Regarding the Pain of Users: Towards a Genealogy of the "Pain Point"

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This essay offers an analysis of the "pain point," a commonplace figure of speech in UX design and contemporary business contexts more broadly. By situating this everday trope within a wider discourse of pain, and its politiciztion in the United States, I seek to problematize the modes of relationality and forms of care entailed in the practice of design research. Ultimately, I will argue, while the "pain point" can be an effective tool for communicating with stakeholders and fomenting alignment about research objectives, it also implicates the more troubling ethical dimensions of applied practice. Through a narrative account of an innovation focused ethnographic research project conducted within the design unit of a major tech company, I argue that questions of solidarity, and its contemporary aporias, can be obscured by the humanitarian rhetoric of contemporary design praxis; a rhetoric of which the "pain point" is a prime example.

INTRODUCTION

The "pain point" is a commonplace figure of speech in UX design and contemporary business contexts more broadly. In some corners of the design world, it is nearly ubiquitous; invoked so readily that it can betray a near naturalized quality. But what does "pain point" mean? In its most general sense, a "pain point" refers to a customer or user problem, one that a new product, service, or feature set might profitably "solve" or "resolve." Given their complexity, within many design research contexts, ethnography, in its inductive, open-ended orientation, has been conceptualized as an exemplary means of identifying "pain points" in all their knotty ambiguity. Through its "generative" or qualitative form of inquiry, ethnographers, so the thinking goes, can "uncover" user pain that surveys and other quantitative methods cannot. Consequently, within the field of UX design in particular, this popular trope is often implicated in the ways that ethnographic research projects are articulated, evaluated, and deliberated by researchers and stakeholders alike.

In what follows, I juxtapose a critical, genealogical analysis of the "pain point" with a narrative account of a six-month ethnographic research project conducted within the design unit of a major tech corporation. In this "innovation" focused study, the "pain point" served as a boundary object uniting stakeholders in product management, marketing, and design research, allowing for mutual intelligibility about the scope, method, and underlying objectives of the study (Star and Griesemer 1989). As a periodically conflictual project, the "pain point" also became a weathervane for disputes about research technique and the kinds of findings it generated. At first a study of American workplace collaborative practices, and the lives of the "digital workers" who perform them, by the end it had become an investigation of conflict amongst coworkers. However, in unsuccessfully uncovering any actionable "pain points," this ambitious study was in the end a failure. Nonetheless, in this essay, such failure provides an opportunity to reflect on the concept of "pain point" itself and its implications for our practice.

In devoting such concentrated attention to the "pain point" herein, my aim is to interrogate the modes of mediated *relationality* that UX researchers enact between "users" and stakeholders. Given the theme of this year's conference, it is also a meditation on the evidentiary forms upon which such relations are based (for instance personas, interview snippets quoted in PowerPoint decks and photographs of users). Ultimately, by situating the "pain point" within a broader discourse of pain, and its politicization in the United States, I will argue that the "pain point," though an effective tool for design researchers, can also obscure the aporias or impasses of social solidarity they face. By perpetuating the notion that product design, development, and marketing constitute a form of care, indeed a peculiar mode of welfare, through a language that also draws on a humanitarian rhetoric of aid, the "pain point" can perpetuate the subtle forms of estrangement by which the socio-economy produces and reproduces itself. In an analysis that draws on Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), a work which questions the evidentiary status of humanitarian photography, as well as the mass mediated mode of alienated sociality which it instantiates, I argue that this ostensibly throwaway figure of business slang thus also encompasses a more troubling set of ethical problematics. In its conclusions and orientation, this essay thus offers a different take on Amirebrahimi' excellent "The Rise of the User and the Fall of People: Ethnographic Cooption and a new Language of Globalization" (2016) and Madsbjerg's 2014 EPIC keynote, "Happy Birthday, Now Grow Up," a talk that provocatively suggested EPIC "divorce design."

