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Designers as empathetic labourers:

A proposal to integrate professional protective practices into design and design education

Keywords: Design Practice, Empathetic Labour, Design Education, Protective Practices

Abstract

The imperative for adopting collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches when solving the wicked problems of the 21st century (Head 2022), alongside the use of co-design and participatory design practices in human-centred industries, has driven an increased need for designers to routinely employ empathy to understand lived experiences. In response, this paper examines literature on empathy from diverse fields, and introduces the notion that designers are *empathetic labourers*, who are increasingly at risk of compassion fatigue, burnout and/or vicarious trauma.

Current practice in design education promotes the use of empathy focussed design methods, especially given their power to shape meaningful design outcomes for end-users. However, we have identified a lack of curriculum focused on training young designers in the deployment of protective practices (intentional strategies and interventions that balance risk factors and promote resilience) when working as empathetic labourers – a notion common in the training of health, education and justice workers.

Drawing on the authors' experiences as design educators and practice-based design researchers in trauma-informed care (Cassidy) and interdisciplinary collaboration (Vickers) the paper proposes the outline for a strengths-based model of design education and practice that integrates protective practices for designers. The value of this will be to empower the next generation of designers to tackle human-centred and life-centred design challenges with a stronger grounding in methods and mechanisms for their sustained wellbeing.

Introduction

The field of Design has become synonymous with specific methodologies for researching, knowing, making and doing in both the academy and professional practice. Among the myriad methods employed, empathy and empathic tools are a common and necessary thread throughout the designer's practice to ensure meaningful engagements with users and stakeholders throughout the design process. These empathic practices are now widely agreed as necessary to ensure that we *design the right thing* before *designing the thing right* (Ball and White 2024). For the designer, this means being open to and engaging with people in close proximity to their lives and experiences, including vulnerabilities and in some cases trauma – which can range from the personal to the systemic. While the ethical considerations of the designer in this role have been examined and discussed in depth to ensure the wellbeing of the participants and communities involved, the wellbeing of the designer is yet to be examined in detail (Barnes and Eriksson 2015). In this paper we identify and examine the impact of *empathic* or *empathetic labour*¹ on designers and their experiences of designing, with the view to answering the question *How might we integrate protective practices into design education to strategically mitigate risk of adverse outcomes from empathetic labour?*

Empathetic labour

We define empathetic labour as the work required of designers to engage deeply and authentically with all stakeholders in a design process.² It is important to note, however, that while empathy and empathetic practices are considered positive and necessary, this labour can also have negative effects on the designer. To deepen our appreciation of empathetic labour in design practices, we are looking to, and draw from, the social sciences, health, justice and education, as mature fields engaging directly in human-focused and experience-embedded work. Going forward we refer to these as *relational fields* and look to them for their more mature critique of the many dimensions of empathy in professional practice.

¹ The term *Empathic Labour* is used widely in mature relational fields such as nursing and the social sciences. The term *Empathetic Labour* is interchangeable with Empathic Labour and has been more recently adopted in fields such as Design. Due to the adoption of the variation Empathetic in the field of Design where this paper is located, we will use this term moving forward.

² Our definition is informed by a qualitative exploration of positive and negative outcomes of 'empathic labour' in professional practices [in Chinese palliative nursing] and one with both cognitive and affective dimensions (Wang et al. 2022).

Adverse impacts of empathetic labour such as negative emotional contagion (Wang et al. 2022), compassion fatigue³ (Joinson 1992; Bush 2009) burn out⁴ (Wilkinson et al. 2017) and vicarious trauma (Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995) or secondary trauma⁵ (Eades et al. 2021) have been examined in depth in relational fields of research. So too have the potential positive impacts, including a sense of professional achievement, enrichment and growth of personal life experiences (Wang et al. 2022), and even vicarious resilience (Hernández et al. 2007). We examine these later in the paper as we are particularly interested in how both adverse and positive impacts could apply to the designer as an empathetic labourer.

