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## **Seriously Playful or Playfully Serious? Critical Reflections on the Interdisciplinary Use of the Cultural Probes Method**

### **Abstract**

Creative and visual methods have shown great potential to engender new ideas and (self) understandings in participants in research focused on topics that are hard to address via conventional qualitative methods such as interviews. Through their playful approach, such methods can open a whole new window for researchers to understand participants or research phenomena. However, engaging participants through these methods can be challenging, and the outcome can be more uncertain and unpredictable compared to conventional qualitative methods. Our article introduces three case studies that applied a method drawn from design research, namely *cultural probes*. By analyzing these cases together, we are able to highlight the strengths, shortcomings, and issues that need careful consideration when probes are applied to an ethnographic research process. We critically reflect on the ideas of playfulness behind the visual and creative approaches and contribute to methodological discussions on playful methods particularly with adult participants. Our findings emphasize the importance of profound understanding of the epistemological background of the method, *why* playfulness is employed in research, *to whom* probes are targeted, and *how* motivation is engendered in participants. Employed without these considerations, playfulness of probes can appear strange and as something that alienates the study participants rather than engages them in sharing their views and ideas.

Keywords: Playfulness, cultural probes, ethnography, visual and creative methods

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## **Introduction: Methodological Explorations in Interdisciplinary Research**

In recent years interdisciplinary research has become more common in academia and in ethnology, including collaborations among methodologically and epistemologically diverse disciplines. While it has been typical for cultural and social sciences to adopt and use theories, concepts and methods from other disciplines quite flexibly, the current trends of inter- and transdisciplinary research have undoubtedly increased both dialogue and the application of methods across different scientific fields. There has been increasing interest in creative, visual, sensory and art-based methods and approaches to complement traditional qualitative research methodology. This also applies to ethnology and its related fields (see, e.g., Pink 2001; 2009; Wiles et al. 2013; Culhane & Elliot 2016; van den Scott 2018; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). These methods have been used and developed to overcome some of the challenges that a rapidly changing world with complex political, environmental, economic, social, and digitalized environments have created for qualitative research (Wiles et al. 2013, 18; Koskinen-Koivisto, Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas 2020, xxi). Some of the challenges became particularly evident and widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic in the years 2020–2021 when many researchers had to take novel stances on how to access the field or conduct interviews or ethnographic research. The drivers for methodological development have also arisen from a need to enable the study of new areas of social life, or to examine aspects of social life that are not accessible by traditional methods (Wiles et al. 2013, 20; Mannay 2016, 47, 51–52; see also Lähdesmäki et al. 2020).

The above-mentioned reasons can also be found behind the methodological explorations that will be presented in this article. The article contributes to methodological discussions by highlighting the importance of epistemological considerations when applying experimental and potentially creative and playful tools across different disciplines and combining them with more conventional qualitative data gathering. While some visual methods such as photography and film making (e.g., Sinisalo 2005; Kupiainen 2022), participant-induced elicitation / photo-elicitation (e.g., Koskela 2018; Hänninen 2020; 2022), drawing and storyboarding (e.g., Siim 2020) and sensory ethnography (e.g., Koskinen-Koivisto & Lehtovaara 2020) have been applied in contemporary Finnish ethnology and cultural studies, this article focuses on examining the possibilities of a typical method in design research—*cultural probes*—that has, to date, been less used in these fields, except in design anthropology. Probes are broadly understood as a self-documentation method, including explorative activities and artifacts such as postcards or booklets to be filled out by study participants. They are used to evoke more creative and

playful thinking that can promote collaborative discovery and inform design processes. (e.g., Luusua et al. 2015)

In this article we will reflect on the strengths, shortcomings, and issues that need to be considered when playful methods such as cultural probes are applied as part of ethnographic research. Based on three different empirical case studies in which the method was employed, we examine *why and how playfulness was introduced to and stimulated in our study participants, how playful and creative assignments were received by them, and why probe-inspired tasks worked better in some contexts and study settings than in others.*

The case studies presented in the article are a part of three different interdisciplinary research projects which included close collaboration between humanists, social scientists (e.g., ethnologists and anthropologists) and designers. The Trust-M project (*Designing Inclusive & Trustworthy Digital Public Services for Migrants in Finland, 2022–2025*) is a broad consortium that aims to create practical digital and hybrid tools and solutions for public services to support migrant integration in Finland by enhancing the inclusivity of services. Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed and Johanna Ylipulli have been working on the project to produce social, cultural and contextual understanding of current integration services and trust formation by examining experiences of service encounters from the perspectives of both service providers and migrant customers, along with the role of digital technology in services. Knowledge produced by these case studies should inform solution-oriented design and technology development.

The other study was a collaboration between two projects funded by the Research Council of Finland—AICity (*Experiencing Artificial Intelligence in the Smart City: Co-creating applications for urban life*) at the University of Oulu, and DISC (*Digital Inequality in Smart Cities, 2020–2025*) at Aalto University in Finland—and a private research studio in Mumbai, India. Both projects focused on understanding emerging technologies in urban contexts, with the shared aim being to explore how digital technologies were used in everyday life in different urban places. This study was conducted by Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua in two very different locales: Finland and India.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Acknowledgements: We wish to sincerely thank our study participants and collaborators, community liaison Shabnam Khan, students who conducted the probes with Finnish university students, as well as our colleagues, design researchers Rūta Šerpytė and Sunok Lee for designing the notebook for service providers and storyboarding for migrants. This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council–funded project Trust-M, (353511), and the Research Council of Finland–funded projects DISC (332143) and AICity (316136).

While the Trust-M project is distinct from the AICity and DISC projects, they share some commonalities<sup>2</sup>: in all projects the focus has been on studying digital technology use on an everyday level among adult participants and they have had the goal to apply research results later in practical ways (e.g., digital/hybrid technology solutions). The endeavor to produce practical solutions has led us to combine probes alongside other qualitative methods (interviews, observations, workshops) that could help us understand research participants' lived experiences and relationship to digital technologies in nuanced ways, to grasp abstract and complex phenomena from different perspectives (e.g., trust) but also to challenge, inspire and reflect practical design processes. By adding playful and creative elements into the research methods in the form of probes we aimed to afford flexibility and an explorative mindset not only for us but also for study participants to defamiliarize mundane phenomenon and to come up with unpredictable results or insights.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of both projects, the authors of this article also come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (ethnology, design anthropology, education, design research, and architecture). We have included the perspectives of researchers who have a more in-depth understanding and experience of using probes because of their disciplinary and methodological background (Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua) and experiences of researchers who were applying the probes method for the first time (Anne Häkkinen and Avanti Chajed). This adds nuanced layers for scrutinizing both the possibilities and potential pitfalls of using probes in ethnological or interdisciplinary research.

