



# Recasting “shadows”: expanding respectful hierarchies in participatory design practices

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## ABSTRACT

Participatory design (PD) often prioritises being vocal and equal as signs of empowerment in enabling social change. But what can such preference inadvertently ignore, like silence and passivity? What relationships might be prevented or put at risk when hierarchies are flattened? This paper examines the subtle and relational power dynamics experienced as various hierarchies that shape multitudinous interactions. We identify hierarchies that embody relationalities such as respect, intimacy, and learning, configured through cultural structures and commitments. We distinguish these plural ‘respectful hierarchies’ to contrast with ‘disempowering hierarchy’ to prevent collapsing vertical power structures. We share discoveries from reflexively attending to unspoken, overshadowed dimensions in a transcultural mentoring program that brought together women in Asia and Australia to support their personal and professional development. In recasting hierarchy, we join with emerging movements to expand PD’s intersectionally situated practices that support social change, as part of embracing plurality of worldviews.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms.

## KEYWORDS

Hierarchy, intersectionality, transcultural, respect

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: MOVING BEYOND HORIZONTAL VS VERTICAL

The presence of hierarchies and the diverse ways in which they are configured, experienced and enacted, shape how people engage and learn during the participatory design (PD) process. Yet, despite acknowledged and unacknowledged hierarchies always being present, we notice that all vertical hierarchies are taken to mean oppressive manifestation of power in most PD reporting. This means, within PD’s accepted practice, problematising vertical hierarchy claims the limelight, and intervening in them is desired to enable participants’ agency in social change. We hear this most often from key works and scholars in Scandinavia that have critiqued the “unevenness” of power and to distribute it “equally”, arising from a desire or expectation to be “balanced” or in “symmetry” [14]. This has the effect of framing hierarchy as binary, leading us to assume that horizontal is good, but vertical is bad. We agree that violent, exclusionary and disempowering hierarchies are harmful, but also, *not all hierarchies are bad*. There are many kinds of vertical power arrangements. We worry that solely taking vertical hierarchies as damaging, risks ignoring the situated relationships which are always contingent and culturally specific. This variety of hierarchy needs to be recognised in PD, and we aim to explore this in our paper.



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In reading recent works in PD, we learn that a practitioner or researcher's attention to situated, lived experiences and relational power dynamics is vital for participation. This care towards participants' intersectional realities is an ethical concern [7, 21]. Our paper builds on these important precedents. Such discourses also show how we are often stepping into contingent, relational power shifts that are hard to discern, especially if we are outsiders to those configurations, or if relationships are "newly" forming through our interventions [3, 41]. To this, we add that various relationships to hierarchies and how we work with them needs to be carefully considered. We argue that flattening power is both ideological and impossible when regarding anyone's intersectional positionalities and their relational dynamic. We question PD's tendencies that only value the kinds of power when it is "horizontal" or when it is bottom-up. In taking up this issue, we articulate how attunement to multiple relationships to hierarchies are complex yet necessary to enable various ways in which participants learn, have agency and feel valued. This is a key argument of our paper.

The paper draws from our experience of a transcultural women's mentoring program in Asia-Pacific. We present the reflexive sensitivities to hierarchies that we, as co-authors and team members, feel ourselves and observed in the program, which has taught us about the diversity of relationships to hierarchy. For the project team and participants with grounded experiences of working and living in countries like Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia, hierarchical relations have shaped who we are and continue to be part of what we become. These hierarchies are inseparable from our bodies. They are part of our gaze, attire, habits, pitch, touch, speech, posture, movements and presence. They extend into acts like the way gifts are given and received, how we use honorifics in addressing one another, and how meals are shared. Respect for hierarchies is enmeshed with how we listen, respond and how we relate. Often, these bodily aspects can express and respond more intensely than words alone. In this paper, we have strove to convey how differing hierarchies are present and expressed through gestures, glances, postures and positioning. These feature as "fragments" in italics. Such fragments have been gleaned from video recordings, interview footage, anecdotal recollections and reflective notes, as a way of assembling "entry points into experience" to account a "brief-but-vivid narrative" [4, p.265]. This is another contribution we make, to help PD researchers and practitioners notice and relate to resonant dimensions in their own work.

Through a focus on how participants communicate preferred ways of being and relating within hierarchies, this paper also asks, how do we notice phenomena that are indiscernible, but undeniably configures the shape of participation? How do we respond to feelings that emerge as part of relations, yet shift so silently in and through our bodies? These questions speak to the challenges of attuning to co-ontologies – of ways of being and becoming together [4]. These are not always outwardly vocalised or signaled visibly, like how respect can be intimated in unspoken ways. By opening up to the loudness of quietude, this paper explores delicate dimensions of participatory work that can be passed over in PD. We assert that a neglect of the unspoken and overshadowed is an unintended consequence of PD's focus on "rebalancing" vertical power to enable voice, inclusion and equality. It is a paradox. We further worry that a repetitive emphasis on outcomes, process and

technology-focused aims can both smother and rush by hidden intricacies. As we decelerate our senses to attend to nuanced intricacies of social change, we invite readers to join us too. As such, the word "shadows" is evocatively used in our paper to expand the Anglophonic application that connotes a negative, overbearing tone, like, "in the shadows" or "under the shadow". We relate this to hierarchies. Shadows, like hierarchies, have rich textures, if we pause to study its depth. This is akin to noticing the shimmering patterns cast by the sunlight that filters through a canopy in the breeze. Some things can only be perceptible when moving slowly or watching with stillness, together.

