

# A South African approach towards caring design practices

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## Abstract

The digital global economy, although democratised in some respects, also creates vulnerability in less-resourced contexts. Small to medium enterprises on the one hand can access markets digitally but on the other, cannot compete with large scale mass production of global companies. In addition, the digital environment can also create *virtual distance*, the opposite of community and care. Using critical posthumanism as a lens, in this paper we explore examples from a South African context – that, through empathy and care, demonstrate resilience in challenging and rapidly-changing environments, to improve economic activity. Braidotti's posthuman theory offers an ethical sense of collective and relational accountability. This finds strong resonance with postcolonial, race and feminist theorists including the notion of "African humanism" or "Ubuntu". Data was collected from creative practitioners in South Africa through observation and interviews. The findings point to alternative solutions based on mutual interdependence in extended communities of practice. Themes from the selected examples were used to develop a framework as a counterpoint to the linear, outcomes-based design process. This framework is presented as a tool that can be used in each phase of the design process to facilitate collaboration, community-building and empathy, whilst questioning what affect our actions (as designers) have on all others. In this paper, we acknowledge the responsibility of the designer as a facilitator of ethical practice. The framework points to a way of working with others, but also with available resources. Furthermore, this framework aims to augment the sustainability of a design project, by building a caring community.

## Author keywords

Posthumanism; care; empathy; design practice; Ubuntu

## Introduction

The digital global economy, although democratised in some respects, also creates vulnerability in less-resourced contexts. Small to medium enterprises on the one hand can access markets and resources digitally but on the other, cannot compete with the large-scale mass production of global companies. In this context, the digital environment can also create *virtual distance*, the opposite of community and care (Lojeski & Reilly, 2007).

Design and innovation play an important role in increasing profitability and ensuring sustainability of globalised econo-

mies underpinned by advanced capitalism (Brasset, 2015). Design's concern with innovation and value (profit) can be at the cost of human and non-human others (Bjögvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2012). In response, designers have developed frameworks (Kouprie and Visser, 2009) and toolkits (Sampson and Chapman, 2019) to try and navigate the ethical concerns that emerge from participatory practices and, more recently, with the ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI). The literature consulted does not address challenges and experiences in South Africa.

In this paper we consider what these ethical implications mean in a South African context, where unemployment rates for the first quarter of 2022, was 63,9% for those aged 15-24 and 42,1% for those aged 25-34 years (Statistics South Africa, 2022). South Africa has highly digitised design workplace environments, but it also has a large informal creative sector. In 2017, the South African Cultural Observatory reported the creative and cultural sector accounts for almost 7% of employment in the country. According to a 2020 survey approximately 35% of creative and cultural practitioners were working informally (unregistered) and 65% working formally (registered). The survey also included freelancers and those who were employers (South African Cultural Observatory, 2022). The purpose of this research was to explore what designers and creative practitioners in South Africa can do to build resilient and sustainable creative communities in increasingly challenging local contexts.

## Posthumanism

Posthumanism questions what it means to be human under the context of "globalisation, technoscience, late capitalism and climate change" (Herbrechter 2013: 107-34). According to Braidotti (2013), posthumanism stresses the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter and rejects dualism, especially the opposition of nature-culture. Braidotti (2013:26) objects to "the unitary subject of Humanism, including its socialist variables" and seeks to "replace it with a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy, and desire as core". This theoretical position acknowledges our co-existence with all matter including machines.

The authors are guided by the posthuman philosophy of Braidotti (2013, 2011,2006). Braidotti emphasises a "cognitive brand of empathy, or intense affinity: it is the capacity for



compassion, which combines the power of understanding with the force to endure in sympathy with a people, all of humanity, the planet and civilization. It is an extra-personal and a trans-personal capacity, which should be driven away from any universalism and grounded instead in the radical immanence of a sense of belonging to and being accountable for a community, a people and a territory" (2006:205). Braidotti's ethical argument is not based on a vulnerability or lack, but rather on assets and empowerment gained through understanding. Nomadic thought considers the 'effects of truth and power that actions are likely to have upon others including external and non-human forces' (Braidotti, 2011:300). The emphasis therefore clearly lies not on the individual, but on relationships between individuals, and not in the dualistic mode of self and 'other', but as an integral part of a mutual specification and co-dependency.