Empathetic practices in Design

Empathetic practices are used in design to understand the lived experiences of others. Patricia Moore pioneered the use of empathy in design practices, particularly emphasising the need to (in Moore's case, literally) walk in the shoes of another to improve understanding of user needs before designing, and throughout testing phases. Leonardo and Rayport (1997) are credited as first describing an 'empathic design' process as '...a relatively low-cost, low-risk way to identify potentially critical customer needs...', adding it 'demands creative interaction among members of an interdisciplinary team' (104). However, as outlined above, it is now known that the impact of repeated exposure to, and empathising with, the experiences of others carries the potential risk of 'cognitive changes that can cause an altered worldview'

³ Compassion fatigue was first defined by Joinson (1992) and elaborated on by Nancy Bush (2009) as an 'emotional state with negative psychological and physical consequences that emanate from acute or prolonged caregiving of people stricken by intense trauma, suffering, or misfortune. [It] occurs when emotional boundaries become blurred and the caregiver unconsciously absorbs the distress, anxiety, fears, and trauma... The cumulative effects of untreated compassion fatigue can have a negative effect on personal and professional psychological, physical, social, and work related health' (28).

⁴ Defined by Christina Maslach and Susan E Jackson (1981:90–91) as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that arises when working in 'people-work' [relational fields] and can negatively impact individual wellbeing and job satisfaction.

⁵ Referred to by The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) as 'the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.' Studied in relation to 'helping professionals involved in the care of traumatized children and their families, the essential act of listening to trauma stories may take an emotional toll that compromises professional functioning and diminishes quality of life.'

(Raunick et al. 2015 in Eades et al. 2021:4). We therefore challenge Leonard and Rayport's assessment of 'low-risk' with our argument that designers as empathetic labourers are at increased risk when working in relational fields concerning the lived experience of others, and especially in a social climate of increasingly urgent wicked problems.

Empathy within contemporary design practice has been mapped by Veronica Barnes and Vikki Eriksson (née Du Preez) (2015), with a notable shift from user-centred design practices to participatory design, co-design and universal design methodologies. Empathic practices in design have also expanded rapidly in user-experience and human-centered design as tools for perspective-taking by the designer as an empath. This can be seen in design thinking models such as the Stanford D. School 5-step process, transformation design (Burns et al. 2006), service design (Cipolla and Manzini 2009), participatory design (Ho and Lee 2012), co-design (Manzini 2015), and the move toward designing for empathic experiences rather than to design with empathy (Devecchi and Guerrini 2017). Growing practices of collaboration and interdisciplinarity in design fields have also expanded the ways design methods are being deployed to respond not only to imperative wicked problems (Head 2022) but also to critical problems in fields outside of design such as the health, education and justice sectors. This shift is significant because 'the exposure of designers to vulnerable individuals and communities has increased' (Barnes and Du Preez 2015:1).

Depicting the function of empathy in design, Antti Surma-aho and Katja Hölttä-Otto's (2022) comprehensive review of the *Conceptualization and operationalization of empathy in design research* proposes 5 core concepts: understanding, research, action, orientation and mental processes. To quantify how these core concepts are operationalised, the authors formed 6 distinct categories from their thematic review of literature: empathic tendencies (self-reported), beliefs about empathy (value dependent), emotion recognition (in others), understanding mental contents (validated by comparison with peers), shared feeling (physiological signals) and prosocial responding (context-dependent, immediate reactions, desired outcomes or behaviours). By mapping these core concepts with potential operationalisation, Surma-aho and Hölttä-Otto demonstrate the influence of external relational dynamics and inward individual aspects of empathetic orientation and processes on overall empathetic understanding in design practices. Their 'prosocial response measures are tentatively matched with the concept of empathic design action' and they

recommend 'new measures or experimental scenarios for empathic design action' (Surma-aho and Hölttä-Otto 2022:11). Though their research stems from differing motivations, our proposal for strengths-based protective practices for designers as empathetic labourers presented in this paper delivers a pragmatic framework that may be operationalised for testing prosocial responses in empathetic design action and research.

