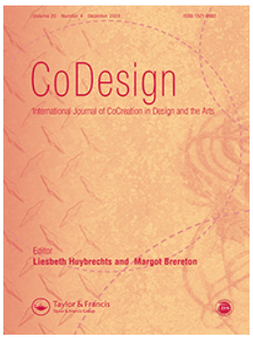

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An autoethnography of quasi-autoethnographies: seeding an impact-oriented complex collaborative research ecosystem

Rosie Hornbuckle

Complex Collaborative Design Research Group, School of Design, Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Complex collaborative research, involving many partners, presents a significant challenge for understanding the distinctive role and value of design research. Participants find it increasingly difficult to extrapolate who did what, and what happened as a result of each intervention. In these contexts, the person with the most complete view of design research is the design researcher themselves, and autoethnography can be a useful ally when other forms of evidence are inaccessible. This paper presents an autoethnography exploring how my quasi-autoethnographies have allowed me to build my 'academic voice'. In the process I reflect on seven roles of autoethnography, taken from the literature, and expand with three roles based on my experiences of building a research ecosystem using an autoethnography-before-impact approach.

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Complex collaborations; autoethnography; impact; systemic design; design research; academic voice

1. Introduction

Complex collaborative research, involving many partners, presents a significant challenge for understanding the distinctive role and value of design research. When outcomes are a result of multiple inputs from science and technology partners, design industry partners, social sciences, service providers and community members, the outputs are entangled with many different forms of knowledge. Collaborators find it increasingly difficult to extrapolate who did what, and what happened as a result of each intervention. Each project is different from the last and so the failsafe of a baseline comparison is, for most partners, unavailable. As one collaborator said to me in an impact interview: 'we are all born with the project'.

In these contexts, the person with the most complete view of design research is the design researcher themselves; by examining the route they took, their rationale and reflecting on effectiveness by piecing together the small victories and failures of their interventions from one project to the next (Sauerwein, Bakker, and Balkenende 2018). It is the connections and comparisons between research events and in between projects that enables theory-building through autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). This can feel quite unsatisfactory, given the pressure on academics to prove impact.

CONTACT Rosie Hornbuckle r.hornbuckle@arts.ac.uk

There is an additional challenge of being able to articulate the role and value of design research to potential partners, often from disciplines where 'hard evidence' is valued almost above all else.

This paper presents an autoethnography of quasi-autoethnographies – these are *might-have-been* autoethnographies where my experiences are hidden within 'more robust' research methods and a third person tense that aims at objectivity. The autoethnography I write now, is both analytic and interpretive, allowing me to explore my research story over 15 years to discover and examine my epiphany that autoethnographic writing is what gave shape to my academic voice and pathway towards impact (Denzin 2014). Concomitantly, this story is critical of the lack of agency I was afforded, particularly early in my career, because I felt that design methods and my own experiences as a practitioner were not considered evidence enough. By examining three pieces of writing from different points in my early academic career, I intend to explore how these quasi-autoethnographies have enabled other forms of enquiry, knowledge exchange and pedagogic innovation, but by the same token were an opportunity missed. I make a case for the role of autoethnography in building academic voice and growing a research ecosystem which lead to legacy and impact. I also explore why autoethnography might be particularly valuable for practice research in complex collaborative contexts, where individual impact may be difficult to evidence in the conventional ways. I will draw on autoethnography literature to provide a theoretical framework for my writing, and to discover if my story reveals different roles for autoethnography within complex collaborative design research.

2. The roles of autoethnography

Denzin describes how the history of autoethnography has fluctuated, falling in and out of favour with various research communities with different aims, values and epistemological stances (Denzin 2014). Critical Autoethnography is one branch of the methodology which surfaces experience as a direct critique of social inequalities. Autoethnography has been adopted by these communities for its ability to give voice to injustices, as protest or resistance to the dominant narrative, for example in legal discourses and practices (Crenshaw 1989; MacKinnon 2013). Autoethnography also allows researchers to examine their own positionality in relation to the research context (Kamlongera 2021) which is increasingly practiced in design research (Hornbuckle, Page, and Nogueira 2024; Westbrook and Ehmke 2024).

