps out power and builds on it in relation to design research where the discussion of 'decentring' and 'decolonizing' is ongoing and evolving to shape future roles of designers and contributes to the discourse of design and empowerment.

This paper uses the basis of field research conducted over a decade in Sindh, Pakistan a region synonymous for its hand craft legacy (Askari, 2019; Askari and Crill, 1997; Edwards, 2011). In particular the case of one women's traditional stitch-craft community [of over 60 artisans] will be examined to highlight the layers of power. Eighteen field visits (each consisting of between five and ten days) and regular telephone contact via WhatsApp messages and calls is maintained with members of this community. The author's engagement with the community began in 2007 through an NGO project, then her PhD research and is still ongoing. Currently, including this group, three other textile making communities are engaged through direct craft making projects in the region. Insights gained through these interactions also inform this discussion. These in-depth lived experiences of making 'with' the community and deep relationship systems built for over 15 years continually enable different layers of knowledge to emerge and form the phenomenological epistemology of this research paper (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

Phenomenology underpins the mindset approach for this paper. The 'subjective' and 'subjectivity' defined here is not an absence of objectivity in the research process or inquiry but the specific connections and contextual positioning 'of lived experience' and 'social arrangements' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Tilley, 2006) that enables the revealing of different knowledge of objects and people in certain arrangements like relationships. It also relies on the crucial cyclical process of inquiry in participatory action research and reflective practice. Both these approaches benefit from chronology.

There is recognition in design research that craft making practice carries embodied and tacit knowledge (Bofylatos & Spyrou, 2017) which extends beyond the "functional and symbolic" (Kiem, 2011). Yet, there is a dearth of research methodology and articulation to unravel these knowledge forms and map its associative power. Design is widely considered a western construct therefore embedded in modernization stances (Shultz et al., 2018). This categorization of knowledge systemically excludes craft and specifically craft of traditional making communities from dialogues of design and thus power. This is also why there are few appropriate research methods of collaborating with indigenous practitioners and communicating their tacit and embodied knowledge as a means of empowerment to be found. As designers and practitioners, we mostly report this knowledge without in-depth sustained engagement perpetuating our dominant role.

However, design practice – in this instance textile making – may offer empowerment strategies for critically reflective spaces, that allow for social transformation of marginalized craft communities especially women. The reflective practice of a design researcher can be used to explore established power relations. It can also search for new dialogues that build meaningful relationships for creating new forms of power in interrelated social, development and design contexts.

2. Literature Review

There is consensus that the crux of the issue of the wide gap between understanding and practice of participatory empowerment is the complexity of power relations (e.g. Eyben, Kabber et al., 2008; Gaventa, 2006; Pettit, 2012). Power relations encompass not only individuals such as the facilitator and community through forms of agency but also the social and political structures around communities such as those of NGOs, local governments, schools and privileged elites.

On the questions of empowerment in craft development projects and layers of power none are more central to practice related research than power relations in the context of privileged designer/facilitators and rural women artisans. Starting from a philosophical standpoint Foucault (1994) suggests power can be controlled and asserted through knowledge in how it is disseminated and historically established. Put differently the ‘history of truth’ might be dependent on the relationships that established it. He proposes multiple truths emerge from multiple experiences because the “relationship in which the subject is” is “modified by that experience”. While Dowding disagrees with Foucault on how ‘domination’ occurs, he notes the interdependency of structures and individuals in wielding power in ‘social power’ and ‘outcome power’ (2019; 2006; 1995). The importance of power relations has been argued: in social change theory by Freire (1970; 1973; 1974) in particular the student-teacher relationship for social transformation; in community psychology linking empowerment to agency (Bandura, 1995; Maton, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000); in development studies on social constructs in the forms of power (Chambers, 1983; Gaventa, 2006; Miller and VeneKlasen, 2006; Pettit, 2012); by feminists on gender-based knowledge creation such as the ‘outsider within’ and in standpoint theory (Collins, 2004; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Harding, 2004; Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992); similarly in the insider/outsider debate that has overlaps with positionality (Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990; Holmes, 2020; Kanhua, 2000; Oz and Timur, 2022); in theory on dominant society and culture such as ‘the forms of capital’ by Bourdieu (1986), ‘cultural hegemony’ by Gramsci (1971), in ‘orientalism’ by Said (2003) and in mobilizing agency against colonial oppression in the Indian subcontinent by Iqbal (1935). In design terms power relations are most often identified in the colonial and modernization stances that design and dominant culture often pursue (Escobar, 2018; Schultz *et al.*, 2018; Tunstall, 2023; Van Amstel, 2023). All these sets of ideas, that theorize different structures as to why powerlessness exists or the systems that lead to diminished power and therefore agency,