Drawing on the UK Design Council's Double Diamond model, Barnes and Eriksson (2015) map empathic habits, design activities and methods in the design process with specific reference to Roman Krznaric's 6 habits (2012) that may be practiced to cultivate empathy. According to Krznaric in his later text *Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It* (2015), empathy can be seen and cultivated in several diverse personal traits, including: curiosity regarding others; challenging personal assumptions; immersion in others' lives; active listening and open communication without agenda; inspiring action; and encouraging social change. Building upon this, Barnes and Eriksson (2015) propose that this can be mapped against the design tools and methods of: immersed fieldwork; exploration or shadowing; ethnography; context mapping; interviews; observation; affinity diagrams; brainstorming; co-creation; role playing; personas; live prototyping; and monitoring and evaluation. While sometimes considered only in the front-end processes of design thinking such as the discover and define phase, this wider scope of methods and tools is important as it demonstrates that empathy should be appreciated as an important driver throughout every stage of the design process. To examine this notion further, we must identify the specifics of how empathy and empathic tools are deployed throughout the design process. And further, how this is reflected in the structure of design school curriculums, to ensure that we are preparing our students for this more empathy-driven version of professional practice.

Six distinct moments of empathetic labour

To develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how and when we engage in empathetic labour in design processes, we completed a scoping review of literature from both design and relational fields and aggregated our findings into 6 distinct moments of empathetic labour.⁶ We arrived at the following:

⁶ Our scoping review included papers published since 2000 and included both highly cited literature from relational fields along with recent design literature. The following key terms

- **Intentionality** to establish from the outset whether any prosocial or ethical frameworks are required and if so, selecting appropriate processes to guide the work.
- **Discovery** phases – the initial gathering of research to understand human and context interactions, which underpin forming insights and development.
- **Pragmatic tools** which include the practical and structured applications of empathy such as immersive shadowing, personas and scenario testing.
- **Reflexive Practice** to cultivate self-empathy and related emotional awareness needed to detect bias.
- **Synthesis** describing the continued need to empathise with others beyond the initial discovery stage and which has been associated with knowledge construction from the converging of insights, ideation and iteration.
- **Delivery**, though typically modelled in the final stages of design, is in fact a strategic phasing of introducing a resolved outcome to end-user ecologies. It requires continued opportunities for evaluative feedback loops to be designed into the process and ongoing empowerment for end-users to sustain impacts from or with the designed outcome.

Drawing on our own experiences as practitioners and educators we have created a heat map of these 6 key moments of empathetic labour onto the UK Design Council's Double Diamond for Innovation (figure 1). This mapping demonstrates an overview and clustering of the many instances of empathy and empathetic labour required in design processes beyond those pragmatic applications when it is typically designated as a tool for discovering insights or understanding the experiences of others.

were explored – Design Thinking; Empathy; Empathic Labour; Empathetic Labour; Compassion Fatigue and Trauma. We also employed the snowballing technique for this review, utilising reference lists from pertinent papers to identify further additional papers for review. We acknowledge the limitations of these methodologies, and frame this as an initial introductory review to support our provocation in these early stages of the research development.