In this article we first introduce the probes as a method and how that method relates to other visual, creative and playful methods that are more widely used in ethnology or ethnographic research. We also briefly discuss how playfulness is understood and defined in adult play research. Then we present the three case studies and how we have applied *activities/assignments inspired by the probes*: as reflective notebooks for city officials providing services for migrants; activities with migrants such as drawing storyboards; and booklets that were completed in long-distance collaboration with Indian participants and researchers in both Finland and India. The probes used in these case studies were applied in the early stages of gathering research material, predating the use of other methods such as interviews or workshops. Each case study illuminates methodological discussions and choices from disparate angles including both the challenges and advantages of playful approaches, particularly with adult participants. Finally, in the last section we draw col-

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2 Johanna Ylipulli has also been involved in all projects and thus has insight on all of the case studies introduced in this article.

lectively on our experiences to reflect on what we as researchers need to take into consideration when using playful methods as part of a study design. By sharing our insights, we hope to further promote methodological discussions of playful and creative approaches.

### **Probes as a Playful Method**

Cultural probes are a research approach developed in design research around the turn of the 21st century (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999) which have become a well-known method of conducting participatory<sup>3</sup> design research. In general, cultural probes refer to a variety of methods that rely on research participants' self-documentation, and adopt a playful, creative, and interactive attitude; their goal is to explore people's unique viewpoints and experiences. Probes were widely accepted and employed by the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) design and research community but also by social scientists (Gaver et al. 2004; Boehner et al. 2007). As such, they have been further developed, for example as design probes (Mattelmäki 2006), technology probes (Hutchinson et al. 2003) and evaluation probes (Luusua et al. 2015).

The cultural probes approach was originally founded on the philosophical thinking of artists-designers and thus, as a method, its central qualities arise from this origin. The method originated from the need to contact diverse and geographically dispersed groups by utilizing self-documentation tasks. As the metaphor of "probe" implies, they are material objects sent independently into research locations where participants complete tasks without direct researcher presence. It is important to note that the ultimate knowledge interest regarding probes was not to produce descriptive understandings *per se*, but to identify opportunities for design (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999). The probes were intended to spark the imagination and to provoke the novel thinking of both research participants and designers, as well as to disrupt traditional designer-user roles; the goal was to challenge, inspire, and enable reflexive design practice. Design scholars Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne and Elena Pacenti (1999, 27) openly stated that their "original" cultural probes were not intended to be analyzed. Rather, the researchers created design suggestions that represented what they had learned from the materials. Thus, the initial probes were intended to be interpreted as a creative dialogue between designers and study participants. The primary research question of design research is usually not "What is?" but rather "What could be?" In general, it has

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3 For participatory work in design research, see, e.g., Bratteteig et al. (2013). For discussion on positionality and power relations related to participatory practices in cultural research and social sciences, see, e.g., Gubrium & Harper (2013), Mannay (2016), Suopajarvi (2017), Koskinen-Koivisto, Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas (2020).

very different goals compared to cultural research or social science; it focuses on gathering insights to guide the creation of products, services, or systems, emphasizing innovation or practical application. Cultural probes, then, may represent an initial step in this process.

Usually, a cultural probe is a collection of artifacts that is intended to help researchers and research participants generate empirical and experiential data through creative and reflective assignments, as well as then collect this data as research materials from participants. The tasks and objects in the collection may include, for example, postcards to be filled out, single use cameras, or simply booklets with prompts for writing, sketching, and pasting pictures (Luusua et al. 2015). It is important to note that probes must be carefully designed, and design researchers strive to make them visually pleasing and enticing; this is part of the idea that probes invite the participants to play and create, not just to collect information for researchers. In addition, these qualities underline the reciprocal nature of interaction between the design-researcher and the participant—a probe is like a gift given to the participant, who, in turn, gives their perspectives back (Luusua et al. 2015).

After various research communities began to apply probes in a more scientific manner, these premises were significantly altered. The probes in their various forms have been used for analytic research such as design evaluation (e.g., Luusua et al. 2015). Probes have also been applied in design anthropology to complement conventional ethnography and to provide information on difficult-to-access settings (e.g., Ylipulli 2015a). For example, information and communication technology (ICT) has become ubiquitous—it is used in public spaces but also integrated into even the most private aspects of life. Engaging with individuals' ICT experiences through conventional qualitative or ethnographic methods such as participant observation can be unfeasible and perhaps intrusive. Probes have proved useful in ethnographic research examining sensitive topics (see, e.g., Hemmings et al. 2002); on the other hand, they can also be seen as useful in studying phenomena that are “everywhere” as they enable the participant to highlight personally meaningful moments and instances connected to technology use. They give participants more time to reflect on and craft more thoughtful replies. In interviews, by contrast, the mode of interaction requires reacting quickly though also enables views to be unraveled through conversation.

Cultural probes can be seen as occupying a position between diary studies and visual and creative methods such as participant-induced elicitation<sup>4</sup> (based

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4 In participant-induced elicitation the research participant is asked to create something, for example take photographs or draw pictures related to the research topics (Collier & Collier 1986; Harper 2002; Hänninen 2020).

on photography, film, drawings and artwork or other visual material), which are recognized techniques in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Bagnoli 2009; Collier & Collier 1986; Elliott 1997; Pink 2001; Gauntlett 2007; Gubrium & Harper 2013; Padgett et al. 2013; van den Scott 2018; Hänninen 2020; Siim 2020). These methods share many similar aims and convergences with probes. They are used to enhance the collaboration, rapport and dialogue between researchers and research participants; to work as an icebreaker in the interview; to study topics or phenomena that are somehow hidden or difficult to verbalize using only traditional qualitative methods; to tackle (invisible) mundane and self-evident aspects of daily lives; to evoke memories and to help recall things; and to promote self-reflective discussions with research participants. (See, e.g., Harper 2002; Hurworth 2003; Padgett et al. 2013; Hänninen 2020; 2022.) Analogous to probes, for example in participant-induced elicitation interviews, research participants are “encouraged to challenge the preconceptions of the interviewer, provide unprecedented perspectives to the discussion, and experiment with different kinds of ideas” (Hänninen 2020, 63). While clear-cut distinctions between the above-mentioned methods might not even be fruitful to make, probes are characterized particularly by their creative, playful aspect and the emphasis on diverse means of expressions.

### **Defining Playfulness**

The focus of this article is not on studying play *per se*. However, it touches upon aspects related to it as our theoretical understanding of *playfulness* is largely influenced by the interdisciplinary field of play research carried out in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in design research. As there exists considerable research literature on play, particularly on children’s play, our focus has been on adults. This outline derives from our research projects in which selected participants were all adults, and from what is already known about adults having partly different views on play and playfulness in comparison to children (e.g., Guitard, Ferland & Dutil 2005; Lubbers et al. 2023).