apply to the women artisans in Sindh in their practices and interactions with others. However, due to the entrenched systems of multi-faceted power, decolonizing design is considered only one facet of the relationship in decentring power in such contexts. Frameworks that build on the social sciences platforms in examining agencies of making in design collaborations offer a more holistic approach to unravelling power. This is examined in the Power Signifiers approach and furthered in the discussion.

2.1 Power Relations Frameworks

Frameworks enabling an environment of 'self-reflective' empowerment for communities and critical reflection for researcher/practitioners are explored. Environments that allow for development of critical reflection and thinking are needed to build understanding of the women's agency, to make informed decisions and be aware of their choices. Participatory development offers methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) that advocate collective concerns centred on 'self-critical epistemological awareness' (Chambers, 1997) for facilitators. Yet, McGee argues that the view that communities are "homogenous, harmonious units whose members share common interests and priorities contrasts sharply with reality, and leaves RRA/PRA ill-equipped to deal with power differences between participants or discern the weaker voices among them" (2002, p.105-106). Kabeer's empowerment framework emphasizes the three interrelated dimensions of power relations: resources described as the pre-conditions, agency as the process and achievements as the outcomes. She argues agency alone cannot be increased without consideration of the conditions under which choices are available to those marginalized, in the way that resources are or can be accessed (1999; 2005). Gaventa provides a framework of analysis through the 'power cube', it describes 'power over' others as either 'visible' or explicit and 'hidden power' as concealed whereas 'invisible power' as internalized power through social beliefs and structures. He suggests transformative change happens in "rare moments when social movements or social actors are able to work effectively across each of the dimensions [...] to challenge visible, hidden and invisible power simultaneously" (2006, p.30). Similar to Gaventa, building on Steven Luke's (1974) three-dimensional power, Miller and Veneklasen's 'power matrix' works on the premise of 'visible, hidden and invisible' power that operates 'to exclude and privilege' some 'over' others while positive power that is transformative is: 'power with', 'power within' and 'power to'. Whereas, French and Raven (1959, p.151) note five bases of relational power based on perception: 'reward power' of the dominant providing rewards, 'coercive power' of the dominant meting out punishment, 'legitimate power' of legitimate right to prescribe behavior for others, 'referent power' of mutual identification through trust and respect, and 'expert power' of the dominant having specific knowledge or expertise.

To define power relations it is essential to situate the research collaboration. The place or local context must be understood and mapped. Through his model of ecology for human development Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes different ecological contexts where human development occurs in five separate settings or environments defined as macrosystems, microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and chronosystems. Macrosystems are primarily outside individual control forming the wider socio-political system or context including cultural beliefs. Microsystems are spaces of direct interactions with the most potential for societal level change (e.g. school, vocational training, workplace). Mesosystems describe how one's embodied experiences might relate or influence another. Exosystems indirectly influence individual development through microsystems such as how stress in one situation might affect behavior elsewhere. Chronosystems are the time dimension. Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems focus on environments that directly influence individuals to develop and transform at a place-based level. In his model the balance of power shifts in favor of the developing person if learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong or enduring emotional attachment (1979, p.60).

Sindh has different layers of power based on these frameworks, however its manifestation has mainly negative connotation; yet, Miller and Veneklasen's (2006) definitions of 'power with', 'power within' and 'power to', and French and Raven's (1959) 'referent power' provide positive forms of power to explore in the craft making context, alongside Chamber's (1997) 'self-critical epistemological awareness' as a design facilitator. Miller and VeneKlasen's (2006) social sciences framework helps to navigate power relations in design terms (Mirza, 2020) – power 'with' people (design as collective strength), power 'within' (using design to build one's sense of self-worth) and power 'to' (design capability to shape own life and make a difference). This research builds on these social sciences power relation frameworks and charted the criteria needed for situated empowerment in marginalised craft community contexts.

