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Constructing a critical anthropology of contemporary design practices

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Abstract: This paper articulates a critical approach to researching design as a contemporary phenomenon that was developed through my doctoral research. The approach - *critical anthropology of design* - is a combination of anthropology of design, critical strategies borrowed from other fields, and a 'Foucauldian' theoretical toolkit, which together allow us to see design as a complex disciplinary apparatus. I advocate for such an approach – a switching of the disciplinary lens when studying design, and a more sceptical engagement between social disciplines and design – as essential for both robust critique and original insight. Such an approach is productive and necessary specifically where one's intent is investigating how power is operant in and through design. The argument for criticality is followed by a discussion of the practicalities both methodological and ethical of implementing such an approach.

Keywords: critical research; power; discipline; anthropology of design

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question of how to go about making sense of design as a contemporary phenomenon when we feel we cannot trust – or find ourselves in disagreement with – the narratives and accounts articulated by mainstream design research and practice. It proposes a strategy for critical research, developed through my own doctoral work, which combines anthropology of design, a set of critical standpoints borrowed from anthropologies of other fields such as management, development, and policy, and a 'Foucauldian' theoretical toolbox of discourse, technologies, practices and objects/ subjects. The paper first outlines the necessity of such an approach and its main elements, and then discusses some practical realities of sustaining an intimate, yet sceptical, engagement between design and social and cultural theory, as they played out through my own project.



2. Research context: In search of a methodology

When I set out on my doctoral research, in 2014-15, I had been working in the design industry in London for a number of years, and had just begun a role with a consultancy that delivered design thinking, co-design, innovation and behaviour change projects for the public sector in the UK. Our clients included central and local government, charities and philanthropic organisations, and also other private providers of public services. We were tasked with things like smoking cessation campaigns, increasing uptake of certain health services, reviewing the government's approach to funding of relationship counselling, co-designing a network that would support innovators and improvers in the health system, helping a local council improve their homelessness service, and so on. This was a kind of practice – heavy on workshops, post-it notes, idea generation activities and powerpoint reports for clients – that was rather unlike the discipline of architecture that I had been trained in. And it was engulfed in a discourse devoted to singing its praises and promoting its usage. I was actually already fluent in this discourse, having actively participated in it when I was working for a think tank and lobbyist advancing the interests of the design industry in Parliamentary and policy circles (see e.g. (Design Commission, 2013)). But the practice was new to me. And the longer I was at the consultancy the more it became clear to me that there was a lack of alignment between the discourse and the practice. I couldn't often see design creating 'change' and 'innovation' for government in the ways it had been lauded for doing. And I could see some other interesting side-effects that no-one was really discussing. Making any sense of this dissonance was complicated by the fact that, to my frustration, much of the academic research on design I was reading seemed to conform to the same set of beliefs, and promotional tendencies, as the lobbying work I had been involved in. It felt like it was obscuring rather than shedding light on the reality I was experiencing.

So I was in need of a methodology that would give me some critical purchase on the phenomenon – 'design for government' – that I was caught up in. Immersed in the site already as a full participating member (Adler & Adler, 1987), an autoethnographic approach suggested itself. But that also presented the conundrum of being incredibly close – possibly too close – to my subject. I needed to find a strategy for distancing myself sufficiently from the whole apparatus in order to see it afresh.

Developing a critical approach to *researching* design took some work. Part of the difficulty I had in identifying exemplars to follow, or in making myself understood, is in the many meanings of the word 'critical' in its relation to design. In everyday language, 'critical' can mean crucial or decisive, finding fault, or simply careful judgment. What academics mean when they talk about being 'critical' also varies a great deal: Moore (2013) identifies seven definitions within small handful of disciplines. Barnett (1997:179) defines 'criticality' as 'a human disposition of engagement where it is recognised that the object of attention could be other than it is' (which confusingly sounds rather like a designerly disposition). When applied specifically to design, ambiguity continues to reign. Design is often said to be inherently critical in as much as designing involves seeking to change a situation, and being discerning about

choosing between alternatives. Critical intent might be directed ‘inward’ toward the practice itself (Laranjo, 2015), or outward towards the conditions of production (Martin, 2005). There are of course critical approaches within design practice (see for example Elflin, 2016; Papanek, 1971; Fry, 2010; Irwin, 2015; Dunne, 1999; Ericson & Mazé, 2011; DiSalvo, 2012; Costanza-Chock, 2018; Lobenstine, et al., 2020), and criticisms of design from within academia (Julier & Kimbell, 2019; Stern & Siegelbaum, 2019; Seitz, 2019; Abdulla, et al., 2019; Schultz, et al., 2018; Sloane, 2019). What I meant by critical was none of the above. So, what I want to establish here is what it means to adopt a *critical research strategy*. This is not about making normative judgments about design, but rather about being open about the nature of design as an object, ambivalent about its value, detached from the interests of practice and reflexive about one’s positionality and role in knowledge production.

