Negotiating Marginalised Identities in and through Participatory Design

Katta Spiel
HCI Group, TU Wien & HCI
Games Group, University of
Waterloo
Vienna, Austria & Waterloo, ON,
Canada
katta@igw.tuwien.ac.at

Christopher Frauenberger
Laura Scheepmaker
Irene Posch
HCI Group, TU Wien
Vienna, Austria
christopher.frauenberger@tuwien.ac.at
laura.scheepmaker@tuwien.ac.at
irene.posch@tuwien.ac.at

Abstract

Identities, particularly marginalised identities, are re-negotiated continuously within participatory design research. In two case studies, one drawing from a project in collaboration with individual autistic children and one with groups of neurodiverse children, we show how different identities are reflected in the materials used and objects created during the participatory design process. We close by briefly outlining a starting point for developing a methodological approach that explicitly includes identity construction as part of Participatory Design.

Author Keywords

Identity; Participatory Design

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous

Introduction

"Identity politics is both about achieving a better deal for people, but also about establishing the stories people tell about themselves, and having them listened to." [3].

Identifying as disabled can come with a sense of agency and, in many cases, only through explicitly doing so, people receive the resources they require. However, to some

disabled people it is most beneficial to not explicitly self-identify as *disabled* [4]. As researchers, we understand disability as a label that can be positively reclaimed [2]. Such an action of reclaiming comes with the concept of agency and attributing it to people who are not traditionally in positions of (discursive) power about their own lives and – relating this back to the area of Human-Computer Interaction and Participatory Design (PD) – about the technologies in their lives. This creates a tension: on the one hand, PD puts their marginalised identity at the heart of its activities without explicitly supporting a productive reconstruction, which may further foster a discriminatory narrative instead of empower participants as individuals. Within participatory design research, it becomes then particularly relevant to engage with this tension productively and to aim at an understanding on how identity might be actively constructed through activities, agendas, power structures, but also artefacts and materials involved.

Case Studies

We provide two case studies that show how identity construction might play out differently in particular contexts of participatory design research. The first case illustrates this for a collaboration with an individual autistic child whereas the second shows how different identities emerge and can be catered to in a group setting.

OutsideTheBox

Within the OutsideTheBox[1] project, we co-designed technologies with individual autistic children. In a series of eight case studies, we developed prototypes according to the interests of each child. However, we adhered to a notion for the technology to be meaningful beyond being a toy. We present one of these cases to illustrate the complexity of identity construction even with only one participant.
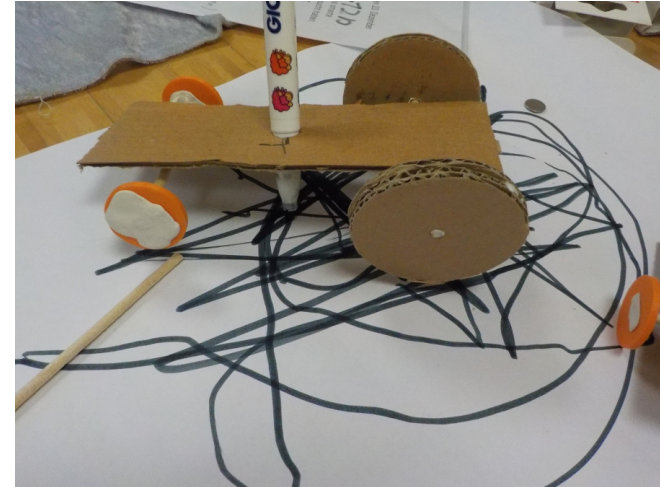
Figure 1: One of Quentin's early prototypes for a drawing car

When we first met Quentin[2], he was nine years old and went to a mainstream school. He was diagnosed with Aspergers when he was in pre-school. Tinkering and crafting were well-loved activities, but only to create a finished object that has a use (even if it is not necessarily evident to outsiders). For our collaboration, we had an empty room in his school around the corner from his classroom to our disposal. We conducted 13 sessions at the school and two additional ones at the digital fabrication lab within the university.