In all, this paper recasts hierarchies, expanding its plurality from the unvaried, *disempowering hierarchy* that is usually problematised in PD. We distinguish this from many other *respectful hierarchies*. We introduce these terms in this paper to explain how they are differently angled and distanced. Respectful hierarchies can be vertical, but not automatically harmful. Most critically, we argue that vertical hierarchies are and will always be present, but what changes them from becoming disempowering, relies on conditions of trust, care, kindness, generosity, and support. To expand various facets of respectful hierarchies, we introduce intimacy, boundaries, quietude and "in-between" space. We highlight these features to provoke expansive ways to think and be-with-hierarchies for PD to explore subtler and multiple tilts and perspectives, beyond the vertical-horizontal binaries. In recasting hierarchies, we contribute to enriching understandings of reflexive practices that attune to silent, infinitesimal matters that can be overlooked when flattening power overtakes as the main agenda.

To clarify, our paper is not proposing "alternative" methodologies for social change. Similarly, it is not a "how to do PD" in Asia-Pacific. Nor do we suggest that the contribution only matters for women and in transcultural contexts. Rather, we hope this paper is relevant for all genders and situations. We argue that attuning to various relational hierarchies is always necessary when being situated and present in the shifting, social dynamics of participation. Arguably, this is where PD can mature further in both deepening nuanced accounts of contingent practices and to broaden its understanding of hierarchies. In contributing thoughts for deepening PD's reflexive practice, we invite a sensitising to plural ways of relating that thrive in the shade, like a fern that unfurls its tendril in dapple light.

We begin the paper by showing where PD strives to counter-balance vertical hierarchies. We identify the values and world-views that this emphasises and circulates in reinforcing norms of PD. Then, in *Learning With and Through Respectful Hierarchies*, we articulate how we witnessed mentors lean into their seniority in accounting their own knowledge and experience, whilst being mindful of how and what they advised their mentees. In turn, some mentees described their mentor as a "senior friend" to distinguish between supportive and disempowering hierarchies. Next, in *Intimacy Within Hierarchies*, we share how some mentoring clusters developed a "sisterly friendship" that evoked the bonds that were nourished. Maintaining a respectful distance was also noted in several mentoring relationships, which we detail under *In-between Space Within Hierarchies*. These angles and distances, tethered to transcultural inflections, was a consciousness that manifested as respect. To explain respect within hierarchies, we differentiate this from individual, universal principles that we generally hear. Lastly,

we revisit reflexivity as our way of attuning to felt dimensions of hierarchies, and share a set of questions we generated ongoingly that sharpened our noticing and alerted others to help us do so too. Altogether, our paper extends pluriversal and transcultural discussions in PD to expand and reframe ways of working with hierarchies.

## 2 THE PRESUMED VALUE OF EQUALITY, SYMMETRY AND VOICE

PD has a proud tradition of empowering those who are marginalised and excluded from decision-making. This principle is a major feature of its aims and practice, and noted as a strength of the approach [60]. While it aligns with broader social movements in western Europe and the US from the 1960s onwards, themselves part of longer historical shifts, the genesis of “egalitarian values” within PD can be traced specifically to socio-cultural roots in workplace democracy in Scandinavia [13]. Throughout its expansion and diversification, PD has maintained an important focus on rights, equality, emancipation and social justice for those who are “marginalised” and “disadvantaged” [39]. In this trajectory, PD has explored methods and methodologies for participants to “have a say”, connecting voice with power, so that people affected by decisions can directly influence them [12, 27]. Alongside voice, some have named language as power to enable both literal and figurative ways for participants to contribute through preferred modes of expression [16]. Principles such as “equalising power relations” [39, p.33] and addressing “unevenly balanced power” [14, p.38] are often offered as guidance for supporting “genuine participation”, seen in handbooks by senior PD practitioners. Cumulatively, these principles reinforce the idea that power can be uniform and must be problematic if it’s not. They support the conclusion that vertical power structures such as hierarchies are a problem that PD methodologies can address, as part of doing PD work.

Disempowering hierarchies are indeed harmful. However, presuming that symmetry of power is both desired and achievable can be just as controversial, especially considering the positions of privilege that practitioners and researchers can have when enacting social change. Some have critiqued what they see as “overly simplistic notions of power and hierarchy” [13], p.107 that place the dominant or preferred socio-cultural values in Scandinavia to be the norms of PD. With the expansion of the PD community across diverse cultures, the persistence of normative modes within PD has become a mounting concern. Very simply, the risk is that non-Scandinavian contexts are “othered”, provoking some to argue that PD perpetuates “a euro-centric standpoint considered as the ‘norm’, with ‘the other culture’ being a deviation and needing to be accommodated through adaptations of the system” [68, p.1]. We note here briefly that Scandinavia and Europe – like any geographical entity – cannot be spoken of as a singular or unified culture or location [42]. They are themselves heterogeneous sites with multiple socio-cultural values, including in the ways that democratic participation is enacted [36]. Scandinavia also carries its own complex histories of centering and peripheralisation, internally and within Europe [50].

Power asymmetries are multiple, nested and everywhere [32]. As such, PD can, and should recognise both how power operates

within specific situations and how power asymmetries operate within PD discourse itself. Modes of PD emerging from Scandinavia can be “provincialised” [20] in their own right, in internal critique and within wider networks. PD has also seen strong currents to recognise the plurality of cultures, values and worldviews within PD’s communities. Commitments to exploring pluriversal, decolonising and Indigenous cosmologies have noticeably fortified, thanks to PDC’20, ’22 and ’24. These discussions are important reminders that, regardless of individual or collective positionality, we all work within global asymmetries in which power has been accumulated and distributed unevenly through historical events and their legacies [18]. In PD, as in diverse design areas, the potential to confuse specific with universal thus arises when design from situational centres, intentionally or unthinkingly, is carried inside epistemes, mindsets and approaches to assert particular ways of being and doing social change. The circulation and popularity of design tools that are “benign” and “democratic” construes the false assumption that similar ends might be achieved through their use without first considering what values, relationships and governing systems they might disrupt or impact negatively [19].

