

# Building a shared relational identity: shifting notions of self in designing social innovation

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## Abstract

While designing social innovation (DSI) is increasingly considering the role and value of relationships, little attention is placed on the complexity of relationality and the specific, situated dynamics of dealing with relational entanglements. In particular, as design's ontological background comes into question, the designers' identity and the processes of collective and personal transformation that characterise DSI need further consideration. This paper reports the outcomes of an exploratory qualitative study aiming at examining relational approaches to DSI pertaining to the construction of a collective sense of self. It provides insights into how practitioners interact and how they construct and nurture shared relational identities, concluding with suggestions for future DSI work based on these perspectives.

## Relational approaches in designing social innovation

Initiatives at the intersection of design and social innovation range from small, grassroots community projects, to large-scale government programmes. Most published accounts of these initiatives are either based on academic research or come from reports commissioned by the funders of the initiatives; also, many initiatives operate independently from institutions, and often go unreported. When consistent reporting does exist, little space is given to the intricacies of relationships and their significance for designing social innovation (DSI). Instead, there appears to be a focus on strategies, methods, tools, techniques which often originate from the West (Akama & Yee, 2016) and operate with a Western cultural perspective and its specific assumptions. Even when relationships are reported on, they too are often considered from a Western standpoint, often through a sanitised reporting style that 'edits out' the designers' relational entanglements and the details of grappling with relational matters with different participants, stakeholders, and colleagues.

This paper proposes that the concept of ‘shared relational identity’ can be useful in beginning to unpack and account for the complexity of situated, contextual approaches to building relationships in DSI. It offers definitions of ‘relational identity’ and nuances this concept through the examination of specific relational dynamics associated with its construction. Finally, it looks at the designers’ identity and its shifts within DSI processes, exemplifying processes of dialogical reflection on a variety of themes connected with the construction of a shared identity.

The paper summarises and presents the findings of an exploratory qualitative study, conducted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Author as part of a PhD, aimed at exploring relational approaches to DSI drawing from personal practice in Europe as well as from contexts and practices in the Asia Pacific region. The theme of building a shared relational identity describes important features of relationships in design practice focused on social change. The paper contributes insights into how design practitioners relate to others and perceive themselves within DSI processes, and suggests how future work can build on these perspectives.

Before we introduce the concept and its theoretical underpinnings, we would first like to introduce ourselves and why relationships matter in our practices.

## Relationships in our DSI practices

We identify as designers and scholars with diverse cultural experiences to contribute to the investigation. We recognize that our educational and professional backgrounds impact our approach and critical lens to the study, since we were both schooled in conventional Anglo-European art and design education. Thus, we believe it is crucial that we offer a brief description of our background and our practices, as well as remark on how we critically interact with stories from non-western cultures.

**Viola.** *My practice is predominately based in Italy. During a 6 months’ work experience with an Indonesia-based organisation in 2017, I became interested in relationships in DSI practice. Navigating a different culture and its customs felt unfamiliar and exposed the inadequacy of the many tools that had constituted my design education, particularly in dealing with the intricacies of relationships. I realised not only that cultivating relationships was fundamental for the projects that we were working on, but also that the approach to relationships was radically different depending on cultural context – although I could not describe exactly how or why. That was my first glance at an intimacy approach to relationships (Kasulis 2002), although at the time I did not have the language or the awareness to describe it. Exploring the role and value of relationships in DSI has widened my perspective on*



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*the discipline and has impacted how I approach relationships in DSI and beyond, changing my perception of myself as entangled with and inseparable from my relations. It is a privilege to be able to explore the margins of my experience by engaging with perspectives and cultural practices that are often marginalised and impacted by a history of design research centred on whiteness. I hope that designers and researchers will view this study as an invitation to examine their practice and their experiences of relating, leading to actions that welcome a stronger plurality in designing social innovation.*

**Joyce.** *I am designer researcher, based in a UK Higher Education institution. I originally trained as a graphic designer in various UK design schools and have experiences working as a designer in Malaysia and in the UK before my move into academia. As a Malaysian national, with a southern-Chinese descent, my understanding and approach to relationships is influenced by my layered heritage, upbringing and cultural conditions. How we build and maintain relationships was never on my radar to 'study' or take notice of as a designer, and less so as a practising designer. I did however note some key differences in how design was practiced (particularly in how relationships are cultivated with clients, collaborators and other designers) in the two different countries which have continued to intrigue me since. My interest in relationships and its importance specifically to DSI work did not really surface until my interactions and conversations with fellow design researchers and practitioners through the [network]. The network was set up in 2015 with another academic based in Australia in response to a growing interest in the use of design to support social innovation in region. Wary of design's western-centric foundation and its potential as a hegemonic force that can inadvertently displace existing, long running local practices, we were purposefully using the network as a platform to learn and surface hidden practices, approaches, and values. It became apparent that in doing work to support social innovation, we are in fact designing the socio-material conditions for new and existing relationships to flourish. Not only are relationships key to the success of the work (for example, in who we invite in and how we work together), it is the very material that we are designing with and for. This ongoing learning has resulted in my own reframing of DSI as a relational practice, and it has been a journey that I have been exploring with others, in this case with Viola.*

Our experiences as professional designers evidence that design is a profoundly relational practice; however, the myriad of frameworks, toolkits, and models available to designers (e.g., Frogdesign, 2012; IDEO, 2015) make little if any reference to relationships and their richness, intricacies, and intersections with DSI. We investigated relationships through Viola's own work, which has become a primary



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focus of her PhD, with Joyce's support through her role as a supervisor. Drawing on the contributions and observations of other DSI practitioners working in different cultural contexts is also part of the reflexive practice process: considering various perspectives and cultural nuances can help reveal views and beliefs that may be assumed to be universal in design discourse, reinforcing understandings of DSI.

