

Design: Applications and Lessons Learned– Written Responses to Live Audience Questions

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Q: Do you think that “personas” can be a constructive tool? I’ve struggled recently with personas that seem to reproduce stereotypes. What might a non-prejudiced persona look like? How do you imagine the persona of the post-structuralist future?

These are important questions. I believe personas can be highly constructive, but like any tool, it’s all in the use and understanding of what it does and does not do. The issue of stereotypes is important and speaks to the ways we embody certain prejudices and preconceived ideas. However, I like to view the term stereotype as an uncritical and often semi- or unconscious process. Personas (when used appropriately) are the opposite: they are hypercritical and seek to surface and expose our preconceptions and beliefs around people in context.

They do this by getting us to examine the context in which certain behaviour or quality is present, how shared it is and under what circumstances, backed by real evidence (observation, affirmation), and in what context. It also allows us to imagine what might be and to ask better questions. It might help us to build new frames of empathy for someone’s situation, condition, or preferences. In doing so, it helps us to split apart what is a stereotype for what is a pattern of shared experience or quality.

Another important point is to validate the assumptions with those you’re creating personas. Involve people in the process. If I am asked, I can probably identify where I fit certain patterns shared with people of similar situations and where I am unique and don’t fit. The same is true for personas.

It’s also vital to keep in mind that personas are tools for imagining patterns in the context of a person’s lived experience. This also means knowing where and when a persona doesn’t fit. Personas are always in negotiation and are never set and forgotten (when done well – which isn’t always the case). They are time-sensitive. When they help us to ask better questions they work well and when we use them as a “cardboard cut-out” stereotype of people uncritically, without input and non-transparently, these can be harmful. I’d view any persona with caution and many questions but wouldn’t dismiss them out of hand.