THE VALUE OF THE PAIN POINT

For ethnographic design researchers, the "pain point" can be a vital resource in navigating organizational politics. In promoting the value of their practice to stakeholders often suspicious about the utility of qualitative research and its "anecdotal" or "subjective" forms of evidence, the "pain point" can be performative of their particular mode of expertise. In context, it can highlight the business objectives of ethnographic praxis and its unique role within the broader product design and development lifecycle. In this sense, in a perlocutionary fashion, its invocation can serve to differentiate ethnography, and qualitative research more broadly, from other common research methodologies. It does so by locating problems within the user's own lifeworld, in turn ensuring they will prove lucrative ones to solve via new products, features, or updates to an existing application. By contrast, other more overtly evaluative UX research methods – for instance, usability testing, surveys, and heuristic design auditing – are techniques whose procedural, etic form can more readily lend them an aura of objectivity. However, by the same measure, their highly-scripted approach can be limited in finding valuable "new" user pain, pain that is often obscured by its obviousness.

The "pain point" is thus for many ethnographic UX researchers a favored figure of speech. It encapsulates the value proposition of their approach by presenting it as a mode of inquiry uniquely suited to revealing problems that are critical for the user, if easily made opaque by their everydayness. In this sense, the "pain point" can often serve as an elementary form of a wider legitimizing or justificatory discourse, a discourse of which EPIC is an institutional example. At the same time, the "pain point" is a term of art, a figure of speech that in practice allows ethnographers to communicate with stakeholders about the methodology, objectives, and deliverables of the studies they are pursuing. In so doing, it

works to enact a mode of relationality between the user and stakeholder (the designer or product manager, product marketing manager, and so on); relations whose management is thus understood as the remit of the UX researcher.

By way of illustration, the following reflections are from a series of interviews I conducted with ethnographic UX researchers in the SF Bay area, including those who work in-house within the design research organizations of major tech companies as well those who work at smaller consultancies symbiotic or adjacent to them. The first interview snippet is from an ethnographer working as a UX researcher in the design unit of a prominent SF start-up. In a conversation about the ways ethnography and qualitative research functions within his collaborative workflows, I asked this researcher whether he uses or encounters the "pain point" in his professional life:

> Let me think about my use of "pain point." I'm pretty sure I used it in a two-line description of an upcoming research project just today. Actually, come to think of it, I use it all the time: to mean "a bad experience for the user," "something unnecessarily painful," and, importantly, "something that we should fix." There is a call to action in the phrase, a movement towards improvement, an intention to resolve. It's also a useful shorthand for demonstrating the usefulness of UX Research: here is your friendly local researcher, who is able to identify bugs (bad experiences or "pain points") in the user experience that we did not previously know about. And once we know, we can fix them, thereby improving the user experience and, by extension, the product. It's a phrase that I and my colleagues throw around quite often, to explain what we are doing and why it is useful. I think the word "pain" is the crucial part, because everyone can agree that pain is not something we want our users to experience, if we can possibly help it.

In this sense, as suggested in the introduction, and as my interlocutor demonstrates in his reflections, the "pain point" not only serves a legitimizing role for research, it also acts as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989) within collaborative workflows. In allowing for mutual intelligibility between UX researchers and their stakeholders, the fact that "everyone can agree…pain is not something we want our users to experience" helps to ensure that cross-disciplinary teams are aligned on research objectives and mutually recognize its value to the product. In other words, boundary objects entail forms of strategic ambiguity, whose "plastic" quality allows for "interpretive flexibility" and a "tacking back and forth" between different levels of "structuration" (Star 2010). In the case of product design, identifying, naming, and resolving to fix "pain points," mediates disciplines, helping teams to move between business objectives (which may be well defined, or highly structured) and some concept of the user; a category whose underlying heterogeneity and ambiguity entails a more diffuse and elusive kind of structure (Amirebrahimi 2016). In this sense, the "pain point" both points to something ostensibly concrete or "real," while doing so with a level of abstraction or vagueness that allows for it to be meaningful within the multi-perspectival framework of a team and its often-divergent assumptions about functionality, usability, and the underlying value proposition of their product.