## Relationships in DSI

In recent years, discourse on relationships in DSI has welcomed the contribution and perspective of a variety of disciplines and scholars, such as Buber's (1923) philosophy of dialogue; collaborative and relational services (Jegou & Manzini, 2008; Cipolla & Manzini, 2009); the notion of 'infrastructure' (Star & Ruhleder, 1994) and its reception in the participatory design community (Bannon & Ehn, 2013; Bjögvinsson et al., 2012; DiSalvo et al., 2012; Karasti, 2014); and Kasulis's framework of *Intimacy or Integrity* (2002), which informs an analysis of how DSI can take place within different paradigms of design (Akama & Yee, 2016).

Buber's (1923) philosophy of dialogue introduces 'experience' and 'encounter' as different ways to engage with the world. In experience, relationships are approached instrumentally; encounter, in contrast, establishes an interpersonal space of dialogue where the other is met in its entirety. Many are still exploring the reception of Buber's concept of intersubjectivity design. For instance, Cipolla *et al.* (Cipolla & Manzini 2009, Cipolla & Bartholo 2014) have considered the significance of Buber's philosophy of dialogue to socially responsible design and the creation of relational services. However, challenges remain when trying to use a non-rationalist philosophical approach in existing frameworks that have their own logic: the authors (Cipolla & Bartholo 2014) found it difficult to adapt this approach to IDEO's Human Centred Design toolkit (2015) as it cannot support dialogue in a Buberian sense. Another study by Ho and Lee (2012) demonstrated that, in a participatory design process, trying to construct the 'persona' of one of the participants reverted the relationship from encounter to experience (2012, p. 81). Although intersubjectivity in design practice is still an under-researched topic, it can be argued that it requires different paradigms of designing that allows the formation and maintenance of a dialogical space.

Relationships in DSI have also been studied in the context of co-design, implementation, and delivery of collaborative and relational services (Jegou & Manzini, 2008; Cipolla & Manzini, 2009). While collaborative services are often presented as promising models for social innovation for their ability to generate or



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enable social relations (Manzini & Staszowsky, 2013; Selloni, 2017), their conceptualization often emphasizes technical and outcome-oriented activities. Relationships are often treated as independent and transactional activities that can be strategically managed to achieve a desired outcome. This fails to recognize that there are pre-existing infrastructures (such as customs, etiquettes, and social norms) that have helped shape and sustain relationships, which are themselves dynamic and evolving. Recognising the complexity of relationality and the specific, situated dynamics of dealing with relational entanglements, this paper seeks to examine relational approaches to DSI that places greater emphasis on the entangled and interdependent nature of relationships (e.g. Agid & Chin, 2019; Akama et al., 2019; Akama & Yee, 2019; Light, 2019).

Star and Ruhleder (1994, 1996) expanded the historic-socio-technical understanding of information infrastructures describing them as relational, practical, and situated. Based on their work, Karasti and collaborators (Karasti & Syrjänen, 2004; Karasti & Baker, 2004; Karasti 2014) coined the term 'infrastructuring' to emphasise the processual, ongoing quality of infrastructuring activities and draw attention to the extended periods during which infrastructuring unfolds, allowing design to continue and be appropriated by those who join the participatory design process in later phases (Karasti, 2014). Infrastructuring is the ability to map out existing 'knotworks and networks' (Bødker et al., 2017, p. 252) between 'publics' (conglomerations of actors with a plurality of voices) and their 'attachments' (entanglements of relationships with each other and their context), as well as to provide 'scaffolding for affective bonds that are necessary for the construction of publics' (Le Dantec & DiSalvo 2013, p. 260). Recent literature suggests that the formation of relationships is a phenomenon that professional designers embed in the design process and is therefore within their agency and responsibility (Dindler & Iversen, 2014, p. 43).

As we interrogate our role(s), identities, contributions, and affective bonds in the design process, we weave this questioning with a consideration of different paradigms of design. In doing this, we are informed by Kasulis's (2002) framework of *Intimacy or Integrity*. While rarely 'culturally monolithic', a society may have a mainstream system of thought that values 'integrity' over 'intimacy' or vice versa (Kasulis 2002, p. 17). Integrity-dominant models of knowledge have been emphasised in the West, while Eastern thought is characterised by an intimacy orientation. The 'integrity' orientation poses an emphasis on public objectivity, independence, and external relations. The 'intimacy' orientation, on the other hand, emphasises interdependence, belong-togetherness, and external relations. An intimacy paradigm perceives knowledge as embodied, inseparable from its context, tacit, affective, intuitive, and only transferable through relationships and situated



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practice; an integrity orientation perceives knowledge as independent from the knower, publicly available, empirical, and verifiable.