Amongst dangers identified, flattening power and hierarchies can also risk flattening asymmetries, used by some to “design out conflict” [51, p.26] or to create “a cozy, consensual world” ([66, p.35]). The desire for egalitarianism and the presumption of its importance could cause PD practitioners and researchers to miss contexts where parity is unwelcome or make relationships risky. While agonism has been an important vein for amplifying differing matters of care and positionalities involved, the incorporation of Mouffe’s work has strangely amplified a preference for matters to be vocalised, discussed and deliberated as a form of democracy. Mouffe’s agonistic democracy has been important for elevating sharper thinking around the politics of conflict, contestation and disagreements in PD, thanks to Ehn [27], DiSalvo [26] and Björgvinsson and colleagues [12] amongst others. These have enabled significant work around fostering spaces and intervening in structures to premise an expectation of differing and plural positionality – including knowledges, abilities, capacities and worldviews – for those who participate in PD. While important in pluralising conceptualisations of PD, agonism and related politics of working with and through differing values, positionalities and worldviews run through the same veins of action-oriented engagement as the main drivers of change. We remind PD that power that is equated as voice or being able to deliberate openly are, in themselves, conditional and culturally specific.

Building and agitating momentum around political activism and social justice are essential. But we must remember that these take many forms. A rich strand in postcolonial feminisms and similar forms of critical praxis since the 1980s teaches us how marginalised individuals and communities who are denied voice through structural oppression present resistance in other forms [35, 62]. Some have raised pertinent questions around social and private circumstances that give reasons for why some people may decide not to act, or to construct “their problems as political in the first place” [51, p.34]. Recognising the politics of silence means honouring that, in some instances, people choose not to act or speak. The desire for visibility, vocality, action and transparency combined with the desire to ensure equality and empowerment can overshadow the

subtle and nuanced ways in which people – in groups, kinships and relationships – are present in, and attentive to, issues in ways that are less visible and expected. Our paper weaves in further layers to this rich body of approaches as an aggregate of practices generated from within multiple and diverse situated realities.

We move next to the rationale for developing the transcultural mentoring program. We relate this transculturality to shadows that flicker and flutter, to invite readers to spend time with varying positionalities and dynamics in relationships. This requires an adjustment, much like stepping into the shade from bright sunlight. Our eyes need accustoming from discerning crisp outlines to notice the hazy hues and tones in the shadows. Likewise, we come tangentially to what might be expected in design research reporting as “case study” or “methodology” to evidence where insights are drawn from, but without the clean contours they imply. Next, we begin by situating our own positioning as co-authors and collaborators, and what we mean by “transcultural” as integral to our practice and the mentoring project. This underscores the importance of co-ontology and relationships as foundational to our work [4, 6, 70, 71].

Since 2015, *Designing Entangled Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific* (DESIAP) has been supporting researchers and practitioners to mutually learn together to enable capacity building to tackle diverse, social and ecological issues that affect communities in the Asia-Pacific [6]. DESIAP reports how women in various creative sectors have limited opportunities as the result of gender inequity, coupled with a lack of support available for women’s personal and professional development [71]. We, as part of the DESIAP team, heard from Thai women that they are rarely recognised or paid for their roles as local community leaders, because of their age and gender. Some working women in Japan are hesitant in taking maternity leave because it risks being perceived as “inconveniencing” their co-workers. These obstacles were acutely familiar to us, the co-authoring project team too. Over our careers as artists, designers, teachers and researchers, inside our institutions, workplaces, and disciplines, women have experienced the harm that comes from spaces that are dominated by patriarchy. Studies of the gendered nature of organisations show that male experiences are taken as the norm of the wider population, and thus, as universal [10, 22]. Rational, skilled, independent and productive minds are the preferred worker, not bodies that menstruate or nurse family members. This assumption perpetuates structures that are taken as apolitical and gender-less, when in fact norms have been created and dominated by masculine constructs. Ignoring and undervaluing women’s knowledge and experiences are symptomatic of this condition [22]. Our project thus aimed to support women in socially-engaged creative professions.

In initiating and calling the program “transcultural”, we acknowledge that the project team and participants were born, raised, educated, live and work in differing locations, sectors and roles, while having the strongest affiliation with Asia and Australia, where DESIAP focuses its work. The program invited individuals with connections to Australia, Canada, Japan, Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia, Mexico, Myanmar, Taiwan, Thailand, the UK and the US, and with those with mixed Aboriginal, Chinese, European, Kenyan and Polish-Jewish heritages. These lived experiences exceed national and geographic boundaries. English was the main language in our communication, however we also worked in Bahasa Melayu, Japanese and Thai. The variety of languages (including multilingualism),

cultures, values and worldviews were embraced and celebrated in the program.

Our approach is different to how others have described transcultural features. For example, transcultural mentoring has been presented as a way for workers in a dominant “host” national culture (like Canada) to familiarise others from another nation (like China) to teach practices in their shared profession (see [48]). In our program, there was no single cohort or nation that “offered” or “received” any support. In another, Winschiers-Theophilus, Zaman and Stanley [69, p.423] describe transcultural as a “smoothie” of cultures to “blend beyond individual recognition” in a “tasteful whole”. Indeed, striving for pleasant engagements are important. Ours differs from these precedents by noticing both specific and diverse contemporary cultures as a reflection of individual identities and different trajectories of lives, while also immersed in constant fluidity of hybrid and syncretic elements [31, 59]. We are informed by a stance developed by diverse postcolonial and cultural studies researchers to make visible and critique the ways intersectional distinctions shape culture and access to power [11, 34, 44–46]. This honed our decolonising approach to understanding power and helped us from over-simplifying “culture”. We endeavoured to think transculturally when differences emerged, and to use these opportunities to recognise and respect differing cultural norms. In all, this “trans-” strategy elevates a consciousness of intersectionality [23], to attend to the complexities and specificities of structure and identities.