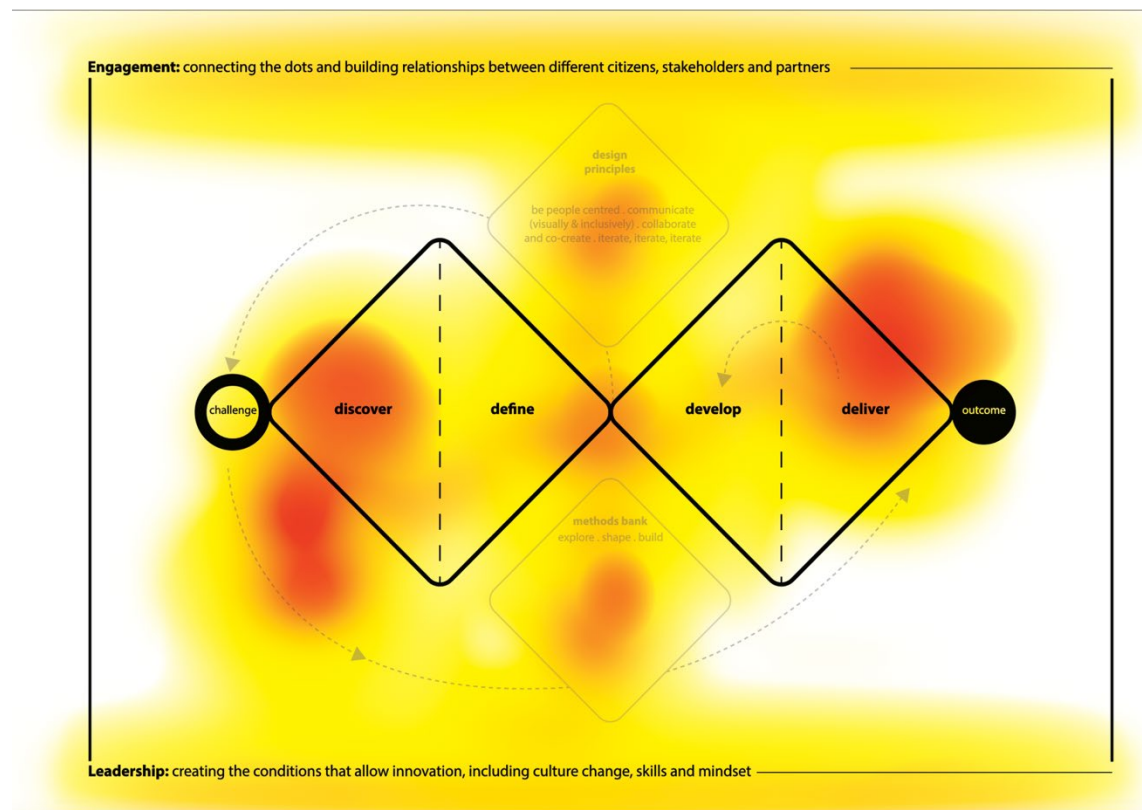


Figure 1: Heat map of our identified empathetic labour onto the UK Design Council's Double Diamond for Innovation.

Risk factors associated with empathetic labour

Relational fields recognise an 'ethical duty to make every reasonable effort to protect themselves and others involved in the research process' (Billings et al. 2015:15). To improve how we educate design students in the deployment of empathy and empathetic tools, there is therefore a need to better understand what relational fields refer to as *risk factors* and *predictors* of secondary trauma or compassion fatigue.

Examined closely in these fields, risk factors can include:

- young age and inexperience
- different coping styles
- limited support
- no safety planning or recognition of the need to address risks in project plans and research protocols (Billings et al. 2015)
- personal history and prior exposure (Bloom 2003)
- stigma (Richardson 2001)
- lack of support for self-care (Yassen 1995)
- working in isolation (Pearlman and Maclan 1995).

Lerias and Byrne (2003) published a review of literature classifying other predictors of risk including individual life experiences or stressors, gender, age, socioeconomic status, prior psychological diagnosis or exposure to trauma, and perceived threat or appraisal of these. As educators, many of the risk factors and predictors identified in the review of literature are beyond our scope of influence, and beyond our mandate for enquiry. However, risk factors we *can* contribute to improving include:

- prudence and organisational skills
- education
- degree of exposure to vulnerable populations or wicked problems via well-defined briefs
- following ethical guidelines to determine appropriate relationships to the people being designed for/with
- empowering personal perceptions of our external locus of control.

Responding to these known increased risks of engaging in relational professional practices with a values-based model of working, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) together with Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) defined 6 *trauma-informed principles of care*, with the objective to not (re)harm ‘survivors and providers’ (Dawson et al. 2021), meaning both the service users and service providers. The 6 principles are:

- safety
- trustworthiness and transparency
- peer support
- collaboration and mutuality
- empowerment (voice and choice)
- cultural, historical, and gender issues.

In parallel, an increased focus on social responsibility in design and emphasis placed on human-centred design in the last 30 years, and now life-centered design practices, have positioned empathetic practices at the foreground of the Design processes and Design Thinking models. This shift from the hero designer to the designer who strives to understand the people and communities they work with on an intimate level is a welcome change. However, like other relational fields, it comes with new considerations for the designer as a service provider. We propose that given the increasing significance placed on empathy in design practice – particularly design practice within the landscape of human experience and from student

designers through to experts – the risks and potential benefits identified above are also probable in design practice.