3. Critical research strategies

3.1. Awareness of disciplinary frames

Building on the insight that design research itself was participating as a kind of cheerleader in the field of ‘design for government’, the first step for me was to appreciate the way that disciplinary communities frame what it is possible to think and to ask, as a researcher. Like critical, the word ‘discipline’ also has multiple meanings, and the connections between these are enlightening: it can refer to the division of knowledge into discrete fields or domains, to the training and regulating of mind, body and habits that leads to self-mastery (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p. 211), and to a larger set of strategies and techniques of control that have come to dominate much of modern life (Foucault, 1977). This is not a coincidence:

power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (p. 27)

Bodily discipline, social discipline, and the disciplines of knowledge, are intimately connected and central to questions of power. And, as academics, ‘we are disciplined by our disciplines’ (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. vii). The concept of ‘disciplinarity’ describes the way modern disciplines control the organization and production of knowledge (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991). Disciplines (in the sense of subject-domains) produce knowledge and facts, practitioners, economies of value, and the very idea of progress itself (p. vii). There are methods and techniques for constructing the field, for defining what gets brought to light, and how – and what doesn’t (Preziosi, 1993). Disciplines are then socialised through practices (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. 15), where ‘individuals have to learn to be bona fide disciplinary practitioners’ (p.5). And practitioners engage in ‘boundary work’ to demarcate and defend their territory (Gieryn, 1983). There is therefore a deep entanglement between the knowledge that is produced and the identities and interests of knowledge producers:

if we think of disciplines as groups with members, it is much harder to regard them as neutral enterprises wherein minds discover pure truths about various phenomena (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. 5).

On this view, design as a discipline is a controlling force, shaping how and what we see, and producing practitioners who defend their turf. So, it follows that if we want to read design differently, to open up inquiry as researchers, it can help to confront oneself with a different set of disciplinary frames – and their attendant tools.

3.2 A Foucauldian toolbox¹

In Foucault's work the connections that make up a disciplinary apparatus are drawn out through studies of specific kinds of knowledge (psychiatry, medicine, psychoanalysis, political economy), the practices and material technologies they are embedded within and produce (asylums, hospitals, the therapeutic relationship, population statistics), the ways they render individuals as objects and/ or subjects (the mad, 'I am mad') and control what comes to be accepted as 'scientifically true' (Foucault, 2002, p. 114).² He was particularly interested in those fields he regarded as 'dubious' sciences, within which he thought the effects of power might be especially conspicuous (p. 111), and I would argue there are good grounds for regarding design as being in a similar category, vulnerable to being buffeted about and transformed through political and strategic games (Bailey, 2021).

These works of Foucault's³ introduced a range of concepts for deconstructing a power/ knowledge apparatus: the idea of *discourse* as an epistemic regime, governing what counts as 'true', and what is sayable and thinkable at any given time and place; *regimes of practices*, those coherent ways of doing things that possess their own logic, rules and reason, producing knowledge and action; *technologies* as physical and material instantiations of epistemic and practice regimes, targeted at bodies and minds; and what happens to human beings caught up in these things, becoming *objects* of knowledge or *subjects* of power (and also resisting these processes). These constructs provide an analytical grid of interdependent elements with which to deconstruct design, and study how power is operant in and through it: the discourse through which it has come to life – that, in fact, assembles and makes sense of it as a coherent field, the social practices and material technologies that participate in production-mediation-consumption (Lees-Maffei, 2009), and the mechanisms by which human beings become objects of design (e.g. users), or the subjects (e.g. practitioners) that are changed through enrolment in its regime.

¹ Foucault himself characterised his work as 'a kind of tool box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area . . . I don't write for an audience, I write for users not readers.' Quoted in (Defert, et al., 1994, p. 136).