However, for some researchers, despite such utility, they find themselves expressing reservations about just how pervasive the "pain point" has become and the ways in which they themselves invoke it. The following snippet comes from an interview conducted with an ethnographer and UX researcher working within a small SF design consultancy. Reflecting on the value of the "pain point" in her working life, she nonetheless expresses ambivalence about its implications:

> We do a lot of journey mapping, which means "pain points" come up frequently: little barriers to enjoyment or efficiency, knots of frustration and confusion, along a longitudinal experience. We often mark pain points on pink post-its (closest to red possible), and prioritize them with round red stickers. We have sometimes overemphasized them with little frowny or angry faces drawn on the post it or sticker. You could easily argue that a term like "pain" in UX conversations is excessive. Is it really "painful" to have to enter your birthdate in an app using a clumsy menu? Or to take a click or two extra to purchase a product online? But there is something productively visceral about using "pain" that commands stakeholders' attention in a way that other terms don't. Maybe it's a subtle technique to engender empathy - the natural reaction of seeing someone in pain is to help them. Likewise, the idea that it's a "point" - a sharp little jab - implies that it can be blocked, or parried, or absorbed...fixed. This helps rally resources to the cause, but also masks types of "pain" that are chronic and systemic.

Much as with the first interview, this interlocutor also highlights the performative, persuasive quality of the "pain point." In eliciting a "natural reaction" of sympathy from stakeholders, it is an effective tool to "rally resources." But this interlocutor also worried that in labeling all user problems painful, certain forms of more "chronic and systemic" pain can be "masked." In other words, if all user problems are understood as painful, how can we distinguish between different kinds of unpleasant experience and through more precise scales of severity, significance, and economic opportunity? In this light, as this interviewee herself implies, "pain" can thus be a barrier to a more variegated language of affect and problematization. However, by the same measure, there is a structural bind implicit in her concerns. Discussing user "irritation" or user "frustration," for example, might not have the same "visceral" quality and thus might not "command stakeholders' attention" in the way pain indubitably can. In other words, presenting evidence of "pain" (a pink post-it note approximating a blistering red) is always going to be a more effective tool for cultivating empathy than a more nuanced, if less immediate language of feeling and problem. A pale-yellow sticker marking user impatience simply doesn't make the same kind of claim on a stakeholder as bright pink pain.

At this juncture, we should pause to question a key concept that this interviewee raises; one that, like the "pain point," is also pervasive in UX design. Namely, "empathy." What exactly does she mean when she says "empathy" and what kind of relation is entailed in a form of it mediated by pink post-it notes? Within academic anthropology, empathy has long been a term out of favor. For instance, critiqued for its projective, universalizing assumptions by Geertz (1984), amongst contemporary anthropologists, empathy has been understood as analytically weak because its fundamental ambiguity. It has also been challenged for the way it can presume an immediacy to intersubjective experience and the circulation of feelings between individuals, an immediacy that anthropological analysis soon shows to be suspect. (Throop and Hollan 2008).

However, by contrast, within the design world, this very ambiguity, as well as the intimation of immediacy is strategic and useful. In this context, "empathy" marks the forms of "shared feeling" between a designer (or product manager) and their inscribed user, but a kind of sharing that carries a strictly delimited set of relational demands. After all, the obligation to "empathy" only goes so far as those problems (like wonky menu bars) that can be solved through design. In this sense, user "empathy" is thus only ever partial and contextual. And as this empathy is typically mediated by the work of a UX researcher in their

interactions with "real" users, it is the obligation of the researcher to present "pain" in such way that it elicits a specific kind of reaction, one with concrete operational ends. In this sense, pain and empathy alike are produced by the researcher, creating a kind of experience for the designer that, in turn, inspires them to create a kind of "caring" or "empathetic" experience for the user. In this sense, pain and empathy alike become key figures in a series of terms that link the developers of a product to their consumers. But how does such a concept of empathy (and the demonstrable pain points a researcher produces to cultivate it) fit within a broader American vocabulary of feeling, intersubjectivity, and care? In other words, how does the micro-culture of UX design in the United States relate to the larger social contexts within which it is situated. To answer this question, we will have to turn more directly to the problem of pain and its recent American history.

