

# BECOMING WOKE: DESIGN RESEARCH AND EMBODIED PRACTICE

ENGAGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

In early 2016, a design research project explored designing engagements to address issues of structural racism and white privilege. The research took place by enacting engagements with patrons in bars throughout New York City. The design “outcome” of this research was a distributable guidebook to encourage and empower discussion and awareness. However, the real designed outcome were the conversations generated by the embodied practice of the research itself—the actual interaction, skillful facilitation and iterative strategy that activated thoughtful exchange between two people. This case study reflects on how as design offers problem-solving services in complex social spaces, the intangible products of design practice become valuable outputs. The designer’s embodiment of their practice must align with the values and intended outcome of the project, thus also making the practice process the designed outcome itself.

## STRUCTURAL RACISM

In February 2012 Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida by George Zimmerman. Martin was an unarmed, 17-year-old, black male returning home from a local convenience store. George Zimmerman claimed self-defense and was acquitted of all charges. Protests formed around the United States in the wake of this decision. People rallied not just for the unjust

death of Trayvon Martin, but also against the larger, systemic problem in which the lives of black victims are treated with less concern and less protection by the criminal justice system as compared to white victims (Weinstein, 2012). It was a key event that helped to catapult the issue of structural racism to national attention. The shooting of Trayvon Martin is just one name in a series of unarmed black men who were fatally shot and their killers questionably acquitted of any wrongdoing. Structural racism in the United States is not a new phenomenon. As a nation that was largely built on the institution of slavery, there is a long history of racial inequity and sordid civil rights battles. These systemic beliefs and behaviors are largely “hidden” and protected, ingrained into the cultural and political environments in ways that are complex, and socially uncomfortable to identify.

As outlined in the story above, leading national awareness of this issue is a racialized criminal justice system. The United States suffers from a rate of incarceration so high and so concentrated that, “we are no longer incarcerating the individual, but we are incarcerating whole social groups,” specifically people of color and acutely black males (Lay et al, 2015). The United States is currently on track to incarcerate one in three black males born today (Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, 2015).

Presented less often in the media, but equally as damning, racial inequity is evident in education, economics, employment, politics, housing and healthcare. It has been shown that non-white Americans attend the most poorly funded schools (White, 2015); are regularly turned away from jobs because of their perceived race, by hiring managers seemingly oblivious to this bias (Bertrand and Mullainthan, 2005); are specifically targeted for disenfranchisement policies (Berman, 2015); are illegally redlined from receiving mortgages to purchase homes (Coates, 2014); and are given less attentive care at doctor’s offices and emergency rooms, also by care providers oblivious to their bias (Betancourt, 2004). Even in our everyday public encounters, it has been proven that on average adolescent black males are

perceived by a stranger as being 4.5 years older than their actual age and as a result are less likely to be given the benefits society affords perceived innocence and immature decision-making associated with childhood (Goff et al, 2014). Not to mention the countless accounts of discriminatory customer service and heightened surveillance people of color report experiencing every day throughout the United States.

John A. Powell, academic and expert in racial justice, racial and ethnic identity, civil rights and structural racialization, emphasizes the critical nature of being able to recognize and acknowledge these “invisible” forces at work (2003):

“Racism and white supremacy are embedded in institutional structures of society, not seeing it is no great service, because it will reproduce itself unless it's disrupted. We can really disrupt race fundamentally, where you can no longer predict access to power and wealth and privilege and meaning, based on race...and that future is possible, but only if we're willing to first notice it.”

In early 2016, a design research project, *Becoming Woke*, investigated how we might design authentic and meaningful engagement that could open awareness and address issues of structural racism and white privilege. This paper will set out the initial framing for the project, describe the methodology of the research and its outcomes and discuss the wider propositions this work addresses for design's ability to be an active contributor in social and systemic change.

## BECOMING WOKE

The title *Becoming Woke* emphasizes two important aspects of this project. ‘Woke’ is a term that was first used in 2008 by singer Erykah Badu. In her song *Master Teacher* she dreams of equality but at the same time is “woke” to the reality of structural oppression and racial inequality. Being ‘woke’ indicates understanding the systemic injustice and a willingness to fight against it (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). ‘Becoming’ emphasizes how the work asks its audience to develop and grow towards a preferred state, without reaching an end goal. The goal is not to for us to *be* woke, but to open to being in a constant state of development. This process of continuous iteration is a well-established quality of design processes, and a critical capacity to be embraced by work with a hypersensitive social issue, mired in deeply entrenched power dynamics. Leveraging design's solutions-focused, yet open and iterative process creates a foundation for a productive, responsive approach to this space (Cross, 2007; Rittel and Weber, 1973).

