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The Emotional Labor of Making Selves, Making Futures: Ethics of Care in Participatory Design Practice for Transformational Change

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This article examines the emotional labor of creative practitioners engaged in social design with communities often labeled as “marginalized.” It highlights how setting up and facilitating participatory projects requires emotional labor, often invisible, and seldom acknowledged in design practice. Through a literature review and the analysis of data collected via interviews and workshops with social designers, we explore the ethics of care and researcher self-care practices that are needed in relational engagements. While much attention is paid to safeguarding participants, we argue for greater recognition of researcher

education and research.

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self-care in emotionally charged contexts. Building on theories of “becoming,” and findings from our research conducted using vignettes and visual prompts, we also highlight how designers support processes of transformational change. In conclusion, we call for better preparation, training, and trauma-informed design processes to address the emotional labor of social design, enabling practitioners, organizations, and participants to sustain ethical and transformative practices.

KEYWORDS: social design, emotional labor, trauma-informed design, ethics, researcher self-care, transformational change

1. Introduction

This article reviews the emotional labor involved when creative practitioners co-design with communities and people labeled as “marginalized” (such as prisoners and refugees) via social design projects that engage participants in making things and experiencing change. To this end, we discuss and answer the research question: How can designers make visible the invisible aspects of social design, linked to the tricky emotional labor involved in delivering creative projects and facilitating transformational change?

The first part of this article reviews emotions and language, before introducing the idea that setting up and facilitating participatory projects involves emotional labor that is often invisible and not fully documented in social design research. It discusses ethical practices that social designers use to take care of project participants and of themselves. While creative practitioners often spend time devising best practices to “do no harm” to participants, they rarely give themselves as much attention. Drawing on our own experience, as well as findings from interviews and workshops we conducted with social designers who work in emotionally charged contexts, this article reveals ways to build up researcher resilience when delivering emotional labor as part of relational engagements.

The second part of this article discusses findings from workshops we conducted using visual thought prompts to aid creative practitioners in considering how best to facilitate, evidence, and sustain processes of transformational change. In conclusion, we argue for the need to review preparatory processes regarding the emotional labor often needed to upskill social design staff, organizations, and participants.

2. Literature Review

To address the complex societal challenges facing the world, designers have long adopted interdisciplinary and participatory approaches to engage with people. The social design movement initiated by

Papanek (1971) called out environmental damage caused by consumer-led design practices, arguing for a focus on real-world needs rather than aesthetic or commercial goals. Yet, social design has been contested. Manzini (2015) distinguishes social design from design for social innovation: the former tackles urgent needs often ignored by the state or market actors, while the latter pursues sustainability-oriented transformations that reshape how society functions. Costanza-Chock (2020) foregrounds community-led practices aimed at design justice, while Noel (2023) invites us to challenge the status quo and design social change by taking action and working toward equity. Casas-Romero and Mazzarella (2024) focus on educating the next generation of designers working with people from the margins to bring about social change. This plurality of approaches responds to the limits of design for social innovation, which has traditionally been driven by people operating in modernized and globalized cities (often considered at the center of contemporary society) and who have spare time, energy, and resources to address social problems while building new social relationships (Manzini 2024). As definitions remain contested, here we use social design and design for social innovation interchangeably to refer to socially responsible and responsive design (Thorpe and Gamman 2011) adopting systemic approaches to bring about social change.

Our main focus herein is on the emotional labor in relational engagements facilitated by creative practitioners, which often arise when making things with people as part of social innovation processes. Such labor is often invisible and unrecognized. Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as the ongoing management of one's own emotions – and those of others – within relational contexts:

Being emotional is a way of knowing about, and acting in the social world, and is just as significant for how we make sense of our respondents' experiences as our own cognitive skills. By acknowledging the role of emotionally-sensed knowledge in our research teams we may be able to further understandings of the social world. (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001, 135)

Emotions often surface in co-design sessions where participants articulate frustrations and aspirations. According to Ahmed (2014), naming emotions is complex: it often requires differentiation between the subject who feels and the object toward which the feeling is directed. Emotions circulate between people, practices, and structures, shaping what can be expressed and addressed. Therefore, designers need methods that allow emotions to be shared beyond words.

Emotional labor, particularly efforts to build empathy by metaphorically “walking in the shoes of others” (Krznaric 2014), using abilities to understand and experience feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others may lead design facilitators to endeavor to create safe spaces. Such spaces promote listening, trust, reassurance, empathy,

and honest dialogue. Additionally, Arao and Clemens (2013) suggest cultivating “brave spaces” in which honesty, discomfort, and accountability can also lead to healing. Costanza-Chock (2020) extends this account to design justice, emphasizing the courage needed to confront systemic inequities. These different approaches highlight that emotional labor involves not only managing interpersonal dynamics but also navigating power asymmetries, institutional constraints, and histories of oppressions that shape participatory encounters (Serpa and Batista e Silva 2021).

In social and participatory design, designers engage closely with people’s lived experiences, often inviting emotionally charged discussions through co-design. Some emotional engagements may be understood as affect: feelings below or prior to consciousness or verbal expression experienced when we engage with people. These felt relational intensities inevitably have an impact on us and shape participatory design. Fritsch (2018) suggests that interaction design delivered particularly in contexts of crisis requires sustained engagement with affect as a condition that precedes conscious emotion and rational decision-making. Fritsch advocates for an affective turn in interaction design, a shift in research focus away from representation and meaning toward examining the pre-conscious, relational, and embodied forces through which knowledge is felt, as we personally recognize when walking into spaces where prisoners and refugees experience and hold trauma. Yet, with a few exceptions, design literature does not address this, and tends to foreground participants’ outcomes rather than the emotional issues, tensions, or conflicts experienced by researchers and practitioners. Balaam et al. (2019) argue that emotional aspects of design remain under-discussed despite being foundational to experience-centered design (ECD).