EVIDENCE OF PAIN

In *Pain: A Political History* (2014), the historian Keith Wailloo examines how, beginning with the Reagan revolution of the early 1980s, pain became a key signifier in national debates about the role of the state in American society. Noting the widespread conservative derision that, as a candidate, Bill Clinton encountered in 1992, when he famously said, "I feel your pain" in the second presidential debate, Wailloo demonstrates that this was but one memorable example of a far more encompassing politicization of pain and questions about the "sympathy" it can elicit. In fact, as Wailloo argues, "the question of pain…refined the very meaning of 'conservative' and 'liberal' as keywords in the American political vocabulary (203). While conservatives, following the example of Reagan, articulated their principles of governance via a skepticism about suffering, and what Waillo calls a "cold objectivity" about claims to state care made on its basis, liberals argued that "social policies should be driven by compassion towards…pain" (6). On the one hand, "liberals" articulated their social agenda through a language of care, one premised on the notion that all subjective pains are valid. On the other, for conservatives, governmentality founded on a principle of compassion erodes the self-determination and freedom they viewed as constitutive of the American project in its industrial zeal and entrepreneurial values. As such, "problems of pain and social welfare came to define American politic theater" (203)

It is in this sense that Wailoo argues that the very meaning of "liberal or conservative became ideologically solidified around the problem of pain" (203). Such political consolidations, indeed polarizations, as he demonstrates, were consequent to the way pain became a symbol of welfare and thus a critical site for debates about its legitimacy in relation to the social contract. In the crossfire of such disputes, not only did pain become a site of political struggle, but it also gave rise a new set of questions about the "truth" of pain and the problem of its verification, evaluation, and representation. In other words, the pain in question generated a kind of politicized skepticism.

As Wailoo notes, "Pain's reality – which pains were real, which were false, and who was the best judge" of their veracity became questions of national import. What followed was a range of policies enacted to "measure distress and…define the right to relief" (7). In a similar vein, beyond the concrete development of policy, questions about "which kinds of pain are real, which warrant sympathy, and whose plight is deemed legitimate…provoked constant political spectacle (203). For conservatives, the figure of the "disabled person in chronic pain became a symbol of much that was wrong with liberalism – it's gullibility, its

support for government dependence, and its embrace of welfare at the cost of hard work" (ibid). In associating welfare with dependency, and its erosion of the principles of autonomy upon which America was ostensibly founded, pain became a battleground for a debate about our collective values. Not only a principle of public policy, welfare became central to questions about the obligation of citizens to work. Phrased otherwise, pain became central to the problem of the social and our obligations to one another as members of a national community.

In *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformations of the Social Question* (2003), Robert Castel demonstrates how, over the course of the twentieth-century, the notion of welfare became central to questions about the role of the state in a capitalist economy of labor. Through a genealogical analysis of the institution of wage labor, one that reaches back to the dawn of industrial modernity, Castel excavates the way in which welfare become "the form — if indeed the mutable form — assumed by the compromise between the economic dynamism demanded by the quest for profits and the sentiment of protection necessary for social solidarity" (193). In the waning years of the twentieth century, such questions of solidarity, and their limits, were increasingly arbitrated by what Castel calls the discourse of "handicapology." By "handicapology," Castel indicates the constellation of administrative procedures and moral technologies that aimed to distinguish those who rightfully demanded the assistance of the state because they were unable to work, versus those who volitionally "chose" not, thus meriting their rejection. In this way, through the diffusion of such discourse and its operationalization in policy, the question of care became linked to a form of procedural, bureaucratic skepticism about pain.

