# Everyday life as always already problematized and (at times) problematizing: towards a new division of labour between ethnography and design

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## Introduction: design *and* ethnography as interventionist

In recent years an intense dialogue between the fields of design and ethnography has developed. While ethnographic work has inspired designers to design not only artefacts, but also social practices (Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007), ethnographers have benefitted from the often more creative methodological approaches to a given field of study operated within design (Brandt, Messeter, & Binder, 2008; Brandt, 2006; Petersen, 2011). A match made in heaven, it seems. However, commentators from the field of design have noted that anthropologists and others practising ethnography[[1]](#endnote-1) are too preoccupied with being critical at a distance towards the interventions carefully orchestrated by designers (Hunt, 2011). Ethnographically inclined commentators, on the other hand, have noted that designers have trouble fathoming and harnessing the critical potential of ethnographic work (Dourish, 2006). We are, as a result, too often “left with the all too common division of labor between designers who intervene and anthropologists who object with belated critical commentary” (Halse, 2013: 192).

However, the idea of the ethnographer as a neutral observer delivering mere descriptions of the everyday life practices under scrutiny has long been problematized (Haraway, 1991). What is more, the notion of intervention is not only discussed and utilized within the fields of design and design research, but also within the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2007) and cultural analysis (Jespersen, Petersen, Ren, & Sandberg, 2012), both of which utilize ethnographic modes of generating empirical material and conducting analyses. This body of work argues that that “analysis should be treated as a form of intervention” (Munk & Abrahamsson, 2012: 53) and seeks to find ways coming to “grips with the inevitable intra-acting nature of research […]” (Jespersen, Petersen, Ren, & Sandberg, 2012: 8).

This contribution seeks to provide a way to go beyond the somewhat simplistic understanding of ethnography as descriptive and design as interventionist, as we believe this is a crucial step in enabling even more fruitful future exchanges between the two. In doing so, we invoke the idea that both design and ethnography are inevitably interventionist, thereby destabilizing the dichotomy between descriptive and interventionist ethnographic research and design practices. This, however, does not mean and should not mean that design is ethnography and ethnography is design. Neither is our point that ethnography should become more like design – or, vice versa – that design should become more like ethnography. Rather, we aim to delineate and discuss what might characterize ethnographic interventions and how these might supplement and elaborate upon design interventions. We suggest that whereas design interventions seem to rest on the assumption that the everyday life practices under scrutiny are in need of a problematization in order to be designed differently – and designed ‘better’ – ethnographic interventions work from the assumption that everyday life practices are always already problematized and, crucially, able to problematize such problematizations, so to speak. The ethnographic intervention lies in being sensitive towards and bringing to the fore how everyday life is problematized by, for instance, political reforms or design projects, and, again crucially, the various kinds of responses such problematizations might bring about. This is to enable more nuanced discussions about how everyday life may be practised and enacted ‘better’. As Noortje Marres, who thrives at the intersection of American pragmatism, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and political theory, has recently suggested, practices of everyday life may be understood as “material *forms* of public participation” (Marres & Lezaun, 2011: 491, emphasis in original), and here we suggest that such an understanding might be productive when seeking to go beyond the current division of labour between ethnography as offering mere descriptions of everyday life and design as interventionist.

In the following we first unfold our understanding of everyday life as always already problematized and problematizing. Through a case – an innovation project that involved a group of local user in the development of a gynaecological outpatient clinic of the future – we then put some empirical flesh on our argument. Lastly, in our concluding remarks, we ponder how the specific understanding of everyday life promoted in this piece might be a way to go beyond the dichotomist understanding of ethnography as descriptive and design as interventionist.