Kouprie and Visser’s (2009) influential model of empathic design describes designers immersing themselves in other people’s lives to inform the development of user-centered products. This consumer-led design approach documents how designers often parachute into communities, utilizing immersion processes to build emotional resonance, ultimately to design for people. Such empathic design approaches are associated with the objectification and dehumanization of subjects, and are rightly criticized (Cipolla and Bartholo 2014) as a consumer-led account of empathy that translates poorly to social design processes. In social design, participants are never passive users, with insights to harvest for commercial gain, but are recognized as active agents who can co-design responses to their own lived experiences and challenges, leading to designing with and by people. Such democratic design engagement processes provoke diverse emotions. Zaki (2019) discusses how recognizing the “pain of others” is a significant aspect of empathy and informs social justice activism. However, Baron-Cohen (2011) argues that the experience of empathy is a genetic gift and not distributed evenly across humanity. Bloom (2017) critiques empathy as a partial and capricious

emotion, and observes that humans tend to empathize more directly with people who are “similar” to themselves or with whom they are in “proximity” or find “attractive.” Bloom warns that empathy can narrow moral focus or be manipulated through partial feelings, and advocates instead for “compassion guided by reason,” grounded in evidence and long-term fairness outcomes. His position aligns with critiques of human-centered design (HCD) that challenge empathic approaches and point toward inclusion (Cipolla and Bartholo 2014). Serpa and Batista e Silva (2021) extend this critique by arguing that empathy in HCD and design thinking is politically weak and potentially harmful, proposing “solidarity” as an alternative ethical orientation, grounded in shared responsibility and collective commitment to structural change, aligning with Bloom’s approach to rational compassion. Nevertheless, participatory design research continues to reference empathic identification as part of trust-building and democratic engagement. Eichbaum and Bleakley (2026) conceptualize “relational empathy” not as something one person extends to another, but as a reciprocal, dialogical process that emerges between people through mutual openness, embodied interaction, and the structural conditions that enable shared recognition and transformation. Therefore, relational empathic connection must remain a strategic and inseparable part of understanding the affective and emotional labor involved in social design.

Designers continually perform different types of emotional labor, needed to initiate, nurture, and sustain community relationships, including listening, reflexivity, boundary-setting, recognition of limits, and the capacity to bear witness and sustain hope. Yet, such emotional labor is rarely described, discussed, or valued institutionally. Yee et al. (2024) describe many types of emotional labor as “invisible designing,” which is time-intensive, tiring, and largely unrecognized. Some theorists have sought to make emotional labor in design for social innovation more visible. Hillgren, Seravalli, and Emilson (2011) emphasize the importance of trust-building and infrastructuring in social innovation. Akama and Light (2018) discuss “practices of readiness,” highlighting the emotional attunement and care required before and during ethical engagement. Yee et al. (2024) demonstrate how designers manage culturally sensitive facilitation, obligation, time-zone differences, and blurred professional boundaries. While trust-building is recognized as central to co-design practice, it demands significant time and emotional investment that may not be acknowledged (Clarke et al. 2021).

Foundational participatory design research understands that participation redistributes responsibility as well as agency, often placing ethical and emotional demands on facilitators (Bratteteig and Wagner 2016). Karasti, Baker, and Millerand (2010) argue that emotional labor must be understood as a systemic concern shaped by organizational conditions. Overall, recent participatory design literature treats emotional labor as a systemic ethical concern, rather than focusing solely on safeguarding participants.

Safeguarding frameworks may be essential to the delivery of emotional labor, even if they too-often prioritize participant protection without fully addressing researcher wellbeing. Trauma-informed principles in design are increasingly recognized as helpful in addressing significant safeguarding gaps (Dietkus 2022). However, such principles are difficult to implement fully without considerable institutional resources that support researchers as well as participants (Skinner et al. 2025). When emotional labor is recognized, it is often framed as individual self-care strategies rather than a systemic responsibility (Moncur 2013; Wolters et al. 2017). Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) argue that researcher self-care must be understood as both an individual and institutional responsibility (Figure 1).

Similarly, a gap exists regarding how to document positive emotional processes involved in co-design for transformational change. Frankl's (2006) observation that "those who have a 'why' to live for, can bear with almost any 'how'" resonates with many social designers who derive hope and joy from witnessing participants' change. Transformational processes of identity transition and becoming, which result from social design work, despite it often being tricky and difficult, offer positive meaning to those who witness it.

Manzini (2015) argues that "everybody designs"; he positions transformational aspects of social design as a civic activity where individuals – as "diffuse" designers – act as active citizens, and engage in processes of co-design and democratic innovation. They are supported by "expert designers," who have been trained and facilitate co-design processes to deliver positive social innovation. Similarly, Sangiorgi (2011) mentions seven key principles of civic transformation design (Figure 2), with a particular focus on public service reform and wellbeing. She discusses a gap in knowledge about organizational change, which relates to how individuals who engage in creative practices, facilitated by designers, begin to change their account of their engagement as "active citizens." In prison contexts, criminologists have also documented that people who engage in

