Lifelines: Users and designers as persons in relation

Sarah Kettley [a]

There is an imbalance across design disciplines in how the user is theorised, represented and ultimately configured. It is suggested that normative user-centred design, as practiced in product design and human-computer interaction (HCI), can lead to a lack-based approach which, when applied in a health and wellbeing context, tends to align unreflexively with a medicalised view of the person. In contrast, the use of self in research is a concept well-developed in health care ethics and care professions, while the interpersonal relationship is valued and analysed in psychotherapy and counselling research and practice. Inspired by these, this article presents a discussion on the sometimes deeply relational nature of doing design with users when viewed through the lens of the Person-Centred Approach (PCA) (Rogers 1961/1967). A case study is used to illustrate an encounter of relational depth as experienced by students working directly with individuals to design prosthetics. Lifelines is a creative project brief developed by Jivan Astfalck (2008; 2011), which asks students to represent ten significant moments in their own lives through the creative use of materials and found objects. In this case, the brief was altered so that another person (the 'user') would be represented. The aim was that the student designers would experience moving beyond implicit conceptions of the user as defined by a need or perceived (dis)ability, and that the intimate and personal nature of identifying and representing significant moments would raise questions about expectations of objectivity in design and research. The case study demonstrates that working in this way can be experienced as profoundly moving, with powerful moments of personal transformation and interpersonal growth. In discussion, it is suggested that through such moments of *encounter*, it becomes possible to examine the qualities of the relational in action, and to analyse not only problematic processes of othering, but also their converse - meetings at relational depth. The Lifelines brief is proposed as a transformative way for designers to re-engage with the whole person, as both substantial (self-realising) and relational (in time, with others and the world), and as one creative exercise in a potential suite of tools for the strengthening of the "ethical reflex" necessary in Design and HCI (Vandenberghe and Slegers 2016, 514).

Keywords: user, person, relational, transformative research, representation, use-of-self, othering, Other, reflexive

Introduction: From user-centred design to relational design

There are serious concerns, based in disability scholarship and feminist theory, as to how designers can inadvertently reinforce cultural normalcies, and even actively 'other' the user, distancing "the very lives and experiences they hope to bring near" (Bennett and Rosner 2019, 2). In solution-focused design disciplines there has been a proliferation of methods and toolkits, and of broader methodologies, for representing the user at the heart of the design process, which has resulted in important nuances being lost as industry instrumentalises 'understanding' of the 'user' in the service of market-driven production (Bezaitis and Robinson 2011), while in design for wellbeing and mental health, user-centred design approaches tend to medicalise the user as patient (Kettley et al. 2017; Kettley and Lucas 2020). Design, as a worldmaking practice, "distinguishes, labels, valorizes,

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[a.] *Sarah Kettley, Professor, Chair of Material and Design Innovation at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, sarah.kettley@ed.ac.uk*

and categorizes people, institutions, codes, and norms" (Southcott and Theodore 2020, 163), and as such is inescapably political (Fry 2011, 123). Design practices should therefore be held accountable for the perpetuation or even creation of exclusions, and needs itself to develop an "ethical reflex" (Vandenberghe and Slegers 2016, 514). A recent thematic journal issue in architectural design education set out to explore othering, searching for "forms of justice" in a form of design in which the Other is not particular, but is notionally universal (Southcott and Theodore 2020, 163); this article addresses the "*particular* Other" more common in product design and HCI, who comes face-to-face with the designer sometimes through participation, but more often through abstracted representational methods during the design process.

However, the situation is rather more complex than even this picture of design would suggest. Current scholarship proposes design as an ongoing process that reaches far beyond rational problem solving, and the goal of making users' lives easier: Ontological Design and New Materialism, and Social and Technical Studies (STS) before them, view design as entangled. In this view, things, technologies and persons are co-defined through emergent performances (most obviously of use). *Intra-action* has been introduced as a term to capture this relational co-constitution, in contrast with *interaction,* which does not adequately include a sense of transformation through such encounters (Barad 2007, 128). There is a need therefore to examine the user as Other not only within the popular problem-solution idea of Design, but within this rather more complex scenario of radically relational ontologies of humans, more than humans and technologies.

This paper suggests that through the lens of *encounter*, design can move closer to working with the ethics and politics of the relational and of intra-action, and begin to do the necessary reflective work on its colonialising tendencies. The concept of encounter draws on decades of scholarship in psychotherapeutic practice and research, complementing contemporary critiques which draw largely on feminist theory, disability studies and clinical psychology. In the case study presented here, theories have been sought particularly in the literature of the Person-Centred Approach, a humanistic modality in psychotherapeutic practice[1].

The interpersonal relationship – encounter and experiences of relational depth

Explicitly adding the relational to the characterisation of the user-as-person opens up the possibility for a new form of design, which requires in turn a commitment to reflexivity and acceptance of personal growth on the part of the designer.