Akama and Yee (2016) have illustrated how Kasulis's framework (2002) is useful in illustrating the existence of a dominant paradigm of design, and an 'other' paradigm of design. The Western paradigm of design, grounded in an integrity system of thought, has a tendency to universalise knowledge. It focuses on problem definition and problem solving, uses replicability and scalability as methods of evaluation of DSI projects, and aims to generate methods that are universally applicable. Conversely, the 'other' paradigm of design, rooted in an intimacy worldview, carefully considers the positionality of the designer in the DSI process and centres care, mindfulness, affect, and the overlap and interweave of identities within a relationship.

The *Intimacy or Integrity* framework encourages us to explore the following idea: the two cultural orientations might deem different characteristics of a phenomenon as the parts most deserving of attention and develop different ways to describe them and argue about them. We believe the *Intimacy or Integrity* heuristic can provide glimpses of how relationships in DSI, and particularly the construction of a shared relational identity, emerge and evolve from different worldviews.

## Methodology

This paper is constructed starting from two datasets. The first is related to the construction and maintenance of relationships in Viola's personal practice as a designer in three different contexts. The second source of data are interviews with 12 practitioners working in 10 organisations from different countries in the Asia Pacific region. The data collected through interviews, observation, and reflection (in the form of an audio, written and visual diary) were analysed through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2019), reflexive ethnography, and autoethnographic methods (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The aim was for Viola to document her experiences and shifts in perspective as she engaged with DSI initiatives operating within an 'other', relational paradigm of design.

### Data collection and sampling strategy

**Personal practice.** Three different contexts constitute the field where Viola collected data on her practice:

- The first context of practice is a project Viola joined with a formal role as a design consultant for its leading organisation (here referred to with the



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pseudonym “the Training Centre”). Named *Schools at the heart of the community*, the project officially started in September 2018 and closed in June 2021. The research focused on the development of the relationship between Viola and the leading project manager, Dario.

- The second context of practice, named *Partnership building for local action*, is centred in work with a volunteer-run community centre in a mid-sized town in the north of Italy. Viola became involved with the Community Centre in 2019 when she was invited to help build the Community Centre’s capacity to engage in social and cultural projects. The research focused on the relationship between Viola and one other volunteer, Greta, who also had an official role within the organisation.
- The third context is a Practice Group which began in July 2020 as a formal training programme on community-building methods focused on peer-to-peer support and mutual aid. Following this experience Viola, together with some participants, formed a crew of five people determined to continue practising online, sharing how they were incorporating these practices in their professional and personal life. This context, named *Mutual aid relational practices*, gave the opportunity to reflect upon how different approaches, methods and tools enable specific aspects of relationality to surface.

From September 2018 to June 2021, Viola collected data on the relationships developed within these three contexts, in the form of recorded conversations, reflection-on-action logs, diary entries, and an archive of emails and text messages.

Context	Name of project or practice	Pseudo nym	Organisations involved (pseudonym)	Job title or role	Country of origin
Schools	Schools at the heart of the community	Dario	The Training Centre	Project manager and consultant	Italy
Community Centre	Partnership building for local action	Greta	The Community Centre	Member of the Board	Italy



Context	Name of project or practice	Pseudo nym	Organisations involved (pseudonym)	Job title or role	Country of origin
Practice Group	Mutual aid relational practices	Nora	-	Member of the Practice Group; designer	Australia
Practice Group	“	Poe	-	Member of the PG; engineer	Australia
Practice Group	“	Sophie	-	Member of the PG; sustainability consultant	Singapore
Practice Group	“	Eric	-	Member of the PG; web developer working for a charity	United Kingdom

Table 1. Pseudonyms of people and organisations involved in personal practice

**External practices.** The selection of DSI practitioners invited to participate in the research was based on a number of factors; their expertise in the social innovation field, the likelihood that they would have an approach to their work that emphasises the importance of relationships, and a position in their organisation to initiate and build relationships. While we are aware that these characteristics are not just found in DSI practitioners in the Asia Pacific region, we chose to build on our own existing relationships, including the ones that Joyce had cultivated through the [network name] network and those that Viola had built through her practice.

The organisations encompass a wide range of activities including funding, supporting, and researching the design and delivery of social innovation initiatives. Participants work in different countries: Aotearoa New Zealand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Thailand. Table 1 presents the list of participants with their related role and context of work; their names were replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.