## FRAMING

The project identified two key criteria to support and direct the exploration:

1. Seek to build awareness that is self-directed knowing, that is able to come through self-

discovery, personal willingness and at a self-directed pace; and

2. Connect the engagement to our everyday lives, as part of our natural lived experience and not couched in scientific test results, academic theory, or formal training

The first criterion was based on research that identified the ineffectiveness of creating lasting awareness or change when people are told they have racial biases but are not led through a process that demonstrates what that means and why. Using testing (the Implicit Association Test) to tell people about their personal biases and hidden belief systems triggers negative emotional reactions, disbelief and disempowerment (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013; Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald, 2002).

The second criterion was established because of both a gap in what current bias and diversity training offers and recognizing a key advantage that design brings to working in this space. Exposure to this topic is often done as part of formal trainings in the workplace or events into which people have self-selected. There is a separation between what happens in these formal spaces and the ability for people to feel capable of applying what they learn back into their everyday life. It also is not able to reach people outside of formal settings and/or a highly self-selecting audience. Design, as a practice and a product, infiltrates the structure of everyday life.

## I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE



Figure 1: Researcher (author) at a bar in Brooklyn, New York.

The research aimed to engage with people who do not have substantial exposure or engagement with issues of race, bias and privilege. In order to achieve this, the research was planned in bars throughout New York City. By bringing engagements into unplanned spaces rather than inviting people to a prepared context, the research was able to interact with a more diverse and unrestricted audience. The venue of a bar was chosen because of the role it plays as a social space in which

people are open to conversation and one of the few public places that people are perhaps even looking to have conversations with someone they may not know.

The bar provided unexpected elements that factored into the overall process. The secondary activity of having a drink proved to be an effective way to relax participants into the conversation and the activity allowed the conversation to “take a break” when necessary. It also provided a way of timekeeping, without having to set up an overly formal structure. One drink was, on average, a good measure of time to maintain a conversation. The seating at a bar provided the right amount of intimacy to have a semi-private one-on-one conversation, while maintaining personal space and the more casual atmosphere of being in public space.

Throughout the three months of these engagements, the visuals, approach and guidelines that led the conversation developed and changed. Eventually, the work settled on inviting patrons to have a one-on-one conversation about race through provocative, yet understated signage on the researcher’s back and taped to an empty chair. Placed on the bar were a series of coasters that outlined the conversation’s guidelines. The aesthetic of each of these elements was clean and simple, using earth tones generally found in bar settings, contrasted with a deep, bright blue used to catch attention and invite participants without being loud or ostentatious. Fonts were chosen to create an unfinished, human touch and avoid looking like a “professional” intervention.

When a participant approached for a conversation, they were asked to agree to the conversation guidelines, which include:

- This is a conversation about personal experience, not expertise.
- Be genuine and share authentically.
- There is no right or wrong thing you can say.
- Ask questions and reflect back what you hear.



Figure 2: Coasters used to guide engagement and promote productive conversation.

A key part of using these guidelines was ensuring that they are both described at the beginning of the conversation and also modeled continuously throughout the conversation. If an engagement strayed in unproductive directions, the coasters helped to redirect attention or remind participants of the suggested structure.

Each conversation began with the question, “What is your experience of race in the United States?” This question was deliberately open to allow people to think how they define race and where they place themselves in relation to that definition. A series of follow up questions were also on hand, for example:

- How do you **feel** talking about race? How do you **feel** talking about racial issues? Where do you think these feelings come from?
- What is your **cultural background**/where are you from? How does this background affect the way you experience race? How does it affect your communication style?
- What **values** do you hold about how to treat other people? How do you make those values visible through action?

Additional questions were not always necessary, but the spirit imbued into them, including asking about feelings and emotions, directing clarification towards personal experience, encouraging participants to reflect on their cultural backgrounds and focusing on values were integrated into every conversation.