This is because the relational involves not only the individual, but also those others they find themselves in relationships with. In all forms of participatory design, this relational aspect of design methodology is proving remarkable; researchers report on the emotional challenges in working in complex and sensitive research areas (Chancellor et al. 2019; Moncur 2013), the need to decompress after working with vulnerable teenagers (Bell and Lee-Perella 2016), and powerful feelings of being moved by participants' openness in wellbeing and disability projects (Shercliffe and Twigger-Holroyd 2020). Like playing tennis against a wall, I need to be prepared for the return when I show any readiness to engage fully with participants; as Lambers says, "The more we are willing to be fully engaged in the relationship…the more likely it is we will be affected by them, changed by them, challenged by them" (2013, 127).

It is clear that the designer in these situations is in relation with the user/participant, and therefore, the designer needs to be prepared to enter into relationship in a way that fully respects both. In some cases, moments in relation

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[1] The interested reader might find the output of the independent mental health publisher, PCCS Books, useful here:
https://www.pccs-books.co.uk/

are experienced very powerfully, as transformative, and to describe these, the concept of relational depth has been introduced. Mearns and Cooper defined this as "[a] state of profound contact and engagement between two people, in which each person is fully real with the Other, and able to understand and value the Other's experiences at a high level" (2005, xi). Schmid holds that for such an 'encounter relationship' to occur, I cannot "simply meet and understand the experience of another person through me and my experiences", nor "draw conclusions from the way in which I experience the other person or understand their experiences, thus putting them into my categories". Instead, I should "open up to what the Other is going to disclose and wants to be understood" (2013, 160).

Such encounters seem to happen when the practitioner (the therapist and, as I will argue, also the designer/design researcher) brings "one own's self" to the relationship (Knox 2103, 34), and is present beyond merely technique-oriented behaviour (Schmid 2013, 168-169). The Person-Centred modality of psychotherapy instead emphasises the development of attitude over a 'toolbox' approach, based on conditions of non-directivity, full acceptance of the Other, and presence (Schmid 2013, 168-169). To be a non-directive designer may feel counter-intuitive, even radical, after all, "all design is directional" (Fry 2011, 210); this will take work. To be a non-directive design researcher may mean nothing short of an epistemological paradigm change (Finlay and Evans 2009; Schmid 2013, 160). To be fully accepting and receptive of the Other also takes work; I need to attend to my own 'developmental agenda' (Mearns and Cooper 2005, 136), and to be aware of myself as a person who is in turn relational as well as substantial (Peron and Braud 2011, 305; Schmid 2013). To be present as designer or researcher involves my "endeavouring to be: (i) bodily and emotionally engaged; (ii) receptive; and (iii) transparent" (Finlay and Evans 2009, 108-109); I need to be attuned and accepting of my substantial self and present this openly in the unfolding encounter. This takes significant work on the self, and not a little bravery. Indeed, the resilience, openness and flexibility inherent in this way of being might be seen as characteristic of Rogers' sixth stage (of seven) of psychological change, a "process by which an individual changes from fixity to flowingness" (1961, 132).

While this paper discusses the Lifelines brief as a way for designers to approach the user as person (as Other), it was originally devised as a way for students to explore themselves as persons (Astfalck 2008, 2011), and this suggests further directions for research into this exercise as a creative method for relational design.

The Lifelines Brief

Inspired by Astfalck's accounts of a project originally intended to introduce undergraduate students to critical theory in a non-threatening way (2008, 2011), the author adapted the Lifelines brief for use with two distinct cohorts of students. Astfalck's approach was to instruct students to read a section of Levi-Strauss' *Myth and Meaning* (1986), in order to be better able to "position their work with reference to diverse social, cultural and interpretative issues" (2008, 77). The project was intended as an experiential learning process that would allow for theoretically informed discussion on the students' material representations of elements of personal and collective mythologies.

In Astfalck's brief, students produce ten small pieces, or 'mythemes', attached at regular intervals to a 'lifeline', a string, provided by the tutor. All completed strings are hung alongside each other as an installation. The review takes the form of a group discussion about the emergent themes in the completed installation, focusing on concepts of narrative, representation, identity and myth. Students are asked to identify 10 significant points, situations, stories or concerns from their own lives, representative of themselves as a person, and related to their own sense of identity. These objects are 'mythemes' (after Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of common components in human mythology). Students are asked to investigate creatively how their own mythemes influenced their attitudes

towards partnerships, families, learning communities, and national communities. The produced objects should measure no more than approximately 7.5cm x 7.5cm x7.5cm, and any materials are allowable. The questions for discussion can be included in a printed project handout: Are there underlying patterns of identity common to all humanity? What role do objects and jewellery play in the construction, representation and mythology of the self? How 'free' are people to present themselves as they wish? Is identity determined through relations with others? What are the implications when, as designers, we represent other people in the design process? Do we think through objects or making? How do they communicate, if at all? How far do we accept psychoanalytical interpretations of our own mythemes, and what does this mean for our understanding of others? (Astfalck 2008; 2011). Whereas the original brief asks student designers and makers to reflect on the poetic representation of their own identity, the author's research is concerned with how designers might represent *others* as whole persons, particularly as design engages with health and wellbeing.