<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Professional role</b>	<b>Scope of organisation / project / activity</b>
Anne	Director of Philanthropy	Grant-making foundation
Thomas	Executive creative director	Design and branding studio working with social innovation initiatives
Gloria	Executive director	Social innovation project within an academic and research institution
Victor	Co-founder	Social enterprise incubator (1)
Carlo	Co-founder	Social enterprise incubator (2)
Rose	Venture support director	Social enterprise incubator (2)
Lamai	Co-founder	Social innovation design consultancy
Lucy	Co-design lead	Government-led project
Leon	Co-founder	Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives
Alba	Co-founder	Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives
Keiko	Co-founder and managing director	Company collaborating with government to create social innovation ecosystems
Somchai	University lecturer	Working on social innovation projects with students

Table 2. List of practitioners involved in the research



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Participants were interviewed through a VOIP (voice over IP) call through Skype or Zoom, with each conversation lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes. The conversations were loosely based on an interview guide that Viola shared with participants prior to the interview; after transcription, a Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2019) approach was adopted to analyse the data. During the course of the research, some participants were engaged in follow-up interviews to validate the data and further explore and nuance themes and topics.

In addition to the interviews just described, with the help of one practitioner (Thomas), Viola arranged a field trip in Thailand and Malaysia between December 2019 and January 2020. She visited four of the projects Thomas and his collaborators were working on and met relevant people from different social innovation initiatives that were supported by his design and branding studio.

The analysis of conversations with practitioners and reflective design practice allowed for the identification of a system of relationship attributes, constructing a multifaceted account of relationship formation and development in DSI. Viola's PhD study found that relationships in DSI are associated with three key themes: building a system of reciprocity; establishing and maintaining mutuality; and building a shared relational identity. Each theme presents specific features, so that themes and subthemes are interwoven into a 'Framework for Relational Literacy'. This paper reports on the third theme, "building a shared relational identity", while a report on the first two themes can be found in Viola et al. (2020) and in Viola's PhD thesis (Petrella 2022).

## Discussion

The research reveals practices and activities that point to a shared relational identity being developed and nurtured between key participants involved in DSI projects. We were particularly interested in how these identities form and why they are important to the development of a relational practice.

We refer to relational identity as a construct that integrates individual, inter-personal and collective levels of self (Sluss & Ashforth 2007, p. 13). It is a specific sense of 'we', rather than 'you and I', that is shared in the relationship (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p. 197). Personal qualities and characteristics based on the role(s) each party has in the relationship are brought together into a new, shared idea of the relationship which is more than just the sum of individual dispositions and role expectations (ibid.). Relational identity stems from and is supported by a shared



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relational culture, that is, ‘a privately transacted system of understandings’ (Wood, 1982, p. 76) that helps people coordinate behaviours.

Parties enacting their respective roles in a relationship tend to come to a mutual understanding of their shared relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth 2007, p. 13). However, having a shared relational identity can also affect the role- and person-based identities which constitute it (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). We are constantly situated in a web of relationships, and we define ourselves based on these perceived relationships (Shapiro, 2010, p. 636); we have varying levels of identification with our role, and varying levels of disposition to change our self-perception and conform to the collective.

This interpersonal perspective is relevant to social innovation initiatives, as these are often centred on smaller teams doing project-based work where dyadic interaction and personal connections create the immediate context for collaboration. Identities and identifications may be the “cognitive and affective glue” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007, p. 10) that holds teams, projects, and organisations together.

## Building a shared relational identity

Figure 1 illustrates the various dimensions and dynamics involved in building a shared relational identity as observed through our research. We focus on two main areas: context specificity as an enabling condition, and the challenges it brings in preserving an individual’s identity whilst also attuning to each other.

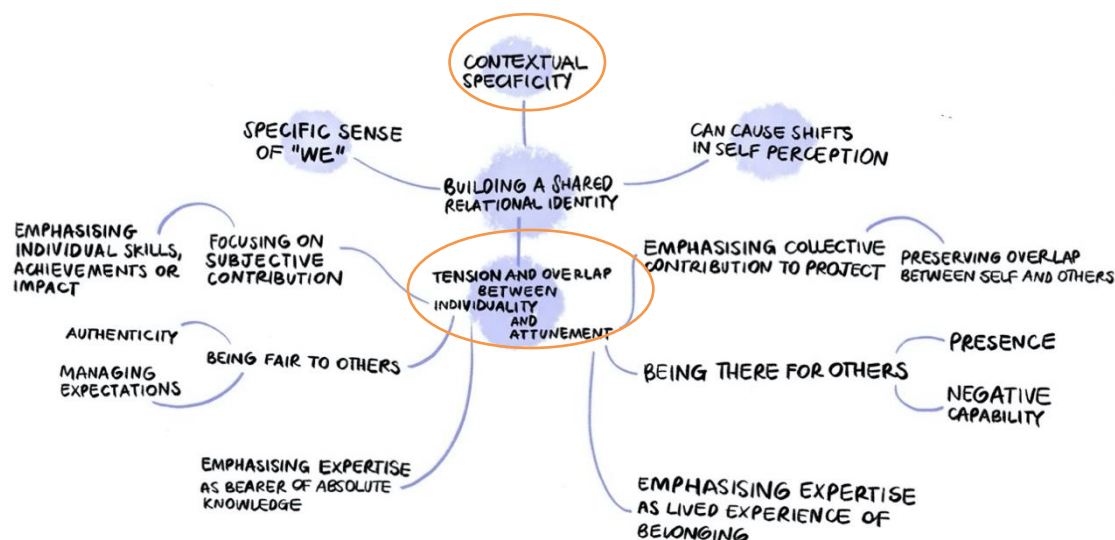


Figure 1. Diagram of the theme ‘Building a shared relational identity’ with its subthemes