On average, conversation lasted about 45 minutes. Many participants wanted to continue the conversation for longer periods of time, but the effort of engaged, active listening and reflection was diminished after an hour of conversation. Ending the engagement earlier rather than later helped preserve the quality and impact of the interaction.

## DATA COLLECTION

Sites for bars were selected in neighborhoods in both Manhattan and Brooklyn of varying social and economic demographics. In total, about 20 “substantial” conversations with people of diverse races, genders, age ranges and socio-economic classes took place.

The project experimented with using photo, audio and video recording to capture the conversations in some of the initial encounters, but in trying to keep the engagements casual and intimate, most were not recorded. Following each conversation, participants were asked to reflect on what they considered helpful or frustrating about the engagement and how it would possibly affect their actions or beliefs in the future. These reflections and/or specific quotes from the conversation were recorded along with a photograph of the person’s hand. These recordings were served as evidence of the interaction.

When an interaction was complete, the researcher also recorded audio and written notes about what had

occurred, with a specific focus on how to inform and guide future engagements. Although focused on the research process, these notes and the self-reflection of the researcher proved to be the most helpful data for reflection and writing the guidebook.



Figure 3: “When you sat down at the bar next to him (her companion) I thought to myself, what is that white girl doing sitting down next to the black guy at the bar? I don’t see race myself. I don’t think about it. I don’t always fit in to one category or the other. But I would have never thought to say this out loud to anyone, not even him. But now that I am telling you, I can see how much I do actually think about race.”



Figure 4: “Music has been a great bridge in unifying myself with different races. You know, race is not something that I care about... But I have a great story about other people seeing me as white... I was long boarding through Brooklyn and a group of black kids yelled at me, calling me a “Peckerwood”... Later, I looked it up and realized that “Peckerwood” is a racial slur for white people. And I’m okay with making fun of myself, but at the same time was he discriminating against me? But I look back and I laughed at it. I thought it was hilarious. Wow... the privilege that I took... I didn’t even think of that as privilege. I guess it is real privilege. I don’t know one derogatory term for white people.”

The responses from participants varied from feeling extremely productive, insightful and meaningful connections to short and shallow to even hurtful. Many patrons were genuinely interested in exploring the topic. White people were often interested in asking if something they did or said was “racist” and also would seek validation for their experiences of struggle, as a white person. People of color, who participated in the research, expressed support for the work and felt it was

important to be brought to attention in more direct ways. There were also a number of people who disagreed with the research, asking the researcher to leave the space or remove the signage or took the opportunity to express the inappropriate nature of the provocation, without participating in conversations.

## DESIGN OUTCOMES

Moving from the research phase of this project into creating a “designed outcome”, the learnings and process developed and enacted in this research were translated into a small, distributable guidebook. The aim of the guidebook was to urge others to acknowledge the forces of race, bias and privilege and empower and encourage active engagement on these issues. It includes a list of resources to familiarize oneself with recent discussions of race and privilege, instructions on how to create space for open communication and, most saliently, offers insights on how to create meaningful discussion around a sensitive and divisive topic.

Strategic suggestions include the conversation guidelines from the coasters and suggested questions for the conversation, tips on how to stay focused on experiences and seek emotions behind stories, the importance of making differences and similarities explicit, encouragement to be open and vulnerable and, most importantly, to engage without a specific end result in mind or goal of changing someone else. These strategies were inspired by various sources, including bias and diversity trainers, therapists and an human behavior expert, and refined through practice. The guidebook lays out a fairly detailed process, but it attempts to de-emphasize easily adopted methods, tactics and strategies. It encourages readers to enact their own conversations in order to learn, understand and mold their own “method” through direct experience.

While the guidebook attempts to capture what was activated in the actual engagements that took place, the real design outcome of this project was the research process itself and the real product were the meaningful conversations created through this work. The embodied practice of the research—the physical presence, actual conversation and skillful facilitation that activated thoughtful exchange between two participants in an engagement—is what was put out into the world.

## PERMISSION TO ACT OTHERWISE

The design of these engagements explored design’s ability to create situations and environments that give people permission to act otherwise—to act differently from what they would consider appropriate and engage in behavior that without the design would not be considered socially acceptable.