3. Criteria for design practice-oriented empowerment frameworks

To unravel power in collaborative encounters foremost is critical reflection and questioning. It begins with identifying the power structures and the systems in place by mapping the hierarchies which broadly fall under 'power over' others and the broader socio-political structure outside individual control.

Identifying who might be oppressed and the kind of oppressive system that exists. To contextualize the Sindh province has an especially acute complexity of power historically; it has a thriving feudal system with large land holding consequently there are embedded social and political structures and widespread socio-educational issues limiting educational opportunities. Traditionally at the community level there are well defined patriarchal systems which exclude women from decision-making in their day to day lives and restricts their

movement i.e. visiting medical clinics or the local markets without male relatives. Some younger women have completed high school while most others attended a few grades. The women's community speaks regional language, Sindhi. Some also speak the national language, Urdu, and know some words in English.

Identifying the stakeholders and players within this system. Outsiders consist of development and government organization staff also designers and research practitioners who are intervening facilitators of development and/or income and/or heritage through the premise of craft. Some facilitators are also a part of the local social structure. Not only are rural communities mostly geographically remote, artisanal communities and women specifically are at the bottom of this culturally ingrained hierarchy and lack autonomy. This leads to artisanal communities being socially marginalized, subjugated and/or disenfranchised.

Identifying how local stakeholders impact participant collaborators and engagement. To address the aforementioned development issues in Pakistan multiple projects undertake 'empowerment'. Socio-economic empowerment is widely applied for monetary benefit and economic uplift to raise social status. For women the medium mainly used is their traditional craft practice and its development. The focus on generating income and not on the nature of collaboration in craft (Rhodes, 2014) by being 'given' design briefs, inevitably places women artisans at the bottom of the power pyramid. Akin to the subjugation the women routinely experience in other spheres of their daily lives. Design briefs can be far removed from the women's traditional making. This asserts a top-down flow of knowledge, decisions and unwittingly privilege, exacerbated by two-way communication being restricted between project managers and aid agencies. An example highlights the subtle manifestation of power. The CEO of a local NGO visited one of the regular workshops conducted by the author. On the agreed day two hours into the workshop, field unit and other operational NGO staff members arrived before the CEO to ensure everything was 'ready' for his visit. The workshop was dismantled. All the artisans were asked to move from the *Charpois* (four-legged wooden bed frames with loosely woven rope strung across) and told to sit on the floor on local patchwork quilts to work instead. The women artisans' position was not just changed to another place but 'lowered' for the attendance of higher management by local staff. This is not unusual in Sindh. Landlords and those seen in authority always sit higher up. Physical boundaries and hierarchies are maintained through touch. This problem arises from a perception of hierarchy that is culturally ingrained and comes from socially conditioned behaviors in response to perceived authority such as those proposed by Bourdieu (1984; 1986), Gramsci (1971), Guerrero (2014) and Foucault (1994). This underlines the phenomenological, physiological and psychological effects of our simple actions that express a significant statement of power.

How to create active forms of participation and interaction. While Sindh has oppressive embedded power structures it also has a rich history of material culture, in particular hand embroidery and stitch-craft, which is largely the domain of women. Fine needlework and textile making is handed down generationally among women. This is a space of access and opportunity for designers to start different dialogues than the social sciences. The medium of practice is a part of designers' lexicon as researchers. Practice is termed as the 'dialogic power' of designers. This can trigger different relationships of meaning and articulation.