Play and playfulness are closely connected to each other. We see playfulness “as an antecedent and precondition to play” (Heljakka 2024, 77) and as an *attitude* (Sicart 2014, 13). Playfulness as an intrinsic motivation and a frame of mind is perceived as spontaneous, individual, undisciplined, innovative and unpredictable but it is also tied to and conditioned by culture (Hänninen 2003, 105–106). Playfulness in adulthood has also been connected to a sense of humor (or a non-serious approach), openness to trying new things, and a positive outlook involving emotions such as joy and enjoyment (Guitard, Ferland & Dutil 2005; Lubbers et al. 2023). Play is considered to be in its essence ambivalent and vague, a self-directed and voluntary *activity* that combines the

player's creativity, imagination and skill to explore varied objects, environments, and ideas. It can be open-ended and unstructured or goal-driven and structured. According to previous research, playing increases curiosity, proactivity and flexibility to our minds, and thus can facilitate thinking and act as a transformative force. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 2; Henricks 2006, 185; Gray 2015, 125; Heljakka 2024, 24, 77–78.) It can help us go beyond the ordinary, moving us emotionally, mentally and physically (e.g. Huizinga 1970 [1938], 28; Sicart 2014, 3), but it can also make us deal with existing materialities and idea systems such as language, cultural and social norms (Henricks 2015, 115). Like play, playful attitude is part of social interaction and can enable individuals to make emotional connections with others (Henricks 2015, 101; Lubbers et al. 2023, 10). By stimulating study participants' playfulness, we have been particularly interested in activating creativity, imagination and self-expression. In the following sections we introduce our practical implementations, experiences and outcomes of bringing out playfulness through probes.

### **Notebooks to Elicit Reflections on Abstract Concepts with Professionals: What About Playfulness?** (*Anne Häkkinen*)

My case study was related to the Trust-M project in which my role was to examine how service providers understood trust formation and the role of digital technology in service encounters with customers. The probes used in this study consist of notebooks—printed booklets with tasks. They were designed to be a part of ethnographic research that consisted of semi-structured interviews and observations with street-level service providers (13 participants).<sup>5</sup> The study participants were working in public services targeted for migrants, including guidance and counselling services (as service advisors), employment services (as personal coaches) and adult education (as career coaches and teachers). The notebooks were meant as a pre-task for the interviews. Nine participants completed the notebook.<sup>6</sup>

In the early stages of brainstorming with my colleague (Johanna Ylipulli), who was experienced in combining cultural probes with ethnography, we pondered possibilities of carrying out ethnography with other methods. One reason for this exploration was my struggle with approaching and introducing

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5 I also interviewed 13 service providers working at the administrative and managerial level but I did not use notebooks with them. Most interviews with street-level civil servants were in-person, typically in their workplaces.

6 All participants signed a written consent form regarding participating in the interview, completing the notebook, and the usage, dissemination and archiving of produced research material. I have not used the notebook as an illustration if the participant has not given their permission to present the notebook material in direct quotes or images.

abstract themes of trust and trust building in the interviews. Because of this, I wanted to try including more experimental and creative tasks for my participants to bring out some aspects of their work that might have been difficult to express only via interviews. In our initial discussions and notes between me and the design researcher (Rūta Šerpytytė), the role and the purpose of the notebook was framed accordingly: “Should not be central to the study but work as an inspiration for the interview (for helping participants to do self-reflection and paying attention to different dimensions of customer work).”

The tasks in the notebook were meant to activate unorthodox thinking and to help participants to recall customer situations afterwards in the interview. Ideally it could help participants with their work, for example with self-assessment such as promoting conscious evaluation of interactions with customers, and the role digital technology plays or *could* play in those interactions. The set of assignments could be interpreted and completed in multiple ways even when some of them were more structured through the given instructions.

When deciding the design criteria together with the design researcher, one important criterion was the possibility to fill the notebook flexibly, either during a workday or after or otherwise occasionally during five workdays, as this could be crucial for adopting a more playful and relaxed attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise (see Malaby 2009, 206). Also, based on the previous research on using cultural probes with professionals (see Luce-ro & Mattelmäki 2007), we wanted to be considerate of the limited time service providers could allocate to completing the tasks. Since it was difficult to evaluate how much time it would take to do the assignments, we offered different options for how to respond to the tasks. This simultaneously introduced participants to several creative ways to express their thoughts but also the possibility to stick with more conventional ways of self-documentation if more playful elements felt off-putting to them. Participants could choose to answer briefly or more in-depth in some open-ended tasks by writing a story/narrative, putting down short notes, creating a poem, or drawing something. We also added warm-up tasks that were quicker to grasp, such as marking the technological tools that participants used in their daily work.

We designed the visual elements to invite a relaxed and playful attitude towards the tasks (e.g., using emojis) as well as to help participants tackle abstract topics. For example, in one task we used building blocks and a wrecking ball as visual illustrations and metaphors to invite participants to contemplate what the elements of building trust could be and what might damage it (see Figure 1). In another task (Figure 2) we utilized the visual cue of a thermometer to “measure” their clients’ trust, expectations, and confidence; participants could freely choose one or several situations they had with clients during the week and reflect on the encounters from these perspectives. As all

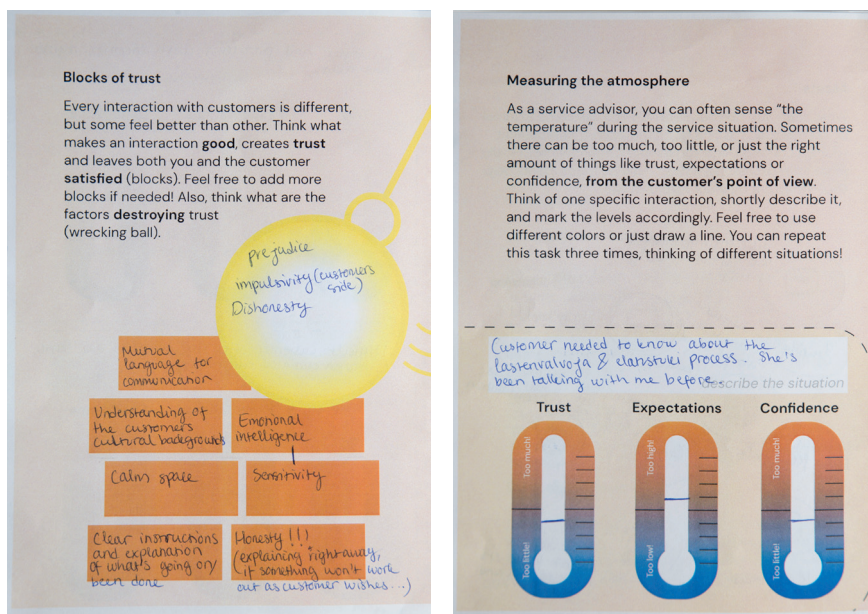


Fig. 1: Visual cues in notebooks to help participants tackle abstract concepts. The notebook task: "Blocks of Trust". Photograph by Tuomas Marttila.