Representing the Other as a whole person in design – adapting the Lifelines brief

The author was invited to deliver a masterclass to an interdisciplinary cohort of 3rd year undergraduate students at the Design School Kolding (Denmark) in 2017. Students were enrolled on an exploratory Welfare Design course (Møller and Bush 2018), and the faculty (including doctoral researchers) were interested in discussions around Person-Centred Approaches to design being co-developed by the author (Kettley et al. 2017). Welfare Design was a response to industry need; the students were working with Sahva, a large and well-established family-run business specialising in prosthetic and orthotic design[2]. In addition to the eight full-time students, the group included placement and exchange students of different levels from Scotland, Korea and Japan. The students, working in small groups of two or three, had already begun working with individual participant prosthesis wearers recruited by Sahva, and they had met their participants the week before, conducting initial research interviews intended to drive a user-centred design process for personalised prosthetics. The modified Lifelines brief was introduced as an intervention, in which the learning outcomes included critical reflection on the ways in which Welfare Design represents individuals and their experiences.

Students had two full days to respond, using found objects and ready-mades to create ten 'mythemes' in collaboration with, or in response to their participant. A discussion was held at the end of day two in an open space in the Design School, with tutors and the student cohort viewing the completed Lifelines installation (Figure 1).

This paper focusses on one student team's encounter with and representation of a participant as a whole person as part of a longer design process. It reflects on the design students' encounter with Per (their participant), and their experiences in meeting him as Other (Buber 1937; Schmid 2013). It does not attempt to account for the experiences of the participant of the encounter, other than through the narrative of the students' experience. Before we continue, it is important to take a moment to discuss the ethics of this work, and the framing of it as research.

Relational ethics as a network of responsibility

The encounter took place in November 2017, and it has been drafted as a paper twice between then and this version. Those drafts framed the encounter and Lifelines brief as a reflection on learning and teaching, and were not published. This paper, in contrast, focuses on the encounter itself and characterises it as one of relational depth according to the Person-Centred literature.

The work was not originally framed as research, but as an experiential learning and teaching exercise for students engaging with design participants, based on an observation that design shares some of the Person-Centred

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[2] http://www.sahva.dk/

Approach's concerns with the relational and the person, and that these could be developed further. It was therefore not organised in terms of the normal stages of a research project, with a pre-research phase, data gathering, analysis and dissemination in the usual sense (Finlay and Evans 2009, 160). Rather, it has emerged as research, as a heuristic moment of crystallisation (Bezaitis and Robinson 2011), of a theme coming into conscious awareness for the first author, and developing into a whole (Sela-Smith 2002, 8-9).

Despite this, data exists in the form of the objects (the Lifeline) created by the students (which were photographed), and of the narrative related by them after their encounter. Kettley's writing up of this narrative represents the data used for this paper, in addition to photographs of the objects intended to represent Per. These notes were typed up as a narrative within two days and sent back to the students to check for accuracy; this is reproduced without changes in the section 'The encounter narrative: Frederikke, Mondo and Per' below. Frederikke and Mondo had also recorded an interview with Per the week before this encounter, towards designing for him, but this does not play a direct role in the research discussed here.

The analysis is heuristic, that is, reflective; noticing is important both in the original telling of the narrative, and in its recorded versions (use of language, emotion conveyed, attitudes enacted). This heuristic process is Kettley's, in the bringing together of the PCA and the narrative of this encounter, but has been verified for accuracy of representation by Frederikke as key protagonist in the original encounter.

Although not originally framed as research, this paper nevertheless now constitutes a research outcome, and so questions need to be asked regarding the appropriate ethical approach at this point. There are inevitable power inequalities (Finlay and Evans 2009, 164): Kettley is instigating this publication, as an instantiation of her academic research into the relational in design. She is in a permanent academic position and is incentivised to produce research outputs. She is reflecting on an encounter which she in part facilitated, but in which she played no primary role, and she stands to gain professionally from doing so. She feels "profoundly touched" by the research (Finlay and Evans 2009, 160), but this in itself does not constitute duty of care. Personal emotional data is being made public about three people in relation: whose consent is needed? How ethical is it to ask each of the students, and the design participant, to revisit the encounter more than two years on? Does it do more harm than good? The design participant is a splints wearer, and the encounter was oriented around efforts at representation of him as a whole person. Is it not the task of this research paper now to represent all involved as whole persons? As such, and at the very least, should all of these people be anonymised? Or is this an erasure that challenges the very aim of the relational approach?