In the United States, the Clinton administration's comprehensive overhaul of the American welfare system sought a "third way" through such polarization; or what Wailoo has described as our collective "political spectacle" of pain. In a sublation of left progressivism, and its recognition of all pain as valid, with conservative suspicion about its underlying reality and threat to self-determination, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) created a new model of "handicapology." Limiting the scope of state care, it nonetheless did so in a reconstituted language of pain and compassion. The new moral vocabulary that ensued rearticulated state restrictions on welfare in an erstwhile "liberal" language of sympathy and care. In this sense, it served as a precursor and hinge to the "compassionate conservatism," which, in unusually crisp turn of phrase from the otherwise tongue-twisted mouth of George W. Bush, was described as follows in remarks he delivered to a San Jose audience in April 2002:

> Government cannot solve every problem, but it can encourage people and communities to help themselves and to help one another. Often the truest kind of compassion is to help citizens build lives of their own. I call my philosophy and approach compassionate conservatism. It is compassionate to actively help our fellow citizens in need. It is conservative to insist on responsibility and results. And with this hopeful approach, we will make a real difference in people's lives… We are using an active Government to promote self-government… The measure of compassion is more than good intentions; it is good results.

Through the rhetoric of Clinton and Bush, care, in the form of "compassion," was no longer indexed to the provision of services and state assistance to the poor and infirm. Rather, it became a rationale for policies that, in "helping" to facilitate work for all, promoted the universal dignity of American citizenry by making work a "right" worth protecting through

enterprise. In this sense, solidarity took on a new valence, one in which pain, no longer polarized, instead became an expression of the moral assault occasioned by unemployment and dependency more broadly. As a result, capitalism was no longer conceptualized as a threat to the social, but rather its ethical guarantor.

There are several points worth flagging from this extended digression into recent American political history. First, that pain, beyond its status as a feeling, has also been a symbol of the relationship between the state and those in need or those who are suffering. And in this way, it has become a byword for questions about the social and their impact on interrelated problems of sympathy, compassion, relief, and self-determination. While in the 1980s, sympathy and self-governance were understood as mutually exclusive options, at the turn of the millennium it became possible to see pain relief and free enterprise as co-constituting. That is not to suggest that every time a design researcher describes a user "pain point," they are implicitly taking a side in this political spectacle, but rather that underlying notions of sympathy and relationality have been conditioned by this broader context. Notions like empathy, compassion, sympathy, and pain, as well as he social imaginary they index are discourses that influence how we make sense of our world historically. In this sense, while a UX researcher who labels a research finding or user perception a "pain point" clearly doesn't mean to stake a claim on welfare or the status of the state, the very meaning of pain in our discourse helps to shape the moral logics entailed. We solve a "pain point" to return the worker to their state of productivity. We resolve pain to promote the autonomy and self-determination of the consumer.

The Birth of the Pain Point

So how and why did the pain point emerge as a figure of speech in design and business contexts? Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the speculative social history I have been sketching herein, the "pain point" began to appear at the same moment Bush was delivering his 2002 remarks on "self-government" in San Jose. Originally, an esoteric term from the discipline of pain management, in the early 2000s, "pain point" became a figure of speech in the business world, just as, under the leadership of Bush, the resolution of social pain became, in its new guise, both an ethical and capitalist imperative. However, such a history of pain, and its semantic evolution, tells only one part of the story. The "pain point" also emerged as a reaction to economic factors specific to the tech industry and its excess valuation at the turn of the millennium. But understand this history, however, will demand further speculation.