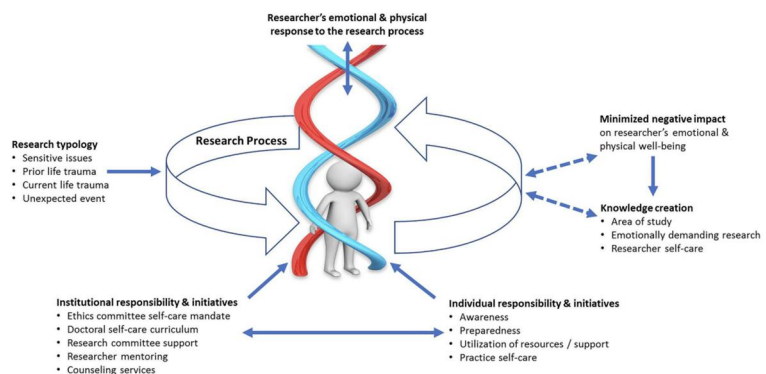
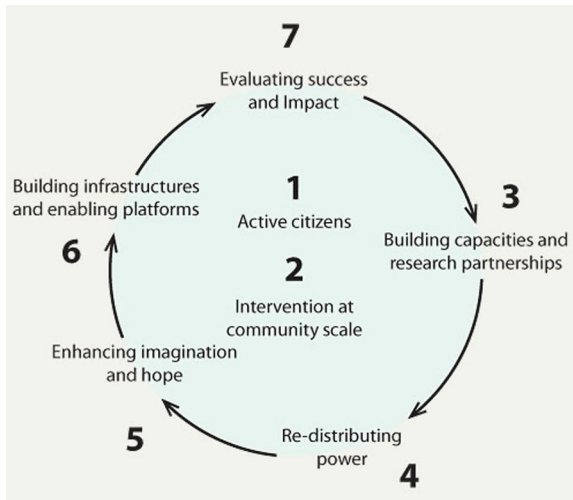


Figure 1
Researcher self-care as individual and institutional responsibility (Kumar and Cavallaro 2018).

**Figure 2**

Key principles of transformation design (Sangiorgi 2011).

creative activities may undergo identity shifts, create “replacement selves” (Giordano, et al. 2004), “desist” from crime, and start imagining new futures (Maruna 2001), as highlighted by ex-offender artist John Costi:

Rather than re-enacting trauma through harm, I re-enact it through making. My work returns to past events (memories, fragments, documents, personal and collective scars) not to relive them, but to reconfigure them. Through collage, staging, repetition, and remixing, I construct what I call an ‘extended DNA of survival’, the remnants of destruction fertilise and nourish the becoming. (Costi 2025)

Diverse theorists, psychologists, and criminologists discuss transformatory processes of becoming. It involves recognizing that the person engaging with creative activities or education where personal life histories are discussed is not an unchanging personality but a fluid subject in process of becoming, a multifaceted ever-changing “I” that perceives, thinks, and experiences the world. Foucault (1982) did not explicitly use this term, but his work deals extensively with processes of subject formation, transformation, and shifts in knowledge and material power, which can be interpreted through the lens of becoming. His account of “technologies of the self” is crucial for understanding how individuals become subjects through relations of reflection, surveillance, discipline, and self-care, as well as through power and resistance. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe becoming as a non-linear, fluid transformation that resists fixed identity categories, emphasizing processes of continuous change, creativity, and deterritorialization. Psychologists and educational theorists such as Piaget (1980) conceptualize becoming in terms of human

development as an ongoing process of equilibration, where individuals adapt to new experiences through assimilation and accommodation. Vygotsky (1978) further extends this perspective by emphasizing the socially mediated nature of becoming in relation to objects and what he calls “proximal development”: a range of tasks that a learner cannot yet do independently but that can be accomplished with appropriate guidance or collaboration. Vygotsky argues that learning and identity formation occur through dialogue, collaboration, and participation in cultural practices. Development is also seen as a lifelong process of identity formation through different life stages, and personal and social challenges contribute to shaping people’s sense of self. This includes the concept of “identity crisis” framed by Erikson (1968). Ricoeur (1992) introduced the concept of “narrative identity” to highlight that a personal identity is formed through “narrative construction” and that we become by integrating experiences into a coherent life story. In humanistic psychology, Rogers (1959) emphasized that becoming is an authentic growth-oriented process grounded in self-exploration and self-acceptance.

In design theory and practice, a social designer who facilitates participatory design processes is often described as a “change agent.” However, the participant is key, and Goffman (1959) acknowledged that participants self-actualize and determine their own transformation. For transformational change to happen, individuals must first have a basic cognitive openness to the idea of change, and must encounter specific hooks for change in their environment – through social networks, structured programs, personal relationships, or tricky experiences – that provide an opportunity for transformation. Overall, these diverse perspectives have helped us understand the idea that creative engagements and making processes that promote active learning do not simply produce objects, but also enable participants to reconfigure their sense of self and imagine new futures, illustrating the transformational potential of social design.

3. Methodology

The work discussed here involved desk research, and reflections on our own situated practice research (Kaszynska, et al. 2022) in social design, adopting multiple co-design methods (Gamman and Mazzarella 2024) with prisoners (Gamman 2024) and refugees (Morgado and Mazzarella 2024), as well as interviews and workshops with social designers. Following University of the Arts London’s (UAL) approval of our Research Ethics application, we approached social designers we encountered in the field and through the international DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) network. Those who agreed to be study participants received an Information Sheet and were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, to agree to participate in this project. They had the right to withdraw at any time, and the option to choose whether their

contributions should be identified or anonymized. Rather than harvesting insights, we collaboratively engaged with a community of practice we already knew and trusted, sharing learnings from our initial explorations and developing ideas together. We also followed up with some participants who became distressed when our discussions triggered memories of conducting research in emotionally charged contexts. Before submitting this article for publication, our study participants also had the opportunity to review and edit their contributions and quotations to enhance the validity of our findings.

We conducted semi-structured 1:1 interviews (Cohen, et al. 2013) – mainly online via MS Teams – with eleven social design practitioners and researchers from around the world (Table 1). We collected qualitative data through interviews to gain an in-depth

TABLE 1
List of interviewees.