*Inspiration is also taken from Haraway (2016:10) who looks not to the past for "reconciliation or restoration", but to a present "becoming-with each other in response-ability", in anticipation of a "still possible recuperation". Haraway (2016:2) argues for approaches that are present, engaged, and responsible. She calls for "making kin" to survive and thrive in a troubled world, by people forming alliances and making- with all others. including non-humans, animals, plants and living cells. Haraway mobilizes an enlarged sense of community, based on empathy, accountability and recognition. The researchers chose to adopt a Posthumanist perspective for this research as it offered a suitable language to comprehend the contemporary global situation. Additionally, they found some similarities with South African Humanism, which is highlighted in the presented findings.*

## Design and Empathy

Themes in design discourses are concerned with design futures, speculative methods, and narratives, all underpinned by a notion of care. Participatory practices including co-design and human-centred design were developed to acknowledge the values of human participation as crucial, viewing the people involved as partners in the relationship (Sanders and Stappers, 2013: 63, 67).

While the need for designers to develop a deep understanding of their users is noted (Newell, Gregor, Morgan, Pullin & Macaulay, 2011: 235; Mattelmäki, 2008: 68), the details of how to do this in practice are limited (Kouprrie & Sleswijk Visser, 2009: 438). The idea of empathy in design practice has not been well defined or described, (Dong, Dong & Yuan, 2018: 295). Mattelmäki suggests empathy is "the skill of trying to look at the world from another person's perspective, making interpretations and imagining how it could feel or look like" (2008: 68). Surma-Aho and Hölttä-Otto (2022) present a

five-factor construction that is premised on designers aiming to understand users and their context (2022, 2). Their model suggests a starting point in the exploration of what it means to empathise in the process of design, by placing empathic understanding in the middle – with internal and external factors on either side. For this paper, the authors focus on the external aspects which are most manageable in a working context.

In the global context of war and recession (Russian – Ukraine conflict, energy shortages, climate pressure – to name a few), it seems unlikely that more monetary resources will be available to contribute to small or non-formal industries in underdeveloped countries. With this in mind, we question what can designers do to harness their human resources, making use of empathy and care, to build more sustainable creative communities?

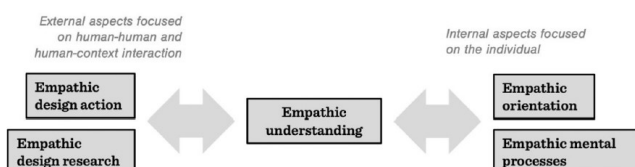
## Method

Using critical post-humanism as a lens, in this paper we explore examples from a South African context – that, through empathy and care, demonstrate innovation in challenging and rapidly-changing environments, to improve economic activity. For this paper we refer to two sets of data. The one set addresses designers and their understanding of empathy in practice. The other explores design and making in the informal sector in SA.

For the first set, data was collected by interviewing design practitioners about empathy in their design practice. Because empathy is so poorly described in design practice and the literature, it was important to find out more from designers themselves. The design practitioners selected were involved in co-design practice, universal design, or freelancers and design consultants working in community projects. A Co-design workshop with 3 designers was held prior to the design practitioner interviews – to design appropriate ways to enquire about empathy and, identify design empathy behaviours and barriers to the research. As empathy is largely viewed as a positive attribute, it is critical to research in a way that the designer does not give the "right!" answer – to give a positive impression of themselves, making the interview design complex. The questions were first tested on a designer to critically adjust for best results, prior to use in the final interviews.

For the second set, data was collected from creative practitioners in South Africa through observation and interviews, targeting informal sector makers of hand-crafted products and designed goods. The participants were selected for observation because they had proven to be sustainable as a group for about 20 years despite not forming part of the formal sector. The number of participants varied from day to day during the observation as attendance is influenced by the daily personal circumstances of the practitioners.

In both cases, consent was obtained prior to the collection of data, anonymity was ensured, and the data, once transcribed, was stored in secure, password-protected digital repositories. The transcribed data was organised and analysed using thematic coding as described by Saldaña (2013). First cycle in-vivo coding of transcripts from the interviews and analytic memos, and second cycle coding was used to group the data into categories and themes to saturation point - where no new themes emerged.



**Figure 1.** Construction of empathic understanding in design (from Surma-Aho & Hölttä-Otto 2022, 5)

## Findings

After coding the interviews with designers, the data showed internal and external features of empathy. Designers may or may not have these traits in personality/ make up (BEING), however the behaviours and actions (DOING) can be utilised to enable caring environments when working with stakeholders. This resonates with the model of empathy proposed by Surma-Aho and Hölttä-Otto. In addition, this possible dichotomous nature of designers corresponds with the model of 'being' and 'doing' which was developed in the coaching field (and this is well illustrated in Figure 2). The 'being' (inside oneself) refers to the assumptions of an individual, including values, worldview, and beliefs, which become partly visible in the actions or behaviours - the 'doing' of the individual. The individual 'being' of practitioners in a professional environment would also be impacted by corporate culture/ norms, and this culture could impact the collective cultural practices - thereby impacting the 'doing' of the designer.