In asking these questions, I[3] am acting 'from my heart and my mind' (Ellis 2007, 3), responding to the feeling that while not traumatic, the encounter was experienced by the students as a shock. Their emotional reaction was (positively) powerful, and shook the foundations of their design practice. In their turn, they had worked hard to encounter Per as a *person* (in Schmid's use of the term, 2013, 158) who had lived through physical and psychological trauma, in the form of the stroke that had led to his losing the use of a leg, and his emotional reaction to this frank openness to *meeting* (in Buber's sense of the word, 2013, 9) was similarly powerful.

These questions are an example of the ethical complexities thrown up in relational research, which in practice, "brings up context-specific ethical uncertainties and challenges" (Finlay and Molano-Fisher 2009, cited in Finlay and Evans 2009, 159). An ethical path needs to be negotiated for this publication, as the final stage in my research, and the potential impact and imbalances of power need to be critically examined (Finlay and Evans 2099, 159-160).

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[3] The first person is used intermittently throughout this paper where appropriate for the use-of-self in research approach being discussed. It is used to indicate individual responsibility within the research process, as well as personal moments of transformation.

Duty of care means I need to ensure the safety of the co-researchers/participants in this process: "[r]elational research often taps sensitive material and can be emotionally intense to experience…co-researchers may feel exposed and vulnerable while the experience of re-telling their stories has the potential to retraumatize them" (Finlay and Evans 2009, 164).

As such, these are not decisions that can be made by myself, the first author, alone. Rather, there is a potential chain, or a network of relations that each involve responsibility to the Other. I was not a part of the encounter being reported, and in trying to "deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with…research participants over time" (Ellis 2007, 4), my approach has been to try and track down the two students. Frederikke in turn reconnected with Per, but none of us have been able to find Mondo since she left the college. As a result, her full name is not disclosed here, and while the paper centres on an account given by both students, Frederikke emerges as the key protagonist, and it is her encounter with Per that we focus on. When Frederikke re-established contact with Per, he confirmed that he *"wanted to be represented as much as possible as himself in the article"* (and we use his real name). He expressed his happiness that the project was going further, and said *"[i]f you ever get the opportunity to help others, you will do it, you know"*. Frederikke feels that the ten objects on a string acts as a strong shared reference point for her and Per now, and that they were quickly able to tune in to each other again through them; on asking Per directly about the mechanics of his splint, he *"jumped back into the sensory conversation they had from the objects and told Frederikke about the spot and the tattoo, and referred to the problems he still had with that"* (all quotations are from personal communication with Frederikke in April 2020). The following section gives the narrative as agreed by Frederikke, and is followed by a discussion of the encounter experienced by Frederikke and Per as having relational depth.

Figure 1: completed Lifelines installation and discussion, Design School Kolding
Source: generated by the author

The encounter narrative: Frederikke, Mondo and Per

This section reports on one student group, a pair, Frederikke and Mondo, and their participant, Per. In this case, the students developed the ten Lifelines objects without Per on the first day of the project, as they knew he would

not be available until later in the week. They based the forms of the 'mythemes' on the interactions they had had with him the week before, including a recorded interview. On the Thursday following the two-day Lifelines project (and having already presented Per's Lifeline to the student group and tutors, Figure 1), they invited Per into the School of Design to have lunch with them. Before they met, I asked them how it would feel to show him the objects - their representation of him. They quickly experienced the responsibility of fully doing justice to Per as a person, and found the idea terrifying. Nevertheless, they took the string of objects to lunch with them on the Thursday. After getting food, they put the pile of objects on the table, *"starting with the easy ones"* (a bundle of accurately cut wires, a heavy metal bolt) (Figure 2), they asked if Per could see what they had been doing, what the objects might be about. *"It's me!"* he said.

Figure 2: student-produced Lifeline of objects representing design participant Per
Source: generated by the author

Several of the objects allowed them to talk about Per's interests without the topic being emotional in itself – he has a love of engineering and precision, and enjoys high-end cars and audio brands that share these values. He listens to heavy metal music, and loves his family. He elaborated on the information the girls already had, telling them he listened to classical music as well. Using the objects allowed them to talk about Per together, without it feeling intrusive, as if they weren't talking about him. The girls' own anxiety about sharing the objects seemed to create a more level power dynamic between them and Per as participant.

The graphic representation of a body with one side dangling (Figure 3) led Per to give an account of the incident 2 ½ years before, that led to his leg being amputated. At this point he became emotional, describing the traumatic event as a movie that played every day behind his eyes. He described how his sense of his centre line has shifted to one side. He wept.