We therefore recommend a strengths-based alternative to current curriculum for teaching empathetic labour. This approach returns to the intentions of the trauma-informed care principles outlined above to not (re)harm service users *and* providers, empowers designers to safely deploy empathy, and counters potential risks and predictors associated with empathetic labour. With this refined scope of our capacity as design educators we propose that we can directly respond to the above predictors of risk by scaffolding *protective practices* into design practice, and more significantly, into design education.

Protective practices

Protective practices refer to intentional strategies and interventions that balance risk factors and promote resilience. Protective practices are currently deployed in relational fields to protect service providers from vicarious trauma, burn out and compassion fatigue in areas such as nursing (Rushton et al 2015), social work (Singer et al 2020), mental health therapy (Harrison and Westwood 2009), secondary education (Carello and Butler, 2015), and other human-focused and experience-embedded work (Pearlman and Caringi 2009; Hernandez-Wolfe et al. 2015; Begic et al. 2019). Proactively embedding strategies within industries at greater risk of vicarious trauma, burn out and compassion fatigue fosters the retention of staff through improved health and wellbeing of service providers, which can flow on to positive user outcomes (Louth et al. 2019).

Our observations from both the literature in relational fields and our observations of colleagues in these fields supports the notion that people can be both routinely and or unexpectedly exposed to the narratives of vulnerable populations. In these fields, proactively working to reduce risks of empathetic labour by integrating protective practices at both educational and professional levels is promoted as 'best practice', rather than reactively responding to adverse impacts as they arise. Significantly, proactively attending to risks by embedding protective practices can also promote vicarious resilience (AbiNader et al. 2023) which is of interest to us as design educators taking a strengths-based approach to tertiary education models.

A framework of protective practices for designers

We posed the question *How might we integrate protective practices in design education to strategically mitigate risk of adverse outcomes from empathetic labour?* In response, we offer a framework (figure 2) specifically for designers as empathetic labourers, which draws upon the intentions of trauma-informed principles for *both* the service user and the service provider. We developed the framework by drawing on our personal experiences and expertise as design educators and practitioners, as applied to selected exemplary protective practices and resources from our scoping review of literature from relational fields. The framework is bounded by the 6 moments of empathetic labour identified previously (vertical axis) and outlines pragmatic ways to enrich empathetic practices with common themes (horizontal axis) throughout the design process. To further unpack this proposal, we discuss the details of one horizontal axis from the framework below.

Commencing in the top left corner, the first protective practice proposed demonstrates the **Intentionality** of respectfully integrating a First Nations perspective of protection described by Tyson Yunkaporta (2020). Yunkaporta's notion of 'a supportive network of pairs' is a non-hierarchical, non-fixed approach to support that focuses on the development of interdependence, rather than the less effective codependence. This approach requires a mindset of protection for both the self and others, in order to strengthen the network that also supports the community. From the outset of a design process, establishing the intentionality of this approach in communities would require setting clear intentions that foster healthy interdependence within the supportive network of pairs. It is important to note that this approach differs from simply working in pairs, but rather is intended as an

