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CONQUERING THE SILENCE, EXPLORING THE UNCOMFORTABLE TOGETHER: A COLLECTIVE EXPLORATION OF DISCOMFORT AS A DESIGN RESOURCE

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ABSTRACT

Building on feminist HCI, care ethics and soma design, we invite design practitioners to collectively explore otherwise hidden and isolating experience of discomfort. By discomfort we understand a range of first-person experiences: from physical pain to a slight sense of unease related to social interaction. The purpose of the workshop is to explore uncomfortable feelings and sensations, which are present in our bodies but whose existence is rarely acknowledged and shared. We will engage in the exploration through a one day workshop combining bodily exercises with collaborative design activities. The first goal of the workshop is to materialise corporeal discomfort and experiment with different ways of articulating experience. The second goal is to explore and change the process of designing together through. We will pay attention to the uncomfortable in order to develop the ways of working together that are based on our shared vulnerabilities rather than privileges and shed light on how collective immersion of bodily discomfort could spark a caring and generative design process.

INTRODUCTION

Pain can be one of the loneliest experiences — not only exruciating but also extremely personal, context-heavy, and isolating because of the lack of means of expression, the absence of shared language (Scarry, 1987) and the social discomfort or reluctance of sharing pain. Pain is in the body, but it is hidden, confined, unspoken. Not only this is due to the inherent limitations of our language, but because we have been trained within the limits of ’success narratives’ (Howell et al., 2021) on hiding the uncomfortable and interrupting the rhythms of our bodies with the purpose to sustain the flows of the social. We have been trained on putting the struggle and discomfort to the backstage of the everyday.

In this workshop, we will draw on the feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) to explore the potential of pain and discomfort within a
design process centered around the generative capacity of non-habitual and uncomfortable somatic experiences. While the experience of discomfort and pain is highly subjective, most often inexplicable, and unshareable, it is potent at bringing our attention to neglected body parts or memories and offering new bodily perceptions with estrangement (Wilde et al., 2017). The workshop aims to contribute to the body of work in HCI investigating the significance of uncomfortable bodily experience (Benford et al., 2012; Benford et al., 2018; Benford et al., 2021; Tennent et al., 2020; Byrne et al., 2020; Beuthel & Wilde, 2017; Demir et al., 2022) and visceral discomfort (Leisohn et al., 2007; Maurer et al., 2017). Placing a social layer on top of this, we seek to understand the importance of collective discomfort in creative design work.

We deem the exploration of discomforts essential for building novel ways of designing and interacting with each other in a way that is based on care for inherent vulnerabilities of our bodies rather than the ideas of autonomy, competition and invincibility. As Gilmore writes, paying attention to pain and discomfort enables us to realize the porosity of “I” as a detached self from the others and can be a fruitful start for caring for more-than-human relationships (GILMORE, 2012). With this attention we adhere to feminist developments in HCI (Campo Woytuk et al., 2020; Almeida et al., 2020; Alfaras et al., 2020; Vallgård et al., 2022; Homewood et al., 2019) and the calls for advancing designs that stay with the trouble (Søndergaard, 2020) rather than swatting it away. Pains and discomfort – in various degrees and incarnations (from the pain of childbirth to injury related pains) – are the constants that cannot be completely avoided, yet they are not easy to talk about. The propensity towards computational abstraction and seamlessness has made it even easier to conceal other’s pain and suffering (Tomlinson, 2020). We ground our exploration in the idea that we need to be accepting to pain so we could interact with each other (within design and outside of it) with a respect to the possibilities of having and causing pains and so we could treat our shared vulnerabilities with care.

WORKSHOP CONTENT

Within this workshop we will turn the equation upside down and work on bringing attention to painful experiences and sharing them with others. We will focus on painful aspects of our lives, felt experiences of bodily discomfort with ourselves and the others, and explore them by articulating and them through materials. We will use pain and discomfort as resources for design with the intention to make discomforting design possible and develop authentic ways of interacting with each other within the design process – the ways that are respectful to our shared vulnerabilities and painful experiences rather than the unreachable ideals of invincibility, privilege, and autonomy. Without the intention of exploring the extreme manifestations of pain related to physical disability, severe injury and traumas, we want to focus on the discomforting experiences of our bodies that are always present even in the most ordinary circumstances (because of chronic conditions, social fears or simply going through menstrual cycle) without being articulated.