Designers are able to create instances to inspire or coerce their audience into behavior modifications that are outside of expected behavior. A creator of this type of work is the self-described “eating designer” Marije Vogelzang’s work. She designs beautiful and poignant events, bringing unexpected groups of people together

around food and asking them to socially engage with one another in uncharacteristic or even “inappropriate” ways.

One such project was a 3-day performance in Hungary, Budapest: Eat Pray Budapest (2012). Visitors were invited to be hand fed a meal by Roma women while listening to stories and memories of the women’s lives. The experience was designed so that the visitor never saw the face or eyes of their feeder and could not identify the individual. Given the social stigma around gypsies in Hungary, Vogelzang (2012) created the experience specifically for visitors to “feel like there are no social codes or rules he needs to follow.” The experience provoked strong emotional reactions in visitors who would likely never or rarely interact with Roma women. This space allowed them to step outside of what they would consider personally or socially acceptable. Creating an event using space, food and performance, the designed outcome was the engagement between participants.

For the engagement research done in this case study, simple signage, tape and props communicated an invitation to have an interaction distinct from what was expected at a bar. Designation of space grants conversation participants permission to speak and act differently than what might be considered “appropriate.”

## DESIGN RESEARCH

Design research investigates the world through examining a constantly dynamic interplay of contexts, human behavior and environments. This distinction from science, which seeks to understand comparatively static empirical truths, highlights design’s pursuit of that which cannot be known—exploring not what is, but that which is *possible* (Dilnot, 2016; Simon, 1981). Clive Dilnot uses this distinction to raise issues about the rigor and capabilities of design’s ability to demonstrate a distinct way of knowing, but it also reveals an asset for design as socially engaged practice: designers’ inclination to pursue the unknowable and embrace uncertainty. Designers build expertise over time in the process (writ large) and are constantly applying that process-expertise to widely different contexts. Thus, when it comes to something like human interactions and cultural understanding, it is open to every interaction as a new learning experience, rather than a context in which it is already “known” what/how people will respond. Thus, the goal is not to come to understand a universal truth, but to engage in knowing the world on a project-by-project, or moment-by-moment basis. It allows for specialized and nuanced perception of complex situations and engenders openness to build understanding based on evolving relational information.

At one of its most basic levels, design research relies on human connection, empathy building and narrative tools to gather data through storytelling, experiences and facilitated insights from users. This data is

grounded in human experience and works to uncover deep and non-obvious human needs and desires.

Panthea Lee (2012), a principal and the lead designer at the social impact design firm Reboot describes how design research differs from market, or even academic, research saying:

“In design research, the methods and data collected differ from those emphasized in market or academic research. Ethnographic approaches to participant interaction clarifies complex human needs, behaviors, and perspectives. Field immersions unearth contextual and environmental factors that shape user experience.”

These tools of design research are key components of design itself, and can be considered outputs of design work. Creating human connection and encouraging storytelling and experiential sharing within the engagement are critical elements of meaningful and productive engagements.

In this case study, human connection is the product that results from the design. The engagement promotes self-directed change, which comes from a person’s own beliefs and experiences. This approach is different from overt political action or formal training. Rather than asking people to change, it provides an opportunity and a space for people to be more aware, and hopefully more intentional in interacting with and shaping the environment. The research capabilities of designers are able to enact and embody this type of practice.

## EMBODIED PRACTICE

The discussion of this case study has focused on some of design’s affordances that it (humbly) brings to work in deeply complex social and systemic issues. At the heart of design’s offerings as a social practice, a practice that looks to create change in society, is the *way* of a designer’s approach, *how* a designer engages—essentially the individual designer’s process. This embodied practice of a designer is arguably more valuable than produced outcomes or distilling work into explicable, method-based practices.

This research aims to deemphasize output and frame design as embodied practice that has the ability to work towards producing equally valuable, but less tangible, goods such as awareness and social connection.

In Herbert Simon’s (1969) seminal definition of design he states that design is the “transformation of existing conditions into preferred ones.” In argument of focusing on embodied practice, designers themselves have the ability, and often are, employed as the objects and tools, which move conditions from one state, into a preferred state. To discuss the role of design in these situations is to present the practices as developing a way of embodying the work in such a way to transform existing conditions into preferred environmental states.

