

# An Interdisciplinary Exploration of an Analog Tool to Elicit Socio-Cultural Narratives

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## Abstract

Eliciting multiple stakeholder narratives is a critical factor when designing systems, services or products. This research explores how the use of an analog tool (the picture postcard) in the digital age can be used to elicit socio-cultural stories to support design for ‘social practice’. The process combines people and things by using a participatory design approach and material culture studies to design, explore and analyze the complex nature of interactions between social ideals and the artefact.

The study emphasizes ‘slow immersion and design’ by creating prolonged interactions that allow people to sit with someone else’s perspective while also introspecting about their own. In an age of echo-chambers, the research examines the impact of reducing the risk of *fragmentation* (where people assign themselves into homogenous groups leading to an amplification of pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2001)) on participants’ ability to generate and sustain a healthy exchange of honest, social narratives.

The research findings reveal a deep bonding between participants and a reduction of implicit biases that initiates a broader range of discussions within a given socio-cultural topic. The space for ‘*elastic interaction*’ (articulation of ideas without fear of judgment; when and how they want it to be expressed) allows honest thoughts to manifest. The findings also reveal that this process slowly allows for an empathetic acceptance of another’s perspectives.

The poster illustrates the research through these various approaches: the process of slow immersion and design research with a combination of postcard exchanges, one-on-one interviews and participatory design research activities to help elicit the stories for a socio-cultural co-design space.

*Keywords: Slow Design, Methods and Tools, Interdisciplinary Design Research Methods, Community-Based Research, Participatory Design Research, Picture Postcard*

Stories and narratives are invaluable. Every story a person relates is shaped by their own socio- cultural and economic background that forms a deep layer of experiential knowledge that can be tapped for designing better solutions and uncovering opportunities. Unearthing these stories moves toward a well-informed research process that allow for more empathetic design approaches, process, findings and solutions. The focus of this research study is to explore how these stories can be elicited for a particular setting or purpose: unearthing socio-cultural narratives, using an analog tool (the picture postcard) through interdisciplinary approaches.

Design Research as an industry is growing at an accelerating pace. More firms, companies and corporations are looking to use design research and thinking for the betterment of their institutions. However, placing the context of the times we are in now—an increasingly digital, fast-paced world-- there is significant pressure assigned to obtaining maximum results in the least amount of time possible. In a lot of instances, this approach is successful as new methods and ideas are developed to generate efficient systems that are put into practice. However, it has also created a culture of rushed processes and research methods in the industry that tend to follow a similar approach across a range of problem spaces—from market research to socio- cultural issues. This approach needs to be revisited as these are different kinds of problem spaces; with different needs, requirements and objectives, which means that these design spaces require different tenors to address them. It is thus necessary identify these goals for the problem space, and explore extending the time frame for the research so as to allow participants to immerse themselves fully in the subject matter and encourage an introspective environment (particularly for socio-cultural design research spaces).

It is important in areas of socio-cultural concern that the given problem space is explored, sifted and approached from multiple points of view, with a holistic sense of thinking to ensure a thorough process and obtain comprehensive results. The challenge for the researcher in this instance is to create a safe space for these stories to be honestly expressed, exchanged and recorded (given the nature of narratives to be sensitive and possibly personal). Focusing on smaller nuggets that aid this process like improving the nature of interactions between participants, and the researcher(s) to create a more trusting, reflective interpersonal and professional relationship could be pivotal to the kind of data that arises from the research (with the already established hypothesis that participants benefit from having more time to become comfortable with the subject matter as well as their co-participants and the researcher(s)).

With the approach of eliciting honest and otherwise tacit narratives from people as the primary aim, the following components of the research was to develop and explore methods and practices that are not pertinent only to mainstream design and design research but to embrace ideas from other disciplines that improve the means to elicit these stories, and analyze them (like art and material culture studies).