Finally, what actions are needed to shift power dynamics. The power dynamics need to shift at two levels. One in the role as a designer collaborator and how to mediate this within your relationship with your collaborator(s). Two, in how your role can create agency and the conducive spaces for collaboration. This refers to the spaces designers can create that are critically reflective; where participants can generate agency and what the participants can see about themselves in those spaces. The medium of exchange in these spaces must be one that participants can relate to and ideally have total autonomy over. How participant collaborators perceive themselves in those spaces, what is mirrored or reflected back to them will determine any potential shifts in behavior. Circling back to critical reflection, only critical questioning, the learning and unlearning of assimilated behavior can lead to transformation. Therefore, any spaces created for empowerment in design research need participants to be able to learn and transform through participatory processes and feel capable of change such as 'I did this therefore I feel I am able to...' on their own account. Designers are not a part of this process. These are the kind of enabling spaces that empower (Maton, 2008).

3.1 Positionality

The designer researcher's subjectivity involves working and shifting between roles as a co-worker, a liaison-point between the NGOs and as a practitioner/academic. Part of this research methodology is the movement between these layers and how the researcher negotiates that movement (Collins, 2004; Fine, 1994). Influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945), Bronfenbrenner (1995), Tilley (2006) and Maton (2008) of how social positionings enable the creation of knowledge, five phenomenological spaces of inquiry are defined (Figure 1).

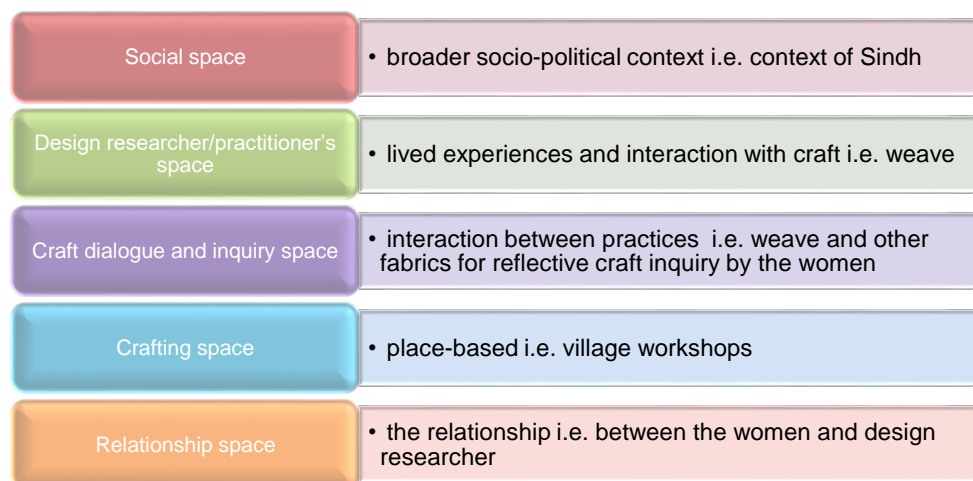


Figure 1 Relational spaces of inquiry of power

The researcher's positionality is important to the methodology as to the kind of knowledge their researcher role can generate. Here the author's role as a researcher no doubt falls into the categorization of 'native' (Kanuha, 2000), 'indigenous' (Fahim, 1977), 'emic' (Headland, Pike, & Harris 1990) but Labaree (2002), Kanuha (2000), Collins (2004) and Harris (1990) offer a realistic balance to the debate with the 'insider-outsider', 'outsider within' and of the emic perspective not being solely subjective. Although the insider has access to intimate knowledge or cultural understandings, the very institutionalization of the insider's way of seeing gives them an outsider perspective (Collins, 2004), or as Kanuha (2000, p.445) notes, native researchers are required to 'place those insider experiences in some separate and impartial context' when acting in our 'contrasting roles as our Others'. In the author's example the insider status comes from the same national and gender identity and understanding the local social structure. It is also in knowing how to access craft groups in Sindh, directly rather than the landlord route which could challenge established power and possibly impede the project. On the other hand, although a craft maker, which gives a degree of insider status on the tacit processes of making, the researcher is a weaver not an embroiderer and does not share the material culture of the women where she is an outsider.

4. Power Signifiers

The practice contended with the multiple embedded layers of power, those arising from social constructs and those that extend beyond, the forms of power in making practice. A combined original methodology was developed, through Power Signifiers, for a critically reflective approach for social and design practice, building on the social sciences discourse of power analysis and power relations frameworks through forms of non-obvious power in developing contexts. It also makes an original contribution to the field through the use of the

'textile' as a flexible space, both as language and a surface for stimulating dialogue and exchange that could generate new meaning and relationships of power as termed in 'dialogic power'.

