

Participatory Moves as Parasitic Relations in Senior Healthcare Workshop, June 1, 2012

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Abstract

This *experimental* workshop establishes a dialogue on research 'participation' in senior healthcare practice including ethnography, design and policy. Its impetus is the observation that participatory research practices often configure or 'aspire' older people as 'active seniors' for 'user-driven' healthcare initiatives (Lutz et al 2012). Yet these same aspirations may overlook, neglect or misrepresent (less) active older people with greater cognitive, social and/or physical challenges. Such aspirations, one could argue, determine the relational play or frictions between 'parts and wholes' – i.e. which participations are included, left aside, or reconfigured anew. Here the notion of parasitic relations, which stems from Michael Serres' treatment of the 'parasite' as well as George Marcus' workshop concept of 'para-sites' – i.e. sites beside or in the field site proper – is used to explore the phenomenon of participation. In other words, parasitic relations are figured as metaphorical feeding with or beside the multiple ways participation moves. This includes the different ways participatory agencies – human and non-human – flow, shift, cut, entangle and potentially transform in the context of participatory research. Discussion will be based on empirical cases and methodological experimentations. Possible questions for this workshop include: *How might parasitic relations refigure conceptualizations of participation and field sites? Moreover, how might parasitic relations entangle the participatory entities in senior healthcare practice (bodies, technologies, policies, routines, et cetera) which we study, design and otherwise shape?* This workshop will appeal to those working along the intersections of design, innovation, aging, healthcare policy and ethnographic research methodology. Since this is an experimental workshop, participants are asked to bring an open mind about the generative potentials of the exercise. Most workshop participants will have experience with healthcare policy, design and/or ethnography.

Designing Senior Healthcare

Much recent IT design research and development concerned with healthcare for older people may be linked with broader strategic initiatives with titles like 'active ageing' and 'independent living.' These are positioned by national and international efforts to support 'healthy lifestyles' among people over sixty, the fastest growing age group in most countries (WHO 2012). In turn, such efforts correspond with political-economic attempts to reduced healthcare costs and increase opportunities for senior community involvement (cf. Stenner et al. 2011). A common feature of many such initiatives is the engagement with 'participatory-inspired' design, an umbrella term for several traditions of involving 'users' in design. These include: 'Participatory Design,' 'Cooperative Design' or 'Co-Design' as well as many other hyphenated labels such as 'User-Centred,' 'People-Centred,' 'Human-Centred' Design or 'User-Driven Innovation.' These participant-inspired design traditions tend to advocate the *injection* of 'user' perspectives and participation *into* the design process with the aim of shifting design from techno-centric to user-centric. Here participation is venerated as a beacon for more robust design (both technically and socially), and includes the attempt to base design on 'everyday' mundane practice. Moreover, especially in the Scandinavian tradition of Participatory Design, 'participants' (e.g. 'consumers,' 'customers,' 'clients,' 'citizens,' 'patients' et cetera) are represented as empowered or *active* agents, rather than *passive* research respondents. In terms of design for 'active ageing' this often translates into empowered seniors who take an active and participatory role in their healthcare design and lifestyle more generally.

Active Ageing?

Nevertheless, the figuring of 'active seniors' may emerge as problematic or even paradoxical. For instance, while participatory-inspired design aspires towards design for the 'everyday' lives of seniors, what happens in actual design practice may emerge as something different. Such initiatives

generally claim 'participatory' and 'inclusive' aspirations towards the representation of seniors-at-large. Instead, a more 'exclusive' brand of *seniorsness*—the 'active senior'—may transpire. Hence the frail and less active senior realities, often entangled with debilitating cognitive and physical challenges, may go overlooked. Such 'participatory moves' may be linked with the particular 'participatory methods' employed, which often require a certain degree of dexterity and cognitive ability with which to 'actively participate.' In addition, research 'ethics' that limit research with disabled individuals, as well as the push of dominate inter/national political-economic trends and discourses on 'active ageing' outlined above, are also implicated in the configuration of *seniorsness* as 'active.' Here then 'participation' emerges as a partial and even para-phenomenon.

These aspirations of 'active seniors' along with their paradoxical effects motivate this workshop. It aims to locate a dialogue on how participation as parasitic relations clots together, moves and transforms in practice. This includes an exploration of participatory moves as a matter of emerging perspectives situated by the particular 'apparatuses' or socio-technical relations summoned for senior healthcare research. In line with Lutz et al. (forthcoming) the intension is not to challenge the numerous initiatives that support 'active ageing' or 'independent lifestyles' *per se*. In other words, the truism that many (senior) people may feel better with self-actualized and socially integrated lives, centred by supportive home environments, is not the issue. The workshop does however echo the concern that collectively 'active senior' initiatives may tend to create aesthetic and moral 'hype' around 'active lifestyles' as the only permissible route for being senior and the implication that less active lifestyles are somehow 'wrong' or at least less attractive. Moreover, 'active' often becomes translated as 'physical activity,' which may disregard other modes of activity. Hence this workshop entertains questions about the possibility of onto-epistemological 'violence' committed against other ways of becoming senior, as well as the ramifications for older people who may experience increasing inactivity and painful difficulties to retain modest forms of activity. Broadly speaking, this is a methodological concern, or rather an 'ethico-onto-epistem-ological' one (Barad 2007), focused on the partial participatory natures as well as their perspectival agencies.