² For example, 'Madness and Civilisation' (Foucault, 1988), 'The Birth of the Clinic' (Foucault, 1996), the three volume 'History of Sexuality' (Foucault, 1998; Foucault, 2020; Foucault, 1990), and the lecture series 'Security, Territory, Population' (Foucault, 2007).

³ See also 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' (Foucault, 1989), and 'Discipline and Punish' (Foucault, 1977)

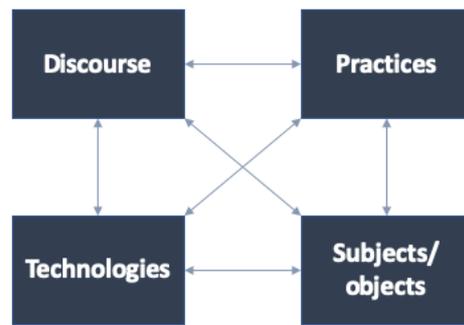


Figure 1. A Foucauldian toolbox

As a framework for examining design, this is quite unusual. Studies of design do not usually begin by problematising the discipline itself. However in some other discursive communities these ideas are well established. Design researchers can take inspiration from critical scholarship on, for example, ‘creativity’ (Reckwitz, 2017; Prichard, 2002; Bill, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Chumley, 2016), ‘policy’ (Shore & Wright, 1997; Shore, 2012; Mosse, 2006), ‘development’ (Escobar, 2012; Ferguson, 1990; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2004) and ‘management’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Adler, et al., 2007; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Such works deconstruct their target field as a disciplinary apparatus. They ask not whether the object ‘works’ effectively or not, or whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather how it operates. The power/knowledge apparatus is assumed, the challenge is to understand what it is doing, to whom, and how. James Ferguson deploys the analogy of vivisection: it is not a question of arguing against the frog, or finding out how well it does at being a frog, but rather of dissecting it to find out what kind of thing it is, and how it works (Ferguson, 1990).

3.3 Anti-instrumentalism, denaturalization, and reflexivity

There are some common elements to these critical scholarly enterprises: an anti-performative or anti-instrumental intent; denaturalisation – or questioning the taken-for-granted; reflexivity; and a recognition of the power/ knowledge nexus.

Performativity – or instrumentalism – has been characterised as ‘the optimization of the global relationship between input and output’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 11), and the resulting ‘subordination of knowledge to the production of efficiency’ and effectiveness (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 17). An instrumental logic has two effects. First, within practices, the point of management, anthropology, policy, creativity and so on, is understood to be to contribute to the delivery of the system’s desired outcome. Things that do not fit within the means-ends calculation are rendered irrelevant or invisible (Adler, et al., 2007, p. 129). In the case of ‘design for government’, it means that the point of design is its utility, and its service to organisational objectives. Second, the rationale for studying practice is to contribute to its effectiveness. The ‘acid test of whether knowledge has any value [is] if it can, at least in principle, be applied to enhance the means of achieving established ends’ (Grey & Willmott, 2005, pp. 5-6). All research should be assessed on the basis of its contribution in this regard – all articles

should end with ‘implications for managers’ (Adler, et al., 2007, pp. 129-30) (or policymakers, or designers, or whoever). Design research in an instrumental mode shares the same set of interests as design practice, which typically results in a preoccupation with studying and accounting for ‘what works’. Critical research resists this kind of instrumental ‘straitjacket’. It is after all rather constraining to the spirit of inquiry to always have one eye on producing something that can be operationalised by practitioners. *Anti-instrumentalism* means assuming there might be other things to be discussed, other ways of thinking about the object, and of interpreting (design) discourses and practices than a reductive means-ends framework. And it means deliberately not being in service mode to practice.

Denaturalisation refers to the simple move of ‘questioning and opening up what has become seen as given, unproblematic and natural’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 13). It is the act of pointing to norms and assumptions that may be so embedded as to have become invisible, and asking questions about them. Does design really deliver innovation? Does participation really empower people? Must the state really become more like a business? Is design inherently a good thing? (And so on). It is through doing so, through revealing the precarious and contingent construction of the present, that one can begin to identify the alternatives ‘that have been effaced by [dominant forms of] knowledge and practice’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 18). Critical research thereby ‘counteracts discursive closure’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), through a commitment to ‘writing in what has been written out’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 18).