## Everyday life as material participation

Recent work within the fields of anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) notes that a growing number of areas acknowledge and actively work with culture, society and politics as not purely human accomplishments. Three examples. Have you joined that group on Facebook against the new building project in your local area suggested to you yesterday by one of your online friends? Are you considering buying a gadget that can tell you more about how those long, warm showers of yours might impact the environment? And are you worried that the meals you prepare for your family are healthy enough and following the directions and recommendations given by public authorities? Facebook Groups, environmental measuring gadgets and public nutrition guidelines can be understood as everyday “objects, devices, setting and materials” (Marres & Lezaun, 2011: 491) deliberately developed and utilized to enact a form of public participation ­­­– in these three examples public participation in local infrastructure, the environment and public health respectively. Further, and crucial for the argument we seek to develop here, it is a form of public participation enacted in everyday life practices – in these three examples connecting with friends through Facebook Groups, taking a shower and preparing family dinners. Noortje Marres has recently summed up this trend as follows:

“The time when it could be considered a provocation to speak of non-human entities as participants in social and political life could soon be behind us. No longer just an interest of adventurous intellectuals, an expanding range of people seem prepared to consider this possibility and to acknowledge the active contributions of objects, technologies and environments to the sustenance of social and political community” (Marres, 2013: 418).

To describe this specific form of public participation, Marres has coined the notion of material participation (Marres, 2012). The crucial trait of material participation is that it is enacted in everyday life and not, as we traditionally understand public participation, dependent upon a forum designed to enable public participation such as the public debate or citizen hearings (cf. Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009).

Here, we are interested not only in the designed devices of participation and their effects in everyday life in terms of enabling and enacting public participation (see, for instance, Marres, 2011), but also the specific concept of everyday life that material participation implies. Everyday life, to Marres, is not exclusively understood as either made up of countless interactions through which society is continuously composed (e.g. [Simmel 1998](#_ENREF_49); [Berger & Luckmann 1971](#_ENREF_5); [Goffman 1959](#_ENREF_18)). Nor is it understood as guided by economic, political or social structures, implying issues of power, domination and alienation (e.g. [Heller 1984](#_ENREF_21); [Lefebvre 1981](#_ENREF_33)). Rather, issues of power, politics and public participation are understood as always already enacted in everyday practices. Drawing upon work by STS scholar Mike Michael (2006), Marres stresses that “[t]he intersection of different activities has been described as a constitutive feature of mundane settings: they provide a space in which multiple, conflicting concerns, activities, and values must be juggled or somehow brought into alignment” (Marres 2011: 529). In this specific understanding, everyday life, in other words, has a kind of agency in relation to the problemazations it continuously undergoes. It is endowed with the ability to problematize the problematizations. We will give examples of how this agency might unfold in our case below.

In the following we discuss how this specific conceptualization of everyday life practices as always already problematized and problematizing might aid us in relating ethnography and design even more fruitfully. We do so by taking Marres’ notion of material participation and the specific understanding of everyday life implied and move it from practices of everyday life into which participation devices have been inserted to a broader field of practices, more specifically practices of design and innovation. Design anthropologist Brendon Clark makes a similar, pragmatist move in his recent book chapter ‘Generating publics through design activity’ (2013), but whereas Clark – and others (see, for instance, Bjögvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2012; Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013) – seem to view design and innovation practices as a means to turn everyday practices into sites of public participation, we here entertain the idea – building on Marres and our disciplinary background in Ethnology as we will unfold below – that everyday practices are always already sites of public participation. We entertain the idea that practices of everyday life are always already – that means with or without ethnographic or designerly interventions – problematized by, for instance, state initiated reforms and that everyday life might be problematizing the issues that such problematizations address. Thereby practices of everyday life are potentially sites for the enactment of participation in issues of public concern.

Our disciplinary background as ethnologists also greatly informs our understanding of everyday life as always already problematized and problematizing. Everyday life has been recurring theme within ethnology, if not *the* object of studydefining the discipline at least since the 1980s (Stoklund 1994, Tschofen 2013). Understanding everyday life from within – its routines, practices and organization – and exposing its inherent logics and thereby conditions for stability and change has become the way ethnologists most often study culture. However, and in alignment with Marres’ understanding, ethnological studies of everyday life do not consider everyday life to be an entity or an object in and by itself, but as an object configured and shaped in specific forms through shifting agendas and interests or what we here term problematizations. Ethnological explorations of everyday life do not just amount to a more or less neutral body of knowledge about everyday life, compiled through rigorous disciplinary investigations in various times and places. Instead, if we are to understand everyday life as a body of knowledge, then we must acknowledge that it becomes intelligible and authoritative in diverse and specific space and time contexts and situated fields of inquiry. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to investigate and to intervene in everyday life was often part of the same practices, meaning that to generate knowledge of the everyday life is also to take part in generating everyday life itself (Damsholt and Jespersen, forthcoming). With today’s advent and broad utilization of devices of public participation (Marres, 2013) and, as we will see in our case, with the growing popularity to utilizing ethnographic and designerly methods to explore and attempt to reconfigure the everyday lives of users in innovation and design practices (Munk & Petersen, 2013), this entanglement of investigation and intervention might at present be even stronger than ever.