Name	Affiliation and expertise
Judah Armani	Social entrepreneur and Head of Social Impact Studio at the Royal College of Art (UK), working in social design, with a focus on homelessness and the criminal justice system.
Professor Azra Aksamija	Director of the Future Heritage Lab at MIT (USA), whose work focuses on the role of cultural and religious identity in conflicts.
Dr Bori Feher	Senior Research Fellow at MOME (Hungary), architect and design strategist, with expertise in sustainability and social design.
Dr Vivienne Francis	Director of One World Media, and Founder of the Refugee Journalism Project (UK), supporting exiled media professionals to rebuild their careers.
Dr Eva Knutz	Associate Professor and Co-Founder of the Social Design Unit at University of Southern Denmark (Denmark), with expertise in social design, participatory design, and health research.
Dr Yanki Lee	Creative Director and Founder of Enable Foundation (Hong Kong), expert in design research for social inclusion and participation.
Professor Thomas Markussen	Professor at University of Southern Denmark (Denmark), with expertise in social design and societal transitions and experience in research-based interventions in hospitals and prisons.
Professor Lucy Orta	Chair of Art and the Environment at London College of Fashion, UAL, and visual artist employing participatory practice methods with diverse marginalized people and communities.
Dr Ella Simpson	Senior Lecturer in Criminology at University of Greenwich (UK) with expertise in creative arts interventions in criminal justice settings.
Professor Helen Storey	Professor of Fashion and Science at London College of Fashion, UAL, and social artist and designer responding to issues of climate change and migration.
Chris Vanstone	Co-CEO at the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (Australia), working on co-design projects on mental health, regenerative communities, the future of the home, etc.

understanding of the ways researchers care for themselves and their project participants but also how they facilitate and capture transformational change. We also facilitated three in-person co-design workshops with groups of researchers and practitioners who use participatory design to address a variety of social challenges, including dementia, displacement, conflict, homelessness, climate anxiety, domestic violence, etc. The first workshop was held at Escuela Superior de Diseño de Aragón (ESDA) in Zaragoza (Spain) on March 13, 2025 and was attended by forty people; the second took place at UAL in London (UK) on July 29, 2025 and involved ten people; the third at UAL on October 1, 2025 had eight participants (Figure 3). The workshop participants shared the issues they face, and discussed best practice in relation to ethics of care in response to a series of vignettes (Figure 4) we developed. Based on our own experiences of witnessing transformational journeys, we also developed some visual prompts (Figure 5). We showed them to our interviewees and workshop participants, asking them to respond and draw the journeys of change they had witnessed in their projects.



Figure 3
Workshops at ESDA DESIS Lab, Spain (left) and UAL DESIS Lab, UK (right).
Photos by Claudia Fernández Martín (left) and Gabriele Grigorjevaite (right).

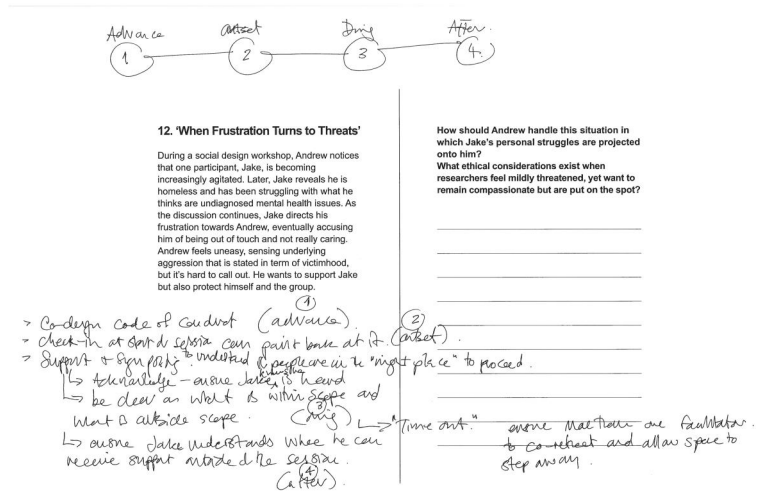


Figure 4
Vignettes used in workshops to aid reflection and discussion on ethics of care and researcher self-care.

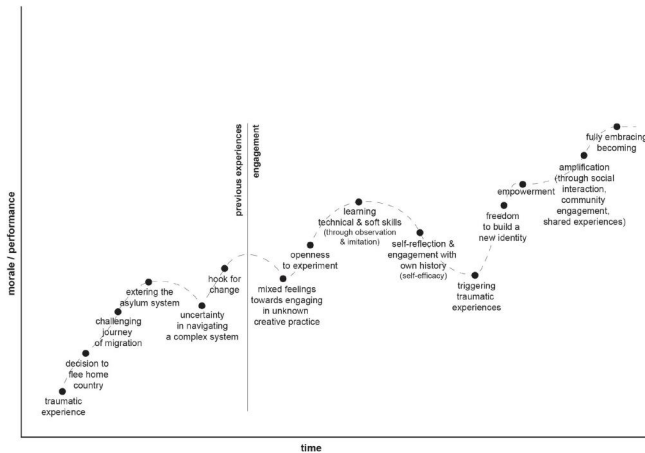
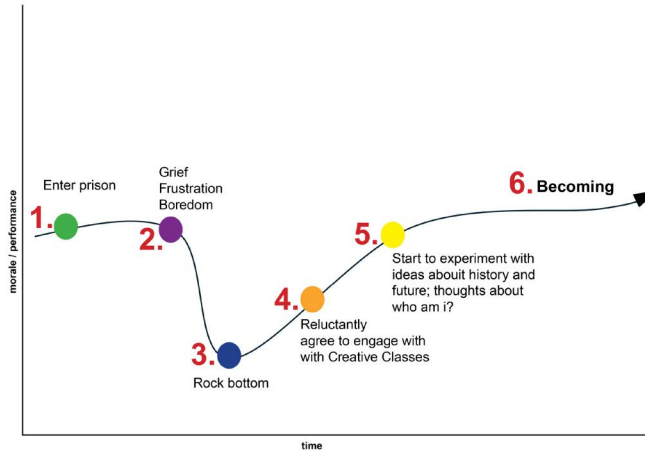


Figure 5

Visual prompts used in workshops to visualize journeys of transformational change.