As mentioned earlier, the pain point is a term that originates in physiology. In medical discourse and practice, it refers to the physical locus of an undesirable sensation caused by intense, distressing, or harmful stimuli. For the physician, locating the pain point, or the point of pain, is a diagnostic activity. However, in seeking to understand the nature of the offending stimulus and, if an external entity, like a splinter, to remove it, or if an endogenous one, like an impinged nerve, to treat it, the ultimate objective of such diagnostic work is to heal. A pain point or point of pain in physiological terms is where pain is either most intense or the place in the body from which it emanates. Its identification is diagnostic; a form of understanding whose aim is to alleviate physical suffering.

How does this physiological definition, or etymology, relate to the more figurative expression that one finds today in UX and the corporate world more broadly? In the late 1990s, e-commerce marketers began using both "pain point" or "point of pain" as a way of

articulating the problems that a customer or software user encountered in their working life. It was a relatively rare figure of speech, used intermittently and irregularly, and appearing in business publications and its associated discourse only infrequently. Starting in the early 2000s, however, and picking up in speed around 2004, "pain point" became an increasingly common trope both in practical contexts and in the business press, through articles in journals like the *Harvard Business Review*. Why did this happen? And why then?

As suggested, answering this question requires a bit of speculation or what our colleagues at ReD call abductive reasoning. My inferential hypothesis is that this spread was coterminous with the popularization of "user experience" discourse and symptomatic of the same underlying economic factors that spurred its popularization. A term first coined by the cognitive psychologist Don Norman, "UX" shifts the focus in software development from technological capabilities to concrete use through the development of an easeful interactivity via "empathy" enabled design. Its attendant research practices, and the implicit reconceptualization of technical and economic innovation it entails (innovation as a result of "solving" customer problems), emerged as a reaction to a moment of crisis. "UX" was not invented in the wake of the crisis, as Don Norman himself would be the first to insist, but rather became widespread because of them.

So, why did customer problems become so important at this point in the early 2000s? Although this would demand research outside the scope of this conference presentation, herein I argue that it was in response to the first dot-com bust and an industry that grew on the basis of technical innovation (the internet) unanchored to consumer desires, behaviors, or needs. In reconstituting itself in the wake of excessive speculation and the demise of many once promising enterprises, a new spirit of market cautiousness became normative. While the bubble was fueled by the availability of a new technology and excitement about its commercial potential, the industry that emerged in the wake of the bust paired the technical with the practical, recognizing that new "affordances" were not always economic opportunities if they didn't "solve" an explicit customer problem. In short, people will not purchase a new product unless it does something for them, no matter how impressive the technological novelty.

In this fashion, the user or the customer (or rather projective formulations thereof), became the arbiter of an idea or product. In this new discursive and practical milieu, one careful about the uncertain profitability of technical innovation, and thus now anchored to a consecration of "use-value" and usefulness, the "pain point," a relatively rare term hitherto, became a way of evaluating and articulating utility or presumed utility. In this sense, it became a figure for problematization, or the articulation and identification of real world, market worthy problems; part of an assemblage of practices and symbols oriented towards to the production of value through scales of usefulness and concrete practicability.

In the following decade, as a once eclectic group of academics, designers, and engineers, like Don Norman and Alan Cooper, found their "UX" framework becoming mainstream within the tech industry, the "pain point" too became pervasive. It did so because, as suggested earlier, it was a kind of boundary object allowing for different disciplines (product management, product marketing, UX design, business units) to share a common (if generatively inconsistent) understanding of the "user." Once more, for those unfamiliar with the term, a boundary object is one whose structural ambiguity allows for both divergence and convergence in discourse and interpretation (Star and Griesemer 1989). Divergence in the sense that though we may use the same term, say "pain point" or "user" we may have

different referents and models implicit in our invocation. Convergence in that there is nonetheless enough semantic and referential overlap that such divergences do not stand in the way of mutual intelligibility and the practical "alignment" it allows. In short, a "boundary object" is discourse that allows for difference in perspective while still promoting collaborative consensus.