In other spheres, autoethnography has found its place as an analytic and/or interpretive method, to construct meaning or build evidence of social phenomena from an individuals' perspective, particularly to examine change, existential questions or an 'epiphany' in that's individuals' life story (Denzin 2014). What-is-more, autoethnography repositions research as a product of social constructs:

> Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010, 1)

Ellis, Adams, & Bochner's definition centralises the role of autoethnography as a counter to the dominant positivistic research paradigm and forefronts the position of the researcher in that construction. Autoethnographic approaches allow design researchers to explore their own practice, as a distinctly social and experiential act, in connection to context and culture. For example, makers and craftspeople have employed autoethnography to explore their own approach to design research through practice (Earley 2023; Hirscher 2022).

Within the context of family research, Adams and Manning (2015) describe four further roles of autoethnographic research, to:

1. *Offer insider accounts [of the subject matter];*
2. *Study everyday, unexpected experiences [of the subject matter], especially [in] unique or difficult situations;*
3. *Write against limited extant research about [the subject matter];*
4. *Make research more accessible to non-academic audiences.*

Paraphrased from Adams and Manning (2015, 350)

The authors also contend that in other research paradigms autoethnography can:

5. *Inform statistical, postpositivist research by offering possible explanations for outliers, contradictions, variations, or highly unreliable findings;*
6. *Generate innovative research questions, form hypotheses, and carefully conceptualize research;*
7. *Influence other research conversations.*

Paraphrased from Adams and Manning (2015, 362)

In this, Adams and Manning (2015) provide a useful overview of the role of autoethnography and in a pragmatic way bring together three modes of autoethnography – critical, analytical, interpretive – to show how it might be adapted to different research questions. This provides a framing for my exploration of autoethnography. In the autoethnographic piece that follows in Section 3, I refer to and annotate (in the sense of a portfolio) three pieces of writing from the period from 2009 to 2022 (Sauerwein, Bakker, and Balkenende 2018). I explore how they contributed to my experience of progress within a complex collaborative research environment.

My practice research explores how design tools, methods and approaches can support collaboration in large consortium research projects involving many disciplines and cultures. Three projects funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme, were significant to my progress from 2014 to 2024, and focused on circular economy and medical innovations (Projects A, B, C in Table 1). In these projects, between 13 and 18 partners from across Europe work together to develop collaborative outputs, often to guide and translate scientific research so that it can be useful in a social context. Table 1 outlines the projects and their characteristics.

Drawing on my systemic design approach, I have mapped my research outputs as an ecosystem in Figure 1, illustrating the connection between different projects, outputs and proposals. I have taken inspiration from Paul Rogers' exemplary work mapping the careers of design researchers which was published as a collection of visualised timelines (Rogers and Wareing 2021). This visual approach allows me to reflect on how autoethnography has seeded my impact-oriented research ecosystem – embracing the complexity of my research world, so to speak. To aid

Table 1. Characteristics of the three projects.

Project	Dates	Consortium size	Assumed cite of innovation	Consortium composition	Overarching transformative aim	Motivation for involving design research
A - Trash-2-Cash	2015–2018	17 partners, 10 countries	Recycled fibres for wearable textiles and composites	Multi-disciplinary circular supply chain	Circular textiles	To demonstrate the market value of the technology, designing circular textiles and garments
B - Pharma Factory	2018–2022	14 partners, 7 countries	Medical products made using plant biotechnology	Pure science and spin-out SMEs	Local, accessible and inexpensive medicines	Public engagement to communicate the value of the science
C - HEREWEAR	2020–2024	15 partners 9 countries	Bio-based fibres for wearable textiles	Multi-disciplinary, circular, regional supply chain and stakeholder network	Local & circular textile economies through underutilized biomass	To demonstrate the market value of the technology, to design circular, local, bio-based textiles and garments and develop design guidelines