All the research activities were audio-recorded and automatically transcribed either via MS Teams or using Plaud AI note taker. We thematically analyzed the qualitative data collected, adopting an abductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following an iterative process of sensemaking (Kolko 2010), we used preliminary insights from our own experience and the literature reviewed to identify themes, locate them in a conceptual framework, and test them against subsequent data collection. Following a cyclical approach, the primary data collection led to further secondary research, as interviewees and workshop participants directed us to academic papers and project reports they had published, which were added to our literature review to support and enrich our findings and arguments. We familiarized ourselves with the data by reading notes from the sessions, and generated themes across the dataset, which we

then reviewed and refined collaboratively, selecting key extracts from the transcriptions to evidence the core arguments. Finally, we drew conclusions from the data by identifying common themes (i.e. emotional labor, researcher self-care, transformational change) and sub-themes (such as safe spaces, emotions, listening, reflexivity, care, empathy, preparation, power, adaptability, hooks for change, becoming, documentation, evaluation) and outlining relationships between them. This process contributed to unpacking the ethics of care involved in participatory design practice and documenting transformational change. While mindful that every person is unique and change is very subjective, the analysis of the data contributed to understanding the strategic importance of emotions in social design practice: it revealed hooks for change that have worked in design practice, and what positive signs of change might look like.

4. Results and Discussion

In the following sections, we present our primary research findings that contributed to answering our research question about emotional labor, ethics of care, and transformational change.

4.1. Common Emotional Strategies in Social Design

Our research evidenced that social designers, working in diverse settings and tackling a variety of challenges, regularly engage with emotional labor and face affective conflicts. We learned about the invisible emotional labor needed to deal with the trauma, despair, and affect experienced, for example when undertaking climate emergency work. Rachel Clarke, during one of our workshops at UAL, observed that “climate activist research involves grief and high emotional stakes.”

We certainly experience affect as we engage with emotional labor in our participatory practice with prisoners and refugees, who are marginalized and made vulnerable by many issues, including poverty, racism, gender inequality, discrimination, and their legal status as incarcerated or displaced people. This means that they do not easily access education, healthcare, housing, and employment, and experience many traumas. Goffman (1963) observed that “spoiled identities” emerge when others do not (or no longer) see participants as “ordinary” people. Instead, they look at them through the lens of the stigma (implicated by the “criminal” or “refugee” label), which can discredit or undermine participants’ attempts to create new social identities. Listening to life stories has given us more nuanced understandings of what is at stake when facilitating engagements with vulnerable individuals.

Social designers regularly bring together people as experts of their own experience to collaboratively develop solutions to problems they face rather than adopting top-down design approaches. While it is common to draw on clear safeguarding principles, intuitive choices

inevitably affect the way we set up protocols and discuss sensitive issues in practice. A trauma-informed design approach (Dietkus 2022) is at the heart of what we think is best practice. Such an approach recognizes the prevalence and impact of trauma on individuals and intentionally creates environments that promote safety, trust, empowerment, and collaboration, offering ways forward that designers might consider as part of safeguarding and restorative processes of support and healing. A trauma-informed design approach requires cultural awareness and avoids re-traumatization or triggering of all those involved. Trauma of mind and body are experienced differently by individuals with diverse lived experiences, and our study participants stressed that one-size-fits-all approaches do not work. Trauma-informed design approaches must respond to project contexts. In practice, even when applying safeguarding principles and protocols, we need experience and full understanding of who is in the room to get it right. Preparatory training where context-specific shared examples of what has worked in previous projects is essential, so that strategies can be discussed and better understood. However, our study participants highlighted that such preparatory training does not really happen as often as it should. They discussed several recurring strategies, mainly learned through doing the work, that may help other practitioners manage complex emotional labor, including the following.

- *Trust and safety.* Creating safe, inclusive, brave, and just spaces, preparing participants and ensuring informed consent occurs, sharing clear information, and using playful or creative tools to establish trust. However, our workshop participants highlighted that we cannot fully control whether spaces are perceived as safe by everyone. Instead, we can endeavor to make them feel welcoming, friendly, and caring.
- *Balancing power and agency linked to positionality.* In social design, we often experience a “stark inequality between the researcher and project participants in terms of privilege,” as highlighted by Helen Storey. To overcome this, it is important to work with “credible messengers”: people who have lived experience and social standing and are perceived as trusted voices within a particular community (Urban Institute 2022). The analysis of our practice research and our interview findings highlighted the need to include in project teams facilitators who are trained in design but also have lived experience that mirrors the intersectional communities they engage with, to facilitate connections.
- *Recognition that design facilitators work with emotions.* Acknowledging trauma without collapsing into quasi-therapist mode, recognizing that some disclosures simply cannot be dealt with or resolved by designers. It is also important to utilize

joy, pride, and hope as motivating entry points in social design processes.

- *Deep listening and reflexivity.* Setting up ways to get advice through mentors or WhatsApp groups by keeping in contact with other social design researchers. Maintaining openness, journaling, and peer reflection to process encounters, and finding ways to feedback truthfully to participants. This means also avoiding what Scott (2017) describes as “ruinous empathy,” where blind loyal support does not make the individual aware by giving difficult feedback on problems. Scott argues for “radical candor,” that is caring personally but challenging directly. She suggests embedding care and consideration in the sensitive critical feedback we give to others, and argues that initiating difficult conversations or interactions is crucial to emotional learning. Most interviewees supported Scott’s approach but felt ruinous empathy was not so much of a problem as recognizing key moments of change when things go well. Ella Simpson highlighted the importance of “spotting ‘significant moments’ of change” in design for social innovation projects. Chris Vanstone shared that at the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), practitioners regularly log significant moments. Vanstone said that at least “every six months, we trawl back through that and see what we can learn from it” to build up data for formal impact reports.
- *Hope and imagination.* Experiencing joy in using creative practice as a vehicle for participants to imagine alternative selves, futures, and positive systemic change. Although this is not easily captured, the sense of fulfillment gained from feeding hope and bettering people’s lives drives many social designers to continue pursuing social innovation projects in challenging contexts. Azra Aksamija, reflecting on her design experience in a refugee camp, and commenting on Sangiorgi’s (2011) principles of transformation design, highlighted the importance of fostering hope in marginalized people, and addressing emotional, cultural, and identity needs, beyond mere biological ones. In her interview, she stated: “Art and design address these needs, supporting dignity, hope, and healing, which are often overlooked by humanitarian agencies focused on basic survival.”