Fig. 2: "Measuring the atmosphere" assignment caused confusion among participants. Photograph by Tuomas Marttila

participants used Finnish and/or English in their work, they could choose to complete the booklet either in Finnish or English. The notebooks were printed in color and stapled, enabling the participants to have them as physical objects and fill them in by hand.

When scheduling interviews with each participant,<sup>7</sup> I confirmed they had received their notebooks in time and would have at least two weeks to complete them. I also gave some general guidelines via email. At this point, some participants asked me for clarifications regarding how to complete the notebook as they worried whether they had understood the tasks correctly. The ambiguity of some tasks seemed to confuse and cause feelings of uncertainty in participants despite my attempts to alleviate potential discomfort both in the introduction of the notebook and in email correspondence. Participants also seemed to struggle to adjust their expectations and ideas about what

7 Participants were recruited via managerial-level persons working in different units within the same city. I introduced my study and the notebook to teachers in their workplace face-to-face. With other street-level professionals we communicated first via email.

scientific research should look like, whether playfulness and the non-serious approach of the notebook fit with the idea of the scientific method. This has been reported in previous studies that have applied cultural probes (e.g., Mattelmäki 2008). During interviews I also asked for feedback<sup>8</sup> regarding the notebook, and received quite straightforward replies:

One of the service advisors mentioned that she had difficulties understanding the instructions of the tasks (overly complicated instructions) during the hectic workday. It took time for her to get some kind of understanding of what the tasks were about and still she and other service advisors were not sure how their answers might help the research, or what they should write about. She said laughing that they (service advisors) should be considered as three-year-old children and instruct them in a similar way. (Field notes, 21.3.2024)

The above-mentioned “Measuring atmosphere” assignment (Figure 2) turned out to be perhaps too ambiguous and complicated, and without further explanations taking place in the interview it would have been impossible to interpret participants’ answers (see also Mattelmäki 2008; Ylipulli 2015b). On the other hand, the purpose of the assignment was to recall certain customer situations, and in that sense the task fulfilled its purpose well.

Despite the ambivalent feelings which the notebook evoked in some participants, they seemed to be motivated to fill it, some of them even thoroughly. However, it is more difficult to evaluate how much the tasks were enabling a playful attitude, creativity or novel thinking. I did not ask this directly from the participants. We had added elements to the assignments that we considered essential for invoking playfulness, such as involving positive affect, having non-literal or symbolic elements to encourage the use of imagination and flexibility, and the tasks to be more ambivalent or vague in nature (see Sicart 2014, 31–32; Gray 2015, 125; Heljakka 2024, 73–78). However, most participants completed the notebook in more conventional ways—writing notes and narratives, even in the assignment in which we encouraged participants to generate ideas for potential future (sci-fi) technological solutions for their work. Only one participant drew a technological solution, none wrote a poem.

There seemed to be more problems engaging in imaginative tasks in the notebook. It is very likely that completing the notebook during the (potentially hectic) workday left participants little time and space for taking a relaxed and playful attitude or activating one’s imagination. However, while the ideas, for example, for future sci-fi technologies were either quite ordinary or not necessarily suitable as real-world digital solutions, some answers highlighted other

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8 Some participants also wrote their feedback in the notebook.

important aspects service providers tackled in their everyday work. As such, these answers gave me a different perspective on things participants discussed in the interviews and, on the other hand, helped them to express these issues in unfamiliar ways. For example, one teacher presented an idea of technology that could enable her to read her students' minds to better understand them to bridge experienced language and cultural barriers. Her answer can be interpreted—based on the interview discussions with her—to emphasize the communication challenges she faced in trying to help her students, many of whom had accumulated a range of problems in their lives.

Regarding integrating the notebook with other methods, the most fruitful combination proved to be the one in which I was able to conduct observations before the interview, and/or when I had a chance to read the notebooks before the interview. This was not always possible, but when it was, I had a chance to ask more elaborate questions both related to my observations and the notebooks. However, the analytical potential of the notebook stayed rather modest apart from the task “Building blocks of trust”. One benefit the task offered was the possibility for participants to contemplate a highly abstract concept beforehand, instead of coming up with something in the moment of the interview alone. Thus, as a pre-orientation for the interview and as a starting point for further reflections, the notebook worked nicely. While it is difficult to know whether more open-ended assignments might have engendered different outcomes, it is possible that the framework of some tasks *limited* the potential of expressions or unexpected insights of participants instead of expanding them.

As this method was new to me, it probably made me hesitant to apply the whole potential of creative and playful elements. The way I adapted the probes also showed some limitations in my understanding of the method even when I familiarized myself with it by reading and having conversations with experienced colleagues. For example, I could have explained the purpose of the notebook even more clearly to help participants orientate to the tasks. I also did not integrate the *social aspect* of playfulness and play (see Sicart 2014, 2; Henricks 2015, 101), such as the possibility for participants to explore tasks together for example in a group interview or in a workshop—which has proven to be a beneficial approach when using probes in design research (Ylipulli 2015b). Now each participant did the assignments individually which, on the other hand, enabled more private insights but left out the chance to discover things in collaboration with others. Doing things together might have also helped to evoke a more playful attitude within a group and individual participants.

## Using Probes with Migrants: Facing the Complexity and Unpredictability of Visual Methods (*Avanti Chajed*)

Like Anne Häkkinen, I was also working on the Trust-M project. My area of interest was to study the experiences of immigrant women in using public services in Finland. I was drawn to the visual and creative methods to add materiality (Kuntz 2015) to my understanding of participants' experiences. For example, small points of connection with research participants, such as their WhatsApp profile photos, may provide a whole new window into understanding them (Chajed 2022, 97–98). Probes could serve a similar purpose. My reason for using probes partly differed from the original intention behind them (inspiring the design possibilities). However, I was drawn to their potential as objects of play, creating new ways for participants to explore and express their feelings about using services and their process of making Finland home. My intention was to use probes as complementary material with semi-structured interviews primarily to spark creative thinking and representation of experience that would tap into participants' emotional, mental and physical realities, much like play and playfulness has been thought to do in previous scholarship (Huizinga 1970 [1938], 28; Sicart 2014, 3).

I created three probe activities to capture the immigrant women's experiences. The first was to create a storyboard of the research participants' initial arrival and process of making Finland home. Sunok Lee, a colleague who works in design and Human-Computer Interaction helped with the

templates and made a comic strip-like page that could be filled with drawings, cutouts and speech bubbles (Figure 3).