On the whole and in summary of the introduction, the larger idea of the study is to explore and challenge those aspects of research methods largely found in the industry today, particularly with regards to socio-cultural problem spaces by working on it over a longer span of time than usual (in the case of this research- a five month period), employing interdisciplinary methods for a holistic approach to problem-solving and looking for opportunities in the given design

space.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Slow Design**

One of larger ideas being addressed in this research, as a core exploratory factor, is with regards to ‘slow design through immersion’. Slow design is a relatively new concept in design research and design thinking in that it encompasses longer design research processes with more time for research, reflection and fine-tuning of ideas; the approach is ‘predicated on slowing the metabolism of people, resources and flows, which could provide a design paradigm that would engender positive behavioral change’. (Fuad-Luke, 2002) A longer time frame for the purposes of research has the potential to allow participants to develop a deeper bond with other people and allows for the research findings to come through in the best manner possible. The aspect of more time also allows a range of perspectives, working methods and ideas to intersect. It is in this space that art, design and other disciplines (material culture studies, in this case) intersect in working towards projects that focus on social innovation. This space has been termed ‘social practice’ for the purposes of this research.

### **Eliciting Stories through Decisive Dialogues**

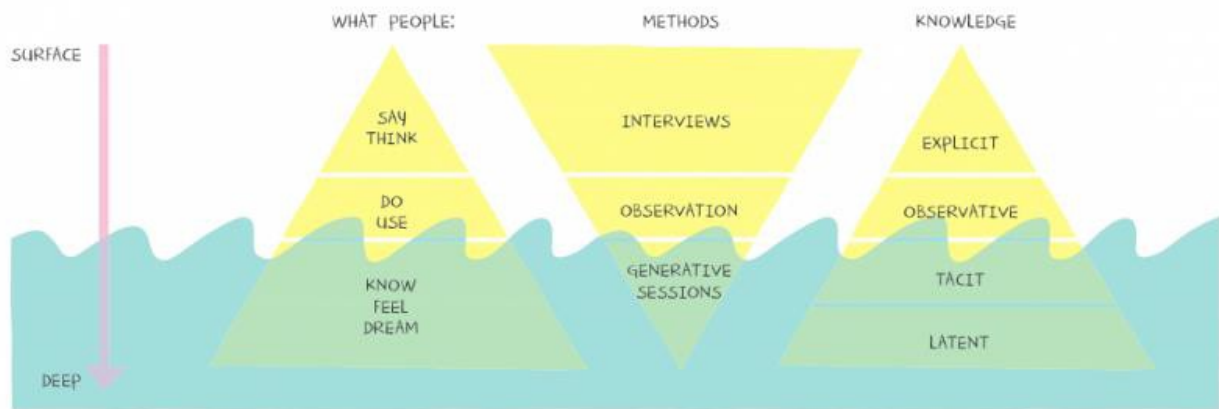
It is imperative that a social operating mechanism such as a community or a city, with its different stakeholders, has important conversations about its visions, shortcomings, mission and culture in order to define problem spaces and design solutions for them. Given the socio-cultural, political and economic extremes that persist, there is often a gap in the understanding and working of one stakeholder group of the community not addressing the other, or even adversely affecting the other. The first step towards social practice, in my opinion would be to work towards a cohesive, social goal—and this can potentially happen through “decisive dialogues” between the different stakeholder groups. Decisive dialogues are crucial conversations that steer towards exchange of ideas, reflection and open discussions. ‘Decisive dialogues must have four components: “First, they must involve a sincere search for answers. Second, they must tolerate unpleasant truths. Third, they must invite a full range of views, spontaneously offered. And fourth, they must point the way to a course of action”.’ (Charan, 2006) This research focuses on tapping into decisive dialogues as a means to elicit honest narratives from participants, in the process of research conversations and later in focus-groups.

### **Approach: Co-Creative Design**

When designing for and with people or social situations, it is important to ensure that the researcher doesn’t assume what it is that the people need, or what the social architecture requires for a solution. Solutions that arise from only the researcher’s comprehension and analysis of a given situation can be limiting in its perspectives and scope; it may contain assumptive stances that may prove to be harmful to the research itself. Thus, the primary step involved in a research that explores socio-cultural design spaces and community-based research is to call for a collaborative mindset with the people involved in the research. This entails moving from seeing them as being just ‘participants’ to ‘co-designers’.

