

Participatory design and feminist interventions. Emancipatory potentials of public engagement.

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When I prepared this talk, I was in a constant struggle between enthusiasm, resignation and despair. At several moments I thought about giving it up and staying at home. But then again the encouragement of friends and colleagues drove me back to my notebook and into the mood of thinking it all through. This might sound like an unusually banal opening of a conference presentation. But I think this is important and symptomatic for critically engaged, reflective research in diverse areas. In my case it is bound to my own hovering between computer science, STS, feminist theory and gender studies. It is also bound to my own thrive for a more just science and society. I would further argue that this is due to an incompatibility between critical ethico-onto-epistemological demands on research practices – most notably brought forth by the diverse work in feminist epistemology – and actually existing research environments. Of course this is also nothing new and basically the whole field of STS was brought into being by such incompatibilities. Therefore I want to take off with the following quote from Ludwick Fleck, published in 1935:

“I consider the postulate 'to maximize experience' the supreme law of scientific thinking. Thus, once the possibility of such comparative epistemology arises, it becomes a duty to carry it out.”
(Fleck 1979, 51)

Fleck based this postulate on his empirical observations which led to his theoretical concepts of thought styles and thought collectives – something that may be to some extent just as well read as situated knowledges. So I interpret this as a demand to practically implement what feminist standpoint epistemology and frameworks like *strong objectivity* or *situated knowledges* have constantly indicated in theory from the 1970ies onwards. As most of you might have already noticed I am referring especially to works by Sandra Harding (1993), Donna Haraway (1991) and Karen Barad (2007), nevertheless not forgetting all the other engaged researchers and activists shaping the discourses, and the encouragement given by friends and colleagues, that helped to bring along those insights. The common denominator in all this is the acknowledgement that different social positions bring privileges

to different perspectives, and different *things* – in its multiple meanings – which we encounter, perceive, attend and facilitate. And with all the critical reflections through the last decades of feminist theory the above quote from Fleck transforms into Donna Haraway's often cited and still unanswered question

“how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.” (Haraway 1991, 187)

So, despite all this work, why do I, and I suppose, why do we all still have to struggle when we try to implement such responsible research practices? According to Susan Hekman's (1997) revision of feminist standpoint theory this might be due to finding ourselves at an early phase of a new paradigm shift in technoscientific theory and practice. As with every paradigm shift, we may look onto the so far marginalized practices, which constitute the paradigm shifting practices vis-a-vis normal science – in Thomas Kuhn's (1996) terms, again reminding on Fleck. While normal science is represented by most of our actually existing research environments that hold the grounds for our struggling, I wanted to look towards Participatory Design, to perhaps find some examples of how it could be otherwise.

What is Participatory Design?

In a very general sense this is answered most recently in the *Design Issues* journal by participatory design researchers themselves:

“At the core of Participatory Design is the direct involvement of people in the co-design of tools, products, environments, businesses, and social institutions.” (Robertson and Simonsen 2012, 3)

Participatory Design is a highly inter-, multi- and in the end trans-disciplinary research field, emerging out of computer science and the Scandinavian approach to systems-design. While we could look onto this field from an STS perspective, this would be misleading as Participatory Design is itself facilitating STS research. I think in looking towards Participatory Design from an STS perspective means much more to engage ourselves in such mailboat conversations as performed in yesterday's keynote. As our collective designer told us there, Participatory Design is “a marginalized utopian approach, enacted at the cornerstones of neoliberal user-driven design.”

While we have collected a lot of good reasons in STS to become skeptical of many fancy versions of “participation” and “public engagement”, the collective designers in Participatory Design are struggling with similar problems and they are looking for material solutions. One aspect of this struggling comes to the fore when focusing on the power involved in every technoscientific design. I paraphrase Ina Wagner's and Tone Bratteteig's definition of Participatory Design, presented at this years Participatory Design Conference in Roskilde:

“Design is decision making, is the exercise of power. Participatory Design is the sharing of this power with participants and users.”

By the way, this was just two months ago and only around 30 kilometers from here, which by chance symbolizes also the spatio-temporal entanglements of STS and PD.

But what are the motives to facilitate participatory design processes? In such motives the political impetus and aspirations are hedged. As one of the more experienced participatory design researchers in my interview sample has put, the reason to facilitate the participation of publics in technoscientific development is simple:

“Better systems. I think this is a rather simple answer. To just develop systems that are really supporting their users. (...) What are better systems? Here we probably would say that this is only exposed in the use situation. Of course then value questions will be exposed.” (I2 R.14)

On the developer or the technologist side this seems to resemble what feminist epistemologies have formulated for the knowledge produced by scientists. As Donna Haraway said,

“[Our] goal is better accounts of the world, that is, 'science'” (Haraway 1991, 196)

Participatory Design functions as a translation tool between situated knowledges and practices. For my interview partner a core component of Participatory Design is to make different perspectives visible and negotiable:

“First of all the different perspectives of the participants have to be negotiated. Because those are not per se compatible from the start. So, it is about developing a common view, or to develop something where different views have place.” (I2 R.10)

In one exemplary project the developed technology becomes itself a facilitator of participatory processes. The development of such technology necessarily involves focusing on marginalized users' needs. In a report on this project the Participatory Design researchers write: “The [design artefact] provides a space for ‘mixing realities’ that can be viewed and evaluated together.” (Wagner et al. 2009, 193) In this case they primarily refer to the different layers of information that can be arranged and coordinated through the tools by the participants. But through this participatory coordination not only the virtual and projected realities are entwined with the local space, ore more generally the specific spatio-temporal configuration at hand. What gets mixed, or at least visible and negotiable are the different life realities of the participants.

Conclusions

While it would be necessary to follow around several collective designers to shed more light on emancipatory potentials and limits of participatory design practices and feminist interventions, I here can present you only my general conclusions, highlighted in the following points. I hope that some of these inspire others to find new ways out of actually existing research strains:

- Feminist epistemology is an important starting point for both, the development of technoscientific artefacts and our STS reflections upon these processes.
- *Participatory Design* brings together those different perspectives and implements and experiments with socially responsible research practices. It partly fulfills those demands which feminist epistemologies have formulated theoretically.
- As a marginalized approach Participatory Design struggles in doing so. This struggle might be a rich and generative space for STS research.
- While Participatory Design already learns a lot from STS, the latter might start to take up insights from the former too. This conference could figure as a networked node of engagement

to do so.

When we now look back to the start of the talk where I quoted Ludwick Fleck, we are reminded just once again that the insights we are producing here and at our institutionalized homes, no matter how nomadic, are never completely new and revolutionary, that they only become so through our own practices, embedded in our own spacio-temporally situated life-worlds. What we can do here, is to translate such ideas into other agonistic spaces in order to shift discourses and practices while simultaneously opening up networks of mutual encouragement and care. In the end it is about positioning ourselves in the shifting landscape of research paradigms.

While usually evident in feminist contexts, we have to make this evident for the broad range of STS contexts too, because we should not forget – despite our institutional settlements – the inherently political dimensions of what we (as STSers) do or do not do. Because it always could be otherwise.

Now I would be very interested in your thoughts on these entanglements of feminist theories, participatory practices and STS.

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