## The importance of context

Context – defined by Özbilgin & Kyriakidou (2006, p. 5) as ‘the whole structure of connections between components that gives components their meaning’ – is important to building a shared relational identity. When discussing cultural practices in Southeast Asia, Sophie noted that the context of the relationship, more than the individuals’ decisions, determines whether parties will engage in building a shared relational identity:

“It depends on [...] whether the external environment requires you to have a shared identity or not. In fact, if it’s detrimental to the external environment, then it dies there [...] That no longer becomes a part of yourself, if that makes sense. [...] [It] continues because it’s contextual. Once the context disappears, then it also disappears, because there’s no reason otherwise for that to exist”. (Sophie)

Discussing his experience as a European practitioner in Southeast Asia, Victor also commented on the importance of developing intimate relationships at work, which are entirely context-based:

“There is this level of [...] intimacy that you need to have, people somehow need to be more or less best friends, or friends at least, when they work together in a team. When they don't work together anymore then they're not friends anymore. [...] There's nothing bad happening between them, but they're just not so much in contact anymore and then they have new friends in a different office.” (Victor)

Participants’ remarks prompt two observations. Firstly, cultural context is relevant to discussing shared relational identity (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Secondly, each person has a socially situated identity which includes specific roles (such as colleague or friend); one’s socially situated identity can shift in terms of a particular interpersonal relationship in a specific context, such as the workplace with its relational culture (Cupach & Imahori, 1993).

An analysis of conversations with practitioners also questions the perceived linear development of relationships. The literature suggests that relationships can evolve from being instrumental to a project’s success to being an end in themselves, with parties involved showing increasing reciprocal commitment (Ferris et al., 2009).



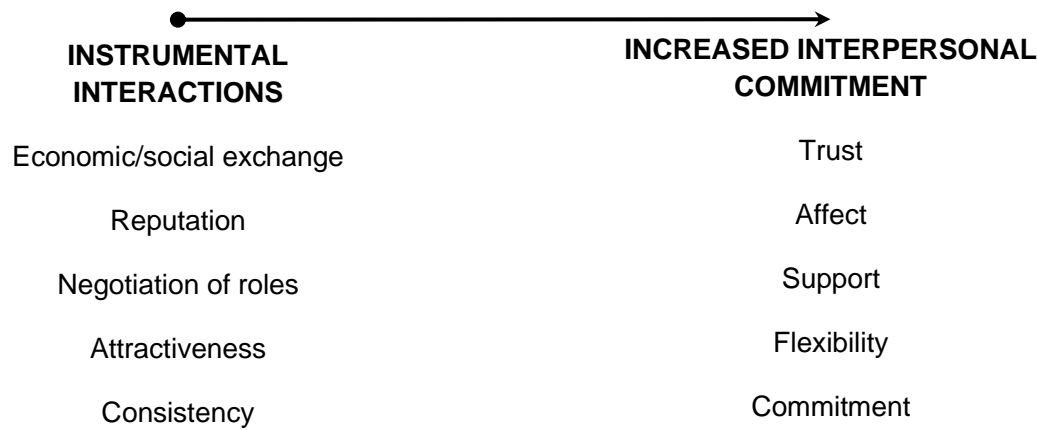


Figure 2. A diagram summarising the linear development of a work relationship described in Ferris et al. (2009).

However, some practitioners were intentionally and purposefully using projects to build relationships:

Leon: “In my view, the outcome, the products, the project [are] an excuse for us to build relationships. [They are] a symptom of our relationship development [...] [C]ertainly I need a project [...] as an excuse to build those relationships. [...] [Relationship is] not a means to an end. It is the end.”

Projects and initiatives in DSI are “useful to relationships” (Alba) in that they provide a contextual boundary, a field within which continued interaction is possible and encouraged and shared relational identities can be built, maintained, and transformed. Anne too questioned the apparent certainty and fixed steps in relationship building:

“One of the most commonly asked questions that I get is [...] ‘How do you know that you’ve made it as a trusted relationship?’. My answer to that is ‘Well, you never really do’. There’s not really a checklist of A, B, C that you can point to. [...] It’s an ongoing intentional process that you have to nurture.” (Anne)

Relationships continuously re-create the context for their development; the context is changed by changing the relationships or, in other words, by creating social innovations. This proposition seems coherent with Mulgan’s (2007) and Manzini’s (2012) definition of social innovation as simultaneously stemming from and creating new relationships, as they configure relationships as a starting point and an end goal of social innovation. However, these definitions seem to assume that relationships and the identities and interests of those involved in them are fixed elements waiting to be reconfigured by design. This way, ‘context’ is presented as a sort of backdrop



that designers animate with their action. Popular design thinking tools such as personas or stakeholder maps support this view by depicting those involved in an innovation process and their relationships as static figures captured at a moment in time. A relational perspective is fundamentally opposed to this approach (Özbilgin & Kyriakidou, 2006): permanence cannot be assumed, because identities are constituted and reconstituted within communities involving cultural values and interpersonal relationships (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013; Light & Akama, 2012; Yee & White, 2016).