4.2. Observations about Researcher Self-Care

Across the cases discussed by the social designers who participated in our study, the following principles stood out as best practice.

- *Establishing clear boundaries and ethical protocols.* Embedding counseling for researchers in funding bids and ethics applications, signposting to any support services available at the outset, and instigating a culture where collective discussions occur

immediately after engagements take place. This echoes Fenge et al. (2019), who show that reflexivity and positionality are critical in supporting researcher wellbeing.

- *Building reflexive cultures* where sharing emotional challenges is normalized rather than hidden. Systematic reflexive practices include maintaining research diaries (Sloan and Drake 2013) or holding “reflections and debrief sessions after community engagement” activities, as stated by Bori Fehér. This helps make emotional labor visible and transforms it into a resource for learning rather than an unspoken burden.
- *Detachment with care* implies learning how to remain present without being overwhelmed by transference or projection, and moving discussions on while acknowledging pain. However, Helen Storey highlighted the “myth of ethical distance” in social design, where “the personal and the professional cannot be separated.”
- *Recognizing that design is not therapy.* Traumatic disclosures may occur, and require respect, limits, and boundaries. Where possible, design activities need to be backed by professional therapeutic support, as highlighted in the interviews with Lucy Orta and Vivienne Francis. This is in line with the Social Research Association (2006) Code of Practice, which highlights the need for formal safety planning and debriefing after engagement to mitigate risks for researchers.
- *Prioritizing empathy for oneself alongside empathy for others* to prevent exhaustion or compassion fatigue. This implies finding strategies to detach when things get painful while physically remaining in the room.
- *Practitioner self-care.* Practicing mindfulness, setting boundaries, accessing mentoring and peer support networks to reduce the potential for burnout or “vicarious trauma,” which is experienced by practitioners working “close to the edge,” in sites of trauma and precarity and carrying unacknowledged burdens, as highlighted by Helen Storey.

Overall, effective social design practice requires collective reflection, mutual care, and acknowledgement that designers have limitations and needs. Ultimately, the facilitators’ wellbeing matters as much as that of participants. This resonates with Drake and Harvey (2014) and Sloan and Drake (2013), who discuss how processing and managing embodied stress is vital to sustaining emotionally charged research. Findings from our interviews and workshops highlighted the need for emotional labor in social design to be seen not just as an ethical adjunct but as a central practice. One senior designer participating in our workshop at ESDA shared that he hadn’t thought about his own needs much before. Yet, once asked, he felt strongly that social designers must learn to “regulate their own feelings,” facilitate others’ emotions, and remain resilient in the face

of difficult encounters, mainly to ensure participants get the most out of workshops. This approach aligns with our experience of finding ways to get on with the work by drawing on our emotional skills, and perhaps suppressing stress to ensure the work continues. It also chimes with literature on emotional intelligence (Fineman 2003; Goleman 1995) that frames emotional skills as essential to effective work, leadership, and organization. Recently, UX practitioners (UX Content 2025) have also begun to argue that trauma-informed design is not an optional add-on, but should be seen as a necessary shift in how we structure engagement, communication, and meaning-making, to effectively prepare designers not just for facilitating participatory activities, but also for witnessing processes of transformational change.

4.3. Becoming a Co-Designer: The Importance of “Practices of Readiness” to Engage

The work of the DESIS network has been important to us when setting up participatory practice research projects, such as “Makeright” with prisoners, and “Decolonizing Fashion and Textiles” with refugees (Figure 6). We regularly use diverse creative methods and making workshops to explore and express shifting identities, as stated by one of our project participants:

I’m here to find myself. I’m here to find myself. We can pray for this to happen every day and night [...] The reason why I do this is because I know [that] a picture can send a message to the outside world. If someone sees this [referring to her textile artwork], they know that this lady is still fighting for her freedom.

While project participants face external contextual issues that can destabilize their engagements in creative workshops, such challenges do not undermine the power of design to enable people to participate in shaping their own futures. Many of our interviewees (e.g. Helen Storey and Judah Armani) foregrounded creative practice as a radical act of hope and resistance, especially for those navigating systems of marginalization or exclusion.

Manzini’s (2015) approach to transformation design is focused not only on systems or organizations, but also on how people can democratically participate in redesigning aspects of their civic lives. While this perspective has been highly influential, it assumes that project participants already have confidence and agency, are ready to learn design skills, and engage in co-design processes. Instead, our experience suggests that this is not often the case. The agency of individuals and communities cannot be taken for granted but needs support. Many participants need time and facilitation to build confidence and self-realize before they are ready to engage as active citizens. This observation resonates with Akama and Light’s (2020) emphasis on “practices of readiness,” which stress the emotional