### 3 FOSTERING GENTLENESS, SENSITIVITY AND QUIETUDE

A key feature we amplify through transculturality is related to social justice. Most of the project team work in societies like the UK and Australia that are predominantly shaped by British heritage and colonialism, despite complex histories and extensive migration. These societies are dominated by whiteness that “others” bodies and cultures, rendering them as neutral or non-existent, or appropriate them to be a literal celebration of “multiculturalism” [2]. The complex and expansive subtleties of social customs, including hierarchical relations, are studied in multidisciplinary fields (see *Politeness Research*, or *Social Psychology Studies* for more) that affirm the contextual ways in which non-verbal behaviours can convey power. Researchers in these fields explore the potential miscommunication that can happen in multicultural settings. For example, politeness shown towards a superior or a new relation by a person in Korea through stooped and rigid posture, lowered gaze and head, and softer, slower and quiet tone of voice, may be taken as submissive and lacking confidence when encountered in an American and European dominant cultures [17]. This perception affects the co-authors too, who are Japanese, Malaysian, Taiwanese or Thai. They have learnt various ways to code-switch to “fit in” in western cultures. This is common behaviour for people and women of colour. It involves adjusting one’s appearance, mannerisms and communication to avoid countering the “appropriate” norms, and to ensure ways to “optimize the comfort of others” and secure “professional advancement” [9, 47, 72]. Some of us have conformed to be taken as “legitimate”, contort “productively”, and grin “harmlessly” in fostering “diversity and inclusion”. This is exhausting,

relentless and emotional labour [1] for transcultural women. The transcultural mentoring program by, for and with, women, was important to recognise this, and to aspire to be a supportive collective.

To advance structural change inside workplaces, institutions and disciplines requires leadership. Yet, leadership was another obstacle we discovered when listening to women. Many shared the difficulties in accessing support. The women in our program work in public sectors, social enterprises, voluntary community settings. Some are artists and self-employed. The high costs demanded by leadership training marketed to women<sup>1</sup> is an inhibiting factor. Reading about these and similar initiatives indicate that they are orientated towards delivering skills and knowledge within a set curriculum. The focus tends to emphasise self-improvement. To be “successful” in a profession implies that women need to “improve” their skills, knowledge and “acquire” social capital (see [71]). Seeing this as another structural barrier for women, our mentoring program questioned the lack of cultural specificity in both the forms that leadership can take, and the guidance they provide.

Combining the first-hand stories with our own lived experience as professional women became a strong motivator to initiate a transcultural mentoring approach and to meet the women where they are. To do this, we honoured sensitivity and quietude. This was an approach that the co-founders of DESIAP, Akama and Yee [6] have cultivated over years as their practice, where convivial conversations with their collaborators have been fostered through eating together. Such atmospheres enabled hesitant quandaries and issues that arise in their work to be mumbled, listened to and ruminated, slowly and gently over meals. In pursuing a similar approach in the mentoring program, the project team explored how tender and hushed ways of being can be welcomed. This meant we aimed to support women to explore their own ways to advocate for structural change for themselves and their communities, in both quiet and vocal ways. These explorations began as a four-month pilot with 19 participants (see [71]) to learn and evaluate how we can ground a culturally-led approach in our work together. The program then evolved, through further funding, to 37 participants, of which 19 were women, clustered into six mentoring groups. The rest were project team (8), guest mentors (2), group of advisors (8), and among this mix were men who were invited to support women’s experiences. This program ran for 18 months from November 2021 to July 2023. Figure 1 gives an abstracted structure of the team and mentoring clusters, which also include the initials of some of the women we feature in the paper.

A key learning from the pilot confirmed the importance of starting collaborations through building thick relationships [71]. Various clusters of prior collaborations had already fostered deep relationships among the project team and between the project team and mentors. For example, three of five mentors from the pilot continued as mentors in the longer program. Others became guest mentors and advisors. New relationships grew out of such fertile grounds. These pre-existing, thick relationships were foundational to the trust, care and generosity that structured important conditions into which the new mentors and mentees were invited in the