The second probe activity was a resource map (Figure 4) in which participants were given an empty box to draw and connect the resources they relied on the most while living in Finland. The participants could add services, smaller communities, religious institutions

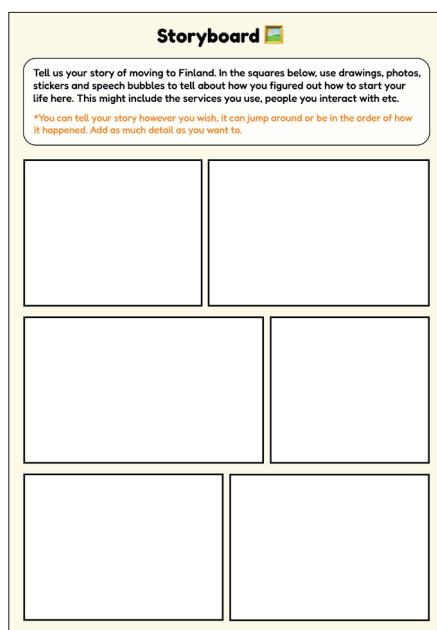


Fig. 3: Template made by Sunok Lee for the “Storyboard” activity. Photograph by Sunok Lee

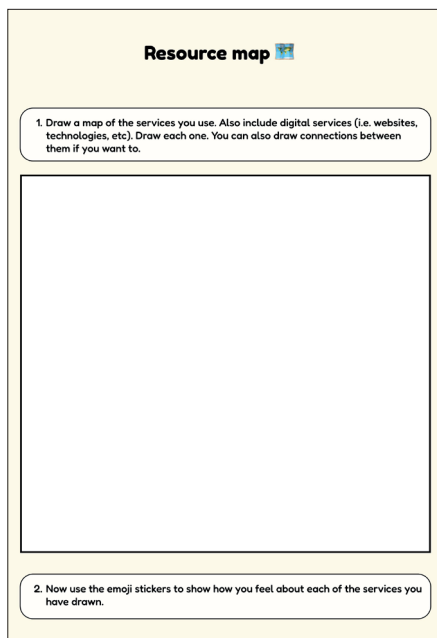


Fig. 4: Template made by Sunok Lee for the “Resource map” activity. Photograph by Sunok Lee

and spaces such as grocery stores. They were then asked to use emoji stickers to label how they felt about each resource. Finally, the third probe activity was a letter from an imaginary friend asking for advice on what to do after finding out she was pregnant. The prompt was to reply to this friend.

Making decisions on how to present each activity turned out to be challenging as I had no previous

experience of using these methods or a thorough understanding of who my participants were. How would participants react to these prompts? What kinds of activities could I ask them to do? There was also a part of me that felt these were a bit silly. Thus, I decided to pilot the probes first with a group of six participants attending an obligatory class related to employment services. The class was held by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that, in their own words, promoted integration. Thus, the target customers in the class were generally migrants.<sup>9</sup> The teacher and I agreed that I would come once a week and pilot one probe a week. After completing the activity together, I would discuss with the class how the activity went and their ideas for modifying it. My colleague (Johanna Ylipulli) had told me about how her own experience of piloting probes had led to very fruitful and interesting results. Through her own pilot, she had discovered that a rather off-beat prompt was in fact the most thought-provoking and generative. I thus had high hopes for this pilot.

A day before starting the actual probes, I decided to do an introductory activity that would help the participants and I get to know each other. With the help of the teacher, I explained in Finnish that we would draw picture representations of ourselves. We could draw the things that were important to us, a portrait, and activities we enjoyed. I wanted to keep this as broad as possible

<sup>9</sup> The NGOs approach to integration was not exclusively on migrants and they actively worked to counter this belief. However, they did not have the power to decide who was assigned to this class.

to allow them the freedom to express themselves however they wished. As an American born to Indian immigrants but now living in Finland, I looked and sounded outwardly like them with my broken Finnish and brown skin. We were limited only by language, as we were all using Finnish and only one participant had relatively fluent skills in the language. Most of the participants seemed to be women in their 50s.

I sat next to one of the participants and drew along with her. She was uncertain about what to draw at first and was self-conscious about her drawing but as time went on, she grew more at ease with the drawing, taking inspiration from others to add more to her own. The drawings that were created were beautiful. Most represented the sun and nature in some way. Traveling was a common theme. I came away from this feeling optimistic about how the probes would go. Enthusiastic, the teacher and I agreed I would come again the next day, this time to try the first probe. The beginning of the session was promising, as was reflected in my notes:

Feeling the lightness in the atmosphere, I started explaining my two goals for today... Karima<sup>10</sup> interrupted me and said my Finnish was much better today than yesterday. I laughed and said yes, because I had so much practice from yesterday...Kiran said I should come more often and my Finnish would get really good.

Things changed though when we started the storyboard activity (Figure 3) about how they made Finland home. They were unsure where to begin. With prompts from the teachers, they all started writing with the same sentence “*Tulin vuonna...*” (in English “I came in the year...”). One woman was writing each letter with precision and care. All three who were attending that day asked for help with spelling at least once. I made several attempts to encourage them to draw, almost pleading with them. It felt like a classroom, and I was a new teacher who had waltzed in. There was a change eventually that I documented in my observation notes:

I asked Kiran more questions about how she found the Finnish class, she again said “sociotoimisto”<sup>11</sup> and I finally decided to ask what this was...we eventually shifted to having a conversation together. At this point, the atmosphere changed again, instead of *them* being the students, *I* became the student, and it became apparent that all of them were the experts. I was the only one ignorant of what they were talking about.

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10 All names are pseudonyms.

11 I later found out she was referring to *sosiaalitoimisto* (in Finnish), or the social services office that provided aid to refugees.

The activities I was asking them to do appeared even sillier when juxtaposed with the hardships their refugee background likely entailed. The pressure I felt in that moment—primarily from their incredulity at how oblivious I was—was too much and tears came to my eyes. Internally, I wondered at the strange turn of events.

After the class, the participants gathered around me and gave me hugs, offering their friendship and admiring a photo of my 8-month-old child. I became very aware of the imbalance in privilege between us and that I was likely to gain more from them than they would from me, a dilemma many other researchers have faced (e.g., Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, and Yazzie-Mintz 2012). I berated myself for getting caught up in the notion of creative methods for their own sake. I realized I could not prioritize collecting research material over the value of making research relevant to and for participants (e.g., Alcott 2008, 8–11).

My next visit was buoyed by their compassion. We were connected by it as we chatted before the class began. Feeling less pressure to have something “interesting” happen, I went in to try the resource map (Figure 4). I decided to give an example this time, having realized I could not make assumptions about what the participants knew or understood. With six participants present that day, we discussed some services we may have used. I emphasized they could just write the name of each service and that no drawing was needed. As they made their own maps, I passed out the emoji stickers and was met with surprise, delight and gratitude as they realized the packets were for them to keep and take home. One man at this point stopped using the stickers, preferring to draw. I imagined him giving them to his children when he came home. They enthusiastically created their maps and marked how they felt about them.