This encounter took place in the large open public space of the Design School canteen, in both English and Danish. Frederikke reported that the more nuanced emotional exchange took place in Danish between herself and Per, as their shared first language. Mondo's first language is Korean. Both students felt that the public, but convivial nature of the space provided some safety for Per, which might not have been experienced in a one-to-one interview, and that this enabled him to show emotion. At intense moments he was able to look around the interesting space and comment on it: *"you have nice windows here"*. Frederikke said she felt emotional too but didn't want to cry in front of him. Mondo said she felt *"so sad"*.

Figure 3: Lifeline object: compromised body
Source: generated by the author

After this, they looked at the representation of the tattoo on the back of Per's knee, a single ink dot that helps him to effectively place an electronic device, which helps his reflex to react when he bends his knee, helping him to walk with his splint. The students were keen to understand more about how this tattoo had come about, and whether it had been Per's choice. He revealed that he actually had many other tattoos on his back and shoulders, and talked about his decision to get the dot despite his consultant's advice (it was possible that the act of tattooing in that spot could have adversely affected the action of the prosthesis). It had proved technically successful however, and

this tattoo had a different role to the others for him. This led directly into an animated session of unplanned co-design. The girls asked Per what he would like them to design for him – a lamp. Between them, drawings emerged for a *"cool"* lamp that reflected Per's personality. He then began to make suggestions for improving his existing prosthesis. When the girls drew what he was describing, he said *"no, you're not doing it well enough",* and took the pen to draw with them. Drawing was used by all three on the same paper, to share concepts and check understanding. Per also began to reimagine the canteen space, saying that the pillars were so straight and boring: *"they just hang there, when they could be so useful and interesting. They could curve to create seating surfaces".* The girls were amazed – he appeared to be speaking about his own body without realising it. This interaction was also emotional. Per said that no-one else had ever listened seriously to his ideas, which he had had ever since his accident: *"he saw someone he didn't know understanding him"*. He was excited and happy. The students couldn't believe how creative he was. Towards the end of the meeting, Frederikke showed Per the object they found more difficult to share, the "*solid ball of happiness*", which he recognised as himself, and she thanked him for sharing his flaws with them, as of course no-one can really be as perfect as that ball (Figure 4).

On return to the studio that afternoon, Frederikke and Mondo separately related the story of their lunchtime encounter with Per; Frederikke had been so moved, she wept openly. She sensed something had changed profoundly in the relationship between them all, and she sensed the full force of Per's humanity.

Figure 4: the solid ball of happiness – a flawless Per?
Source: generated by the author

The encounter (the ontic experience)

Schmid points out the difference between the ontic relational experience, that is, moments that are described as 'an' experience, and having particular qualities, and the broader relational situation which appears to allow it to come into being (Schmid 2013, 168-169). O'Leary tells us what it might feel like to experience such an encounter at relational depth: "one of the most common features here was a sense of aliveness: a feeling of energy; exhilaration, empowerment and revitalization, often with a heightened awareness and a greater perceptual clarity" (2006, 229); physical sensations are also reported, such as "electrifying or tingly feelings, and a level of emotional intensity" (Cooper 2013, 68-69). Others have developed scales to quantify the depth of encounter experiences (Wiggins 2013), however, given the nature of the written account of the event here, I here choose to use Knox's proposition that the ontic experience is not one moment in particular, but "a moment-by-moment process of action" (2013, 34), a

flow of experiencing that becomes an event (Figure 5). The following section goes on to discuss how the students' attitude appeared to offer a relational situation (ontology), playing an important part in the emergence of this encounter. In this discussion, it will be seen that the roles of client (Per) and practitioner (the students) blurs and moves back and forth; the paper is concerned with the experience of the students, but their experience does not seem to be entirely separate from Per's, instead they support and hold each other in turn.

The first of Knox's observed steps is one of *slowing down*, involving the opportunity and invitation to meet as persons. In the design research environment, what a therapist would individually be offering might be helpfully expanded to what the project or institution offers; Light for example, talks about the quality of this moment of recruitment of participants to the research process as setting an important scene for dialogue (2018). Knox further points out the importance of attitude at all times: "[a]t such moments, the therapist's every move would seem to be under scrutiny by the client, with any indication that the therapist is reacting unhelpfully, not understanding, or not accepting of the client or their material being enough to stop the client in their tracks" (2013, 35). Firstly, I suggest that the students' making of the Lifelines objects can be seen as an invitation to slow down and engage fully with Per following their recorded interview from the previous week. They then invite him into the convivial, light and open space of the design school for lunch.

