I Am More Than My Pain:
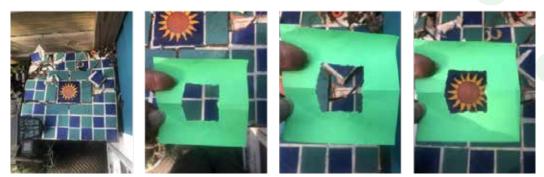# Alternative Framing Strategies In Design

By Lesley-Ann Noel

In the design world, we love 'pain' and problems. Therefore, many design challenges start with a search for problems that designers can solve.

If you are a product designer, you may be familiar with the term 'pain point'. A pain point is a persistent point of tension for a product or service user. It is an annoyance that needs to be fixed to improve the user experience. In several design disciplines, designers use 'pain points' or points of friction in the user experience to support problem framing and to elucidate areas where they can intervene and improve the experience of the person for whom they are designing. If you teach industrial design UX design or human-centered design, there is the possibility that you use the word 'pain point'. I've used it for several years, even finding it helpful to identify friction points in the customer journey.

In the world of social design or community-focused design, the focus on pain and deficits can send problematic messaging about a community's lived experience, reinforcing a one-dimensional portrayal of these people as depleted or broken (Leitão 2020; Tuck 2009). How you frame an issue depends on your positionality and point of view. As a designer, are you only focusing on pain? Who has named the matters on which you are focusing as problems? In the same way designers can choose to frame issues around pain points, they can also choose to frame issues with other starting points that are not pain and damage-centered.

In photography, I can compose an image around what I want you to see, what might be most compelling or essential. For example, if I take a photograph of a broken table with a tiled tabletop, I can frame the image to highlight the tiled flower, frame an abstract pattern in the tile work, frame the destruction of the table. In the same way, framing an issue changes what people will see in design or research. How I create the frame depends on my positionality or identity, what I deem essential, and what I want people to see.

Caption: How I frame the image guides people what to focus on.
Source: The author

In the design process, problem framing helps designers define issues they want to focus on and make issues more focused and addressable. The frame helps us bring the issue into focus. We can frame an issue in different ways. We must also be aware that our positionality impacts our focus as we frame issues. If we call an issue a problem, who are we to define it as such? There is an unspoken tension around who has the power to define an issue as a problem. As designers move more towards issues such as equity, we need to analyze this tension. We also need to open up how issues are framed, exploring multiple points of view and starting points to gain a more complex understanding of issues. Asking critical questions while defining the issue helps the designer see more possible frames for the problem.

While searching for pain points and problems to solve has been helpful in my career as a designer, these days, I've become more reflective about how framing issues around pain and problems can lead to an excessive focus on (and even fetishization of) the pain and distress of other people. I have also become aware that fixing problems may not lead to joy and thriving.

I have intentionally sought alternative ways of framing issues and consciously stopped myself from using the word 'problem' in my more current design practice in the field of social design, often with community partners. I refrain from diagnosing problems and trying to fix them. In empathy interviews, I use more varied conversations about a broader range of emotions so that my students and I cannot only focus on people's pain. In the interviews, I use the Feelings Wheel, designed by Dr. Gloria Wilcox (1982), to guide conversations about a broader range of emotions around the issue

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in focus. Participants talk about how the issue has made them feel mad, sad, scared, joyful, powerful, and peaceful. In framing issues, the design statements are also intentionally around maintaining joy, peace, power and not just fixing pain and sadness. Focusing on pain and problems can make us forget the complex multi-dimensionality of the real people we are serving in our work as designers.

In my interest in decentering pain, in addition to using the Feelings Wheel, I have used other design prompts in more recent work such as futures, fun, relationships, and other design prompts that consciously move me and my students away from seeking pain points. These have resulted in design concepts for future versions of ourselves, food trucks about health, a series of conceptual services to create friendly relationships between police and residents, among other ideas.

I encourage other designers to problematize the concept of the pain point and consider more creative frames for design challenges. Here are

How does worldview impact problem framing?

How do unequal relationships of power impact the framing activities of designers?

Can problem framing be grounded in questions around the future, utopia, happiness, and other bold new approaches in design?

How do unequal relationships of power impact the framing activities of designers?

If we don't call it a problem, then what do we call it?

How can designers use play more intentionally in the design process?

What could be the role of happiness and fulfillment as alternative starting points in the design cycle?

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Focusing on pain and problems might not get us to the futures we want. We are more than our pain, whether the cause of that pain is racial inequity, economic hardship, barriers related to gender or ability. The people who we serve as designers live rich lives that cannot be reduced to only pain and suffering. A simplistic focus on pain and suffering of others is dis-empowering. Therefore I challenge you fellow designer to move beyond merely seeking pain points to understand the complex lived experiences of the people you serve.

References:

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