Six Moments of Empathetic Labour in Design

Protective Practices	Intentionality	Discovery	Pragmatic Tools	Reflexivity	Synthesis	Delivery
	Cultivate self-empathy and foster interdependence with a supportive network of pairs. "... look out for yourself... to look out for the people around you" (Tyson Yunkaporta, 2020).	Fostering a culture of collaboration and team work as a deliberate social support strategy for creating time to debrief (Rosenbloom, Pratt et al 1995, Regehr and Cadell 1999, Richardson 2001).	Researchers trained to recognise stress and how to manage it, and or access supportive supervision and counselling (Coles, Astbury et al 2014).	Cultivate and value the ongoing practice of self-empathy by viewing reflexivity as integral to design practice and an essential professional skill that requires empathic habits of curiosity, imagination, and challenging of assumptions.	Design responds to variables and synthesis is context sensitive. The designer must lead in projects that draw on other disciplines with the aim to change the situation. Valuing design as a way of knowing (Cross, 2001) empowers the designer as an expert by experience.	Professional supervision and / or senior mentor involved in debriefing. Team approaches to debriefing and consistent check-ins with managers and colleagues (Hatcher, Porter et al 2015).
	Valuing others' input into the design project (Postma, Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, Daemen & Du, 2012).	Avoid judgement when observing others (Koupric & Visser, 2009).	Elevate client voice and share 'small wins' (Louth, Mackay, Karpets, & Goodwin-Smith, 2019).	Gain awareness and understanding of inner states. Attend to own experience to bring self-awareness to thoughts and feelings as well as assumptions and biases ... [to] distinguish the experiences of self and others and to avoid preconceived outcomes (Niezink & Train, 2021).	The above can be advanced using context mapping and hermeneutic methodologies to ensure outcomes are 'fit for purpose' and the designer considers their role in the process - also identifying where they do not hold responsibility for the outcomes of others...	Empathetic interactions with service users can engender feelings of personal accomplishment, replenish motivation, commitment, and energy, and build emotional resilience (Kinman & Grant, 2016).
	Researcher safety is built into project design (Social Research Association, 2006).	The need to set aside time, establish boundaries and freedom to express / discuss trauma-based work (Louth, Mackay, Karpets, & Goodwin-Smith, 2019).	Teaching students value of multiplicity of ideas and not taking design developments too far (getting personally attached) before consultation - reiterate the students will not 'run out of ideas'.	Recognise and acknowledge the impact of working with vulnerable populations on the health and wellbeing of the designer as a practitioner / researcher.	Translating design research into actionable outcomes through synthesising the design process can help in sensemaking (Kolko, 2010), which is understood to improve our understanding about the world... known to reduce psychosocial risk factors (Park & Folkman, 1997).	The Big Anxiety Research Centre UNSW Don't Rush Home concept "adapted from First Fortnight, an arts festival in Ireland that challenges mental health stigma while supporting vulnerable people through creative processes..." It is "an informal invitation" to stay in the venue after the event and share experiences with others. "The idea is that no one should leave the [event] feeling upset, distressed, concerned or confused". https://www.thebiganxiety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Don't-Rush-Home-Guide-Naarm-Melbourne-2023-1.pdf
	Reframe the value of research that will be used for positive change (Coles, Astbury et al 2014). There is not always a need to respond to a problematic.	Encourage experiences of discovery to develop agency of the designer (Gray, Chivukula, Carlock & Duane, 2023).	Use action-focused language to empower practitioners to make ethical changes (Gray, Chivukula, Carlock & Duane, 2023).	Empower designers with knowledge of and access to referral services that provide further support for the population / group / community / people being designed for / with.	Social support, education, and personality and dispositional factors are clear domains of protective factors (Buchana, Walker, Boden, Mansoor and Newton-Howers, 2023).	
	Strategic and human-centered planning to ensure longer / enough discovery and lead time for sustained engagement beyond initial 'drop' / delivery deployment	Embed opportunities to learn and help others (Louth, Mackay, Karpets, & Goodwin-Smith, 2019).	Co-creation, immersive fieldwork, shadowing, ethnography, active listening in interviews / conversations, and observations.	Provide ecologically-meaningful detail and ensure materials are accessible (Gray, Chivukula, Carlock & Duane, 2023).	Scaffold processes and provide structure by returning to clear guidelines in design briefs to facilitate convergent thinking.	Matching principle: The greater the congruence between the demands and the potential resource, the stronger the protective effects that will be observed and likely to protect wellbeing (Cohen & Wills, 1989).
	Engage imagination - Imagination can be a reparative and restorative experience that helps us discover novel ways to address life's challenges (Cathy Malchiodi, 2022).	Ideate, iterate, as what is? and how might we?	Personas, scenarios, role-playing, body storming, affinity diagrams	3-2-1 Shadow process introduced to design via soma design theory (Kristina Höök, 2018) as a way of taking 3rd person (it), 2nd person (you) and 1st person (I/me) perspectives to "face it, talk to it, be it" when reflecting on and analysing research.	Control affective (emotional) empathy while practicing cognitive empathy. (Wu, Siu, & Bühring, 2022).	Triple match principle: The probability of a moderating effect of the matching principle can be enhanced when demands, outcomes, and resources are within the same domain (De Jonge & Dorman, 2003). Domains can be physical, cognitive, or emotional.
	Promote and value interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary collaboration.	Maintain other hobbies, a routine and being active (Louth, Mackay, Karpets, & Goodwin-Smith, 2019).	"... encourage improvisation or 'remixing' to allow for methods to feel resonant in a broader range of settings" (Gray, Chivukula, Carlock & Duane 2023)	Develop confidence in self to trust instincts and value working intuitively. See also Reflection-in-action (Donald Schön, 1991) as a means to improve the experience itself by acting immediately (as it happens).	Reflection-on-action (Donald Schön, 1991) to determine what has worked / should be avoided or developed further in the future to reduce harm or stressors. This can create opportunities to develop depth and breadth of a practice in repeatable and deliberate ways.	Emotional resourcing that focuses on emotional support and emotion-focused coping, can mitigate negative impacts of emotional labour on emotional exhaustion (Kinman & Leggetter, 2016).