Having made the above considerations, DSI can be redefined as the engagement with a dynamic context of existing relationships. It involves building shared relational identities and accepting identity shifts that simultaneously depend on the context and change it. Essentially, social innovation is a change in who we perceive to be, in our identity; this change depends on our experience in relationships with others. Designing social innovation, therefore, can be defined as identity shifts that happen in, and are supported by, shared design work.

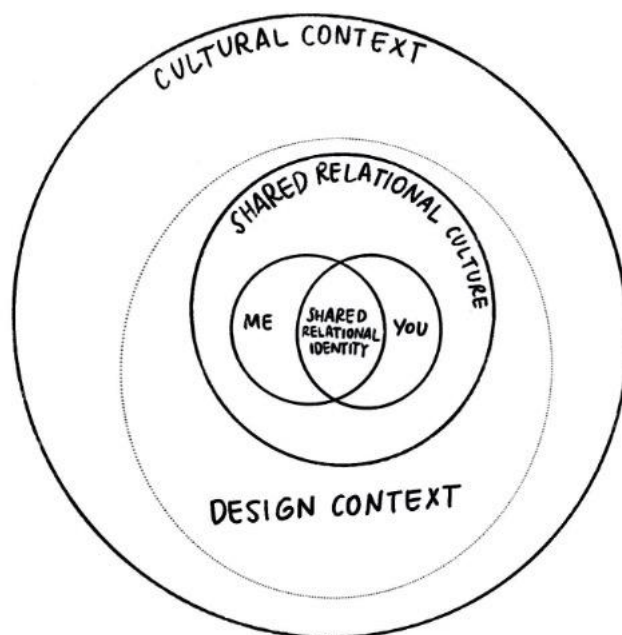


Figure 3. A diagram illustrating the relationship between cultural context; the contextual boundary offered by DSI projects; shared relational culture; and specific relational identities. Changes at one scale of the diagram reflect in other scales.

### Individuality and attunement

Relational identity integrates individual, inter-personal and collective levels of self (Sluss & Ashforth 2007, p. 13) that brings about a sense of 'we'. For this reason,



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individuals experience identity shifts when a shared relational identity is emerging. These shifts are not necessarily explicit or easily identifiable, but can be surfaced by observing the dynamics associated with them. This research has identified a key relational dynamic where these shifts can be observed: the interplay between the preservation of individuality and the cultivation of reciprocal attunement.

'Individuality' and 'attunement', with these or other names, are recurring concepts in literature on interpersonal relationships. To Kasulis (2002, p. 51), by virtue of their reciprocal attunement, people can enter a locus of intimacy, while "the person of integrity maintains the individuality of others as well as his or her own" (Kasulis, 2002, p. 55). Similar concepts also appear in Shapiro (2002), as respectively "autonomy" and "affiliation", while Wiggins (1991) proposes "agency" and "communion" and Sluss and Ashforth (2007) described relational identities as constituted by three layers of self: an individual level, driven by self-interest and independence; a collective level, focused on seeing self as the member of a group; and an interpersonal level, driven by interdependence and intimacy.

Discourse on individuality and attunement does not seek to set a dualism where one element can only be understood as distinguished from the other, but rather invites to consider both orientations and be mindful of their interplay; it would be rare for one approach to be completely excluded and play no part in the construction of a shared relational identity. An intimacy cultural orientation would support an attunement-based approach to relationships in DSI, while an integrity cultural orientation favours an individuality-based approach. However, individuality and attunement can be cultivated even in cultural contexts that do not support them, which can generate relational tensions and nuances.



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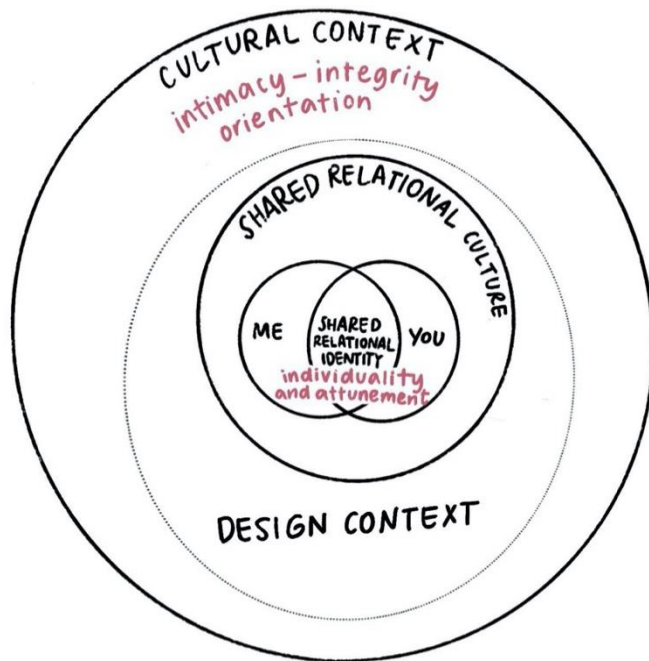


Figure 4. A diagram illustrating intimacy and integrity orientations as attributes of the cultural context; individuality and attunement as attributes of building a shared relational identity.