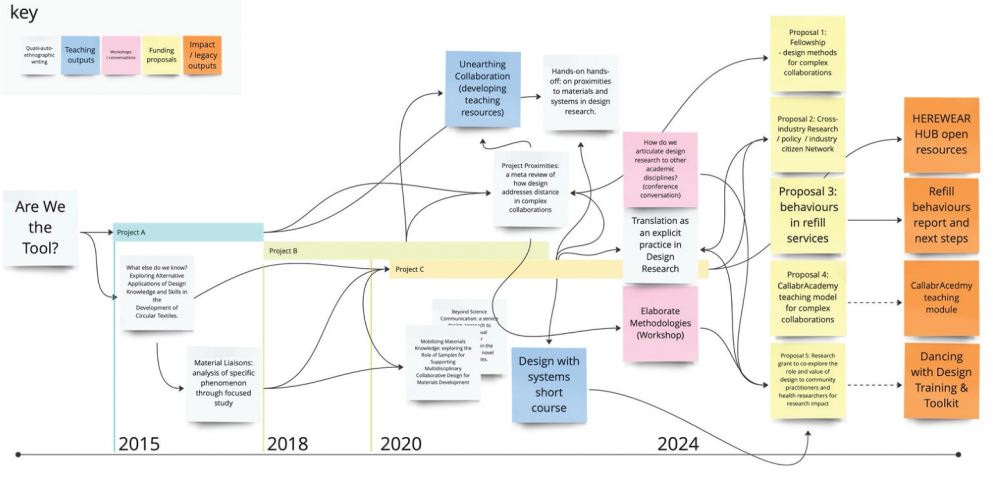

Figure 1. A sketch map of my research output ecosystem, expanding from quasi-autoethnographic writing towards impact and legacy outputs.

reading, I have also outlined these outputs in Table 2. I include teaching and knowledge exchange as key parts of the overall research ecosystem geared towards impact from research. The three writings I refer to in my story are highlighted in bold.

Table 2. Overview of selected writing and research project proposals.

Date	Title of event/output	Characteristics	Nature
2009	**Are we the tool?**	**Reflections on my role in relation to the design tools we create**	**Conference paper**
2010–2015	*Career break to take care of children*	*Time to reflect on my personal professional role and motivations*	*Domestic*
2016	**What else do we know?**	**Reflecting on the expanded role me and my team took in Project A**	**Conference paper/Journal article (2019)**
2018	Materials Liaisons	Focused analysis on the roles of individual boundary spanners in Project A	Conference paper
2021	Design with Systems	An introduction to the theory and practice of how design considers systems	Short course
2022	**Project Proximities**	**An analysis of the design methods and tools we used in Project A, B & C**	**Conference paper**
2022	Unearthing Collaboration	Resources to support undergraduate students to collaborate	Teaching resources
2022	Project Proposal 1 (unfunded)	Fellowship to investigate how design methods can serve collaboration within complex cross-sectoral challenges	Research Fellowship proposal
2023	Project Proposal 2 (unfunded)	Network grant where I would curate design interventions to enable collaboration	Large research and KE network grant
2023	Project Proposal 3 (funded)	Community based business, supporting their development using systemic and circular design methods	SME support grant
2024	Elaborate Methodologies	Workshop to explore how different design methods can combine to address complex collaborative challenges	Conference workshop/ toolkit
2024	How do we articulate design research to other academic disciplines?	Conversation exploring how the distinctiveness of design can be understood by other academic disciplines	Convened conversation at a conference
2024	Translation as an explicit practice in design research	Paper exploring the principles of design translation in achieving impact from research	Conference paper/ Journal article (in review)
2024	Project Proposal 4 (funded)	Development of a teaching module to co-create collaborative skills in students and professionals	Short course development grant
2024	Project Proposal 5 (awaiting decision)	Research grant to co-investigate the role of systemic design in addressing complex challenges-to-impact in health research.	Research grant

3. My story

In this piece I tell the story of my epiphany (Denzin 2014) – that autoethnographic writing was central to developing my academic voice and building an impact-oriented research ecosystem, and that those struggles were in part due to my focus on collaborative practice and in part due to the preoccupation of design research with rigour and objectivity.

My story begins with an admission: I'm an autoethnographic novice. I refer to my previous writings as quasi-autoethnographies because I wasn't writing in full awareness of the autoethnographic process and its established methodological traits. I don't believe this undermines the key argument of this paper; had I known more about the autoethnographic method at that time then it would have strengthened the trajectory of theory-building and research enquiry rather than reducing the effect I discuss in this paper.

The story that follows it about how I used my own experiences to guide my research, when extant evidence was lacking. I refer to Adams and Manning's (2015) seven roles of ethnography (listed above) to unpack what I was doing through these pieces of writing.