Parasites and Para-sites

This experimental workshop format takes its cue from the anthropologist George Marcus who, together with his design colleagues (namely ones at the University of California Irvine including Paul Dourish), has developed the methodological concept of 'para-site' as an experimental mode for design and ethnography (cf. Deeb and Marcus 2011; Center for Ethnography 2012). Marcus explains, 'The para-site is a surrogate for collaborative design in that at appropriate phases of a project it injects carefully staged (and designed) events like seminars in which ethnographers, research subjects, and selected others do conceptual work critical to the development of the research ...' (Marcus 2009:30). Thus Marcus' concept of 'para-site' depends on participation from 'counterparts'—e.g. colleagues and research subjects—'who offer novel, overlapping, and differential situated thought about contemporary change close to [or in] the centers of institutional power' (Marcus 2000: 9). Marcus stresses that the 'para-site' concept is really more of a pun on the term 'parasite,' which marks the work subjects do along side of institutional practices undergoing transformation. Furthermore: 'The para-site always involves a material dimension, a kind of labor, or a making of things out of the way they are supposedly otherwise given' (Marcus 2000: 7). Given this different but related connection between 'para-site' and 'parasite,' it is reasonable to consider some of the other ways the 'parasite' has been understood.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines 'parasite' as one who eats at the table of another, hence one who lives at another's expense and repays him with flattery, etc.; feeding beside. It also denotes a series of multiple host-guest relationships, most readily found in biology: those (organisms) who live in or upon another and draws nutriment directly from it; those who live as tenants of others, but not at their expense; those which depend on others in various ways for sustenance; those which grow upon others, deriving support but not nourishment from them, or which live on decaying organic matter. It is also useful to quickly note its roots: *para-* and *site*. The OED explains that 'para-' comes from of the Greek preposition, *παρά*, meaning, by the side of, beside... alongside of... as well as to one side, aside, amiss, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong; also expressing subsidiary relation,

alteration, perversion, simulation, etc. On the other hand, 'site' refers to the situated place or position occupied by some specified thing.

Marcus' 'para-site' plays on this distinction of 'near locations' or 'places beside' and stems from his earlier work on 'multi-sited' fieldwork as a method for tracing dispersed phenomena (Marcus 1995). The 'para-site' concept remains an experimental method, which resembles more 'speculative' or 'critical' design approaches. Nevertheless, while his main concern is with ethnographic experimentation, Marcus also acknowledges resonance with the French philosopher Michael Serres and his treatment of the 'parasite' (2007 [1982]). Serres' employs the term 'parasite' to figure 'posthuman' relations, or the relational becomingness of human and non-human agencies. It is important to also note that in French the term 'parasite,' beyond its social and biological connotations, also comprises the sense of noise, static or interference. In this sense, parasitic human relations produce *interference* and in Serres' reading there exists no relation without interference. [Note: Haraway (1997) and Barad (2007) use the term 'diffraction' while Strauss (1993) has coined the phrase 'continual permutations of action.'] This parasitic interference, Serres argues, drives (posthuman) relational systems by repositioning and transforming their content and meaning:

The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. ... To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have a relation with only the relation itself. ... And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite*: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. ... It has a relation to the relation, a tie to the tie; it branches onto the canal. (Serres 2007 [1982]: 38-39)

This positioning of parasitic (power) relations of course resonates with timeless expressions like McLuhan's phrase 'the medium is the message.' However Serres is less concerned with the similitude and simultaneity of 'non-relations' implied with such statements, but rather the subsidiary interferences generated on top of, in, or beside media *and* messages or channels *and* stations—the relation of the relation. Hence Serres' parasite emerges as a philosophy of relational interference and this, according Wolfe in the introduction to Serres' book, is exactly what Serres thinks of as parasitic relations, ones that 'work because they do not work':

Given the basic informational and communicational paradigm of 'two stations and a channel,' messages are exchanged, and 'if the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed.' Thus, [Serres] continues, 'Relation is nonrelation,' and if the channel that carries the message 'disappears into immediacy,' then 'there would be no spaces of transformation anywhere' (Wolf in Serres 2007 [1982]:xiv).

As a parasitic *para-site*, this workshop may be understood as located near other senior healthcare relations, in somewhat of an uncomfortable, irregular, and interfering or otherwise 'experimental' relational site. The invitation is to become one another's parasite, *feasting* on the others' interferences and diffracted perspectives on stakeholder *stakes*, counter-*parts* and partial '*participations*' *next to* senior healthcare participations. Here the link between participation and perspective becomes evident. With regards to this 'para-site' workshop, 'participation' may be considered *food* for its parasitic apparatus, which potentially generates other parasitic perspectives. The hope is that this might evolve different ways to think about participatory moves than are normally considered especially with regards to the design and ethnography of senior healthcare. Some working questions are: How might the notion of parasitic relations interfere with notions and formulations of participation in design and ethnographic research? What new forms of participatory moves emerge with parasitic interference? In turn, how do these moves interfere with or disrupt current ideas about 'active ageing,' including its technologies and policies?

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