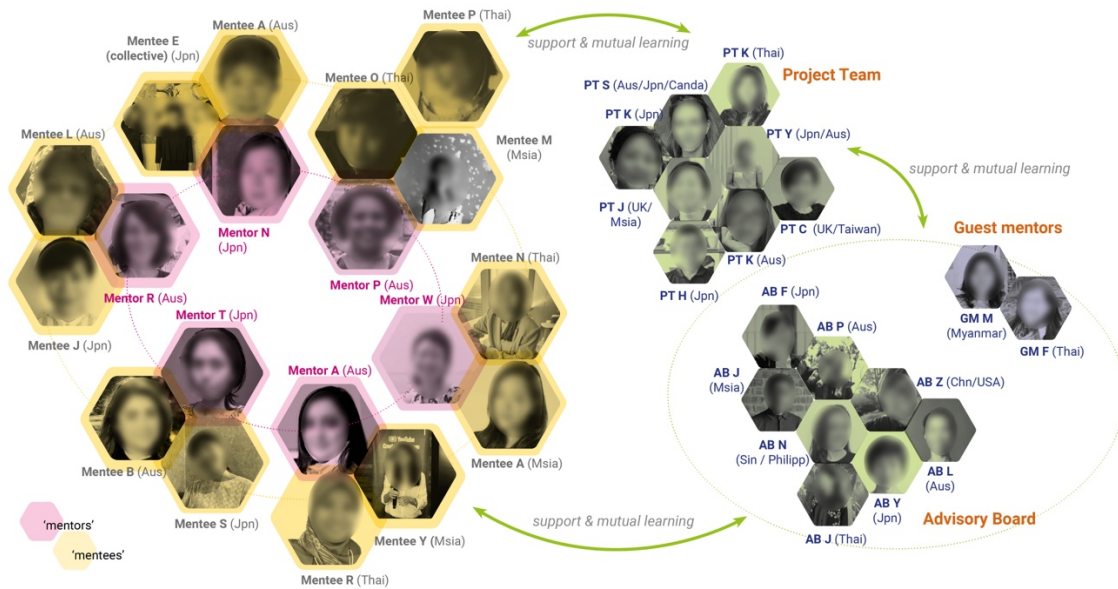
larger program. This was noted by P, a mentor, when reflecting on the invitation she received by the project team: “there’s a level of care and thoughtfulness [in that invitation]. . . that carries a fair bit of weight. Something about that sets up what you’re inviting us into. . . you’re asking us to step in and carry that intention into that relationship” [71, p.101]. We hear how P intimated an atmosphere of kindness within the program that had established a sense of responsibility. She remarks about how this “carries a fair bit of weight”, for her to, in turn, maintain “a level of care and thoughtfulness” in meeting her mentees and building new relationships [71, p.101]. The importance of kindness, generosity and care was not made explicit as a principle or instruction in any of our communications. It is both poignant and suggestive to hear how she felt it so tangibly through, what must have been diffused, relational, bodily, non-verbal, atmospheric cues. In addition, these features, we explain, are also part of the varying respectful hierarchies too. Similarly, such invisible yet powerfully visceral dimensions will be explored further through a focus on expanding and recasting hierarchy.

#### 4 MENTORING, HIERARCHIES AND POWER

Various hierarchies are present in almost all relationships, among parents, siblings, friends, groups and community. We are born into differing hierarchies and, before formal education, learnt and were taught, in other words, were mentored by those around us through these relational structures. Relatedly, hierarchies feature in mentoring relationships because the person acting as a mentor often considers their maturity in experience and knowledge, sometimes through age, as an important capability to guide another [67]. Hierarchies also become formalised in workplace settings where managers mentor junior staff, or leadership is provided for trainees [49]. Despite the existence of hierarchies in mentoring, or to compensate for it, advice for achieving equal positions is a thread throughout the largely US-based literature in academic and professional contexts [71]. We touched on this earlier about norms of leadership or training that suggests universal applicability by not grounding its recommendations in cultural specificity. These discussions oversimplify an understanding of hierarchies and echo our take on PD that aims to flatten them too readily.

It is also important to state that the project team themselves differ in age, ethnicity and seniority. Some are significantly senior in their experience and formal roles as university professors, whereas others are emerging scholars. This is reflected in age, some by more than ten years. Several work in internationally renowned universities in socio-economically wealthier locations, and some in lower-to-middle income countries. A handful had worked on the pilot, and the majority joined for the larger project. All these combined shapes our differing positions in the program. They speak of complex structures of hierarchies and power that are always present. We cannot merely “give up” or step out of our positionalities, which is why we are troubled by “balancing” and “redistributing” power, implied as expected in PD. To assist our reflexive praxis, we iterated questions for the mentoring program. They enabled all, the invited participants and a group of external advisors, to further help us continuously reflect. Specific questions were crafted to address our positionalities, such as, “how are we

<sup>1</sup>Take for example the five-day women’s leadership program at the University of Oxford Saïd Business School in the UK, which is \$8900 US, or the four-day program at Yale University in the US at \$7400 US, respectively, for six weeks, as of 13 February 2024.



**Figure 1: Structure of the transcultural cluster of mentor-mentees, project team and Advisory**

being self-aware of power, especially those that feel ‘heavy’?; “how do we attend to silence and miscommunication?”; “how are we creating safe ‘spaces’ for reflection, learning, vulnerability and critique?”; “how are we respecting and responding to participants’ lived realities e.g. childcare, illness, lack of time and energy?”.<sup>2</sup> Asking and revisiting these questions throughout the program, among project teams and with participants, helped us sensitise, listen and respond to emerging dynamics. We will revisit these later in catalysing attendance to relational hierarchies during the program.

The primary source of this deep, embodied knowing was through our lived experiences in Asia, and by being mentored and mentoring others. For some, this is from birth. As discussed already, hierarchies are co-ontological – it exists in-between and emerges within relationships. For example, respect, as one manifestation of hierarchy, was noticeable in the email correspondences and online meetings during many discussions in the inception of the program. In these preparatory stages, the honorific pronoun *khun* (eg. Khun Muttita) was used between the Thai participants when referring to one another. Reflecting this, the Thai researcher spoke softly, listened attentively and affirmed hearing by frequent nods and smiles. Among those familiar with Japanese customs, using first names too soon in a relationship risk being abruptly casual and tactless, so surnames and adding *-san* (eg. Naomi-san) were preferred. We also observed *keigo* or *teinei-go*, a formal phrasing of certain Japanese words and sentences in conveying polite distance by such participants. Being aware of this, a Malaysian-British team member worried about mistaking the appropriate honorifics when addressing participants from Thailand and Japan. So instead of accuracy, we aimed to be sensitive, always. In all, the felt dynamics

of respectful hierarchies indicates the undeniable existence of these socio-cultural dimensions that live and shape our behaviours in obvious and infinitesimal ways. The next section introduces three facets that we saw emerge through our program.