This framework offers an outline for mapping the negative and positive forms of 'dialogic power' that designers bring to their collaborative encounter. This approach mediates power at a more individual level as described in the microsystems, mesosystems and exosystems using positive forms of 'power with', to enable spaces for 'power within' (using design to build one's sense of self-worth) and 'power to' (design capability to shape own life and make a difference).

It considers two types of phenomenological power dialogues: Silent and Active. These signifiers are subjective and will vary from individual to individual due to perception being phenomenological. Silent Signifiers are inevitable implicit and tacit means by which we perceive others outside our own local sphere based on social affiliations. Active Signifiers are the means or skills available to outsiders who wish to collaborate. As outlined earlier this requires the understanding of the social context and the examination of our own signifiers of tacit power. For craft practitioners, an active method of reflection and dialogue is available in making and learning from our own practice of craft and that of others. This basis of positive 'dialogic power' was used in the practice-based methodological approach for this project.

Silent Power Signifiers could be privileges such as family legacy, race, gender, social influence, social status and education. These past experiences or opportunities have an implicit bearing on the (new) meaning that outsiders hope to generate in their encounters or projects with others. As an upper middle-class urban Pakistani woman born and raised in the largest city, Karachi, the author is in a position of privilege. She studied at top-rated private schools in the country and is fluent in writing and speaking two languages: English and Urdu. She also had the opportunity to study in renowned UK universities. Her parents (also raised in Karachi) are educated and liberal individuals who encouraged their children to make their own decisions and lead independent lives. Ethnically her family is 'Urdu speaking' (as politically correct urban circles might note) or more commonly used *Muhajir* (literally translated as 'immigrant', used for migrants to Pakistan who were originally from areas in present-day India). She acknowledges these stark differences to the women collaborators as they form inevitable perceptions in each.

Active Power Signifiers are the aspects of power to be considered and mediated through modes of interaction, modes of conducting design work and the collaborative craft-based syntax. Outsiders' past privileges or background cannot be changed, approaches must be adjusted according to the level of silent power an outsider is perceived to have both by him or

herself but also by the community. This requires critical self-reflection on the outsiders' part. It also requires understanding the phenomenological settings or environment of a context to gauge what kind of learning and unlearning for transformation and re-adjusting of power balances is needed. To mediate her social and educational affluence the author makes conscious choice of dress and is especially mindful of her body language. As noted a direct physical projection of deep-rooted power is a particular place-based issue in Sindh. She also tries to learn and use Sindhi the women's language where possible, by noting commonly used terminology. The significance of the author's actions is noted from the women's reflection on them. Naz recounted Ambreen's statement about the physical interaction – sitting, talking and eating together – as favorable over the interactions with others who maintain social distance (Mirza, 2020). The workshop environment is a lively space, while making there are conversations about life and aspirations. Further mediation is anchored in practice-based approaches discussed in the findings.

The Power Signifiers diagram initiates this approach while developing 'dialogic power' in the hope that other design researchers will contribute and add to it by considering their subjectivity.