There is a feeling of vulnerability on the part of the students, as they reveal the pile of objects on the table – how will Per react to their representation of him? He is in turn open, saying *"it's me!"*.
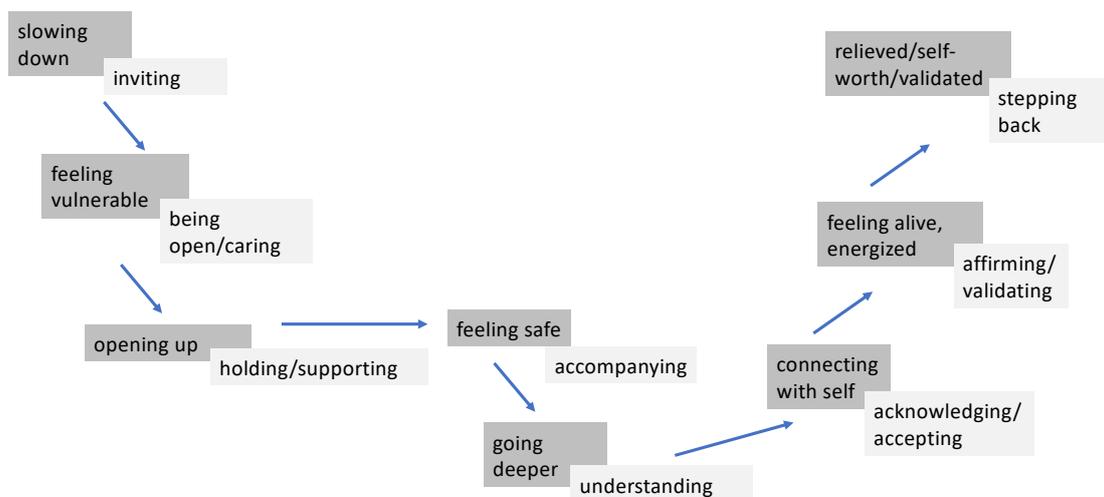

Figure 5: Client and therapist interactional moment-by-moment process (dark rectangle denote client, pale denote practitioner)
Source: redrawn by the author from Knox (2013, 34) (reproduced with permission)

The written account of the meeting places quite a lot of emphasis on the safety of the environment, and the students' care for Per's feelings of safety (*opening up and feeling safe*), and objects are selected to allow the initial conversation to circle around safer, less emotive topics, described by the students as "creating a level power dynamic", and *holding and accompanying him*. Very quickly, the graphic representation of the imbalanced body leads to a *deeper* encounter in which Per describes and experiences his emotions openly, and the students relate that he sees "someone he didn't know *understanding* him". In feeling *acknowledged and accepted*, there follows an open connection in which his attitude to his prosthesis is talked about candidly, and in *validating* Per's creative

approach (his decision to have a tattoo on the back of his knee), a hugely *creative, energetic* moment of co-design occurs in which all three are *empowered* to share and critique design concepts. At the end, there is a further moment of vulnerability on the part of the students, when they feel more able to share the problematic ('triumphant') solid ball of happiness, and there was *relief* and thankfulness – a *validation* of the students' attitude and commitment to this meeting. I would also suggest that the students felt intense relief, self-worth and validation again when relating the encounter to myself and other tutors afterwards.

If Knox's moment-by-moment process model can be used to demonstrate that an encounter may be described as one of relational depth, then it is clear that this encounter between Frederikke, Mondo and Per was indeed such an encounter.

I further suggest that at the moment of connection with the self, after the moment of depth, there is change in the client/participant. Were we to continue designing for 'need', this might be the point at which the brief needs to change also, as the 'real problem' emerges (Fry 2011). It therefore suggests that as designers and design researchers in relation, there is a choice in following through with a standard User-Centred-Design approach (understanding the user to inform expert-led design solutions), or to follow a non-directive design route; that is, from designing for a continuation of inequality (design *for*) to designing for what the client sees as a facilitative, supportive outcome rather than a technical solution alone (design *with*).

Attitude as relational ontology: Bringing the self and encountering the person as Other

Schmid is at pains to explicate the 'person' at the heart of Rogers' Person-Centred Approach. In this view, a person is "human as a substantial-relational being", simultaneously combining "both the uniqueness and capabilities of the individual, and the unavoidable connectedness of the individual-in-relationship" (Schmid 2013, 158). There is no either/or here, rather an acceptance of 'both-and'; the person is constituted by dialogue between autonomy and the relational.

All too often, we meet the other on our own terms of reference (Buber 1937; Sanders 2007); in contrast, this approach seeks to allow the Otherness of the person to flourish on their own terms, offering a countering relationship to facilitate this. Mearns and Cooper (2005) and Schmid (Schmid 2013, 164) describe this way of understanding the encounter as "being with and counter" the person. While their discussion concerns the client in therapeutic encounter, this paper proposes that this literature (and practice) offer a valuable approach to encountering the participant in design, answering Bezaitis and Robinson's concerns with the ways in which ethnographic practices are at risk of instrumental commodification in scaled-up institutional user-centred processes (2011).