Figure 2: Six moments of empathetic labour in design practice used to categorise proposed protective practices for design education.

intentionally structured and considered support mechanism that could be integrated into curriculums.

In the **Discovery** phase, sustaining the interdependent network is essential. This can be reinforced by reiterating the intentions to carry protective practices forward and to foster a culture of collaboration. This collaboration co-creates social support strategies in the network as it expands to the users or community being designed with. Effectively integrating these practices requires building on known protective practices such as dedicating time for processes of *debriefing* as deemed necessary (Hatcher, et al., 2015). It is important not to delay opportunities for debriefing until the completion and evaluation stages (delivery) of the project, which are typically identified as (re)turning points in fixed models where designers either iterate or continue a design development. We posit that more flexible, responsive and ongoing opportunities to debrief are needed throughout the design processes, not just after the 'final' design outcome is delivered. This approach will create the necessary conditions for networked and deep collaboration, guided by the designer and user needs.

The selection and implementation of **pragmatic tools** in this thread should build on the relational dynamics established in the prior 2 stages, for example the careful selection of appropriate tools, rather than the indiscriminate use of all tools available (which is often the case) and the debriefing of the findings and success of each tool in careful cyclic phases. These tools need to be introduced as exploratory and non-threatening and revisited through a lens of reflexive practice. This will ensure that designers are better equipped to identify stressors in themselves, their peers and the extended network of each project, or of equal importance, that they know how to access further supervision and support services to facilitate this.

Valuing **reflexivity** as a deliberate practice of self-empathy supports the cultivation of essential skills that empathetic processes require, such as curiosity, imagination and the ability to challenge assumptions. Reflexivity in this instance relates to observing the parts of the self that become apparent when engaging with the lived experience of others. It differs from self-compassion and requires an attitude of suspended judgment that resonates with Donald Schön's (1992) definition of both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Design responds to variable conditions and the employment of synthesis is context-sensitive. Synthesis is also multidimensional, as the designer must be empowered to take the lead in projects that draw from other disciplines and also manage relational dynamics with clients, co-designers and user expectations. Valuing design as a way of knowing (Cross 1982) positions the designer as an expert by experience. This is particularly important to acknowledge in the 5th empathetic moment, **synthesis**. As a protective factor, translating design research into actionable outcomes through synthesising the design process can help in sensemaking (Kolko 2010), which is understood to improve our understanding about the world. Furthermore, the outcome of sensemaking or synthesis relates to meaning-making (when situational factors are contextualised within a broader context), which is known to reduce psychosocial risk factors (Park and Folkman 1997).

In another horizontal axis we note there is a risk of affective empathy limiting outcomes in this stage, with cognitive empathy (traditionally recognised imaginative empathising) being more conducive to developing a resolved outcome (Wu et al. 2022). Protective practices to counter this risk include proactively creating supportive environments for networks to collaborate in authentic ways. This requires establishing trust and means networks working with confidence in ways that do not serve to appease each other, but to collaboratively work toward the best design outcome (Wu et al. 2022:222) for the specific design situation. To do so, we propose there needs to be a shared understanding that while cognitive empathy⁷ must guide design decisions, it may not be effective to engage in affective empathy⁸ during synthesis in a design process.