I recognise that the context of my research is atypical. I am a white heterosexual female, whose parents attended university, and although they chose to live frugally, they were university-educated. After completing my PhD at a mixed-discipline university I began my post-doctoral career at a university specialising in Arts and Design, which is rare. This had an impact on the value placed on creative disciplines by the institution, and therefore the support given to the type of research questions I wanted to investigate. Although not a textile and fashion designer myself, I was positioned within this department, to apply my collaborative research methods in large multidisciplinary and multistakeholder projects. I was in a department of experienced female academics which put me at an advantage when compared to female design researchers working in male-dominated design subdisciplines. Therefore, although my story doesn't dwell on these aspects, they nevertheless represent barriers that I understand have been present in other research trajectories, particularly females with care responsibilities. In the UK, academic research now enjoys a clear direction towards impact, which favours design research. As such, this narrative assumes a certain paradigm of research where an emphasis on impact brings about new opportunities for design researchers. I recognise these represent privileges in my background that have helped shape my journey.

When I first started thinking about what designers do, aside from what I had been taught at Design School (which essentially was designing a thing to be used by public), I was observing my research-lead and how she interacted with people who wanted to visit the materials collection she curated. I felt a deep disparity between how the collection was valued as a commodity, a concrete thing, versus how the design researcher was valued as the curator, connector and translator of diverse and complex knowledge. I became fascinated by the dominant assumption that 'things' were the most important vehicle for conveying knowledge – in this case knowledge about the sustainability of different materials. This was counter to what I observed *everyday*: that the knowledge was being produced, enabled, facilitated and translated by a designer. It was only by connecting with two other people working with materials collections and sustainable materials-sourcing that my confidence in what I was experiencing grew. In 2009 we attempted to make sense of this feeling by writing a short conference paper entitled '*Are we the tool?*'. Central to this paper was the argument that design tools and methods are made useful through the knowledge that comes with design practice in context and resides within the designer.

Essentially the motivation for making an enquiry through reflection on my own experiences at that time (a quasi-autoethnography), was having no other way of investigating, testing or understanding a phenomenon that I felt was central to our progress in material sustainability. Although I can't speak for my co-authors, I think we shared a sense that 'the world' we inhabited was crucially missing the point. That it wasn't the expensive and shiny things that were important (the lovely packs of design cards, the coffee table design books, the big design trade shows, the impossible-to-resource material collections) it was the designers and other practitioners, who worked in between these

spaces to translate that knowledge, who were going to be crucial in driving the change. In the following excerpt taken from this paper, I am reflecting on the reasoning that has led me to question what I see as the normative approach of design and the disparity between intent and action in sustainable design. Through this piece of writing, I am trying to align my own experience, observations and knowledge (from my doctoral studies) to the problem as I see it:

> When I reviewed the relationship between the designer and his tools in reference to my model, one glaringly obvious problem stood out; in order to use a tool, a designer must be in a position to use it; many of the attributes I had decided were necessary in order for tools to work, simply don't apply to sustainable design in the majority of professional design practice today. This was my realisation: that adding to the plethora of 'how to do it' texts and guidelines might not be all that useful, at least not on their own. [. . .] The survey also suggested that designers are more likely to seek information through dialogue with a colleague, with a supplier and particularly with their own experience, than from a static source. So, if designers are not in a position to use sustainable design tools, what is our next move? Perhaps what is needed is a pre-tool, something (or more probably, someone) to encourage designers to think about the broader debates and principles of sustainable design. By using this understanding and our respective positions, we have the opportunity to build awareness in the designers around us; using methods better suited to them. (Hornbuckle, Qualmann, and Sutton 2009)

There is an element of critique here, out of frustration that the focus of sustainability support is often on producing tools rather than on people and their behaviours. This opening part of my journey epitomises points 1–3 of Adams and Manning's (2015) roles of autoethnography, where an absence of *extant evidence*, typically something that is emergent, involving *unexpected experiences in unique or difficult situations* leads to an increased value in *insider insights* that my co-authors and I could offer the conference audience. Later this paper was cited as one of the main reasons I was given my first post-doctoral research position and was influential in the thinking of a PhD student in that department, relating to Adams and Manning's role no. 7: *influencing other research conversations*. The paper was a relatively insignificant short exploratory paper, essentially a footnote, yet this reflective piece seeded my research ecosystem. A broader question that I ask myself is why I abandoned the honest and more authentically autoethnographic writing of this piece in my later essays, discussed below. The only answer I can find is that I felt autoethnography would be seen as a less valid form of evidence.