The Lifelines brief as a tool, appears to support such encounters through "imagination in the service of empathy", a phrase used by O'Leary to outline what he gains from returning to Rogers' "consistent legacy of words" (2006, 230). He outlines five qualities from this legacy that may encourage and inspire practitioners, these being: *congruence, commitment, confidence, imagination* and *generosity*.

Congruence describes the presence of the authentic person in relation, that is, an individual open to their own experiencing in the moment, and genuine in their expression and communication of this. In expressing their anxiety and by saying *"I feel so bad for you"*, the students in this case were congruent. They demonstrated a genuine empathic attitude and a willingness to listen without judgement, accepting Per's accounts of himself and his experiences. The objects helped the students communicate their own creative processes and learning (their internal frames of reference), and their concern over the 'solid ball of happiness' was a congruent awareness of its potential for being read as a stereotypical representation of Per's story as one of "triumph over tragedy" (Cook and

Pullin 2020, 130-131). Per in turn experienced their congruence, and their unconditional positive regard for him, and felt understood and prized for his own attitude to life, and for his creativity; "*He saw someone he didn't know understanding him*". This opened the floodgates for his collaborative redesign of his prosthesis, of the pillars in the dining hall, and of the lamp he desired. He stated he had not been listened to like this by any other care professional.

The students showed *commitment* and congruence in putting themselves in a position of vulnerability, "suddenly feeling afraid of their own emotions", and of feeling transparent not only to Per, but also in relating the encounter afterwards (Knox 2013, 23). Their fear at revealing how they saw Per through the string of objects was founded in respect for him, and they were acutely aware that they were inviting him to make a decision about entering into this encounter with them, to experience and stay with his own vulnerability. As Knox says, the client is often the person who makes the decision at this point to make the leap into the relational encounter, trusting in the "safety net" provided by the practitioner (Knox 2013, 24-31). Commitment is also demonstrated by a sense of "something 'over and above'" what would be expected from "someone in a professional role" (Knox 2013, 25; O'Leary 2006, 231), and it may be that the objects were experienced as a commitment to meeting in full. The students were then very aware of how the environment supported feelings of safety, and were able to hold that space for the encounter to fully unfold.

Their *imaginative* engagement was made explicit in the development of the ten Lifelines objects, which seemed to open up the potential for further, shared, imaginative interaction, and the conditions for Per's creative contribution. His confidence in challenging the design students' efforts was felt by them as an emergence of the real person in relation with them, and they were delighted and moved. Generosity was experienced on both sides, in the unfolding presence of each person in relation.

Personal growth as an aspect of design researcher development

Given the potential for personal impact and transformation, it may be worth students being introduced to integrated models of research. Braud points out that usually, "…research, practical work with clients, and the researcher's own personal and psycho-spiritual growth and development are considered quite distinct and are deliberately kept separate in practice" (2011, 89). In contrast, an openness to the relational in design research may "…simultaneously provide opportunities for knowledge gain for the discipline...benefits for the research participants; and psycho-spiritual growth and the possibility of transformative change for the researcher (and also for the research participants and for the eventual readers of the research report)" (Braud 2011, 71).
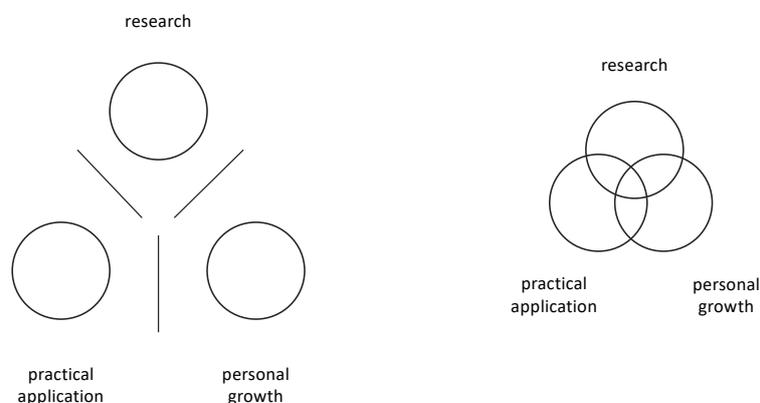

Figure 6: Braud's model of an integrative approach to research
Source: redrawn by the author from Braud (2011, 89) (reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLScle)

Frederikke's experience, and for many, the experience of reading her account of her relational encounter with Per, illustrate a type of relational experience that many participant-research practitioners in design are still struggling to articulate, or do not reflect on in their research and participatory practices. Others account fully for this as an aspect of participatory design research, but perhaps without situating in a wider context, such as that provided by Braud (2011) (Figure 6). While in design research there are examples of researcher transformation, such transformation is rarely a goal; current incentivisation of research tends to favour impact on a field through "disciplined inquiry" (Braud 2011, 90), and its resulting intellectual declarative knowledge (Niedderer and Townsend 2014); impact on the participating researchers seems currently undervalued. Arguably, given the reach of design in framing everyday lives, and its growing role in systemic, political and infrastructural processes (Fry 2011), as designers we have a responsibility to examine the potential for our own personal growth, as the foundation for our subsequent actions in and on the world, while being able to situate powerful experiences within a research framework.