Figure 2. Doing vs Being (Source: Carabi, 2018)

In Posthumanism, duality is rejected in favour of an embodied monistic view of the mind and body in that the two are one and the same, hence we reframe this by placing the "doing" within the "being". The description of empathy as an embodied practice, a dialogue between empathy as part of the design process, and empathy as part of the designer themselves is reinforced by the notion of being, doing and becoming. The notion of 'becoming' is integral to this position as an affirmative, future-focussed concept. 'Becoming' in the future holds the potential of self-fulfilment and transformation (Allart Wilcock, 1999: 1).

The three themes that emerged from the informal practitioners are briefly described in this next section which speak to empathic methods to resilience and sustainability in a South African context.

### Storytelling (language and diversity)

Storytelling provides the opportunity for sharing of stories and conversation within a community of practice. By not privileging the written word, storytelling gives each participant agency in exploring their own designs and enabling each participant to have a voice. In turn, this unlocked potential for innovation. Using storytelling and drawing as means of conceptualising new subject matter, a range of products was birthed to which customers responded positively. In this instance, the focus of the training was on the development of a process through storytelling and drawing, rather than on focussing on the final artefact. This approach provides the pro-

ject with a process to ensure the authenticity of the subject matter and by extension, innovative products.

### Authenticity

The success of the makers observed and interviewed is based on everyday objects being made and interpreted in an authentic way, rather than on innovation of new products. This resonates with literature indicating that in the digital age, authenticity can take on different dimensions and is process-driven rather than artefact focussed (Loh, Burry & Wagenfeld, 2016). This authenticity is based on what participants bring with them in terms of their personal stories, experiences and daily circumstances rather than responding only to consumer trends.

### Ubuntu (Cultural norms)

One prominent observation was that there was a tendency for the group of practitioners working together to work to the speed of the slowest person in the group. This tendency to work to the [s]lowest denominator could be attributed to the principle that by working to the level of the weakest member of the group, no one is left behind or is denied the opportunity to contribute. Therefore, by protecting the group, the interests of everyone are protected. Interestingly, this does not seem to apply to very strong craftspeople - who tend to leave the group and work from home.

The protection of the individual within the group speaks to the African notion of "Ubuntu", and it also references the reciprocity between the members of the community of practice. Economically, this is counter-intuitive: why not make more units and increase the potential for profit? Yet in this instance, the protection of the group took precedence: as without the group there would be no projects. This is a philosophical position strongly embedded in African tradition.

## Discussion

Amongst the informal practitioners the emphasis is not on the individual, but on the preservation of the group in support of the individual. In contrast, in the formal sector, the focus is on designer and influence of their being and doing on the design process. In both instances the issue of power dynamics was pronounced - with the designers there is a power dynamic between the trained designer/s, possible interdisciplinary partners and the other stakeholders in the process such as clients, and end users. In the case of the design-makers the power dynamics centre around difference in resources, access to materials or vulnerability due to economic and social circumstances.

The findings point to alternative solutions based on mutual interdependence in extended communities of practice. The African philosophy of Ubuntu is underpinned by a strong ethical sense of collective and relational accountability. Braidotti's posthuman theory resonates in this aspect with post-colonial, race and feminist theorists including the notion of "African humanism" or "Ubuntu" (Braidotti, 2011:211-218).

We found that empathy and care behave as the 'social glue' for informal businesses and communities of creative practitioners. Themes from the selected examples were used to develop a framework to complement the linear, outcomes-based

design process. In this framework, we acknowledge the responsibility of the designer as a facilitator of ethical practice. In addition, we acknowledge the natural diversity of designer personalities, values and beliefs. The findings, supported by literature and theory, put forward the idea of embodied design practice as 'being, doing and becoming'.

In designing the framework we took a cue from Clarke and Parsons (2013: 35), who consider that 'rhizome researchers' should "...recognize their embeddedness, allow the research to lead them, accept that attempts to synthesize are never finished, listen to those before them and on the margins, and give themselves to a life of becoming, thus 'breaking' the binaries that can capture or stifle their attempts to be educational researchers ...". Therefore, we have placed the designer in the middle of the framework. This positioning also speaks to a situated context regarding finding innovative alternative solutions to complex problems.