Our point is that investigations into everyday life have always been part of a broader political and interventionist agenda. In the perspective of reform politics, for instance, common people were seen as ruled by a conceptual world of prejudices, dogmas and traditions without reflection and insight into the ‘true nature of things’. Interventions into everyday life had to be made, reformists argued, and information based on scientific explorations was disseminated via, for instance, home visits from public health consultants. The combination of investigation and educational programmes became a technology for installing new and what was understood to be better habits by the reformers. Ethnologists have thus become interpreters of habits and everyday life, explaining how seemingly irrational practices of everyday life more often than not have their own logics. This could explain why well-meaning reformers are met with resistance from citizens and their everyday lives and why new social or material innovations often do not succeed. If not curators of every form of everyday life, many ethnologists at least consider everyday life to be something that has to be taken serious. One could in this way argue that everyday life as an object of study and as a body of knowledge is shaped not only by disciplinary conventions, but also within governmental practices with specific agendas of improvement and change, for instance the discourse of innovation of the 21st century (Damsholt and Jespersen, forthcoming). Thus, as an ethnological object of knowledge and investigation, everyday life can be understood as always already problematized and the ethnological intervention lies in bringing to the fore and communicating the responses to such problematizations, which are – more often than not – enacted in everyday life practices. With an affinity for analytical resource that highlight cultural diversity and, more recently, what may be termed cultural multiplicity (Ren & Petersen, 2013), ethnology has in this way sought to help enact a specific version of everyday life, a version where cultural diversity and multiplicity (for an example, see Andersen, Klatt & Sandberg, 2012) are the defining features of everyday life and features that reformers, ethnographers, designers and others all should care (more) about and for.

We thus have a conceptualization of everyday life as always already problematized – by, as we have given examples of, well-meaning reformers, by disciplinary inqueries, by designers or by objects, devices, settings and materials designed to do exactly that. However, ethnological experience and horse sense tells us that everyday life also seems to be problematizing such problematizations. It kicks back – or does not do anything at all. Inertia. It responds to problematizations. It is not always willing to comply with the agendas and interests of specific problematizations. It is this double nature of everyday life as always already problematized and problematizing, that we believe is important to grasp and make part of future configurations of the relationship between design and ethnography, because it offers an alternative to the descriptive-interventionist divide. Designers and ethnographers alike, we suggest, would do well to understand better the dynamic between everday life as problematized and as problematizing if we are to engage critically and in unison with the current discourse of innovation. We will seek to illustrate how this might work through a case – an innovation project – to which we will turn to now.

Case: Innovating future everyday life at an outpatient department

How does everyday life at an outpatient department unfold? And how should it unfold? These were the two pivotal questions for an innovation project located at the gynaecological outpatient department of a Danish hospital in greater Copenhagen. The innovation project was to future-proof the outpatient department and worked from the assumption that this could be achieved by involving local users in the innovation project.

The group of consultants and researchers that conceptualized and carried out the user involving activities were not deliberately seeking to generate public participation. However, public participation was – to some of the consultants’ frustration – enacted in the practices of involving users. This, and the fact that the consultants utilized a combination of ethnographically informed and designerly ways of involving the local users, constitutes the innovation project as an case well-suited for discussing different conceptualizations of everyday life and how the conceptualization of everyday life as always already problematized and problematizing might be a way out of what we believe to be an unproductive division of labour between design as intervention and ethnography as description. One of the authors, Petersen, explored how the project was carried out through observations of meetings, workshops and user involving activities, through a 2-hours interview with the consultants and researchers involved, through photography and through documents produced by the group of consultants. This ethnographic work was conducted in the spring of 2011.