‘Co-creative design’ as a mindset has been adopted in the research in order to ‘work with

people’, to consider them as the experts of their own experiences in order to explore problem spaces as co-designers. Stories are extremely useful in co-creative design as they are engaging and they evoke imagination and empathy that aid the process of designing better solutions. (As a combination of true and imagined natures of story-types, stories (and story-telling) are a very effective way to trigger ideas in a given design space, which is of applicable use in the case of research in socio-cultural problem spaces).



**Figure 1: Levels of Knowledge (Sanders and Stappers, 2012)**

Figure 1 illustrates the levels of knowledge possessed by people and the different methods through which these stories can be elicited. ‘Knowledge’ here refers to thoughts and ideas that one has experienced and has stored in their memory. There are four different levels of knowledge:

*Explicit* knowledge can be stated in words, and is relatively easy to share with others.

*Observable* knowledge refers to thoughts and ideas that can be obtained by watching how other people behave.

*Tacit* knowledge refers to things we know but are not able to verbally communicate to others.

*Latent* knowledge refers to thoughts and ideas that we haven’t experienced yet, but on which we can form an opinion based on past experiences. (Sanders and Stappers, 2012)

Some levels of knowledge are easier to access than others. Explicit and observable narratives are obtained through methods like interviews and observation exercises. However, the deeper levels of knowledge, namely tacit and latent, are much harder to unearth. These levels of knowledge are generally triggered during co-creative design workshops using a variety of techniques. This research is a combination of participatory design methods that explores how stories can be elicited at each of these levels, particularly tacit and latent narratives.

### **The Tool: The Postcard Exchange**

Tools are extremely important in design research: through the planning, research process, analysis and findings, as well as in the final data delivery. In usual cases, the approach to

design research and designing something tangible (like a product) or intangible (like a system) is to start with the story, to look into behavior patterns, consumption, rituals etc. However, embracing interdisciplinary approaches calls for looking at the same problem space through a fresh perspective. The discipline that largely intersects this research (by virtue of proposing the use of a physical tool in a digital age) is material culture studies, where emphasis is laid on the object, its story and the complex nature of interactions between social ideals and the artefact. 'Alternatively, material culture studies may take the human subject or the social as their starting point: the manner in which people think through themselves, and their lives and identities through the medium of different kind of things' (Tilley, C. Y., Keanne, W., Kuechler, S., Rowlands, M., & Spyer, P., 2006). This allows for a new way of thinking about the design space.

This research in its process reached a question of how, and which physical tool suits to evoke honest responses from people. The chosen artefact for the purposes of the nature of exchange is the picture postcard which incorporates visual dialogue with its front side and space for written introspection and communication on the back. The postcard, with its minimal space, pushes the participants to refine their thoughts before they write, and also helps them to sit with their partner's responses for a while before writing back instead of immediately responding, as in the case of face-to-face interactions.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The research, which spanned over a period of 5 months, had two parallel phases to it to understand how the picture postcard can be useful as a tool to elicit stories. The first phase was engaging in dialogue through actual postcards. Each participant in the research was paired with someone else from the same city (Columbus, USA) but from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds so as to create a setting that allowed them the potential to explore perspectives different from their own. The topic being investigated was about 'home and community'. Assigned co-participants exchanged postcards as their sole means of communication to talk about the topic during the research period, with the researcher being a part of the conversation by virtue of remote observations (for participants send a photograph of their cards to the researcher for documentation purposes). Emphasis was laid on setting this up as a safe space where the participants could decide what they say, how they say it, and when. They could choose to use their real names or remain anonymous. This kind of freedom allowed them the space to decide how much of themselves they wanted to reveal. This flexible space for the movement of the participants to exchange their narratives has been termed as 'elastic interaction' for the purposes of this research.

