

DILEMMAS AROUND MEASURABILITY

Impact assessment options for socially engaged design- and art-based
interventions

Rita Szerencsés

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest Doctoral School
PhD in Arts (Design Theory);
PhD Programme in Design Culture Studies

SUPERVISOR:

Anikó Illés, PhD
associate professor
Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design

Budapest, 2023

THESIS

The goal of the thesis, based on exploratory qualitative research is to explore the impact assessment itself, as opposed to the comprehensive and specific impact measurement of individual projects.

1. At the intersection of practice and theory, by experimentally using existing toolsets and methods adequate impact assessment modes and systems can be applied and implemented for socially committed design and art-based interventions, specifically within the realm of social design projects. These implementations consider impact assessment as a system, following the principle of triangulation to support methodological pluralism and data diversity for validity and credibility.
2. Emergent approaches of the impact assessment in the civil and social spheres have proven applicable for artistic interventions also. These approaches mainly manifest in tools used for impact planning and goal definition, providing theoretical and structural foundations for an intervention. Additionally, they encompass several narrative methods that, after some adaptation, can be transferred to social design situations.
3. If and to the extent that the empowerment, capacity-building, creativity development, and increasing self-esteem of the target community are the objectives of the social design interventions (aligned with the ultimate goals of moving away from perceived or real learned helplessness / powerlessness and achieving social mobility), then the shift in these aspects can be examined through sociological, anthropological, and psychological methodologies and analysis. Most methods that align with the design process fall into the realm of qualitative research tools. In terms of approaches, we can refer more to anthropological toolkits, while in semi-quantitative situations, sociological techniques (questionnaires) are more appropriate.
4. Impact assessment is an integral part of the artistic/design process; it represents one stage of the design thinking while also serving as an informative data source, yet simultaneously an external layer whose sole purpose is to ensure and legitimize the intervention's quality. Both statements are true, and yet there is no dichotomy between them. Ideally, impact assessment becomes embedded in the design process, but not in

the same way, for example, as prototyping is a phase of design thinking. This inherent difference makes impact assessment somewhat external since it requires dedicated time and attention. However, it is essential that impact assessment tasks find their space and time on the timeline and moments of intervention. Reflection and processing of events require time; therefore, it is necessary to some extent to separate impact assessment from the literal sense of a design workshop. Nevertheless, within the comprehensive design process, impact assessment still has a legitimate place and role. Its results nourish and inform the design processes, indicating directions for continuing co-creation and co-realization (which implicitly relates to quality assurance). Additionally, by planned data analysis, statements can be distilled, enhancing the credibility of the intervention when published (the impact assessment process itself already increases the credibility of an intervention). Moreover, the findings regarding the tracked change help legitimize the intervention's purpose.

5. The designers, researchers, and the target community are all subjects, data providers, and researchers within an impact assessment process. Therefore, it is worthwhile to architecture the impact assessment in a way that allows designers and design researchers to conduct data collection and analysis. Additionally, it should enable both designers and design researchers to be involved in the investigation with their own narratives. The same applies to other participants who, in the spirit of participation and inclusivity, can become active co-creators and co-researchers in the impact assessment.
6. By transforming and complementing existing techniques, the necessary complexity and specialization can be achieved, making them practical and applicable in real-life situations. The experimental impact assessment did not rely on pioneering tools but rather adapted methodologies already tried and tested in the social sciences and civil sector, ensuring safety and reliability. However, it is still beneficial to employ design techniques (such as persona building, mapping, journaling, etc.) in impact assessment. This approach creates a continuum with design workshops and better reflects the complex nature of the design proces. Moreover, it is necessary to reinforce this integration, especially to ensure the experiential factor, for instance, by shaping it into community activities or workshops.
7. Participation in creative processes indirectly impacts self-esteem, self-confidence, and proactivity through experiencing the quality of creativity. Creative competence development, as a prominent indicator in design, serves as a tool rather than an end

goal, catalyzing changes in general personality traits and attitudes. Existing impact assessment methods can offer solutions for assessing changes related to creativity and external confirmation of behavioral manifestations of self-esteem. However, these assessments always rely on qualitative and subjective foundations. Aggregating subjective data can serve as a quantitative basis, but determining shifts in self-reflection, self-disclosure, internalization, and cognitive levels remains uncertain and challenging.

8. The impact assessment as a system is non-linear, and it is advisable to follow the principles of grounded theory. However, within grounded theory, the tools and methods used should maintain linearity and even temporal linearity to ensure comparability.
9. In case of a participatory action research study the impact assessment process should reflect continuous feedback and the organic modification of variables. Participatory action research entails involving participants, but those engaged in the impact assessment possess their own agendas stemming from their personality, profession, and roles. Consequently, their observations, impressions, and narratives may implicitly serve these agendas. Exploring these agendas becomes a task during impact planning, and it may be beneficial to incorporate them as control variables in the analyses.