### The designer's identity between individuality and attunement

The designer's identity is a discussed subject in DSI. Escobar (2017) imagines what it would mean to take a relational perspective in design, and affirms that it would require "active inner work" (2017, p. 157) as well as a readiness and dedication to interrogate the dualist ways of being, thinking, and doing that form the "ontological background" (2017, p. 83) that most designers have internalised. Manzini asserts that "we are all designers" (2015, p. 1) and that "every subject, whether individual or collective, [...] in a world in transformation must determine their own identity and their own life project" (ibid.). He also worries about expert designers' role either being reduced to just a "process facilitator" doing "post-it design" (2015, p. 66) or falling into an egotistical approach that centres the designer's expertise and marginalises the experience of other participants (ibid.). Le Dantec and Fox (2015) stress that roles, identities and positions are not exclusively defined by designers, but are the result of a negotiation process and sometimes fully attributed by others; Clarke et al. (2016) remind us that situatedness cannot be fully known and reported on, as it pertains to a self that is continually reshaped, and the complexity of identity can only be perceived as roles are performed in context.



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The outcomes of this research align with these concerns. Some practitioners were acutely aware of the tensions, contradictions and nuances associated with identity in DSI work. Others did not necessarily approach the matter critically during our discussion, but tensions and overlaps surfaced in their anecdotes and stories. Identity shifts were sensed in situated interaction, and accounted for through examples and dialogic observation of the variety of emotional responses they generated. Identity shifts can make designers feel challenged or even threatened, but also foster a sense of belonging and community, satisfaction, and pride. Emotional involvement happens at a personal level, where a desire to belong, be present, be flexible and hold space where possibilities can emerge coexists with a wish that expertise and prowess are recognised, that expectations are clear, that values are unscathed and design solutions generate a clear impact.

The following paragraphs exemplify processes of reflection that took place in dialogue with practitioners. They describe the questions, concerns and dilemmas that surfaced by collaboratively reflecting on roles and identities and a sense of belonging; other themes discussed, both with colleagues and external practitioners (Petrella 2020, p.180), were hierarchy; self-awareness; loyalty; and authenticity. These reflections highlight the opportunities, accomplishments, and pleasures connected with building a shared relational identity. In this process, individuality and attunement are intermeshed, and their tensions and overlaps contribute to shift and shape the practitioners' self-perception.

**Holding our identities lightly.** Practitioners often expressed the fluidity of roles and identities when involved in DSI projects. For example, when talking about his role as a designer, Thomas compared himself to a doctor, who provides a diagnosis and prescribes the therapy but is also able to tune into the patient's need for support and empathy. Lamai, who is originally from Thailand, compared her design work to preparing food. When taking a cooking course in a Western city, she noticed that every recipe was detailed and meticulously followed. She contrasted this methodical approach with the more intuitive way food is prepared in Thailand, leaving more space to "be[ing] open to the unexpected, to intuition". Both examples show that the role of the experts is not negated: the doctor, the chef, the designer are not taken out of the process or deprived of their role. However, their contribution expands beyond what is expected of their role to include attuning to others, to the situation and its contingencies. This can bring practitioners to not only identify with other roles beyond their formal or professional ones, but also to prioritise this identification, should the context need it.

**A sense of belonging.** For some practitioners, attunement allows them to develop a sense of belonging to the community that they work with. For example, Somchai



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explained that working in community projects over the years he has developed a “membership”, or a sense of belonging, to a group of community architects. His identity of “community architect”, he clarified, is meaningful in that it is publicly recognised by his students, by community members and colleagues, and has positively impacted on his work and his reputation. Moreover, within this group he can cultivate what he defined “close friendships”, where everyone can understand what the other is thinking just by exchanging a meaningful glance:

“I wouldn't say it's a new family, but it's kind of– we need to understand each other [quickly] [...] sometimes [when working] in the communities we look at each other's faces and say, ‘Okay, this is not good now, we need to share ideas’[...]. So we need to realize what everyone is thinking.” (Somchai)

Somchai's shared relational identity with his colleagues is not only a source of professional satisfaction, meaning and pride, but also allows the whole team to intuitively attune to each other and to the contingencies and the needs of the communities it is serving.