Ann Light and Yoko Akama (2012) argue in their research that the ways methods are actually enacted are more important than the methods that are created and used:

“it is not meaningful to separate the designer from method since we cannot know participative methods without the person or people enacting them. Methods and techniques require embodiment.”

As participatory design practitioners, they emphasize that explaining a method is useless without looking at it in relation to the practitioner characteristics, “their worldview, purpose and decisions on the day (2012).” They note that from experience in the design field, most would note this as obvious, yet we continue to report our findings emphasizing methods rather than the performative and intangible nature of how one designs with groups. A step further, we avoid talking about the nature of the designer as an individual, the way in which their approach to develop knowing affects the users, environment and project context.

Interaction designers Woolrych, Hornbæk, Frøkjær and Cockton (2011) make similar arguments using a recipe analogy. They argue that when we report our learning, we need to not simply provide recipes for others to follow, but rather detail what actually got cooked and “how it gets cooked.” In their research and experience they emphasize the importance of not just identifying the methods used in practice, but how designers actually embody these practices, work with them and adapt them to different contexts.

In actuality design is “not the method or the designer but the designer using the method” (Light and Akama, 2012). This is the essence of an embodied design practice. There is a thoughtful approach to developing specific methods. There is research and testing, principles and criterion that is developed. However, these materials are meaningless if detached from how the designer approaches their application. This goes a step beyond a solely process-focused argument to a discussion of the individual designer and their ability and willingness to embody the values, the change, they wish to make in the world. It is a call for the embodiment of values to permeate every aspect of the practice, both within and outside of a singular project space.

## VALUE OF DESIGN PRACTICE

As design is employed to address systems, organizational development, social problems and behavior change, the “products” the practice puts out into the world are socially complex and elude distinct categorization. The popularity of “design thinking,” offers design not as an end product, but as a particular way of problem solving in multitude of contexts. The inclination to “package” practice makes it accessible to wider fields and is one of the factors that has led to a cross-sector interest in design thinking. As noted in

Kees Dorst’s (2011) research exploring the value of design thinking for organizational problem solving, he notes design’s affinity to “professionalize” ways of problem solving and thinking that are not necessarily unique to design,

“... although many of the activities that designers do are quite universal, and thus it would be inappropriate to claim these as exclusive to design or ‘Design Thinking’, some of these activities have been professionalised in the design disciplines in ways that could be valuable for other fields.”

The greater value add of design however is not in the activities themselves or the methods applied, but the designer’s ability to call upon and apply these practices in varying ways. Dorst explains, “The value then is not so much to be found in a general adoption of something as amorphous as ‘Design Thinking’, but it lies in the application of these specific professional design practices.” It is how the designer applies these practices that differentiates how a designer applies design thinking compared to other fields. This is a much more nuanced and difficult to capture practice. He continues,

“... design is not just an activity within projects, but that experienced designers develop up their own processes that work across projects within a firm or professional practice.”

There is a trend to translate the embodiment of design practice into easily consumable, shareable outputs. From design researchers, to service designers, to organizational designers, to humanitarian designers and design consultants, there is an overwhelming amount of translation of service offerings into explanatory “methods”.

An example among many of what is being called out here is illustrated through the website, ServiceDesignToolkit.org (2014). The site was created by three design groups, the digital design firm Namhan, the service design firm Design Flanders and the European public service design hub SPIDER. The site offers a service design toolkit, including information on how to run workshops with accompanying frameworks and materials, posters used to explain the service design process, a manual to explain service design step-by-step and technique cards to explain in detail “techniques” to run a service-design project. The offering is visually well-designed, comprehensive, extremely accessible and free. At the bottom of the page, is the statement (2014), “With this toolkit you will be able to do most by yourself. However, it is recommended to hire an external consultant to moderate the workshops and to guide you through the process.”

This “plug-and-play” model restrains design’s ability to embody a mature service offering and removes what can be the most powerful use of design—having the designer “in the room” and able to embody the values being proposed through the work. It undermines the

importance of an embodied practice of a designer and leads to shallow service offerings under a diluted umbrella of “design practice” that one can “do most[ly] by yourself.”

When addressing systemic cultural change, the work offered to the world must go beyond outputs. The

values espoused by a design approach must permeate the research, processes, applications and be embodied by the designer through their practice. Indeed we must embody the design created and consider it inextricable from externally produced outcomes.

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