We invite design practitioners to join us in our collaborative exploration of pain through bodily practices and first person design methods (Höök et al., 2018). The one day workshop will consist of two parts: we will first engage in bodily activity to explore discomfort individually and collaboratively. We will start from engaging into gentle body work that is inspired by yoga practice and to then add elements that evoke light discomfort. We will then use photography as a tool for eliciting felt sensations that may emerge during the bodily activity for design use. In the second half of the day we are going to use the elicited experiences as a resource for designing artifacts, wearables, or experiences that could materially externalize their felt discomfort or that could attend to pain or discomfort. We are not planning to induce any strong sensations of discomfort, yet we will try to redirect the participants’ attention to sensations that are already and inevitably present in our bodies without us necessarily noticing them.

The workshop seeks to traverse three ambitions. First, we want to explore the social discomfort emerging from interpersonal bodily interaction and from difficult experiences of going through a somatic pain (e.g., chronic pain, menstrual cramps, mental depression, etc) in social settings. In doing so, we will look into subtle expressions of discomfort such as laughter or gestures that indicate the need to share uncomfortable experience with others. Secondly, we want to experiment with means of expressing pain and documenting our collaborative experience through photo elicitation (Harper, 2002). Lastly, we are interested in how materializing discomfort could bring attention to neglected bodily experiences and provide a caring space of experiencing and expressing discomfort in social situations.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The workshop and our interest towards explaining pain through design is grounded in the methodology of soma design (Höök, 2018), feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) and feminist HCI (Søndergaard, 2020; Howell et al., 2021; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011). The workshop interest towards using body work is grounded in soma design’s exploration of
non-habitual movements (Benford et al., 2012; Umair et al., 2019; Benford et al., 2018; Demir et al., 2023); questioning the artificial dichotomy between mind and the body, rational and felt experiences (Garrett et al., 2023). Using a first person design perspective, soma design also directs our attention towards the generative potential of breakdowns in collaborative work of a design team (Popova et al., 2022).

Our exploration joins the ongoing developments of feminist-oriented HCI. Howell and colleagues have problematised the distinction between success and failure to challenge the narratives of ‘success’, drawing attention to ‘failures’, ‘breakdowns’ and otherwise the problematic aspects of design work that often remain unreported when we strive to sustain the ‘tidy’ design narratives (Howell et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Balaam and coauthors have explored the concept of emotion work and the uncomfortable experiences as an integral part of design research work that often remains unreported and unarticulated (Balaam et al., 2019). Devendorf, Andersen, and Kellihir suggested Design Memoirs as a method to approach the uncomfortable yet rarely articulated publicly personal experiences around parenting (Devendorf et al., 2020). In our previous work we analyzed how carefully analysing breakdowns within collaborative design work can help to develop purposeful vulnerability within a design team with the intention to advance a more authentic and caring way of designing together. This line of research suggests that reapproaching failure, breakdown, and discomfort is important for creating better understanding of potential harms and advancing design justice.

Overall, the workshop motivation is built on our interest to feminist ethics (Lorde, 2022) that promotes escaping from the ‘either-or’ ways of existence and resolving the dichotomies between failure and success, rational and felt, vulnerability and power, and – as we want to add to the list: between pain and joy.

**ORGANISERS**

Kristina Popova is a doctoral student at the department of Media Technology and Interaction Design at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. She is an interdisciplinary researcher with a background in social science currently working in interaction design. In her PhD, Kristina is developing a hands-on approach to ethics of technology with the purpose to explore ethics as situated in the details of technology design and the corporeal experience of technology practitioners. She combines empirical exploration of ethics in design research with theoretical exploration of feminist ethics. Her work is grounded in feminist theories, care ethics, and first-person design research.

Joo Young Park is a PhD student in Interaction Design at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. Jooyoung’s work is focused on designing critical and feminist interactive technologies in the contexts of intimate care and chronic pain. Currently, she is exploring somatic discomfort and pain as a generative space of inquiring how wearable technologies can intimately touch our bodies and facilitate slow yet longer term cultivation of bodily awareness. Her works are oriented around Human-Computer Interaction, feminist theories, critical design, soma design, soft robotics, and first-person research methods.

Arife Dila Demir is a doctoral student and a junior researcher at the EKA Estonian Academy of Arts. She works in the Sensorial Design project at EKA exploring how movement-based interactive textiles facilitate somaesthetic awareness of bodily discomforts such as chronic pain. Dila is involved in somatic practices i.e. yoga and dance improvisation which she interweaves with her design research. Her research background is in soma design, somaesthetics, kinesthetic interactions, interactive textiles, Human-Computer-Interaction, autoethnography, and first-person research methods.

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