We never did the last activity as writing a letter would not fit well with the setting and the group of participants who had limited language proficiency in (written) Finnish and/or in English. Instead, the first two probes served as a preface to form a relationship with participants as I stepped back and became an observer, a helper and a co-participant during their regular activities in the class. My pilot morphed into participant observation as I explored how this NGO carried out the controversial task of integration. From the pilot taking an unexpected turn, I could build a stronger relationship with all of them.

Would I do probes again? Probably not without serious consideration about who and what they were for or without having a deeper connection to design research in my study. The setting of a classroom where the participants were required to be present meant that the elements of playfulness were difficult to create as it did not promote spontaneity or feel self-directed (see Hänninen 2003, 105–106). In this case, the classroom environment, when it was not based on voluntary participation in the course, was at first adding power im-

balances between participants and me as a researcher. It is likely that participants felt obliged to engage in probe activities even when they were told the activities were voluntary. Thus, circumstances made probe tasks more restrictive to participants instead of broadening possibilities for self-expression and self-exploration for them. However, when I let go of wanting the probes to be fun and made the activities suitable for a classroom through modeling the resource map first and making it less “artistic” and more flexible, the participants responded more positively. By giving stickers to them, the research (or “playful”) objects also became a gift (see Heljakka 2024, 60). This helped the participants feel at ease, which in turn probably made the research more collaborative and more connected to the original idea of the probe method (Luusua et al. 2015).


At its essence, my experience in the field shows how working with others and with methods that we are less familiar with is often messy and unexpected in nature and can lead to uncomfortable and vulnerable situations for both researchers and participants. It can, however, also make visible and shake existing power structures. For my study, this moment of vulnerability more than the use of playful methods was a pivotal moment, allowing me to put participants first and learn the value of care in our journey as researchers.

### **Cultural Probes as a Method for Long-Distance Participatory Research** (Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua)

Our study was a collaboration between the projects AICity and DISC, and it was originally born as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented researchers from engaging in face-to-face contacts with participants. In and around the year 2020, public gatherings all over the world were viewed as physically risky as well as ethically problematic and were sometimes outright prohibited. As a response, telepresence methods were quickly adopted and developed globally, with academic work being no exception. This prompted us to ask the question if we, as researchers should and could do research differently in a post-pandemic world. Therefore, we decided to experiment with *probe-inspired* tasks that enabled in-person contacts to be minimized. We have successfully applied probes before in our studies, therefore exploring how probes work *per se* was not the focal point of our study but rather exploring how they work in such a long-distance context with co-researchers as intermediaries. In the study locations of Mumbai, India and Espoo, Finland, the researchers initiating and supervising the study (Johanna Ylipulli and Aale Luusua) did not directly interact with the participants, not online or in-person. The Indian portion of the study was carried out by a designer and co-researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) working in a private research studio based in India, and the part in Finland was carried out by a group of master’s students acting as co-researchers.

## BRIEF GUIDE

### संक्षिप्त गाइड



- 1

**Get to know the package/booklet**  
कार्यक्रम पैकेज के बारे में जानें

This booklet is based on the Cultural Probe method. **Using your own personality and creativity in filling out the booklet is allowed and recommended!** There are no right or wrong answers to the questions – **we want to hear your unique thoughts.**

यह पुस्तिका सांस्कृतिक जांच पद्धति पर आधारित है। पुस्तिका को भरने में अपने स्वयं के व्यक्तित्व और रचनात्मकता का उपयोग करने की अनुमति है और अनुभवा की जाती है। सवालों के कोई सही या गलत जवाब नहीं है - हम आपके अनूठे विचार सुनना चाहते हैं।
- 2

**Complete the tasks in the package in a way that suits you**  
कार्यों को इस तरह से पूरा करें जो आपको सूट करे

If you run out of space, you can attach new pages or materials. **You can add pictures, text, drawings or even poetry to all tasks!** For your convenience, we have also included cut-and-past pictures, a gluestick and scissors. You can also send us digital materials to [Dani's email] if you wish.

यदि आपका स्थान समाप्त हो जाता है, तो आप नए पृष्ठ या सामग्री संलग्न कर सकते हैं। आप सभी कार्यों में चित्र, पाठ, चित्र या कविता भी जोड़ सकते हैं। आपकी सुविधा के लिए, हमने कट-एंड-पेस्ट तस्वीरें, एक ग्लूस्टिक और कैंची भी शामिल की हैं। आप चाहें तो हमें [दानी के ईमेल] पर डिजिटल सामग्री भी भेज सकते हैं।
- 3

**Return the package to us**  
हमें कार्यक्रम पैकेज लौटाएं

We are available to answer your questions at any time through Whatsapp, text or email.  
9567756586 or danikraju@gmail.com

हम कब-कब, टैक्स्ट या ईमेल के माध्यम से किसी भी समय आपके सवालों के जवाब देने के लिए उपलब्ध हैं।

Fig. 5: Instructions to fill in the booklet. Photograph by Dani Kalarikalayil Raju.

This created contingency that was also part of our study design and led to one of the questions we wanted to reflect on: How far can we go with erasing the presence of the researcher from the study setting, using probe materials as mediators and working with other people as co-researchers who are present in-situ?

At the same time, our intention was to collect materials with our young adult study participants<sup>12</sup> to understand different ways people engage with digital technologies in urban public locations as well as to inform the design of urban technologies. Thus, our study can be perceived as design research. Content-wise, our probes had the goal of playfulness, aesthetic pleasure and engendering creativity in our participants. These came into consideration in every aspect from the content of the tasks, the informal language used, all the way to the colorful art style and high-quality print work. To allow more creative expressions and various styles of communication, we offered the possibility to attach, for example, cut-and-paste pictures, drawings or even poetry to all the tasks. These were all meant to invite the participants to be part of our design research process—to *collaboratively create something that could be*.

The study design consisted of the probe, which included a *printed colorful notebook and its accompanying materials* (Figure 5), and a *video-logging* (vlog) task. These tasks were afterwards discussed in an on-site/

12 The age group was chosen due to being the focus of the DISC project.

hybrid workshop. In addition to reflecting on the self-documentation tasks, the participants collaboratively did a task on *technology as magic* in the workshop (described below). During the “probing period” before the workshop, participants were to complete the notebook on “technology in everyday life” in two weeks. In the notebook, we asked the participants to provide their basic information; perform a self-perception task; track their digital device use for one day; list all the digital devices they used daily; and finally, tell us about their background with technology and views on digital inequality. We intended to defamiliarize the participants with their everyday life by including surprising aspects in some of the tasks—for example, by asking them to match the devices they used with an animal from the provided image sheet.