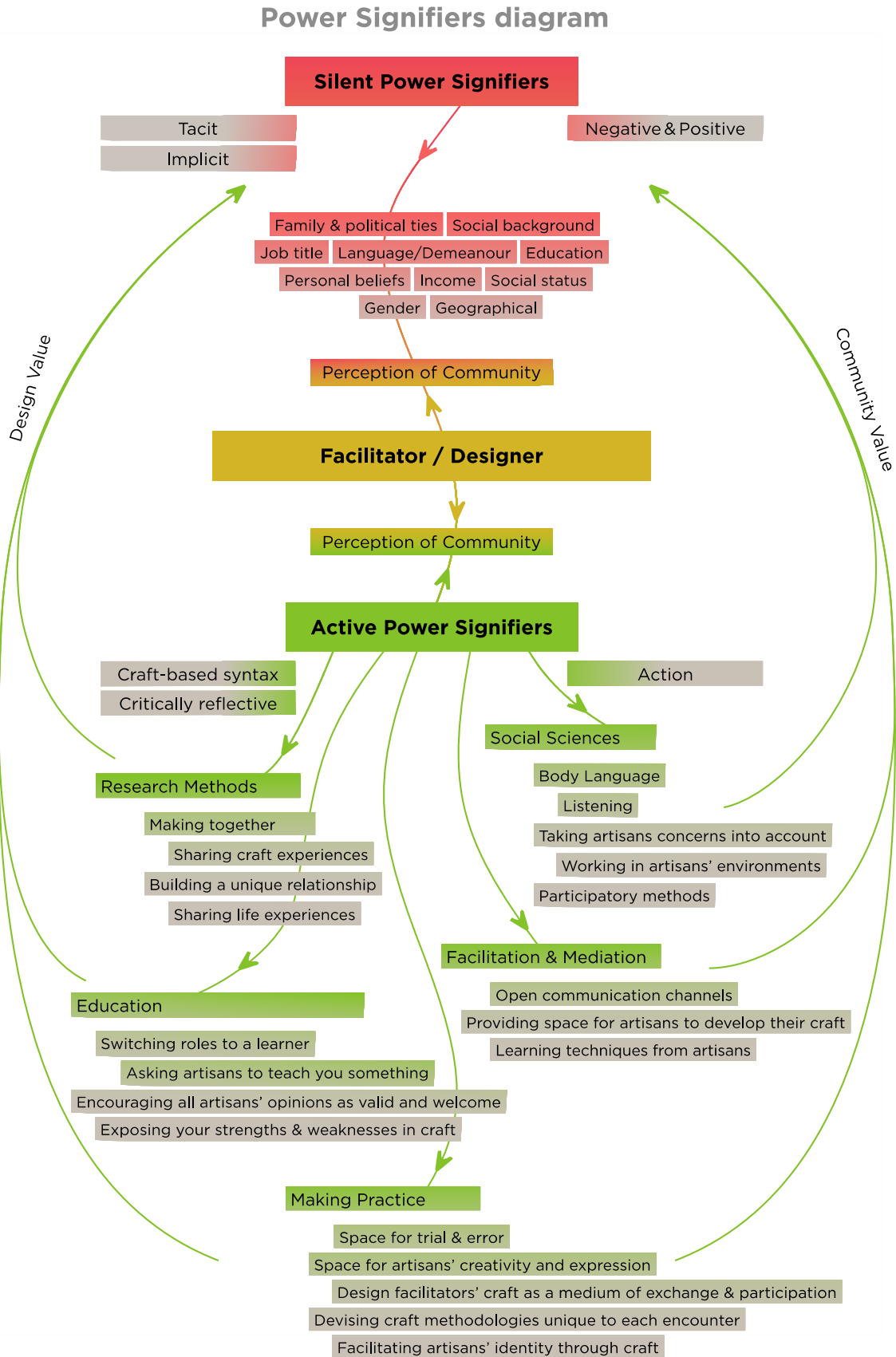


Figure 2 Power Signifiers

5. Findings

Demonstrating ‘dialogic power’ the author used her craft of hand weaving as a substrate, a space, a language and a site for reflection and stimulating dialogue and exchange. This highlights different aspects of empowerment in practice contexts. A selection of textiles provide visual indicators of the themes discussed earlier. Here, chronologically ‘power over’, ‘power with’, ‘power within’ and finally ‘power to’ are presented using visuals of practice to develop the discourse on design practice research methodologies.



Figure 3 Textiles series 1: Representational samples

Textiles series one (Figure 3) presents the women’s response to the design brief of ‘the best way of representing what you can do and of representing yourself’. This followed the women’s description of their stitch-craft as their ‘representative identity’. Subtly showing that as an outsider the researcher acknowledged their perception and wanted to explore *with* them. The women’s embroidery samples are mostly contained within borders in symmetrical arrangements showing the tracing and re-performing of ‘habituated patterns of hierarchy and domination’ (Pettit 2020, p.79).