Reflexivity is an increasingly common expectation within social research (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Adler, et al., 2007; Spicer, et al., 2009), having moved from the feminist margins towards the mainstream. Non-critical writing is characterised by the lack of reflection on epistemology, ontology, or methodology (p. 19). In critical work we expect to find ‘the capacity to recognise that accounts are mediated by those... who produce them’ (Grey & Willmott, 2005, p. 6). In critical design research, we would expect to see a degree of self-consciousness about what approaching design research with the framing of a design practitioner (or any other frame) means in terms of the knowledge produced.

These three tenets – anti-instrumentalism, denaturalisation, reflexivity – are all underpinned by the assumption of *a constitutive relation between knowledge and power*: ‘forms of knowledge, which appear to be neutral, reflect and reinforce asymmetrical relations of power’ (Adler, et al., 2007, p. 121). By resisting the pull towards instrumentalism and constructing other bodies of knowledge, by questioning what is taken to be common sense, and by reflecting on the conditions of the production of knowledge, critical research actively and knowingly engages in the power/ knowledge struggle.

From the broad landscape of research looking into design, design history is the strand that most often adopts this kind of critical standpoint. But if our concern is the present we are caught up in, how might we tackle *contemporary* design practices in a similar manner?

5. Critical anthropologies of design

Most of the studies touched upon in 4.2 deploy their critical standpoint as part of an ethnographic or anthropological inquiry. But how much of the anthropological work that concerns itself with design adopts the critical principles outlined in 4.3? Design is certainly an increasingly popular anthropological target (Murphy, 2016, p. 444; Garvey & Drazin, 2016). Design and anthropology come in various combinations – anthropology *of* design, anthropology *for* design, and design anthropology. I am particularly interested in the former here. Keith Murphy notes that this strand remains bifurcated into studies of material culture and studies of the practice (Murphy, 2016, p. 435): an interesting split, one that comes from within design's own logics, perhaps. On the basis of an admittedly small sample of readings, whilst some evidence critical research approaches of the kind we have just discussed, others take a more straightforward approach. They either do not attempt to denaturalize the object 'design' (for example, none of the articles in a special issue of the Journal of Design History on design and anthropology problematize the ontological certainty of design), and they appear broadly engaged in the project of advancing design practice. Even Lucy Suchman, who makes a case for a 'critical' anthropology of design (Suchman, 2011, p. 3), is ultimately interested in 'contributing to the emergence of a critical *technical practice*' (p.16). This idea of design as technical capability or creative process is what one might call a 'gaze-narrowing device' (Agha, 2011). There is nothing inherently wrong with such a framing of course: but it is rarely recognized as such, and it does limit the terms of inquiry.

This is particularly curious as within ethnographic practice there are concepts that would read design as something other than a kind of artefact or technical capability. If all disciplines have their own fields of visibility and ontologies, then ethnography in its broadest sense sees social and cultural worlds. And recently the concept of the 'site' has been complexified to accommodate a broader range of phenomena. There have been calls to 'study up' – to scrutinise elites as well as the less fortunate (Nader, 1972) – and to move closer to home, to turn the anthropological gaze on one's nearest environment and home culture (Rosselin, 2009; Augé, 1995; Strathern, 1987; Alvesson, 2009), to pursue studies of 'urban elites, scientists, activists, professionals, technocrats and specialists' have proliferated (Sorge & Padwe, 2015). There has also been a 'decentering of locality' (Coleman & von Hellermann, 2010), and a shifting sense of what 'a site' is, away from 'the village' and towards 'systems of relations that constitute more globally holistic realities' (Sorge & Padwe, 2015). George E. Marcus coined the concept of 'multi-sited ethnography' to accommodate the fact that experiences of contemporary life are rarely confined to a single place (Marcus, 1986; Marcus, 1995) and to allow for the possibility of research 'following' its quarry across such dislocated things as 'commodity chains/ productive processes, migration networks, plots/narratives, metaphors, or circulations of ideas'. Eva Nadai and Christoph Maeder conceptualise the field as a 'social world(s) constituted by a set of actors focused on a common concern' (Nadai & Maeder, 2005). Not dissimilar is the idea of 'field-level ethnography' (Zilber, 2014,

p. 97), an extension of organisational ethnography (Watson, 2012; Ybema, et al., 2009) designed to get some purchase on phenomena that cut across and between organisations and locales (Wulff, 2014).