Our probe included a vlog to track digital technology use outside the home by filming participants’ everyday urban settings. The flexible video approach allowed spontaneous filming and commentary to determine what the participant are doing, why they are doing it, and how it makes them feel. We framed this task as a vlog, a popular social media activity, to create a mood of informal and relaxed playfulness through an intrinsically motivating activity, while allowing participants to reflect on their daily lives and self-document the results. The researchers also filmed their own vlogs, sharing glimpses of themselves and their values for the participants before they did the assignment.

With the final task, which was carried out during the workshop, the idea was to explore participant imaginaries of future cities and technology by using the metaphor *technology as magic* (Ylipulli, Luusua & Ojala 2017). Metaphors have great potential in producing “creative friction” and they can thus effectively work in research that aims to empower the study participants to imaginatively envision alternative futures (Lakoff & Johnson 2008; *ibid.*). In this assignment, participants were asked to first recount familiar magical stories they knew and use these stories while envisioning future cities and future mobilities (with the metaphor of a magic carpet). We held long conversations between the three researchers on whether these tasks were appropriate in the context, and eventually deemed that magic seemed to be a suitable touchstone for our participants.

The India study consisted of 14 participants, aged 20 to 29, and all were residents of a Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) in Mumbai, India. SRA buildings constructed by the government contain apartments for slum dwellers who vacate their homes in slums. The apartments are often very small with many family members living together. Our co-researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) led pre-workshop meetings in one such home and the workshop in a community space in the same building.

The community liaison—a longtime collaborator with the private research studio in Mumbai—presented the research team, project, data privacy eth-



Participants reviewed notebook assignments and discussed in groups of four to five during the three-hour workshop. The co-researcher and community liaison led the workshop by communicating the agenda, keeping us on schedule, and guiding discussions. Audio recordings from each group were captured for analysis. During the workshop, participants spoke Hindi, English, or both, and the atmosphere was relaxed. The way participants interacted with each other showed a shared sense of humor, including joking and laughing.<sup>14</sup> The playful nature of the probes seemed to work to our advantage especially well in this context, probably at least partly because the group knew each other very well beforehand.

Furthermore, including vlogging as a part of the probe enabled us to see the city through our participants' eyes but also helped participants to see the city from different perspectives (see also Mannay 2016; Hänninen 2020). This was illustrated in a reflection by one of the participants:

I travel from my workplace to home everyday but I have never observed people or watched them using these machines [digital devices like mobile phones]. I am very glad to see so many new machines in my area but at the same time I was wondering why I haven't seen those things even though I go through the same road everyday. (Audio recording, translated to English from Hindi)

Overall, the importance of rapport building was highlighted in this study because of geographical distance and non-existing direct contact between supervising researchers and participants. The local researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) was living in the same city as our participants, was a competent speaker of Hindi and English and a researcher with a background from a respected institution, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). He also participated in pre-workshops and the workshop in person. Consequently, these factors helped form a rapport between our local researcher and the participants. He also acted as a mediator and interpreter between the Finnish researchers and Indian participants, aiding with the design and explanation of the tasks and the subsequent analysis of the materials. However, probably the most important factor for the success of the study was that the local researcher was familiar with the probes method and design approaches in general. Thus, he was able to generate a playful atmosphere and explain in depth the nature of the probes to the participants. He acknowledged the intrinsic value of creating conditions that enabled the participants to project to the future, reflecting on different kinds of future possibilities.

It was not addressed in our study whether doing such work would be possible in a situation where *none* of the researchers would be locally present. Our study,

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14 For more on humor as part of playfulness, see Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005), and Lubbers et al. (2023).

however, confirms that a hybrid model for long distance participatory research is a feasible strategy, and research methods such as probes could help overcome obstacles when researchers cannot enter the field physically—as long as everybody is on the same page about the deeper methodological commitments.

This point on methodological understanding is further confirmed by the study that we did at the same time in Finland to compare results gathered within different cultural contexts. In the city of Espoo, ten young adults aged 20 to 29 participated in the research. They all studied at the same university located in the capital region.<sup>15</sup> The study process and tasks were the same as those carried out in India, with the exceptions of the language used and some visuals: as mentioned above, we adapted the images used in the notebooks to reflect the study contexts. In addition, this study was realized without the Finnish researchers being in direct contact with the study participants: a group of three master's students carried out the practical parts of the study as part of their course assignment, so they acted as our "local researchers." We were not teaching the course but acted as advisors of the assignment. The two Finnish researchers held a few meetings with the students and advised them on cultural probes, on how to approach the participants, and how to facilitate the workshops. Cultural distance was not an issue within this context, and we also thought that having students as co-researchers who facilitated the study with other students would promote rapport building.

Overall, we can say that this part of the study also produced interesting research material. However, the recorded data demonstrates differences in the atmosphere and depth of the discussions compared to the material collected in India: the study participants did not seem to fully understand the playful dimensions of the tasks, and conversations stayed on a more superficial level. The master's students who facilitated the workshop also reported to us about this confusion, and the workshop itself was shorter, lasting less than two hours.

We deem that we underestimated the need to provide detailed instructions and background information on our research and especially on the probes approach to the master's students who acted as intermediaries in this case. Because we were all Finnish and from an academic background, —including the study participants—we thought we did not need to have as many meetings and negotiations as we had in the study in India. This proved to be wrong: we did explain the principles of probes as well as the aims and goals of our projects to the students, but as students inevitably had a more limited understanding and experience of the probe method as well as on design research in general, we should have reserved more time for discussions with students. We should have given them a better sense not only of the method itself but also of the

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15 Some, but not all, of the students that participated in the workshop in Espoo knew each other beforehand.

ideas of playfulness and creativity, potential challenges of the method and how to inspire study participants to engage in playful activities (for more on play as an attitude, see Sicart 2014, 13). We should have also established a more profound relationship with them to enable them to mediate and transmit our ideas to the study participants. Thus, the sub-study in Finland did not bring us as close to the digital worlds of the participants as the study in India did, despite the (assumed) cultural and geographical closeness.

### **Discussion: Applying Playful Methods as Part of Ethnography— Lessons for the Future**

Our article contributes to multidisciplinary research on visual, playful and creative methods by discussing why and how cultural probes used in design research could be applied in ethnology or related fields. Probes can be particularly suitable for use alongside interviews and participant observation in *applied* and *participatory* research in ethnology or interdisciplinary work when a research goal entails developing practical societal, or design implementations and solutions. The main contribution to previous research, however, comes from our reflections on what needs to be considered when applying the (playful) method typical for the discipline (e.g., design research) that greatly differs from ethnology. Probes were eventually developed in design research to function as an instrument for supporting concrete design processes. Thus, usage of probes in design fields have different research aims, such as acting as a catalyst for creating speculative knowledge (how things could be), than they do in ethnology and cultural studies that typically thrive for in-depth understanding of studied phenomena.