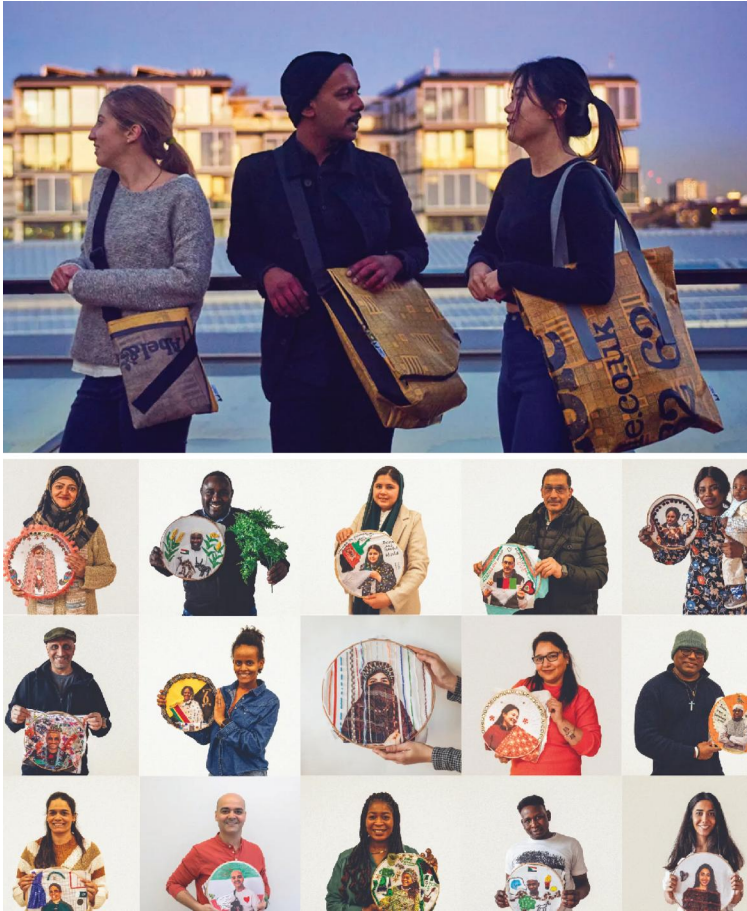


Figure 6

Makeright project led by Gamman with inmates, photo by Design Against Crime (top). Decolonizing Fashion and Textiles project by Mazzarella with refugees and asylum seekers, photo by J.C. Candanedo (bottom).

labor designers must undertake to remain attentive, responsive, and accountable within participatory encounters, before meaningful co-design can take place. It suggests the need to prepare designers to enter communities and understand them before trying to facilitate social innovation processes, but also to recognize that participants, if all goes well, may end up engaging in emotional processes of self-discovery, realization, and “becoming”.

The social designers we interviewed reminded us that effective interventions are long-term, iterative, and flexible, and that creative approaches must evolve in response to participants’ needs and contexts. Our research findings suggest that effective co-design involves the following.

- *Begins with preparation* to build designers’ capacity and trust before starting a collaboration or intervention (as highlighted by

Chris Vanstone and Helen Storey). For instance, we often recommend that our social design students get to know communities by volunteering and supporting/amplifying existing initiatives rather than parachuting into contexts and attempting to start new design interventions. In one of our workshops at UAL, Silvia Grimaldi highlighted the importance of “working with trusted organizations as gatekeepers, which act as a cushion between the researcher and project participants, to sense-check if your plan is sensible.”

- *Involves sharing agency and power*, through co-ownership of design processes and outputs, open Intellectual Property agreements, and participatory governance (as stated by Judah Armani, Yanki Lee, and Azra Aksamija). Challenging power asymmetries, political structures, and institutional constraints involves emotional labor and ethics of care, and requires participatory designers to practice reflexivity and solidarity (beyond empathy), as emphasized by Serpa and Batista e Silva (2021).
- *Adopting bespoke, responsive methods*, tailored to each community and context, acknowledging that emotional intelligence and experienced facilitators are crucial.
- *Balancing structure with freedom*, adopting defined frameworks within which participants can experiment, iterate, and express themselves freely.

Our research findings highlight that often people who participate in co-design workshops or make things by hand for the first time adapt to these new learning experiences and start discovering new things about themselves and surprising latent aptitudes. Design can provide unexpected “hooks for change” that have an impact on how participants see themselves. In our practice with prisoners and refugees, we have found that, through learning how to make things, or by engaging in co-design with experienced designers, project participants do more than produce objects. They start to recognize they have capabilities that may have been hidden, begin to imagine themselves and their lives in new ways, and develop future aspirations. Our interviewees (especially Bori Fehér, Helen Storey, Judah Amani, and Lucy Orta) highlighted the transformative potential of design, which enables participants – especially marginalized people – to reframe and reconstruct their identity, build confidence, and envision new futures. The role of designers in facilitating safe spaces and using creative and craft-based tools to aid participants’ reflection, identity formation, collective empowerment, and contribute to enhanced wellbeing is further explained by Fulton and Orta (2025). Some of the social designers we interviewed (in particular, Judah Armani, Eva Knutz, Thomas Markussen, Yanki Lee, and Helen Storey) highlighted that they reject adopting the role of helper and instead position themselves as enablers or co-learners, fostering

mutual agency and facilitating spaces in which participants lead or co-design things, based on their lived experiences.

In one of our workshops at UAL, Paul Haywood highlighted the importance of practicing “gifting” in social design engagements, supporting reciprocity, sharing, and “recognizing each other’s lived experience, skills and achievements, in line with an asset-based approach.” In our work and that of the social design practitioners we engaged with, “Certain conditions need to be in place for change to happen; an asset-based approach requires a shift in values, and curiosity is needed for that shift to happen,” as stated by workshop participant Naomi Bulliard. However, it is not always easy to pragmatically identify what is working. Some indicators are easier to measure, such as the fact that participants turn up more regularly, or engage more enthusiastically or confidently, sometimes with more interest and agency than before. Although noticing how a participant’s language changes could be measured going forward, this may be hard to pinpoint in the moment, as the process, like the making of objects, is usually cumulative. Some of the creative practitioners we interviewed (such as Ella Simpson and Chris Vanstone) working in more established organizations highlighted how difficult it is to chronicle significant moments, although they are endemic to evidencing any theory of change set up for individual projects. Thomas Markussen, Eva Knutz, and Ella Simpson reminded us of the importance for designers to get into the habit of regularly reviewing and writing down whatever is seen, through field notes, debriefs, and shared reflections aimed at tracking transformation, processing emotions, and building collective learning. Trying to document change on a regular basis helps push ourselves to review shifts, including those regarding emotional language. Nevertheless, accounts of ambiguity about when change happens chime with our own experiences, and prompted us to think about visualizing how we witness participants’ transformation, which often brings us great joy.