Taken together these concepts allow us to see ‘design’ as a different kind of object, and to pursue it across domains as an idea, a technology of power, a (globalised) discourse, a set of practices, a social and professional world, and an assemblage of subjects and objects. Anthropological studies in this mode include: Tim Seitz’s ethnography of design thinking workshops that explores their role as a mediator of the logics of contemporary capitalism (Seitz, 2019); studies of fashion and dress practices – and the labour that sits behind the fashion economy – that problematise the concept of a global fashion industry and the kinds of human objects and subjects it produces (Moon, 2020; Moon, 2016; Luvaas, 2016; Jenss, 2016; Sadre-Orafai, 2016); or Juris Milestone’s paper, ‘Design as Power’, which takes a field-level approach, treating design as a contemporary idea, and exploring its manifestation and effects in the popular press and a student project (Milestone, 2007). Jakob Krause-Jensen’s ethnographic book on the organisational culture at Bang & Olufsen meditates on how employees inhabit and express organisational values, finding that they are not dupes of some corporate ideology but (applying governmentality as a theoretical device), engineered to be self-managing (Krause-Jensen, 2010). These ethnographies critically deconstruct design thinking, the fashion industry, design as a structuring idea and design workplaces.

6. Applying the approach to ‘design for government’

So, how might such principles and approaches be operationalized? This section discusses the actual approach I took to studying my site of ‘design for government’, some of the messy realities of the project, and the attendant ethical challenges.

6.1 Outline of approach

In practical terms, my project brought together three distinct research tasks: a discourse analysis of the literature on ‘design for government’ (both academic and other kinds), auto-ethnographic observation and writing based on my own professional life, and a critical reading of that data using the Foucauldian framework outlined in Section 4.2.

Working out how to deal with the ‘design for government’ literature was a central challenge of the study. Initially, I attempted a straightforward approach, undertaking a traditional literature search and reviewing it as a theoretical body of work. And yet I was equally aware of the copious quantity of grey literature – policy documents, industry publications, think tank reports, advocacy efforts, and practitioner blogs that discuss, promote and attempt to theorise ‘design for government’ – that I perceived to be equally if not more influential, and cer-

tainly more public than academic writing. There were clear parallels between these literatures, in terms of the accounts of design therein.⁴ And at the same time, there was a confounding incoherence to the body of literature as a whole, a bewildering number of things design is said to be or to do. I could not make it add up to any sort of sensible conclusion, or resolve it into a clear set of findings to build on. Switching the disciplinary lens, and treating the 'design for government' literature not as a set of truths about design but a discourse to be analysed, helped things fall into place. The echoes and the incoherencies, the entanglements and conflicts of interest: what had been frustrating when trying to conduct a traditional literature review became quite interesting when parsed with a discourse analysis lens.

My reading of the design literature was thus unavoidably coloured by my standpoint. The second element to my methodology actively exploited that position. As someone fully entangled in the apparatus, my own professional life, experience, practices, sense of identity, and so on, presented a potentially valuable source of data. This element of the approach might therefore be called 'opportunistic auto-ethnography' (Sambrook & Herrmann, 2018). I went about my work in a busy design consultancy as normal, whilst also keeping in mind the questions of my research. I accumulated the range of materials that working life naturally generates, which helped with recollection (notebooks, materials produced for projects, reports, photos taken and tweeted during co-design workshops, and so on). I also kept a diary where I made minimal notes each day, or every few days, recording what I had been up to and how I was feeling. Occasionally, I wrote about specific events or moments within projects in more detail, committing what had happened to the page while it was still fresh in my memory. As I was coming to the end of my time at the design agency, I wrote some longer more reflective memos about my experience of working there. Alongside this auto-ethnographic dataset were notes from a number of interviews with civil servants and design consultants. However to describe these interview and field notes from practice as my only 'dataset' is of course misleading. Although I did begin with a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of my field notes, my interpretations were also a result of broader primary experiences – of seeing longitudinal patterns in a professional life over several years. Ethnographic data is both hard (documents and artefacts) and soft (memories and impressions), and the soft is essential for the interpretation of the hard: for achieving ethnographic insight (Pool, 2017).

Finally, appreciating that I needed some other academic literature outside of design as a kind of foundational scaffolding for the research, I read widely in other fields, which furnished the set of constructs outlined above. In this way I transitioned from being a design practitioner-researcher to a researcher immersed in social and cultural theory. I used my theoretical reading as a set of provocations for recasting and reinterpreting both the hard

⁴ Admittedly, my professional experience and somewhat skeptical standpoint set me up to have a particular relation to the literature. Well-versed in its agenda and schooled in its tactics, I found it difficult to take much of it at face value. Frequently spotting my own lobbying efforts for the Design Commission quoted as supporting argument in academic work (Deserti & Rizzo, 2015; Pirinen, 2016) was something of a red flag.

and the soft data, for re-reading things I wrote at a particular moment in time, and as prompts that have re-called to mind things that were never written down.