#### 4.1 Learning with and through hierarchies

In Asia, men and people with wealth, education, certain professions and those in age-seniority are commonly perceived as having higher social status. Such intersectional structures have often been the cause for younger women in our program to lack confidence and be acknowledged as legitimate in their professions. This is one example of *disempowering hierarchy*. Given these contexts, identifying individuals and clustering them under terms like “mentor” and “mentee” risked affirming a rigid, top-down power dynamic, which could trap younger or less-experienced women in continued states of disempowerment. The project team anticipated and addressed this frequently. For example, at the outset, we suggested that the mentoring clusters co-design their own structure and processes. This included negotiating their respective preferences on what to discuss and how often to meet. Such attempts aimed to foster a space of mutual contribution by all. Yet, we soon realised that this was a misguided expectation. During the early check-ins, several mentees confided that they felt anxious about how much time they could reasonably ask for from their busy mentor. Others wanted clear, instructional guidance from the mentor on specific matters, so they were confused about being asked to suggest a topic or lead a conversation. These confusions, hesitancy, anxiety could be attributed to dispositions of politeness, sensitivity and care for others, especially in showing respect towards those in senior roles, so no one loses face. These features are related to *kreng jai*, (in Thai), *budi* or *adap sopan* (in Malay culture) and *kizukai* (in Japanese) [8, 54].

<sup>2</sup>See Yee, Akama and Teerapong [70] to learn more about the research that generated this reflexive approach with social innovation practitioners in SE Asia.

These women live inside cultural hierarchies, always, so we quickly acknowledged and aimed to work with these conditions.

For mentors in Australia, embracing their seniority required adjustments. Mentor P has significant experience in facilitating ways for people to find their own methods and pathways to problem-solving. For P in Australia where thoughts and opinions are relatively freer to exchange, she was initially hesitant in giving direct advice to her mentees in Thailand (O) and Malaysia (M), by being mindful of the disempowering effect of hierarchy. She reflects: “. . . probably the richest learning was because we’re working in a non-Western context. . . I couldn’t just do the things I automatically do. . . I really needed to slow down and just go, okay, well, let me listen and listen and listen for context”. Her sensitivity and responsiveness helped her find ways to lean into hierarchy. This is important to her mentee, O in Thailand, who considers P like a teacher and “senior friend”, in respecting P’s experience and maturity. For P to expect or force flatness would have been awkward and unwanted. Working with vertical-hierarchies itself, was an important learning outcome for M in Malaysia, who was also mentored by P in Australia.

*M pauses frequently, to take the time to find the right words to explain her experience of being mentored by P: “. . . I feel like I’m more comfortable working in a team now, especially with older people, because I’m more aware of hierarchy, right. Because of a bad experience I’ve had with a past mentor and then now with new mentors. I am able to grasp what I can do with that hierarchy. And respecting that hierarchy and making sense of that relationship in order to do something together.”*

We hear M differentiating her current mentoring relationship with P from a “bad experience with a past mentor” that might be akin to a disempowering hierarchy. We also know from other conversations how M had felt apprehensive by previous negative relationships with older mentors. Mentor P is older and experienced too, but when we hear M learning “what I can do with that hierarchy” and “making sense of that relationship in order to do something together”, this indicates her gaining confidence. M further distinguished their relationship and learning through pauses and gestures: “I feel that a friend is there when you need someone to listen to you. . . a mentor is there to help you ask the right question. . . Help you find solutions for yourself. I feel that I’m able to get that kind of support from you.” Mentee M’s reflection indicates how much she’s learnt from, through and how to work with hierarchies that may help her navigate disempowering hierarchy, too.

## 4.2 Intimacy within hierarchies

*Two women, A from Malaysia and W from Japan, are listening attentively to each other as they describe their experiences and growth through the mentoring program. W’s four-year old son is playing in the background and begins to distract everyone, but they both smile at him in a joyful way. It’s an intimate moment. W then cuddles him while they talk. A reflects on being mentored by W. “At the beginning of the mentorship, we had this conversation of how do you want to identify each other?”*

*You know, how do we want our relationship to be? And it’s been a very sisterly friendship that I really appreciate. It doesn’t feel like school or anything. When people talk about mentorship, you think about teacher and student, but I got a different vibe from her.” W further expresses her pride in witnessing A’s growth: “it’s a kind of sisterhood of a very flat relationship. When I asked some questions to A. . . the question is also the question [for] myself, you know, so through this mentorship program, I also find out what is important for me as well. And it’s very, very nice to see, you know, A. . . getting confidence through these six months or seven months. I can see the changes.” The sisterly friendship is evident in their ease as they glance, nod and smile at each other with every thought shared.*

We hear A referring to an approach that she was familiar with in Malaysia, such as at school where the learners are directed to follow the teacher’s instructions [37, 58]. She contrasts this teacher-student power dynamics with a “sisterly friendship” with W and how much she appreciated that “different vibe”. A “sisterly friendship”, rather than just a “friendship” can be taken as a different kind of hierarchy. In seeing how their relationship grew, it suggests intimate hierarchies among sisters and siblings in a kin-like manner. This is further clarified by A, “I wouldn’t say that we have a friendship per se, because it’s slightly more than that . . . because I don’t have an older sister so I don’t have . . . someone to look up to so I, you know, I appreciate. . . these opportunities and I get to share that kind of, . . . you know, ask for advice.” Of course, sibling hierarchies can exist in burdensome and disempowering ways, so perhaps this is what W is trying to spell out by explaining “a kind of sisterhood of a very flat relationship”. We see a resonant kin-like support in a study of family-like relationships in Thailand by Teerapong and colleagues [63]. They describe elder-younger or brother-sister structures called *Karm Pen Phi Pen Nong* that help, love, advise and support junior members with warmth, compassion and respect. This support and generosity can be witnessed in kinship hierarchies, which in turn, becomes a form of respect that is offered. We can observe how this respect exists and operates within intimate hierarchies between A and W.