My first post-doctoral position was within a consortium project concerned with developing textiles for the circular economy (Project A), which became the springboard for two further consortium technology innovation projects (Projects B & C). Although the role of design research in innovation is often assumed to be to translate scientific knowledge as given, these projects presented new opportunities and challenges for our design research team to guide innovation pathways. I found that to achieve our design research objectives we needed to first work on supporting the collaboration itself and working with partners to open up and shape their enquiry. In particular, collaborative language needed to be established, along with trust and appreciation of difference. I found that my sensitivities as a design researcher, along with my earlier experiences and observations of the translation gap between disciplines, meant that I could create interventions that allowed the collaboration to flourish. At this point I wrote the conference paper *What else do we know?* which

continued my earlier narrative around exploring the value of the design researcher beyond what was assumed by our partners. I supplemented my reflections with observations of what design researchers and designers were doing in addition to their assigned tasks. The newness of these research contexts paved the way for an autoethnographic approach, but it's notable that I presented these observations in the third person and perhaps paid less attention to representing my experience. In the following excerpt from the journal article, I have changed the tense to first person to reflect how I wanted to write this piece, but didn't have the confidence to do so. My alterations from third to first person are highlighted in bold, and with insertions explaining my feelings and actions.

> The great number of barriers to understanding within this project quickly led me to identify 'project visualisation' as a method that could enhance the collaboration and aid understanding. One example is the Capability Map **that I produced** for workshop 4. I asked project partners to complete an online survey of their knowledge and capabilities in line with the project focus on materials, recycling, design, manufacturing, end-users and lifecycles. **I created** a tabular 'map' from the results identifying each person's capabilities and knowledge, **my** intention was to allow partners to quickly see who they might talk to when requiring particular expertise and to build a sense of community within the project. To accompany the map, **I devised** an interactive task to be completed by partners in between scheduled sessions in the project meeting. **I pinned** a large poster of the material/product lifecycle within the workshop space and participants were given their own 'face stickers' to place within the project space.
>
> **My** intention was to visualise the knowledge that had been captured in the survey in a fun and engaging way that would draw attention to the map and also produce some data. Every workshop participant took part and some added other colleagues (who are involved in the project but not attending workshops) using sticky notes, **and this gave me a great sense of achievement that my intervention had gone beyond what I had anticipated and participants were now adapting the task to fill a gap that I hadn't anticipated**.
>
> The feedback from the post-workshop survey was positive, with partners asking for it to be made available online and stating that it will become 'increasingly useful'. In the post-workshop analysis, I was able to 'code' people by their discipline (design, science, manufacturing) which also gave an overview of where different types of knowledge reside within the project. Strikingly designers positioned themselves throughout the project space – in every section apart from fibre science, showing the 'general' nature of design knowledge compared to scientific knowledge, which is specific. **The unanticipated value of the tool for furthering our understanding of how different disciplines see themselves, drove me to draw on this data when we were writing the methodology white paper, understanding the situatedness of design, not at one point of the lifecycle (after materials/before production), but throughout the whole lifecycle.**
>
> (Hornbuckle 2018)

The original piece missed out the reasoning behind the decisions I made, which would have acknowledged my interpretive position, and how I was building theory based on my own experiences and feelings as well as ethnographic observations of what was happening. Although I built the evidence, discussion and narrative in reference to key literature (removed here for readability), the added layer of my experience, feeling and thought process brings with it an acknowledgement of the human in the research. The white paper I refer to in this excerpt later won an award, which evidences the impact of the knowledge the quasi-autoethnography unearthed.

What else do we know? allowed me to explore the research questions that my experiences were raising. I was then able to plan modes of enquiry to explore these questions directly, using methodologies that might be considered more 'evidence-based'. For example, I chose to focus on a significant moment in the collaboration where translational activity was emerging. During this moment I was ready to recognise its significance and intensify my data collection efforts. I conducted interviews focused on this significant moment. This was my first foray in linking these quasi-autoethnographic insights, and the research questions they enabled me to develop, with a more concrete piece of evidence-based research. The progression demonstrated here expands Adams & Manning's roles of autoethnography.