While our project and the associated funding was putting the focus on Quentin as an autistic child, he identified predominantly with the persona of an inventor. He was full of ideas and impatient to realise them. The drawing car in

Figure 1 is an example of how he creatively used low-tech material to quickly craft functioning prototypes of what he had in mind. However, within the scope of the technologies we were aiming for, we could not fully determine a theme that was meaningful to Quentin beyond a single session. Once we understood this rapid production of ideas as part of Quentin's core interest, we could focus on creating a more dynamic and open artefact more appropriately in our final prototype. Through continuously inventing and creating new artefacts, Quentin actively established himself as a curious builder and crafter. We co-constructed a set of sound-cubes which allowed him to experiment with sending sound but were also accessible enough for him to continually change and re-invent them. Negotiating this identity, expressed through his interests and aims, with the project goals we had as researchers was an active, even if at the time unconscious, process in our participatory design collaboration.

Social Play Technologies
In the Social Play Technologies[3] project, we co-design technologies facilitating social play with groups consisting of four to six autistic and allistic[4] children. The project is ongoing and so far we are working with two groups creating individually suitable technologies that aid the children in realising their visions for play. We plan to engage with two further groups over the course of the project.

In one of the groups, there are five children two of which have a diagnosis of autism, one with trisomy 23, one with ADHD and one with generalised learning difficulties. Due to the diversity of the children, different needs and desires need to be constantly assessed and acted upon. The chil-

---

[3]http://www.socialplay.at
[4]Meaning non-autistic in the spirit of [1]. Being allistic can and does include other neurodiverse conditions, such as ADHD or Trisomy 23.

Figure 2: Mixed materials for taking up and negotiating different identities through participatory design in groups

dren are all attending the 2nd year of primary school together, but comprise a distinct subgroup within the larger class. Our meetings (eleven so far) are held in an activity-oriented room next to the traditional classroom.

The complexity of negotiating multiple identities is dramatically increased when designing with groups of several participants. In aiming at catering to different desires and preferences, we used mixed materials through which the children could express themselves in the participatory design process (see Figure 2). Some of them were more interested in investigating different technologies, others role-played with the tactile sensations of the materials while others again tried to find out ways in which they could combine them. Through the material, they can also explore different ways to express different aspects of their identities, and

through negotiating limited resources, they also negotiate their identity within the group of peers and the present adult researchers. For example, one of the children took up different roles using different textile accessories as signifiers. The other children included or excluded him in their play according to how they saw the role he embodied as fitting to him and to the group at that moment.

Discussion & Conclusion

Through our two case studies, we could show that identity was continuously renegotiated using the setup of the participatory design itself. While this might be the case in all activities in their lives, especially considering that children are more actively trying out new identities to shape their own, PD offers an opportunity to do so through artefacts and materials. From both case studies, we draw that identity construction appears to be not only an individually steered process but instead is itself of participatory nature. Hence, identities appear to be co-constructed per se. Participatory Design can then not only serve as a platform where negotiations of identity can occur but also as a means to explicitly negotiate identity through.

However, the dimension of identity seems currently under-represented in PD on a methodological level. We suggest that first steps in that direction could further investigate the roles of materials used and artefacts co-constructed in PD in regards to their contribution to identity construction for all participants. The workshop presents to us the opportunity to discuss this matter further with colleagues interested in the topic.

REFERENCES

1. Andrew Main. 2003. allism: an introduction to a little-known condition. (2003). `http://www.fysh.org/~zefram/allism/allism_intro.txt`

2. Jenny Morris. 1991. *Pride against prejudice: tranforming attitudes to disability*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, CA.

3. Tom Shakespeare. 1996. Disability, identity and difference. *Exploring the divide* (1996), 94–113.

4. Nick Watson. 2002. Well, I Know this is Going to Sound Very Strange to You, but I Don't See Myself as a Disabled Person: Identity and disability. *Disability & Society* 17, 5 (2002), 509–527. `DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687590220148496`