5.1 Power relations

After mapping traditional practice, making was used as the medium for a different reading of power dynamics between rural women makers and the design researcher. Building on Pettit’s ideas (2020, p.77) of “using embodied symbolism, metaphor and fantasy” for guiding

participants “that could otherwise be flattened by conceptual language”, craft-making and the surface of the fabric was used for an embodied dialogue of power.



Figure 4 Textile dialogue series 2: Author’s weave and Ambreen’s embroidery interaction

Ambreen embroidered medallions mirroring the woven patterns and also embroidered her name onto the weave (Figure 4). This labeling surprised the researcher, emphasizing the ‘preciousness’ she felt towards her weaves. This subtle action of labelling the sample as Ambreen’s own has profound meaning for power relations. It swaps the roles where artisans are anonymous, but designers are always ‘known’, subverting the conventional power relation. It sets a different tone for the ensuing collaborative practice.

This is categorized as power relations because there is learning for the designer/facilitator and learning for the women, the questioning of a conventional power dynamic and the establishing of a new one. This can be described as ‘power with’, where textiles allow for the subtle reading of power.

5.2 Critical Reflection

The samples below focus on critical reflection of one’s abilities in craft and of perceived limitations. Bandura (1995) notes personal agency or self-efficacy as the ability to see the potential in oneself. This form of agency is instrumental to power, as Miller and VeneKlasen (2006) have noted in ‘power within’.



Figure 5 Textile dialogue series 4: Author's weave and Sughra's embroidery interaction

In the example above (Figure 5) the brief was to draw anything the artisans wanted. The artisan initially responded, "I can't draw, I don't know how". After some encouragement from the researcher she made an elaborate peacock. This shows the space of initial hesitation, then inquiry and trial embroidery which provides the opportunity to critically reflect on one's own abilities and perceived limitations. The need for approval from the outsider begins to overlap with the need for approval from oneself as confidence in one's abilities grows.

In other samples the women made free-hand figures, and some chose to leave some patterns asymmetrical or 'broken' to form unconventional shapes rather than their usual 'completion' or banding of traditional motifs (Figure 3). In another sample embroidery was unpicked and redone. These textiles encouraged thinking and engaging critically with the women's craft: its stitches, but not necessarily the patterns of their traditional textiles, suggesting a critical thinking approach towards achieving the design task. These figurative patterns are a means, an experiment to reflect back a different perception of one's abilities, rather than products or finished outcomes.

5.3 Transformation

The series of textiles exchanged between the participant women and the researcher, led to a large Jacquard weave that encapsulated sustained relationship over the years in patchwork-

like woven images taken during the workshops. The researcher left her mistakes in weave visible, exposing the error and her vulnerabilities as a maker. Guerrero et al. note the nature of communication as ‘dyadic’ unfolding “through a series of messages and counter-messages” (2014, p.127). The women’s response when they first saw this piece was to gather around it excitedly and try to recognize themselves in it. The women stitched into it at their leisure over a few years.



Figure 6 Textile dialogue series 8: Author’s weave and women’s embroidery interaction

The figurative embroideries and the expression in the jacquard piece demonstrate confidence, the familiarity and affirmation of one’s skills in the freedom of mark-making on the researcher’s cloth – in the playful creatures speaking to the woven images of the women (Figure 6). The approach is in sharp contrast to the first samples (Figure 4). There is informality, of the stitches and of messages that the women wish to communicate. This ‘informality’ signifies a transformation of power of less distance, “casual approach feeling” and seeming more relaxed (Guerrero et al., 2014, p.134). It highlights the ‘power to’ create change.

5.4 Social Implications

In this practice, tasks like group critique created an environment of autonomy. The researcher’s woven pieces were a space for trial and error with no right or wrong way to embroider into them. The artisans could freely interpret, conceptualize and embroider however they wanted. This helped to transform archaic perceptions of conformity in material and in turn in social practice. The women became critically reflective of their society’s norms and

openly discussed their personal concerns after three years of participating in the project (Mirza, 2020). Zohra shared how the women made collective efforts to eradicate commonplace domestic violence by men. She describes, “we explained calmly to the men (once their anger cooled down) that there should be no beating and that women deserve to be treated with respect and have rights!” More changes were reported, “since doing this craftwork we have become more confident and independent. We travel to the local markets by ourselves and even travelled back from [the metropolis] Karachi unaccompanied. Ambreen and I said to my brother, ‘we have pending work at the village and need to go back’. He said, ‘Okay, will you be able to do it yourselves? Will you know which train station to get off at?’ I replied, yes, of course we can do it and nothing will happen [to us]” (Mirza, 2020).