As projects A, B & C continued to exhibit similar characteristics, I was able to combine my autoethnographic writing with ethnographic evidence and comparative analysis to create what I felt was a more compelling narrative for the conference paper *Project Proximities*. In the following excerpt, which again was written in the third person originally, I have changed the tense to first-person and added the reasoning and feeling that I remember experiencing at the time but omitted from the paper:

> On joining a complex science and technology innovation project, **my colleagues and I** were faced with a variety of translational challenges equal to the complexity of the system or problem space. Effective translation and collaboration in these projects required **us to use our** creative intuition, a knack for sense-making, holistic thinking and strategizing that are all akin to the thinking, research and process **of our design practices: Increasingly I could see the** opportunity here for design researchers **(like me)** to take a lead in designing and facilitating systemic transformative projects of this nature requiring complex collaboration.
>
> The diversity of the approaches **I used** is characteristic of design practice as bricolage, however it is important to recognise that this is not the work of **me alone**, nor one design research team. **I am not an expert** in communication design for example, but **my understanding of design potential meant that I was able** to curate and commission other creative expertise to create impactful and meaningful communication.
>
> I observed and interreacted with people outside design research teams, who are skilled in boundary-spanning, working on these types of projects, even if they don't define their role as such. **Together we co-learned the translational needs of the project, and grew into the project space to lubricate the knowledge flow.**
>
> **Alongside my design research colleagues, I found myself** co-ordinating activities, **bringing along promising translators** and boundary-spanners from other disciplines, sense-making, connecting and convening, commissioning translation, visualisation and communication, as well as practicing translation **myself**. (Hornbuckle 2022)

Importantly here, I wanted to recognise the osmotic nature of practice, that what I was doing was also affecting my collaborators and they were affecting me. I wanted to understand what was unique about what I brought to this process but also to see it as the result of collective effort. Yet I had no evidence other than my own observations, and often what I perceived as important, even in other peoples' roles, they did not recognise for themselves.

In addition to the reflective observations and assertions in this paper, I brought reflective visualisations into quasi-autoethnographic practices for the first time, to

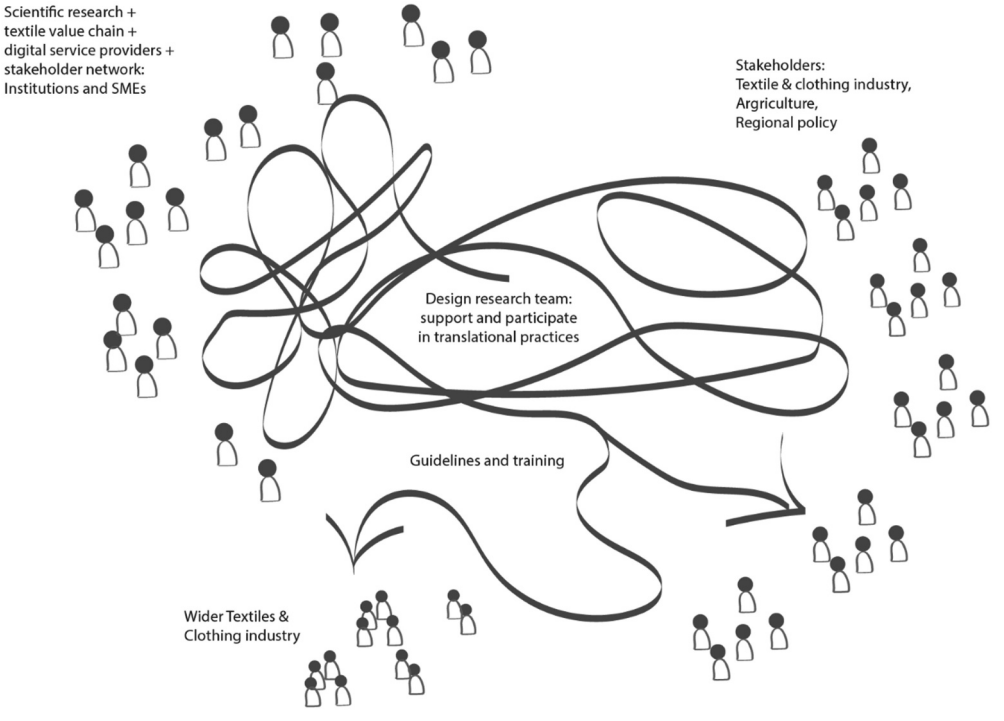

Figure 2. Example of a reflective sketch diagram I created for the quasi-autoethnography conference paper 'project proximities'.

explore the role of design researchers (including myself) in bridging knowledge gaps (i.e. Figure 2).