As described the user involving innovation project aimed at future-proofing the gynaecological outpatient department of a Danish hospital. Within the next five to six year the department was to move to an entirely new building. Existing Danish healthcare facilities are at the time being redesigned and rebuild and completely new ones are added to the map. The vision of this 15-year, state- and region-supported project with a total budget of €5,5 billon is to “create a future-proof hospital service where the patients are in focus.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The innovation project explored here is not formally related to this larger project, but aimed to contribute to it.

Forestalling this move, a mixed group of consultants (some of these employed at the hospital, others privately) and researchers (some with technical backgrounds, others social scientists) planned and executed the innovation project with the aim of innovating and designing the organizational and functional features of the future department. The project entailed, first, ethnographically inspired observations of existing working procedures, then workshops concerning possible futures and lastly – but definitely not least – so-called table top simulations of what was assessed to be the most promising, possible organizational and functional futures. The project involved an, again, mixed group of local users ­– doctors, nurses and secretaries employed at the department – in its innovation activities.

But why involve users in this endeavour to innovate and design the outpatient department of the future? A document produced by the consultants and researchers outlining a detailed script for the simulations says that there are three advantages of involving users and simulating future scenarios with them: first, it increases the quality of treatment as assessed by the department. Second, it increases the quality of treatment as experience by the patients. And, finally, it increases the overall efficiency of the department.

Let us pause here for a moment before venturing deeper into the project and what happened in the user involving practices. Because it is crucial to note that the project and the way it was planned and executed did *not* in any way seek to “spark a public into being” (Marres, 2005), meaning that it did not seek to turn the future of the outpatient department into an issue for the local users or others to be engaged by voicing their different concerns, interests and agendas as citizens. Quite the opposite! The project sought to create value for all of the different parties and stakeholders (and practices, one might add) involved simultaneously. Rather than seeking to enact public participation, the project sought to enact a form of peaceful and apolitical coexistence, where concerns, interest and agendas that we traditionally would understand as either directly opposing or in potential tension – for instance between managers and employees, or between the hospital and its patients – are brought into alignment. For instance, during the interview one of the consultants explained how their framing of the workshops was meant to take the users “out of their everyday life” (Interview, 7 July 2011) at the department. The consultant further explained that the idea with taking the users out of their everyday lives at the department and into the workshop was to neutralize the “normal hierarchies” amongst the staff of the outpatient department (Interview, 7 July 2011), as this enabled discussion of sensitive subjects concerning, for instance, the future core tasks of the secretaries.

Taking on the role of the critical ethnographer and not believing that differences in interests or agendas can be washed away by involving a few users in a development project through various workshops or simulations, one might see the project as a case of rather clever exploitation of the users, accomplished by an equally clever cast of rationalization experts, namely the mixed group of consultants and researchers. And this might actually be the best way to analyse the project and its effects. Done deal. Such a line of analysis, however, is premised upon the assumption that whereas designers (in this case the mixed group of consultants and researchers) intervene, the ethnographer (in this case Petersen) makes mere descriptions and offers (belated) critique of the innovation and design activities and their effects. Instead, let us try to see how the project sought to problematize everyday life at the department and how the users (and, at times, also the consultants and researchers) responded to this problematization. We will focus on the simulations, the methodological crown jewel of the project.

The table top simulations consisted of a wide range of low-res materials, representing the patients, doctors, nurses and secretaries, the various rooms and the technologies of the outpatient department. During the simulations different patient trajectories were simulated to see what kind of configuration of the people, materials and technologies of the department would result in the best and most efficient treatment of the patients.