The postcards themselves were well-designed and illustrated with a mix of blank, mass-produced and artist-rendered postcards (by the researcher), of various sizes. Participants could pick and choose the cards they most resonated with to write on and send out to their partner. They were also given a set of 'trigger questions' for reflection that they could use should they feel like they're hitting a roadblock in the conversations. Participants were handed over their postcard packets personally by the researcher, after the first interview, to help prepare them for the study.

The second, parallel phase to this analog means of communication involved the use of electronic mails with similar parameters to the postcard exchange in order to compare-and-contrast with

the postcard correspondences, except this method had worldwide participants. The participants of

that parallel research phase sent images (also offered to them) and unencumbered mails (in length) to one another in the place of postcard exchanges.

The study also comprised of three one-on-one meetings between the researcher and every participant in the study—a preparatory meeting (with a participatory design activity to prime the participants about the subject matter), a mid-point meeting to track progress and thoughts, as well as an exit interview. The objective of these meeting is to encourage improved interactions between the participants and the researcher, and between the participants themselves since the final, optional interview brought both the participants and the researcher together to meet one another. All these interviews were well-documented through audio-video recordings as well as photographs. Also, each of these postcard dialogues were tracked and maintained on record by the researcher throughout the entire period of the study.

## **DISCUSSION**

There has been a good amount of data that has been collected in the research process: the content on the postcards themselves, the participatory design activity data and transcripts from the three one-on-one interviews. These narratives and different facets of stories of people are observed, analyzed and studied through qualitative analysis in Grounded Theory.

The multiple interviews helped to develop interpersonal and professional networks and relationships between the participants themselves, as well as the researcher which could play a key role in a socio-cultural problem space. One of the other key insights of the study is that the postcard exchange can be used as a ‘priming method’ in a larger study in order to prepare participants before they attend participatory workshops and other kinds of social convening. The hypothesis is that a thorough priming of the participants about the subject matter and their own reflections on the same allows for introverted and even socially anxious people to be more confident about their ideas, especially if there is one other person in the room that they know and trust (their partner).

## **CONCLUSION**

The research currently stands at the completion of the overall data collection with the project having come to an end and the exit interviews with the participants in place. The conclusions at this point in the research are largely positive. Some of the initial findings are as follows:

- 86% of the participants (out of the sample size of 20 pairs of participants) would like to meet their partners at the end of this research; no one has yet said they don't want to meet their partners.
- 69% of the participants have expressed that they were more honest with their narratives in their postcard exchanges.
- 86% of the participants found themselves in increased introspection and reflection regarding the topic thus far in the research.
- 58% of the participants expressed good bonding, connection and relationship with their partners even before they met.

- 65% of the participants have said that their perspectives have been broadened in their conversations with their partners.

It appears that the research process has provided a safe space for open dialogue and conversation that invited people to interact with their counterparts with more vulnerability (without feeling threatened at the same time), by exchanging postcards with one another, so far in the study. In an industry where the bigger demand is for immediate results and findings, this research has the potential to address larger concerns and organizations like the healthcare industry or the work of NGO's who have a cultural and social focus that could benefit from prolonged studies.

These primary results have been positive and as the third and final exit interviews come to an end, it appears to have better results than its email counterpart phase, largely owing to the tactility of the medium of communication. The insights from this research are to be presented to experts who have previously used postcards in their research in some manner or form from several disciplines like art, design, anthropology, material culture etc., to obtain their critique on the working methods of the research and its further applications. There is a vast amount of data collection in this research process that is of good use for socio-cultural problem spaces, and it will be a good way to go in for community-based research, social practice and innovation.

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## Author Biography

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Hemalatha Venkataraman is an architect who has completed her Bachelors in Architecture in India. As a qualified architect and also an artist by vocation, her research interests and work lie in exploring interdisciplinary approaches (the author has also completed a Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in 'Analysis of Material Culture') with a participatory design mindset, and designing for the larger social good and the community. Her cultural background and landscape allows for a fresh perspective in the research setting, as an international student in America. Alongside her Masters thesis, she is also pursuing a separate research which explores arts-based research in community-activism. She is currently a third year MFA candidate pursuing Design Research and Development at the Ohio State University.