The following except (adapted from the third person) shows how I justified including such autoethnographic interpretations of what I was witnessing or experiencing:

> **I made these diagrams** to aid reflective practice, **they are from my** viewpoint and **based on my experiences of the project** and not the only or 'true' representation of that subject or phenomenon. These visualisations **became tools in my** research process to assist with theory-building, rather than concrete representations of the projects described.
>
> **I used** a continuous line to represent the 'pathway' that **myself and my colleagues took** to translate and transfer knowledge between different stakeholders and actors. It is perhaps not surprising that these pathways are 'messy' and iterative in the convention of design processes. (Hornbuckle 2022)

These diagrams catalysed my thinking around the relationship between systems and collaboration around this time. I started to understand the complexity of the collaborations in these large consortium projects as being related to the systemic nature of the problems they were trying to address, involving representatives of multiple parts of the system in one collaboration. The complexity of the collaboration brought a new complexity to the translational role I took, adding additional layers to the theories I was building both through my own reflective writing, my observations and in parallel new lines of

enquiry within the literature of other disciplines dealing with boundary-crossing and systems.

Through this autoethnography I have realised that earlier in my post-doctoral career, I was packaging my experiences in third-person observations, supplemented with other forms of evidence. This approach strengthened the research, but there was no confidence in, or commitment to the autoethnographic process. It is only through this piece of writing that I have come to understand the important role that autoethnography has had in my research, in building my research voice and growing a research ecosystem. Recognising my research as 'theory built through practice' has been an awakening throughout this period, which draws me towards autoethnography as other practitioners have (Hirscher 2022; Malinverni and Pares 2016).

These quasi-autoethnographic writings have allowed me to raise questions and build theory based on my experiences. On their own they answer to little of what is expected of academic research, impact and recognition being the main measures of research success. What happens *after* autoethnography is the key point here. What does autoethnography allow to happen from experiential bases in research enquiry, when other forms of evidence are lacking, as is the case in complex collaborative research.

In the following account I will explain how I then drew on these autoethnographic events to build an impact-oriented research ecosystem and my academic voice – a process that is ongoing.

Around the time of the *Project Proximities* paper, I was invited to develop a short course about systemic design which I titled *Design with Systems*. I planned the course as an introduction to systems thinking for designers, yet the course attracted community practitioners and those working in the third sector or local government. I was suddenly exposed to the impact potential of the theory and the methods I was developing as part of my research and practice. This gave me confidence to pursue a particular direction and to develop 'academic voice' based on these signals, Essentially this was my research ecosystem expanding by beginning with quasi-autoethnographies and then later finding ways of planning other forms of evidence-based study, or literature reviews to compound and validate my experiences and observations. Alongside, invitations to join research consortia who needed these methods began to increase, which expanded my networks and developed my understanding of how the methods interact with and relate to the challenges experienced by other disciplines and sectors. The prevalence of complexity, the need for a systemic approach and consequently the needs for new collaborative methods of these partners, in turn expanded this impact-oriented ecosystem.

4. Discussion

One of the challenges that complex collaborative (systemic, multistakeholder and multidisciplinary) work presents design researchers, is the inability to garner any compelling evidence of effectiveness or impact of design interventions from our collaborators. When everyone is acting together, it is impractical to say whether it was the design intervention or this conversation that changed a mindset or enabled a particular line of progress. These influences and their outcomes are entangled. What is more, the projects are non-replicable, each time a different set of people are convened around a slightly different topic, and so – as one collaborator commented –

'we are all born with the project', with nothing to compare our experiences to, to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Therefore, the 'autoethnography-before-impact' approach that I've taken in my research journey, seems particularly relevant for design researchers working in complex collaborative projects where, as Adams and Manning (2015) contend, insider insights can allow critique of the status quo and norms of theory within extant research and can provide researchers with an opportunity to raise new questions, and build theory or hypotheses. These can then be explored through studies designed to capture specific data, forming a more complete evidential picture to support the impact of design research.