It is, however, also important to note that encounters of such relational depth are rare and do not need to constitute the goal of relational work. This encounter was experienced at unique depth and while other students working with the Lifelines brief and participant individuals commented on relational aspects of their projects, many found it difficult to see the whole person, stating a desire to move past limb loss as the defining characteristic, while continuing to make this object first, and placing it at the top of their lines of ten objects. Many of the students were not ready to hear their participants' personal disclosures, and jumped straight to 'solutions' instead of attempting to represent the person; furthermore, few focused on significant moments in their participant's life, instead generalising their perception of the person's mindset, and organising their representations around a coherent 'theme', such as strategies for time management.

For students more often trained in objective and transactional or instrumental approaches, or in implicitly psychodynamically interpretative or cognitive-behaviourally oriented design methods for 'understanding the user', the relational encounter challenges the normative fundamentals of their discipline, demanding a "far-reaching epistemological paradigm change" (Schmid 2013, 160). Such a challenge can be threatening, and requires students (and staff) to be operating at a high level of personal congruence to be able to respond confidently and without distrust.

Frederikke has spoken about this project and her encounter with Per as a transformational moment in her design practice, going on to explore the sensory as a meeting place in participatory design as part of her Masters study at the Design School, Kolding (and since then in securing her first professional appointment as a designer).

It is therefore suggested that the Lifelines brief may be used in its original form with students reflecting on their own identities, in combination with its use as an introduction to meeting users as persons. In this way it offers both a pragmatic and a transformational act in making the politics of design "invitational" and "relationally connected" (Fry 2011, 13), and can support an understanding of the person-centred in design as more than "self-realization as a negation of 'beings together'" (Fry 2011, 123).

Concluding remarks

While the Lifelines brief is just one creative exercise, it can be seen as a way of examining the qualities of encounter within an expanded, ontological view of Design, and as a way of introducing students to alternative modalities and philosophies of the person. This is particularly important in light of calls to examine the limitations of empathy in HCI (Bennett and Rosner 2019), and in response to the need for a more informed reflexive capacity as set out in

the introduction. As such it helps to orient Design towards being-with persons, rather than 'understanding' users, and tends towards the lifeworld (Wong et al. 2020), praxes of care (Latour 2008; Key et al. 2021), and designing contexts to support embodied participatory sensemaking (Jaasma et al. 2017), rather than the reductive goal of the 'killer app', as critiqued by Abowd and Mynatt in 2000. Furthermore, the attention paid to philosophies of the person by the Human-Computer Interaction literature to date tends to understand these as applicable only in therapeutic engagement, rather than as fundamental to research, even when research is directly engaged with individuals (Thieme et al. 2020). It is hoped this study illustrates how modality (in this case the Person-Centred Approach) informs research at all levels (Kettley et al. 2017; Kettley and Lucas 2020), most obviously at the level of interactional qualities between designers and participants, but also at the level of the philosophical framework of research.

The paper does not make claims for the Lifelines exercise as an efficient or the most effective way to achieve this, but rather, observes the impact of it on one participatory design team, and explores one aspect of relevant theory as a result. Further research could therefore include a scientific study of the Lifelines brief across cohorts, and could explore further the drawbacks in certain settings (for example with cohorts whose cultures would not normally encourage the sharing of significant moments). It is also suggested that the brief might not sit alone but form part of a suite of experiential exercises that could work together to help Design and HCI students reflect on the relational in their design methods, their personal research philosophies, and in the creative outputs they develop. A contemporary European project attempts to do something similar through the use of prompt cards to develop young designers' future literacies[4], while the author is involved in collaborative curriculum development and delivery that explores aspects such as 'therapeutic intent'[5], and 'phronesis'[6] in creative practice. This last will include the Lifelines brief alongside activities drawn from Fuel4Design, and exercises for thinking through the ethics of 'interventive' designs and technologies, also framed by the psychotherapy literature (Warner 2000). In this way, it is hoped the Lifelines brief may become part of wider education practices with Design and HCI students, in the pursuit of scaling up thoughtful, radically careful, design cultures through education (Fry 2011; Latour 2008; Löwgren and Stolterman 2007).

Acknowledgements

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[4] http://www.fuel4design.org
[5] in the *Film Medicine* course run by Amy Hardie at Edinburgh College of Art.
[6] in *Wise Innovation*, a course in development for master's students at the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

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