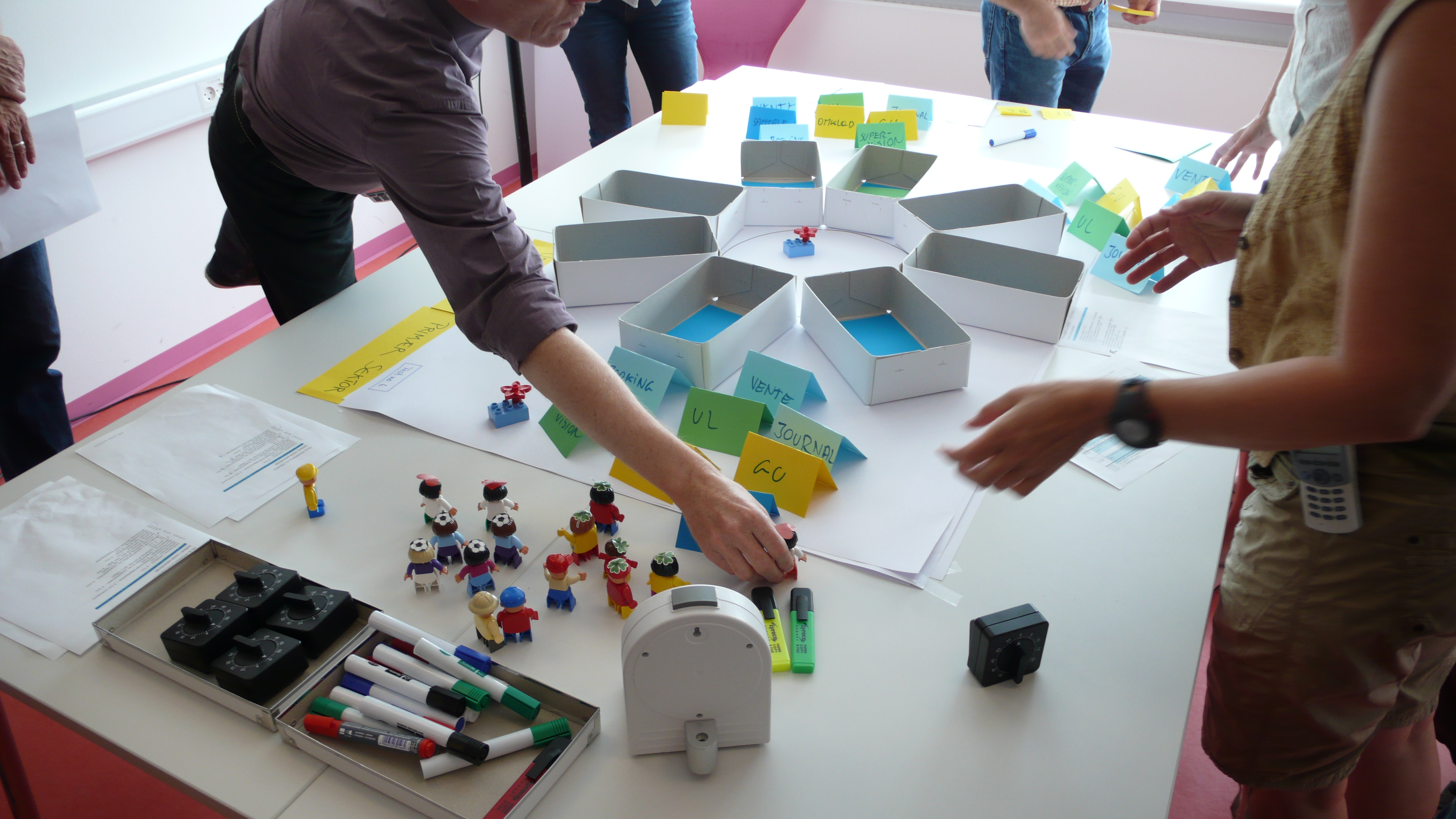


Figure 1: The table top simulation in action. Photo: Morten Krogh Petersen

The simulation with all its materials, its rules for how to move the patients, doctors, nurses and secretaries, represented by the small figurines in the photograph in Figure 1, as to enable the cameras above to catch these movements for future analysis and its implied outlining of what the consultants talked about as “typical patient trajectories” (Observation of first simulation, 31 March 2011) can be understood as a specific problematization of everyday life at the department, rather than a more or less neutral simulation of everyday life at the department. At least that is the impression one is left with when focusing on how the users responded to the specific problematization of the simulation. While the consultants and researchers – at times stubbornly – sought to arrive at “the optimal patient flow design” (Observation of second simulation, 11 May 2011) the users questioned the problematization of the simulation. Let us give three examples. In the second simulation the consultants and researchers decided to work with time. That is why there is a big white and small black alarm clocks to be seen in the photograph in Figure 1. Beforehand, the consultants and researchers and one doctor had collaboratively outlined how much time is need for the staff to complete each of the tasks implied when treating a patient. After being presented to these time determinations, with a smile the nurse said that if these time determinations were correct, then they would have to go to the hospital management right away to ask for more time. She was, in other words, hinting that in her day-to-day work she completes tasks much quicker than suggested by the time determinations. During the same simulation the doctor involved opposed the whole idea of designing an optimal patient flow. “It’s extremely complex,” he argued and added that if their work had consisted of uniform building blocks then an optimal design would be possible (Observation of second simulation, 11 May 2011). Obviously, to the doctor, everyday life at the department does not consist of uniform building blocks. Lastly, as the project neared its end, the consultants and researchers themselves began to problematize the problematization that their project entailed. The first two simulations resulted in what the consultants and researchers termed a star model for the placement of the various rooms and technologies of the department. “Something magical happened with the star model,” one of the consultants said in the interview, the magic causing them to “fall in love” with the model. This magic and falling in love made them question the model: “In one way or another, after the second simulation we thought: “Is this really it?” (Interview, 7 July 2011). The point here being that the consultants themselves began to question the adequacy of their own problematization of everyday life at the outpatient department,

Summing up, one can say that everyday life and its questionings and contestations of the problematizations it undergoes – in this case a specific problematization caused by an attempt to innovate and design the outpatient clinic of the future – was still very much a part of the project in spite of repeated attempts at getting rid of exactly such everyday questionings and contestations. Maybe it is these questionings and contestations that deserve more attention from ethnographers and designers alike if we are to innovate sustainable – in every possible meaning of the word – futures?