## 4.3 In-between space within hierarchies

*N, a Japanese artist and curator has been scripting, filming and editing a video with her Japanese and Australian mentees. This poetic film crystallises their mentoring experience. The scene begins with a younger woman knocking on a door to a house. A poised, older woman answers and welcomes her into the house. The older woman glides into the interior, turning around occasionally to nod at the younger woman to continue following. Ethereal voices emanate. The older woman begins to dance, and the younger woman, seeing her invitation, begins to twirl. There is correspondence with the voices and in one another’s movements with some distance apart. N explains: “As the session goes on the mentee [younger woman] discovers that the voice she is hearing is her own voice, and that the older woman was*

*a phantom. She realises she must find her own path forward by herself."*

We shared our worries earlier regarding the complex tensions in using pre-fixed labels like "mentor" and "mentee", that can inadvertently lock-in disempowering hierarchies, but also, how these "imperfect" labels were needed to recognise roles defined by someone's maturity, experience and professional standing. The latter qualities mattered, especially for the mentees, to respect and learn from mentors who were also identified as such. When N was invited to mentor, she frequently apologised for lacking confidence and experience, perhaps in part because the concept of mentoring (called *mentāringu* in Japanese) is uncommon in art circles. In the end, N worked with her mentees in the way she felt most comfortable – through her curatorial practice of collaborating as artists. One such collaboration produced the video described above (Inner Voice: "Earmind" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\$-SUMIXGs0NlxU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=$-SUMIXGs0NlxU)), including co-creating the earpieces worn by the actors in the scenes. Most notably, the gestural stance and movement of the actors suggests respectful hierarchy, like the way the older woman leads the younger woman into her house. We see the space between the women is powerfully evocative. The younger woman is not gestured to hurry or walk alongside – she follows a few steps behind. While they dance, there is no suggestion that the younger woman copy the older woman's movements. They intentionally stand apart, and in their effortless sways, there is undeniable, nonverbal "co-responses".

We could, again, see how this group leaned into a respectful hierarchy, given N's professional expertise and standing, despite her lack of confidence initially. We might also interpret the measured space in-between as a metaphor that relates to a form of respect within this hierarchy. To us, this respect feels different to a "sisterly friendship" fostered between A and W, explained before, as intimate hierarchies. N's mentoring cluster were mainly Japanese women, so what we observed might be akin to kindness that maintain boundaries, which is noted in Japan as a way of managing distance and alleviating burdens of emotions and unwanted, excessive proximity [38]. While we cannot draw lines of correlation too directly, we sense a resonance in N's group in the way negotiations were carefully done to enable sincere engagements without over-closeness.

We could argue that being mindful of appropriate distancing and negotiating the preferred in-between space for women in their mentoring cluster was just as important in building support and solidarity. While social cohesion is often a strategy to build allyship, community, galvanising action and social change (see [65]), carefully attending to distance, separation and thresholds are perhaps less noted in design (with exception of see [64]). Witnessing the felicitous collaboration in N and P's respective mentoring cluster indicates how both were sensitive not to overstep the hierarchical distance that made their relationship work well. We see this as one manifestation of respect within hierarchies.

## 5 RESPECTFUL HIERARCHIES

As we have shown, respect is a significant feature in hierarchies. Curiously, papers in PD and associated fields like HCI do not often explore respect. Papers that do appears to associate respect with

due regard, such as rights and dignity. This includes working with the elderly [43], or ensuring how AI systems are designed to treat humans with respect [57]. These thought lines are indicative of the predominance of western moral and political philosophy, which can assert the primacy of regarding people as *equal*, no matter what their status and background or our subjective interests or relationship [24, 29]. Indeed, all individuals deserve respect, as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. However, taking respect only as a liberal, universal principle based on individuals has the effect of stripping away cultural and relational contexts. This misses the nuance we took care to elucidate in our paper. In tethering how respect exists within hierarchies as intimacy or boundaries, our paper has begun to unpack complex dynamics and configurations of positionalities within group work. This is just the start, indicating the richness of research yet to follow.

## 6 LOUDNESS OF QUIETUDE

Through our focus on how participants shared their ways of being and relating within hierarchies, we endeavoured to give accounts of phenomena that are indiscernible, but undeniably shapes how they participated. This attuning, in turn, shows how we noticed and responded. Through our observations, reflective notes and conversations with participants and team, we tried to describe how respectful hierarchies are felt and communicated through bodies. Honorifics and pronouns are shaped on our tongues. They angle our heads, direct our attentive gaze. Palms are pressed together to offer gratitude. This bodily manifestation of respect may sound like the stereotype of meek Asian women. However, we remind readers that stereotypes are a reductive shorthand. Instead, we have strived to provide enriched worlds of women's embodied interactions. In doing so, we join important movements in PD that recognise a whole swathe of engagements from tacit, oblique, gestural, non-verbal and "material utterances" [25]. These considerations are important more so in attending to those that are also marginalised from the "norms" in societies and research that include working with animals, children, older people, people with disabilities and in the Global South [15, 33, 40, 61].

In contexts like PD where voice has a direct relationship to power and decision-making, silence can sometimes be missed only to mean censorship, oppression or disempowerment. Some researchers have explored the politics of silence to question PD's preference for clarity, vocality and directness. Worlds of participation includes hesitations, deliberate or accidental interruptions, indecipherable babble, where proclaiming in words and sentences alone cannot be expected [4, 30, 53]. Likewise, we have attempted to explore the expansiveness of quietude, and to embrace muted and reticent tenderness that were, and are part of women's lives and experiences. We hope these hushed dimensions as "fragments" can stimulate reflection, thoughts and discussion for others in PD wishing to explore ways to enunciate feelings, atmospheres and facets of being and becoming with one another.