In this section, we pull together the most important insights and lessons from our studies. We have chosen to openly share our experiences and reflect on when we have not been able to meet the intended objective of the study or have not been so successful with the method. By scrutinizing the features that cannot be regarded in advance when conducting research, we hope to increase understanding of the method, potential challenges and pitfalls but also the means of how to avoid them and how to develop the study design further. These lessons can also be applied to other visual and creative methods as they share many similarities with the cultural probes approach.

As brought out in our case studies and in previous research on probes methods, the benefits of using them lie in their potential to open new perspectives to understanding participants' experiences. Creative and visual methods have repeatedly shown the ability to engender new ideas and discoveries in participants and particularly have the potential to defamiliarize aspects of our lives that have become self-evident. Probes can work as a method for long-distance participatory research when researchers cannot directly attend or access the

field physically. These methods also allow participants to express themselves in alternative ways than with language although analysis of materials still requires further discussions between researchers and study participants to ensure adequate interpretations. Additionally, probes can help to verbalize more complex and abstract things that are difficult to explain immediately in words in interview situations. (see first and third case study; Gauntlett 2007, 3; Mannay 2016, 28, 32–34, 112; Hänninen 2020)

However, we argue that the method cannot be used without acknowledging its broader epistemological commitments. This argument is embedded in all the following insights marked in italics. Before applying the method from another discipline, *the researcher needs to have a well-grounded understanding of the epistemological background and research tradition of the method, how they are or are not aligned with the aim of the research and with other methods chosen for the study, and how they might need to be modified to fit into other kinds of research traditions*. Otherwise, what may seem exciting and fun methodological experimentation for researchers, can turn out to be something else for participants (see also Wiles et al. 2013, 18, 28; Mannay 2016, 7, 52, 87). All our case studies demonstrate challenges in these areas to some extent. Our examples show that the risk of lacking epistemological understanding of the method is likely to be higher with novices either lacking professional competence in conducting research in general or lacking experience of using the method. It is also more likely to underestimate than overestimate the time needed to acquire enough understanding to use the method successfully. We emphasize the importance that *the researcher needs to profoundly understand why playfulness is employed (motives, purposes), and what it is that the researcher wants to accomplish by using them (outcomes)*. If the purpose of playful activities is not clear to the researcher, it will likely be unclear to the participants as well.

To achieve the best possible outcome, the researcher needs to carefully consider the following: *who playful and creative methods are targeted at, who they are suitable for, and how they could be implemented in the study in a way that accounts for, along with social and cultural contexts, the time commitments, artistic abilities and technical proficiencies of participants*. For example, engaging adults with drawing or storyboarding activities has proven to be more challenging than when used with children as illustrated in our second case study with migrants (also e.g., Richardson 2015; Siim 2020). There could be resistance and reluctance to engage with drawing. They can be “a site of embarrassment and discomfort” (Mannay 2016, 86) and they can be interpreted as being childish by participants or even by the researcher, particularly if the circumstances and the target group do not fit together. Our first and second case studies shed light on how the study environment—workplace or classroom—can shape the expectations of participants and set

limitations on their playful and creative expressions due to time limits, other people (teachers, other students) and/or a lack of familiarity with expressing oneself via drawing. Participants might end up feeling pressure to complete the tasks and even have a feeling that their assignments are somehow being evaluated (cf. the case study in India, in which participants were successfully engaging in drawing).

Adopting playfulness is also more intrinsic for some individuals than it is for others. Thus, playful methods may not work for everybody. As shown in the first and second case study, *it is important to stay flexible in the use of playful approaches*: to tailor or to adjust them to suit particular age groups, communities or circumstances, to offer alternative ways to carry on with the tasks or participate in the study, to change activities or more fundamentally the direction of the study if the approach is not appropriate to use with participants (see also Mannay 2016, 86–88).

Due to their being self-chosen and self-directed, a playful attitude or creativity cannot be forced out but only stimulated in different ways (Henricks 2006, 185; Malaby 2009, 205–206; Gray 2015, 125). These features make using playful and creative methods more complex and uncertain than conventional qualitative methods. All our case studies address the fact that *participants need to be carefully motivated for playful activities*—otherwise they can appear strange and as something that alienates the study participants rather than engages them in sharing their views and ideas. Playful approaches need to make sense or feel meaningful to research participants. Our experiences highlight that motivating playfulness requires reserving enough time for communication and rapport formation with participants and with different partners who have a role in the research. Explaining the purpose of the playful assignments might also require more effort with adult participants than it would with children.

We have encouraged our participants to engage in playful and unorthodox thinking by offering both verbal and visual cues in the form of written and video instructions of the probes but also in pre-workshops, email, and face-to-face conversations with them before and during the production of research material. In those conversations participants could ask for further guidelines and we had a chance to alleviate possible uncertainties related to assignments. Despite these efforts we ended up with different outcomes. For example, our third case study with university students (in Finland) entailed problems in creating a playful attitude with the participants while the same assignments worked well in the Indian context. While social and cultural contexts were quite different and might have played a part here, there was also significant difference in the level of in-depth understanding of the method among co-researchers between the studies, highlighting the importance of methodological understanding to further motivate study participants for playful approaches.

The outcome of the qualitative data gathering is never completely in the hands of the researcher, and this applies maybe even more when using experimental methods. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned remarks when using probes or other playful and creative methods, we still consider that the study might benefit from applying them. One option to overcome some of the challenges discussed in this article could be to involve study participants in the design process early on so that they are included in the ideation of assignments/activities. This strategy is used, for example, in collaborative ethnography. Then, the chosen activities could arise more from the daily lives of study participants and thus be even more participatory in nature—and most importantly, personally meaningful and satisfying to them.

## **AUTHORS**

Anne Häkkinen is an ethnologist and works as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. Her research interests cover a wide range of topics from transnational (marriage) migration, integration and the role public services play in it, to industrial and cultural heritage, including industrial know-how and skills.

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Johanna Ylipulli is a design anthropologist holding the title of docent in digital culture. She works as a principal investigator at Aalto University, Finland, researching digital realities and possible futures with qualitative, participatory, and speculative approaches. Her focus is especially on urban contexts.

Dani Kalarikalayil Raju is an alumnus of IIT Bombay, doing HCI research in India. He is a co-founder of Studio Hasi, a startup working with marginalised communities to facilitate their participation in the design and deployment of advanced technologies.

Dr. Aale Luusua is an architect who works as a University Lecturer at the University of Oulu, Finland. Aale's research revolves around the topic of participatory urban planning and design, especially in relation to digitally augmented urban places and spaces.

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