As creative practitioners, we felt visualization processes might be helpful. Although our visual prompts (Figure 7) are not definitive diagrams and do not offer a single reading of the various contexts in which we work, they are designed to encourage dialog and multiple interpretations. Our study evidenced that such visual prompts can provoke discussion and remind social designers to think about the emotional labor involved in facilitating change. The interviewees also highlighted the difficulties faced in evaluating social impacts, especially when change unfolds long after projects and funding end. Moreover, change is often intangible, indirect, and hard to attribute to a single design intervention (as emphasized by Helen Storey and Vivienne Francis). Azra Aksamija advocated for “developing a new language within art and design to communicate impacts, moving away from traditional scientific metrics toward more humanizing, narrative-driven approaches.” Helen Storey raised the issue of the despair of not being able to fully realize transformation (rather than faith

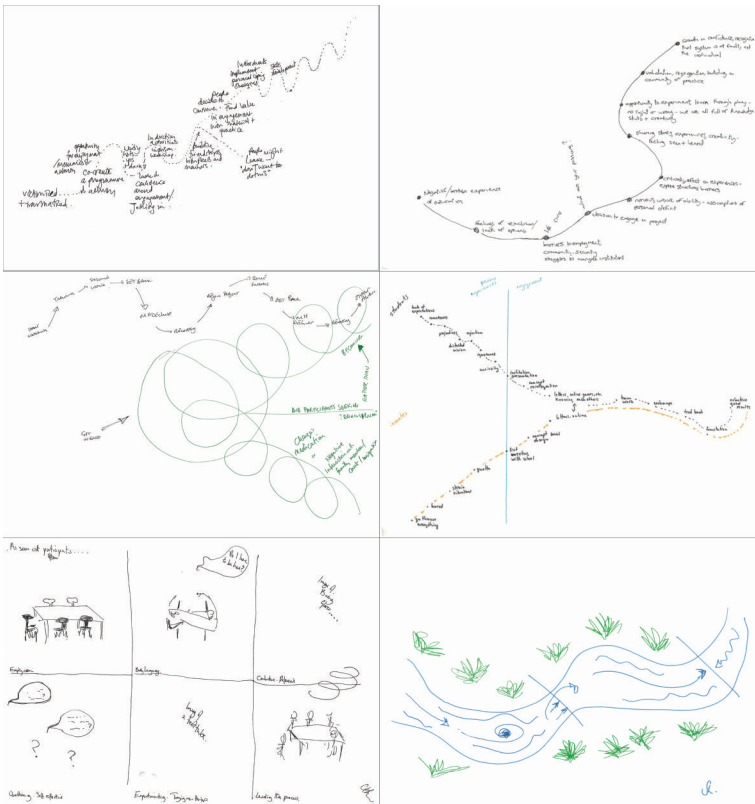


Figure 7
Diagrams drawn by workshop participants to represent journeys of transformational change.

in change) in increasingly harsh and interdependent political contexts, where the hopelessness experienced by refugees can give rise to existentialist dilemmas that are hard to witness, respond to positively, or reconcile with continued belief in the work, despite the ruminations of Frankl (2006).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that considerable emotional labor underpins social design practice; yet, with a few exceptions, it is rarely named, valued, or institutionally supported. We have also argued that this persistent invisibility is not incidental but systemic, and that trauma-informed design approaches can offer concrete ways to understand affect and sustain such emotional labor. For social designers, emotional intelligence in relational engagements extends beyond empathy to include reflexivity, boundary-setting, recognition of limits, and the capacity to sustain hope. When such emotional labor is ignored, it can become isolating and exhausting; when recognized, taught, and supported through preparatory training, it can instead function as a shared resource for transformation.

A key recommendation emerging from this study is the need to better understand the systemic dimensions of emotional labor, embed discussion about it, and cultivate emotional intelligence within teaching, learning, and professional training of social designers. This is necessary not only to support individual resilience, but also to develop preparatory cultures of care for practitioners and participants before they “learn by doing.”

Drawing on reflections from our own practice and insights from the interviews and workshops we conducted, we have also observed that participatory design can generate transformative hooks for change and self-realization. These moments can catalyze participants’ development of technical and interpersonal skills, while supporting the reconstruction of self-narratives and processes of social reintegration. In some cases, such engagements facilitate processes of becoming, through which participants develop “replacement selves” aligned with prosocial values (Giordano et al. 2004; Maruna 2001). Transformation design is not only concerned with fostering active citizenship through public-sector service interventions (Sangiorgi 2011), but also with enabling empowering moments of participant self-realization. When emotions are placed at the center of design practice, we can recognize and prompt shifts for participants and designers alike. In this way, making within social design becomes more than instrumental object generation or problem-solving; it can operate as a site of rehabilitative and regenerative healing and reorientation under conditions of constraint and systemic disempowerment.

We acknowledge the limited number of our study participants, the predominance of researchers and practitioners from the Global North, and the context-dependent nature of the trauma-informed strategies discussed here. While approaches may not be easily replicated, our study participants consistently identified recurring themes that we believe offer evidence of best practice. We also recognize that the visual prompts developed through this research are not formal diagrams but provisional sketches, operating as tools for dialogue rather than a means to collect data and synthesize the diversity of accounts encountered into a single framework. In conclusion, we believe a trauma-informed design approach, as well as the visual prompts we have experimented with, can facilitate engagement with policymakers, educators, community leaders, and creative practitioners to promote a better understanding of the value of ethical approaches to designing social innovation.

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