## 7 REFLEXIVELY WORK WITH HIERARCHIES

At the start, we discussed our curiosity and motivation to respond to feelings and ways of being that emerge as part of relations, yet



shift so silently in and through our bodies. Lastly, we unpack reflexivity as our key approach in noticing and working with hierarchies. Here, the important work by feminist, anthropological and STS theories have helped PD generate ethical and careful awareness to explore situated entanglements with relational structures of place, culture, practices, knowledge and technologies. In particular, our work is in resonance with researchers that explore complexities of reflexive practices that attend to how power configures in situated ways, which also includes the designer-researcher’s “being-with”, and “being-present-to” the micro dynamics of interventions [5, p.9]. These encounters are “always-in-negotiation” [52, p.25]. Learning from these precedents, attuning to situated entanglements and relational structures like hierarchies also requires reflexivity together with an amplification of thoughtfulness.

We mentioned how being aware of our own bodies, individually and between the project team, and the bodies of other women was a significant way of being reflexive of hierarchies. Undoubtedly, being proximal to places and cultures by having some shared experiences was a major part of this sensitivity. However, relying on our own first-hand experiences can be a double-edged sword. Ease and familiarity can dangerously create presumptions, blunting our awareness. We introduced before how the project team was mindful of our own varying positionalities as senior-junior, younger-older researchers and the power dynamics of our own socio-economic contexts. We aimed to sharpen this awareness, not just through our own reflexive efforts, but via other kinds of assistance. Firstly, we iterated a set of questions (introduced in Section Four) for reflection and learning that was co-designed by DESIAP previously [70], and evolved it through early dialogue with the advisory group. This group constituted past DESIAP collaborators, including mentors from the pilot program. The thick trust and relationships, accumulated over many years, facilitated candid feedback and incisive evaluation, which we invited through a tri-monthly catch up. These advisors were like peer-mentors to our team to help us notice in response to questions like, “how are we creating safe ‘spaces’ for reflection, learning, vulnerability and critique?” This enabled us to anticipate that there was much more going on than what met our eye. Other prompts like, “how are we respecting and responding to participants’ lived realities e.g. childcare, illness, lack of time and energy?”, helped us be mindful of the hours we were taking up and our intrusions into the women’s lives. Moments when their small children joined on their laps and in their arms during afternoon and evening video meetings was a reminder of their rich yet demanding family life as an important dimension of their labour, alongside their professional roles as creatives. These questions further prompted an attendance to silence, miscommunication, and to the tangled realities of these women.

One question was specifically vigilant of our positionalities – “how are we being self-aware of power, especially those that feel ‘heavy’?”. Questioning peers or challenging those in senior positions is often taboo in cultural and community settings. Similar worries are analysed by Engin [28, p.83] in a study of students with English as Second Language, where they observed nervous laughter in students who deflected conflict or avoided direct, disagreeing statements, to mitigate “shame, embarrassment and a desire not to lose or threaten face.” Respect within hierarchies can work in a similar way. Questions about power were a constant reference

point for discussion among the team, advisors and mentors throughout the program, for this reason. Frequent one-to-one check-ins was undertaken by the younger researchers of the team. Anonymous online feedback was also set up. We also invited images, drawings and metaphors as expansive modalities to elicit feelings, atmospheres and states of being (see fig. 2). All together, these openings attempted to create a sense of safety for participants to hint at, rather than feel pressured to make explicit any discomfort or dissatisfaction. These efforts did not intend to remove, flatten or reverse vertical-hierarchy. Seniority, maturity, expertise and professional standing of various participants remained in shaping the various hierarchies that are, and will always be part of their relationship.

Hierarchies are not just vertical or horizontal, with the former being problematic and the latter being the preference. Rather, we contend that many kinds of hierarchies are always present and contingent. We sensed the several that we observed and were compelled to recognise, and there are possibly more to discuss and discover in further research. Exciting lines of inquiry can stem from this work that includes the relationship between multiple structures of power and hierarchies. Furthermore, we have shown that vertical hierarchies are different to disempowering hierarchies if the conditions fostered trust, care, kindness for learning and relationships to flourish. This feedback from mentee M is meaningful in that regard: “I feel that the whole program is a process of getting different things into my cup and the process and the experience of receiving kindness and support from the program allows me to then give, pass the kindness to other people in my context or in my work environment.” We were humbled to hear how she felt nourished and supported, and how this was enabled by working with women with varying relationships to hierarchy.

## 8 CONCLUSION

In welcoming PDC’24 for the first time in Asia, we presented research by and for women with lived experiences in this region to attend to invisible facets of social practices that we noticed are still in semi-darkness in PD. Yet in bringing attention to these dimensions, our aim is not to beam a spotlight to transform them into crystal clear processes or practices. There is immense depth in worlds of the wordless, just as there is richness and respite in pools of shadows. Rather than expecting visibility, verbosity and voice as principal indicators of empowerment alone, we gave glimpses to how stillness, softness and silence are equally powerful ways of being political. We must honour and respect these dispositions as legitimate ways of participating in social change for the plurality of intersectional positionalities.

Our paper reflected on the various ways we have observed how vertical hierarchies were a constant part of the social fabric for the women participating in the transcultural program. We unfurled facets like learning with and through hierarchies, and how intimacy and boundaries are part of relational hierarchies too. In distinguishing these as respectful hierarchies, we hope the discussion has ignited curiosity in others to expand binaries that have come to characterise how hierarchies have become too oversimplified in PD. We hope our stories inspire many transcultural and intersectional experiences to be recognised, including those from and in the



**Figure 2: An illustration by mentee M to convey atmospheres of the mentoring experience**

Global South. By acknowledging respect as distinct from universal principles to be attended to as a cultural and transcultural inflection, we anticipate this may catalyse ways to work with dynamics of power and participatory practices within intersectionally plural contexts.

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