When initially presented with different design briefs the women responded with, “I don’t know how”, or “I can’t make that” (Mirza, 2020). The researcher encouraged the women to learn by doing by working out ways to apply their craft. “Active learning is a participatory process that includes ongoing opportunities for practice, feedback, and reflection” (Maton, 2008, p.10), while being told what to do would have similar end results but none of the significant behavioral and psychological shifts in thinking, perception and reflection. These happen when the participant conducts critical inquiry. Shamim says, “When you come here for a workshop, we all come together and we try new things, by the time you come again next time we have many new ideas in our mind about how we can apply our craft in different ways and variations” (Mirza, 2020).

6. Discussion

Within the framework of spaces this paper offers conscious reflections on the experiences of gender, age, national and ethnic identities as components of the agency of the design practitioner that relate to and signify power. Especially significant is the conscious, emotional, ethical and political fact of relationality through which power can be read and understood subjectively in its given context.

In this discussion of empowerment through social relationships, the quality of the affective relationships between the craftswomen and their creativity, and between the women and the design practice researcher (French and Raven 1959), suggest methodological innovations for design research.

‘Dialogic power’ contributes to designers’ Power Signifiers. It demonstrates supportive, evolving, equitable, and critically reflective social relationships that engage in multiple (explicit, implicit and phenomenological) dialogues may generate meaning in craft and mutually empowering experiences. Practice and the spaces it enables are key components of this sense of empowerment building on social conceptualizations of power.

This 'dialogic power' of design practice is seen in the subtleties that textiles as a medium offer in close up encounters where inquiry and critical reflection can occur with the potential to make significant changes. Makers' well-rehearsed traditional craft practices also allow for different forms of expression where language or social confidence may be barriers.

Miller and Veneklasen's (2006) definitions are used to contribute to the discourse of power in design research and towards design education where we are still grappling with the role of the designer in empowerment contexts.

Power over – outsiders in design contexts controlling decision-making

Power with – mutual learning with facilitators and relationship development

Power within – self-belief about abilities to reflect critically and create transformation

Power to – create change by transforming perceptions of self, realizing one's choices and acting on them

From this emerges:

Dialogic Power – the dialogue of making practices of designers and communities

For empowerment through design practice the designer can:

- Map and change their own dynamics
- Create spaces of critical reflection (physical and phenomenological)
- Build relationships
- Develop making mediums that are enablers
- Observe and reflect on transformation within communities and within individuals and map how they are critically reflecting on their own behaviors

These broad steps will help identify and determine any shifts in power.

7. Conclusion

Through craft making and sharing textile and personal spaces, reciprocal agency can be found through meaningful design and social interaction. This leads to transformative changes in rural and marginalized communities where socio-educational opportunities for growth and/or shifts in power are scarce, or of limited quality because stagnating practices can limit critical thought within communities. The agency of craft in knowledge generation was tested and led to a synthesized framework in the Power Signifiers which employs available social situations and material tendencies in making communities.

This paper highlights the need to change our perspectives as designers and shift them from positions of authority into relationships with the 'other' without othering. Dialogic power, a lexicon of practice is mutually available for design research practitioners and traditional makers alike. The Power Signifiers approach helps to map this in the place-based context.

For designers there are limitations in mapping social sphere changes, yet the relationship systems built, and the spaces enabled will echo back changes. The shifts in power dynamics leading to transformation are not confined between the designer and the community but occur with other place-based players through the mesosystems and exosystems that we dwell in.

Subjectivity can be used constructively in creating new knowledge through using and investigating the perspective that the positioning of a researcher and their context provides. It offers a new example of how phenomenological epistemology, participatory action research and reflective practice layer up as systems to create space for dialogic power, enabling rural craft makers in complex socio-cultural contexts to have a voice through their practice and therefore agency.

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