Now we reach the present day, as I await the outcome of a recent research funding bid to explore the role of design methods for supporting health researchers and practitioners in addressing the challenges they face in achieving impact from their research . . . would I have reached here without my quasi-autoethnographic beginnings? I don't believe so.

Taken in isolation, autoethnography can be seen by the wider research ecosystem as a wishy-washy methodology which is insufficient for producing irrefutable proof. With the new focus on 'impact', the type of evidence produced through autoethnography falls short of almost all measures across the arts and humanities as well as in the physical and social sciences. However, within the context of complex collaborative and expanded practice, I have tried to demonstrate that the role of autoethnography has also expanded, as it becomes even more difficult to extrapolate individual contribution from the melee of co-creation and intertwined expertise. Here I see a role for autoethnography as a central means by which we analyse and understand our practice research within the context of a wider research ecosystem.

Moreover, I argue that within the field of collaborative design (as this is the field I can speak to with most authority), which is nuanced, context-oriented and often an 'open' process, researchers may not truly know their capacity for contributing to impact-oriented research until they have undergone a significant period of autoethnographic practice. This can be alongside other methodologies, for example in my case, I used ethnography, action research, comparative analysis, and a case study approach to conduct, analyse, write and publish research.

Returning to Adam's and Manning's roles of autoethnography, I'd like to propose three additions based on my review of my quasi-autoethnographic writing. These speak to the particular challenge of complex collaborative design research, but can also be taken more generally as important for emerging researchers to find their voice and seed their impact-oriented research ecosystem.

Autoethnography can:

(1) Help practice researchers build theory when studying complex collaborative phenomena, where other forms of evidence are unavailable;
(2) Be adopted early-on in emerging research questions or themes by early career researchers, as a strategy for building academic voice and independent research trajectory;
(3) Be used to explore impact before the means to 'prove' impact are available, in turn paving the way for future research that aims to gather more complete evidence.

A further motivation here is to highlight to emerging researchers that in lieu of the means to collect what might be considered 'more robust' data, autoethnography can be hugely

valuable in kick-starting an independent line of enquiry as a design researcher who tends to work collaboratively.

5. Closing remarks

I cannot claim that my writing exhibits all the features that Adams and Manning have described as being essential to 'a strong autoethnographic contribution' (2015, 360). My writings were often reflective, but within the false belief that my own account of the situation wasn't enough, so they are rarely presented in the first-person narrative style and frequently attempt to legitimise my experiences through ethnography and action research. This combination likely resulted in more authoritative and compelling research, and my only regret is that, had I realised the value of my own narrative for the development of my academic voice, I may have given autoethnographic methods more attention. I hope this gives early career researchers and their mentors a reference point for giving autoethnography more priority.

A design approach to autoethnography can be different to other disciplines. Within specific research contexts, such as complex collaborations, autoethnography can have different or additional purposes. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010) claim that autoethnography is 'both process and product', but I would contend that within the creative disciplines is can also be practice, as we bring our translational, visual and material craft to bear on the autoethnographic method.

The design research community needs to develop the confidence to make autoethnography its own, and teach emerging researchers about the value, accessibility and multiple roles of writing autoethnographies, as well as the methods they can adopt to make 'a strong autoethnography' (Adams and Manning 2015). This follows a more general need across design research to build methodological confidence and shake off the desire to try to prove itself as worthy by aspiring to the 'robust' methodologies defined by other disciplines. Yes, we can learn from others, but no other discipline is like design. We have our own methodological strengths and innovations to bring to the table, not least in complex collaborative and impact-oriented research.

Finally, I want to reflect more broadly on where impact-oriented research is taking us methodologically. It is widely acknowledged that the systemic, societal, and environmental challenges we face require complex collaborative research, involving multiple sectors, disciplines and system actors. This raises the question: is the current research paradigm, its infrastructures, values and measures, appropriate for this way of working? Does it nourish and create space for complex collaborative research, or does it in fact create walls by continuing to value individual contribution above all else? As we move towards impact-oriented collaborative research ecosystems, I believe we will need new ways to appreciate our own stories, and autoethnography can play an important role in these future research paradigms.

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ORCID

Rosie Hornbuckle http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1823-9100

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