However, for others, the awareness of their own individual identity has enabled deeper engagement and attunement to a community and its context. For example, Lucy is Pākehā (a non-Maori New Zealander of European descent) and works with Indigenous communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is mindful of her identity and how it reflects on her roles and actions:

“[W]hat does it mean [...] to be European? I'm Pākehā, my ancestry is as a settler. So how do I practice in a participatory way in the context of the politics here, given that social innovation is targeted towards Maori and Pacific communities, because those are the communities that are completely disenfranchised and have entrenched disadvantage?” (Lucy)

In this context, Lucy chooses to take a supporting role; her work is, in her words, “at the edge of practice” and consists of supporting the teams that work in community:

“[H]istorically I might've done frontline work, where I was working with young people or going in interviewing people [...] design research, [...] or doing prototyping or running workshops with community members. My work is less about that now because I'm supporting a team of people who come from the communities in which they're trying to do the change. And so, they own the relationships with people. (Lucy)

Lucy's awareness of the implications of her identity allows her to take a step back and let the group focus on meaningful collective contribution. A desire to be fair to



others and respect their identity does not cause her to disengage from the project but translates into a way to cultivate presence that is appropriate to the existing relationships.

Being aware of the dynamics between individuality and attunement can support designers in observing shifts in their own identity and self-perception as they navigate the relationships they form in DSI.

## Recommendations for relational practice

The research has shown that design projects can provide the context for the formation of a dialogical space or a locus of intimacy, where relational identities are constituted and transformed. Yet, the dominant construction of DSI as a discipline rooted in integrity (in the meaning proposed by Kasulis, 2002) is fixated on design thinking methods and tools and unaware of the intangible, situated, subjective, unspoken dimensions of design – those that can be observed in tensions, silences, and gaps. The negotiation, construction and reconstruction of identities and self-perceptions is not only a phenomenon that designers can observe and describe, but one we are actively involved in, that can deeply affect us, our relationships, and our work. It can be tricky to balance identities, affiliations, and memberships to different (and potentially conflicting) groups as they form within and around specific projects, initiatives, organisations, or relationships. Yet, engaging in this change is unavoidable: these dynamics are a key component of our relationships, our sense of belonging, our profession, and ultimately, our sense of self.

Amidst this change, how do we, as designers, hold our identity lightly when designing social innovation? How can we deal with and support identity shifts and transformations happening in others and in ourselves? The Framework for Relational Literacy (Petrella, 2022) is proposed as a 'scaffold' for reflective, relational practice, cultivating awareness of the entanglements between relationships and DSI initiatives and projects. Building a shared relational identity is essential to relational practice; this paper has shown how reflections on the topic can be carried out, and what narrations, knowledge, and practices can stem from them – but it firmly criticises the construction of models, or transferable methodologies, of what 'building shared identities' or practising 'relationally' should look like. Its aim is not to present 'solutions' to relational 'problems', but rather to help practitioners acknowledge that relational difficulties (and joys!) are an inevitable experience of designing social innovation and precede, permeate, sustain, change, stem from, and succeed such initiatives.



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In the light of the findings of this research, we would like to make three final recommendations for relational practice.

- The importance of relationships needs to be acknowledged at every step of the DSI process, including the reporting phase. The challenge for designers lies in centring relationships and giving them legitimacy, depth and nuance without using them as a rhetorical device to prove the effectiveness of the design intervention.
- Thinking through shared relational identities requires to cultivate a lightness, a delicateness in entering contextual identifications and power relations, considering the (unexpected, unpredicted) consequences of altering relational dynamics and putting the wellbeing of all people participating, designers included, before design outcomes.
- Our predefinitions of what ‘design’ and ‘social innovation’ mean need questioning. Designers should seek and embrace plurality, and welcome uncertainty as an opportunity to move beyond integrity-based, normative structures and practices into intimate ways of designing that are tied to place, to specific people, to worldviews and ways of life.

## Final reflections

**Viola.** A few years into the research, I shared with Joyce that what I was learning about relationships had started spilling over in different projects I was involved in, and in other areas of my life that are not necessarily connected to my design profession. Exploring the role and value of relationships in DSI has widened my perspective not only on the discipline, but also on who I am. Becoming aware of identity shifts and processes of building a shared relational identity in my work and in that of others, has resulted in a different perception of myself as a contextual co-creation, inseparable from my relations. I expected this research to ‘design me’ (Willis 2006), yet I had not realised how ontologically transformative this process would be. Despite my ‘division of self’ into relationships, I do not feel that I have lost my identity, but that I have built a stronger one – just one that is less ‘individual’. Identity shifts and their contextual nuances should be understood not just because they have an impact on the solidity and sustainability of design initiatives, but because they are an essential aspect of relationships that constitute the essence of social innovation – and ultimately, of who we are and perceive ourselves to be. Perhaps, the complex issues that social innovation initiatives aim to ‘solve’ would be



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better addressed by shifting our focus from design methods and tactics to relational literacy – from what design and designers *do* to what design and designers *are*, as we weave relationships and observe our collective and personal transformation.

**Joyce.** Framing design as a relational practice represents a fundamental shift in how I think about designing and my identity and role as a design researcher in DSI initiatives. Feeling an affinity with stories shared by the practitioners made me realise that I have been subconsciously working relationally. However, it also made me realise my limited vocabulary and frameworks in allowing me to explore further. Learning with Viola and sharing her journey in developing a relational literacy framework has allowed me to bridge the disconnect between the established design canon that I was educated in with the situated knowledge and practices that I enact through practice. Revealing and revelling in relational practices in design practice has opened up rich avenues in which to explore the transformative nature of relational entanglements and encounters in DSI practices.

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