
Can Personas Speak? Biopolitics in Design Processes

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Abstract

In this provocation, we problematize the use of personas as an interaction design method. We explore whether the use of personas within design processes prevents meaningful participation, with reference to research with third-sector organizations in the United Kingdom. Personas should help designers and developers to empathize with the people they are designing for, but we find that their use is biopolitical, turning singular experiences into static, reusable design resources. We call for a research agenda focused on the ways design processes prevent participation, encode power relations, and entrench marginalization.

CCS Concepts

- Human-centered computing~Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms
- Human-centered computing~User centered design
- Human-centered computing~Participatory design

Author Keywords

Personas; participation; biopolitics; digital civics.

Introduction

Personas are a widely established interaction design method, intended to make design processes more user-centric and used by researchers and large businesses (like Spotify [10]) alike. They enable designers and

developers to envision specific, archetypal users of their intended creation, and explore ways these users might interact with it, potentially changing the design in light of this [4]. Yet what if the use of personas actually prevents people having a voice and role in shaping a given design? Moreover, what if the use of personas actually entrenches existing hierarchies into designs?

Cooper - who initially formalized the use of personas as an interaction design method - claims personas to be goal-driven, focused on the achievement of a singular goal through the use of technology [4]. In contrast to programmers, who 'live and die by edge cases', Cooper maintains that design is 'defined at the center'. The designer then needs to empathize with these 'centered' personas [9]. However, this focus on centered composites can lead to unconvincing, static personas, without a 'sense of personal history, growth or experience' [2], and is an exclusionary mechanism which imbues designs with the same exclusion.

Previous work has similarly critiqued the form and use of personas. Marsden and Haag [8], for example, problematize personas from an intersectional feminist perspective, finding that discourses on personas risk the reproduction of existing stereotypes, or cognitive biases. The experts they interviewed stressed the need for empathy with users when using personas, but rarely reflected critically on their use of the method.

Practically applying these concerns with designers' reflexivity, Allhutter [1] proposes the mind scripting method to make participants' underlying value systems legible. Design processes then become conceptualized as situated, embodied practices that result in artefacts which materialize and reproduce hegemonic discourses. From a similar ontological starting point, we seek to

contribute to an emergent thread in design research on the biopolitics of design [6].

Biopolitics and design

Our approach blends biopolitics with Bratton's critique of the User, 'a shadowy hypothetical identity' [2] through which designers project requirements onto the fictional bodies of personas. The User embodies the normative agency in a design process, often established through the use of personas. Biopolitics – understood here as the 'processes of power that seek to regulate and control life' [7] – is made manifest through the design process by creating personas and trying to make real people behave as if they were these constructed archetypes. By doing so, personas hope to render complex experiences as static, reusable resources for design.

Biopolitics relies on the production of knowledge in a particular format about an individual or group. By defining 'legitimate' knowledge, biopolitics defines what it excludes [5, 7]. Similarly, by valuing fictional composite archetypes, certain experiences become privileged. If personas are used unreflexively, the already existing power relations in the design process can become encoded into designs.

We explore this by reference to research with third-sector organizations. In one case, a Digital Change Group within a charity created personas meant to represent the range of different practitioners within the organization. The created personas did not, however, represent the plurality of the practitioners' lived experiences. In the other case, the use of a participatory persona-creation method prevented young people being able to share their experiences openly. In



Figure 1. Example cards used within PersonaDeck.

both cases, personas prevent the meaningful sharing of peoples' lived experiences in the design process. Only by cultivating sensitively and empathetically managed moments of vulnerability within design processes can we hope to make them more specific and relevant to the lives of those we are designing with and for.

The Digital Change Group

Rocksteady, a large, national children's charity in the United Kingdom, has recently established a Digital Change Group, seeking to integrate digital technology seamlessly into the organization. We began to engage with Rocksteady as the Group started their 'discovery' process, trying to understand what staff thought and felt about the potential impact of digital technology within the organization. As part of this, they created six personas which they felt were realistic representations of staff, which were shared with the authors. For the purposes of the charity's anonymity, they cannot be shown. Yet it became clear that the use of personas cemented existing perceptions which entrenched the dominant interpretation of individuals' problems, instead of relating to the complex lived experience of Rocksteady practitioners.