Becoming care-full speaks to the affirmative potential of transformation and mobility of thought. The 'doing' of the design practice includes behaviours and actions that can show the care and empathy needed to support users and stakeholders, in seeking affirmative solutions. 'Becoming' a care-full designer is the centre of the model (figure 2), with the 'doing' actions and behaviours around it. The 'Being' of who you are as a designer (values, beliefs) underpins it all.

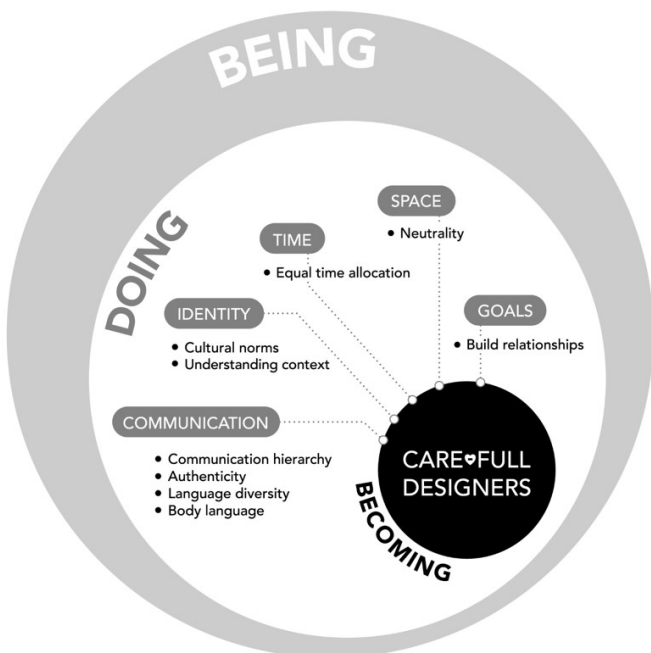


Figure 3. Becoming Care-full Designers (Authors, 2022)

**CONCLUSION**

In response to the question that we posed regarding what designers can do to harness their human resources, making use of empathy and care, to build more sustainable creative communities, we present this framework. It points to a way of working with others, but also with available resources such as people, environments, and skills. This model encompasses an iterative part of the design process and is underpinned by the principles of Post Humanism to provide a guide for care-full design.

This framework is intended as a non-hierarchical and affirmative tool that can be used in each phase of the design process to facilitate ethical collaboration, and community-building, whilst questioning what affect our actions (as designers) have on all others, including non -humans. The prompts serve as reminders to enable dialogue and empathy throughout the design process. By acknowledging the responsibility of the designer as a facilitator of the design project/ community/ process, we place the onus on them to address the power dynamic in the situation. They can use the features of the framework to ask leading questions about their behaviour (see table 1).

Table 1. Aspects of Becoming Care-full Designers (Authors, 2023)

DOING CARE-FULL DESIGN	
COMMUNICATION	ASK
Communication hierarchy	Whose voice seems to be most important? Who is being heard? Everyone needs a voice
Authenticity	Is this a place where participants can be authentic and real?
Language diversity	Does the conversation make space for all languages?
Body language	What is the body language of the designer/ participants saying?
IDENTITY	ASK
Cultural norms	Am I aware of the cultural context?
TIME	ASK
Equal time allocation	Is the time equally allocated? Both participants and de-signers need to be heard
SPACE	ASK
Neutrality	Whose space are you working in/ meeting in? Is this a safe, comfortable place for participants?
GOALS	ASK
Build relationships	What needs to be in place to build understanding of participants and context?

The framework can be used as a reflective tool for practitioners or to inform a code of conduct in co design contexts to harness the care and empathy behaviours needed to build resilience in informal and formal creative industries.

Developed and affluent nations are increasingly embracing machine working and AI and all that these technologies offer. However, as they harness technology, the economic divide between these countries and the less- developed and differently resourced nations increases. Given that in times of conflict, concerns for domestic economies are more pressing, it remains likely that nations will be left to fend for themselves as this digital and resource divide grows. It is hoped that this framework for - *Becoming a Care-full Designer* - could facilitate the harnessing of available resources to mitigate the challenges faced by creative practitioners in South Africa. Recommendations for future research include care-full testing of the framework in various design contexts.

**Authors' note**

The datasets described in this paper were collected as part of two doctoral studies, as detailed below:

Di Ruvo, M. 2022. *Towards resilience in South African craft enterprises, from design theory to craft practice*. (DTech: Design).  
 Barnes, V. E. 2023, tbc. *Empathy in Practice: a grounded theory in Industrial Design*. (DTech: Design).



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