Finding the means and systems to continue the connections and discussions established around projects during and after the **delivery** is the final protective practice in this horizontal thread. It highlights a need to work as a networked community of educators and students within design schools, so projects are not bounded to the end of term and project schedules. This is important as the risks of

⁷ Cognitive empathy describes imagined perspective taking, as in 'I understand what you feel' from an objective stance (Healey and Grossman 2018:2)

⁸ Affective empathy is the sharing of a feeling or physiological resonance, as in 'I feel what you feel' (Healey and Grossman 2018:2)

being affected by empathetic labour are not necessarily limited to these curriculum boundaries.

Next steps: Experiential dimensions of empathetic labour for the designer

We acknowledge our limitations in the scoping of literature to develop this initial framework and do not claim the resource to be a definitive or fixed method ready to apply to all design education settings or unique design contexts. Though the framework is not all encompassing, it has been developed with the intention to be dynamic and adaptable for each unique design situation (Schön 1992). It is by embedding protective practices into design education that we believe the greatest cumulative potential exists to limit or mitigate the adverse impacts of empathetic labour on designers working in relational fields. Protective mechanisms compensate for adverse experiences, mirroring the literature, which promotes a need to identify relational factors and resources that contribute to resilience (Morris et al. 2021). The included framework therefore offers an example of the application of protective practices in design education and a provocation for further practice-based research in this area.

In developing the framework discussed above, our understanding of the experiences of empathetic labour has deepened. An example of the different needs for affective and cognitive empathy has been noted above. Returning to the literature of both relational and design fields, we note more nuanced definitions of the qualities (passive, active, affective and cognitive) of empathy are used. As this paper is proposing an examination of the designer's experience of empathetic labour, the next stage of our research includes identifying how experiential dimensions of empathy might be used to further understand how the designer's use of empathy in the design process can be scaffolded and supported. For example, active empathy is commonly used in design practice and refers to the deliberate use of behaviours to simulate the experience of another, while passive empathy may be a precursor to reflexivity and purposeful intention to be empathic (Stephan 2023).

The intention of this next stage of coding is to reflect upon when and where empathy is deployed by the designer and to better understand the experience of empathy for the professional practitioner. Through this understanding, we can design protective practices for wellbeing that are specific to design. Applying these dimensions is a step toward a more comprehensive understanding of where in the design process

empathetic labour is most applicable and how it is experienced by the designer in these contexts.

Conclusion

Just as designers continually examine, iterate and prototype concepts and outcomes for their clients, users or stakeholders, we argue that we have a responsibility to continually examine, iterate and prototype ways to improve Design practice and processes, to ensure the methodologies of the Design field remain relevant and robust.

As outlined in our introduction, neither the risk factors of empathetic labour nor the embedding of protective practices to counteract these risks has been explored in depth for design practitioners or design students. We believe this is a significant gap as the social and environmental conditions we live in are exponentially responsive to crisis, and design is increasingly being deployed in diverse fields that have deeper experience integrating trauma-informed principles in professional practices. Furthermore, given the rise of co-design, participatory design and other deeply experiential and collaborative methods that place designers in closer proximity to communities being designed *with* as opposed to *for*, we propose that there is an imperative to ensure a more robust professional practice that benefits the designer as a service provider engaging in empathetic labour. Therefore, by drawing inspiration from the strategic implementation of protective practices in relational fields as discussed, we advocate for an industry shift toward embedding protective practices in design education, as a necessary next step in improving the experience of designing (*for the designer*) and ultimately the advancement of the field of design by strengthening the design industry.

Going forward, we will continue to scope the relational fields of research for guiding protective practices that are applicable to the empathetic labour of Designers. This is with the aim to reorientate our practices as design educators through providing a more nuanced and effective education in empathetic labour and scaffolding courses with the protective practices necessary to build a more resilient design profession. We are especially interested in understanding the relationship between which protective practices are prioritised as necessary skills to cultivate in design education and how the formal recognition of this significance in course content, rubrics and outcomes might improve the experience of designing. We look forward to discussing

and testing this framework with colleagues who are teaching empathetic tools and practices in their current curriculums.

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