6.2 Messy realities

I don't know if it is essential for a 'critical anthropology of contemporary design practice' to pursue an autoethnographic approach. Perhaps not. In my case this element of the methodology came about by evolution and circumstance. However it does present some striking advantages, if one is inclined to be skeptical rather than credulous. As a practitioner one is privy to plenty of behind-the-scenes action: we can see the strings being pulled. If you know how to talk the talk, you also know how to spot spin coming from someone else. Equally, you are intuitively aware of what is taboo, or deliberately not being discussed by your peers. With a degree of introspection, you have access to the effects of 'the apparatus' on your very self: and, if you can be honest with yourself, might get to some difficult truths that research subjects would be unwilling or perhaps even unable to articulate to an outsider-researcher.

All of that said, however, and in the spirit of 'confessional tales' (Van Maanen, 1988), establishing such a dual identity, and carrying out a more critical re-reading only really became possible with a degree of distance. Proximity to the field presents methodological difficulties in any auto-ethnographic study, but it is doubly complex, maybe impossible, to actively critique, or suspend judgment on, a practice one is immersed in, indeed actively selling. Doing so produces a high degree of cognitive dissonance, which wasn't a pleasant experience. Freilich (1970) talks about the psychological strain of being a 'marginal native' – both part of the group and not – but it also presents problems when it comes to analysis. How easy is it to see a range of other interpretations when one is in a practitioner headspace most of the time? Making the familiar unfamiliar, seeing beyond accounts structured by pre-existing ideas of design, is harder when one is constantly rehearsing one particular narrative, keeping on-brand and on-message. I thus struggled with distancing myself sufficiently from the quotidian concerns of practice to be able to see it in other terms, until the point at which I took a sustained break from that professional environment.

I stopped working for the design consultancy in October 2017. This wasn't necessarily part of the plan, in terms of the research methodology: it was a life decision taken with my partner to move away from London and take a sabbatical from work. But it opened up the space to move away from more instrumental and practical questions, and the time to do the necessary reading. Up until that point I had made intermittent attempts at analysis. These moments of reflection and consolidation undoubtedly helped move my thinking forward. For example, reflecting on what we had produced in Bailey & Lloyd (2016) helped me to understand a distinction I was searching for between types of design research. In Bailey (2017) I tried various theoretical ideas on for size, testing their explanatory power. Conversations with Chad Story around aesthetics (Bailey & Story, 2018) catalysed the analysis of 'techniques' of governmental power. However it was only whilst taking a pause from consultancy

that I developed my theoretical/ analytical framework and, working through my memos, as well as returning to the original raw materials (notebooks, project reports and design materials), began to build and iterate a set of insights.

The process of writing therefore was not so much one of 'writing up', but an ongoing act of inquiry and analysis (Richardson, 1994), of iteratively building an understanding of the apparatus I have been caught up in, slowly arriving at a greater sense of clarity. I looped back and forth between writing ethnographic accounts, reading and assimilating new theoretical concepts, applying them to the ethnographic data and writing analytical passages. The final set of insights presented revealed themselves gradually and painfully as a result of multiple writings and re-writings.

6.3 Ethical considerations

Aside from the strain of maintaining a Jekyll-and-Hyde kind of existence, the combination of design practitioner-critical researcher also presented a number of ethical challenges. For reasons of space I can only note the existence of many of these here, but they are discussed in depth in Bailey (2021).

Auto-ethnography makes the practice of anticipatory ethics (Tolich, 2010) more complex, if not impossible. It presents risks to the researcher, and has been likened to the process of 'outing' oneself (Flemons & Green, 2002), 'of not being to be able to take back what you have written or having any control how readers interpret it' (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). Others around us are often easily identifiable: 'the word auto is a misnomer', because 'the self is porous' (p.1608). We do not exist, and our stories are not made, in a vacuum (Chang, 2008). We are not the sole owners of our narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This presented complexities around obtaining informed consent, around balancing the need to protect confidentiality and anonymity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 264-275) with the need to share some data to achieve reliability and 'trustworthiness' of the text (Le Roux, 2017), and around relational ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Ellis, 2007).