## Concluding remarks: sustainable everyday lives

In this paper we have sought to usher a way to go beyond the dichotomous understanding of ethnography as descriptive and design as interventionist. This dichotomous understanding is problematic because it entails a division of labour where designers intervene in everyday life practices (to the anthropologists too readily and unreflectively), while ethnographers offer critique of the implication for everyday life of such interventions (to the designers too timidly and too inwardly). We have sought to go beyond this understanding by, first, outlining how ethnography and design can (and should) be understood as interventionist and, second, by bringing to the fore an understanding of everyday life as always already problematized and as entailing the potential to respond to, to question and contest, such problematizations.

When conducting ethnographic work and when designing social practices this, we have sought to argue, entails specific problematizations of everyday life practices. Health reforms and ethnological studies of how these unfold in practice, for instance, entailed a specific problematization of everyday meal practices. And as we saw in the case of the innovation project, everyday life at the outpatient department was problematized as consisting of (too) uniform building blocks in the doctor’s view. Such problematizations are inevitable (cf. Michael, 2012). What is not inevitable is that we – ethnographers and designers alike – find ways of grasping, appreciating and handling the questioning and contestations that such problematizations might engender.

Over a couple of we have both been part of and we have been studying numerous innovation and design projects. In doing so, we have acted as ‘watchdogs’ (Jespersen, Petersen, Ren, & Sandberg, 2012: 3) for a diverse set of everyday practices, seeking to disseminate this cultural diversity and/or multiplicity to designers and other innovators also involved in these projects. While this continues to be an important task and one of the defining features of ethnological scholarship, we have here suggested that we – designers included – should become better at caring about and for the questionings and contestations that attempts at designing of everyday life often enact. Too often, we sense, such questionings and contestations go unrecorded (Michael, 2012), they are writing off as either methodological failings on part of the designer or ethnographer or, and perhaps worse, they are seen as an effect of not having involved the ‘right’ informants or users. Instead, these questionings and contestations enacted by the problematizations that ethnographic and design work inevitably entails might be the key to develop more sustainable everyday lives.

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1. Here is not the place nor the time to go into discussions of disciplinary differences between, for instance, the disciplines of ethnology and anthropology. From now on we therefore use the notion of ethnographer, as our argument concerns ethnographic explorations of everyday life, which are conducted by ethnologists, anthropologists and others. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.godtsygehusbyggeri.dk/Maal%20og%20styring/Vision.aspx, accessed 8 July 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)