One persona, for example, focused on senior practitioners in the UK's regions. This persona was identified as having frustrations with their email and being driven by a need to more effectively use technology to report back to management. This persona did not represent the concerns of Florian, a senior regional practitioner. He did not want to use technology to report back more effectively. Instead, he felt the bureaucracy mandated by senior management was little more than a justification practice, a way for

managers to appear to be doing participatory work, rather than genuinely doing so.

Other practitioners cut across personas, hybrids of everything yet represented by nothing. Angela, the co-ordinator of a major new project within Rocksteady, was one such practitioner. She was in a senior position, but her role was characterized by planning documents and large bouts of intercity travel. She was in full support of the introduction of digital technologies but wanted to know how to effectively use them. She worked face-to-face with young people frequently, but was not bound by many of the structures other face-to-face practitioners experienced.

Angela would simply be left unconsidered within a persona-based design process, in too unique a position to be designed for - yet her role was one which engaged more significantly with the role of digital technologies from a strategic perspective. In this instance, personas were used to render complex experiences fixed and knowable. The Group created personas as a way to attempt to know their user, to disambiguate them. Through this disambiguation, though, there is an exclusion: those who do not fit into these categories cannot be included within the process.

Here, we return to Bratton [3]. There was no flaw in the process followed by the Group. Instead, it is clear that personas epistemologically maintain that the results of this process are best used to create artefacts and systems best suited to the 'nuanced interests of completely fictional people following fictional scenarios' [3]. They are biopolitical because they seek to make real people fit these fictional ones, rather than vice versa. The use of Florian's persona in a given design

"I came from a big family, with a decent relationship – but space was limited so I had to move out... my confidence took a knock when I was beaten upon the Metro once. I'm good with money thanks to my family.... But I don't make good decisions under pressure, which has often got me into lots of trouble in the past."

Figure 2. Example practitioner persona.

*"Not to confident – was in a car crash when I was younger and have a big scar on my face
Sleeping well – im sleeping well because im in a routine doesnt receive benefits – because i got sanctioned"*

Figure 3. Example young person persona.

process, for example, imagines that the concerns of senior management are Florian's authentic desires, while Angela's voice is completely absent, unheard through fragments of multiple personas. Personas, then, become a justification practice, a way to signpost participation without truly doing it.

Participatory Persona Creation

Changemakers, a policy and advocacy charity for young people with experience of homelessness in a region of the United Kingdom, were interested in exploring the potentials of digital peer support. Working with them to explore the design of digital peer support systems, we developed a participatory persona creation method called PersonaDeck (shown in figure 1). PersonaDeck comprised a deck of cards with descriptions of situations on them which represented young people's support needs (as identified in previous workshops). These ranged from being unable to make 'good' decisions under pressure, to having insecure housing or feeling lonely. On one side would be a statement, and on the reverse would be its opposite.

PersonaDeck was used in a workshop with four young people and three practitioners. In the workshop, eight cards were drawn from the PersonaDeck per person to generate a persona, which participants were then encouraged to create backstories for. The personas created by practitioners were highly detailed, informed by their professional experiences (an example can be seen in figure 2). The personas created by young people, on the other hand, were much more limited in scope (as seen in figure 3). Two of the young people, however, chose not to use PersonaDeck, instead using the exercise to reflect on their own lives. One of them, April, mentioned she never had time to do this, and

think about how she might act in the future. The other, Toby, had recently moved into a supported accommodation, and the activity helped him to understand how far he had come in a short space of time.

It became clear that lacking opportunities to reflect on their lives is a significant barrier for many young people with experience of homelessness. Yet because personas force experiences into a narrow frame of knowledge, this insight would have been missed if we had insisted upon the use of personas. It becomes clear that just like the Digital Change Group, our use of personas was biopolitical, an effort to render the experiences of participants usable as a design requirement.

Conclusion

If used carefully and reflexively, it is likely possible to use personas in a positive way – perhaps as a method of eliciting participant's perceptions or lifeworlds. We question, however, if personas can be seen as an effective means of participation. Personas rarely change, and cannot speak or grow like living, breathing people. They are biopolitical, static remnants of a singular process, and always focused on filtering through design requirements.

Yet personas are just one way in which design processes can prevent participation, encode power relations, and entrench marginalization. People's lives are always complex and shifting. Personas render them static by capturing a snapshot, filtering them through the lens of design requirements, the designer's perceptions, and the capital/power dynamics of the design process. What might we understand if we applied the biopolitical lens to other methods?

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