This last one was a source of almost constant concern, reflection and negotiation. Auto-ethnography – and critical research generally – is valued precisely for writing in what has been silenced (Brewis & Wray-Bliss, 2008), for countering hegemonic narratives with personal stories that contradict (Lee, 2018; Muncey, 2005). And although I do not consider myself 'oppressed', I do consider this thesis as a kind of counter-narrative, an act of resistance within a discursive milieu. So what, then, does one do with the perspectives and interpretations of others when they accord with the official narrative? If one's starting point is that there might be more going on than practitioners typically understand or are able to articulate (which was my own embodied experience *as a practitioner* at the outset of this research endeavour), that individuals might be rendered subjects through discourse without their own consciousness of the fact, this suggests limits to what can be learned by privileging emic interpretations. We cannot only rely on practitioner – or even academic – interpretations if our prem-

ise is that those narratives are representative of dominant, discursively available explanations. They can only tell us about that which is discursively available. They will not advance our development of other, possible, as-yet-unarticulated, explanations. This also has methodological implications: there are limits to what can be learned through interviews and conversations with those 'inside the tent'. Here the risk of appearing dismissive and academically superior is acute. In response to this, one can modify one's claims: not to having some kind of privileged access to an objective truth about others, but making use of the opportunity to read more widely and play 'devil's advocate' in offering up an alternative account.

Differences in understanding, and developing ideas that are not typically held by the group in question, are a natural consequence of researching as well as participating (Strathern, 1987). These differences between myself and my peers – and the question of how to 'navigate multipositionality' (Vernooij, 2017) – have been an ongoing ethical question throughout the research. My approach while still working in design consultancy was to try and be open about my views (although I myself was confused about what these were for a long time). But I didn't hide my doubts regarding design practice. I gave presentations to the team on critical theory and research, and my reputation in this regard was reflected both in formal feedback and in office banter. Hopefully I cannot be accused of wilful deception or betrayal (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). And in writing the text I certainly did not want to unduly offend or upset anyone working in the field, or make them feel like I was singling them out for condemnation. What I would like is for peers to read it and feel it has shone a light on something – not to be antagonised. Here I tried to emphasise a particular nuance: it was not a study of the human beings that appear in it, but of the relational ontology of discourse, technologies and practices, and processes of subjectification. It was an analysis of a disciplinary apparatus, undertaken from my vantage point which was necessarily within some specific organisations. But it was not about that particular consultancy or its employees. It was about the material detail of practice, the hands, gestures and bodies, the 'things said' (Foucault, 1989, p. 123) and done, rather than the individuals saying or doing them.

There is still a risk though of alienating myself, or of hurting peers by appearing to denigrate what they might think of as a joint endeavour of progressing a field of research and practice. But holding a different view is not in itself unethical. It might be uncomfortable, of course: but does it constitute 'harm'? Many ethical codes of practice now go beyond 'do no harm', to requirements of beneficence, justice, promoting well-being of research subjects, and so on (Hammersley, 2009; Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2007). Stephen Andrew, in his book, 'Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic', lists fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence (Andrew, 2017). In the case of critical research, I have come to the view that being guided by a requirement to *promote* beneficence over and above any other research objective may be unrealistic if not actually undesirable: simultaneously too narrow and too grandiose.

7. Conclusion

My aim with this paper has been, first, to call for a more critical set of scholarly practices in relation to design, via a sustained engagement between the social disciplines and design, which I believe will furnish new kinds of research question, research site, and insight. And, second, to propose a particular combination, which I call *critical anthropology of design*, and to begin to draw together under a collective banner those studies working in this mode. In my doctoral research I used this to explore design's ascendancy within the public sector in the UK, however it could equally well be applied to other kinds of design. I believe this is a strategy worth pursuing in design scholarship for three reasons. First, we know design is complicit in all sorts of problems – historical and contemporary – and we need tools to robustly critique it, and produce accounts that help us understand and articulate the nature of that complicity. Second, the disciplinary switch, and the power/knowledge angle, breaks us out of the straitjacket of design discourse, which will lead to greater originality in research. Finally, a sustained methodological discourse on these matters would be of benefit to students and early career researchers (like my earlier self) seeking advice and guidance on a critical approach to researching contemporary design practices.

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8. References

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