Around 2004-2005, when the "pain point" became more common in design contexts, asking about user or customer "pain" served as a way of checking untested or unvalidated assumptions about the end-user and their needs. Such questions set the ground for the increased viability of research practices forged in the service of such validation. It was no longer enough that a new product, service, or feature should be "cool," impressive, or technically sound, it must also "relieve" user "pain," because if not, the product would not be commercially viable. Or if successful, only because of precarious speculation founded on the basis of technology not consumer behavior. In this sense, developers, product managers, marketers, designers, and researchers became physicians of a sort; translating technologic novelty into the development of digital analgesics. These new commercial therapeutics were expressly created to relieve pains occasioned by the modern world and the increasingly complex ecosystem of tools its immaterial knowledge workers had to master to flourish within it.

In this light, the "pain point" today is most commonly invoked the context of work-related software contexts. For consumer level goods and services, my interviews with UX researchers revealed, it does not appear as frequently. For instance, while at Adobe, where I worked for two years, it would be difficult to spend more than an hour without hearing "pain point" in a meeting. At Facebook or Twitter, I've been told that while it may be invoked occasionally, it does not have nearly the same ubiquity. In this sense, this is precisely how "pain point" framed in the popular and influential *Value Proposition Design: How to Create Products and Services Customers Want* (2014) Here a "pain point" is linked to problems explicitly related to work and the successful performance of one's professional responsibilities: "Pains describe bad outcomes, risks, and obstacles related to customer jobs." (9) Thus, asking, "but what's their pain point" became a way of saying, "is this useful and if so how? Does this solve a problem in the user's working life?" Such questions affirmed the value of design research practices and at the same time became an idiom that allowed for researchers to define their role and place within the product development lifecycle. For this reason, as suggested earlier, the "pain point" has consistently been popular amongst researchers who find it useful in communicating with stakeholders and articulating the goals of a study. In turning now to a case study from my own work as a UX research, I hope to interrogate the themes of what has preceded through a detailed example.

The End of the Road

Towards the end of a long, languid Bay Area summer, the remaining members of the team congregated by videoconference to have one last conversation before the project finally concluded. On the line were three product managers, an external marketing consultant, a mixed-methods user researcher, and myself, the ethnographic lead on the project and the primary field researcher. By that point, we were a battered bunch, as the project had taken many twists and turns over the previous six months of work. Personnel had shifted several times and the original three-month timeframe had doubled by this, the last day we were

assigned to the project before long-delayed vacation. Some of this exhaustion was a legacy of the project's early phases, when contradictory approaches and discordant objectives had made fruitful collaboration amongst the team a recurrent challenge. Most of this discord was structural and principled. Thankfully, exceedingly little was personal or temperamental. Even after the most heated debates, interactions remained cordial and professional. Yet despite such civility, tensions remained persistent.

The team was principally comprised of a novice ethnographic researcher, fresh from a PhD program in anthropology (the author), and a more seasoned corporate researcher, whose background was in psychology, information architecture, and mixed-methods user research. They were paired with a product manager and product marketing manager who represented the interests of their key stakeholders. Each researcher represented a distinctive methodological orientation. And they each employed different field and interview techniques. Neither entirely approved of the other's approach. As an ethnographer, I resisted the more structured, procedural UX approach of my colleague, Chris (a pseudonym). By the same token, Chris found my ethnographic orientation overly personal and poorly equipped to uncover the explicitly technical problems our company could solve. In the first weeks of research, our divergent approaches quickly mapped on to an ongoing disagreement between the marketing and product teams who were our primary stakeholders. In short order, I quickly made allies with a product marketing lead assigned to the project and Chris aligned with the product team he had worked with for many years. While marketing was interested in "motivation," product by contrast was concerned with what they alternately called "needs" and "pain points." Sides were drawn, and as research began, our daily debriefs continually served to arbitrate these disputes.

Initially the design research team of which Chris and I were part had been commissioned to provide persona level insights for a large-scale segmentation study that quantitative market researchers were launching later in the year. This project was spearheaded by a product marketing team who had wanted an observational, ethnographic method. But before the work started, a product team asked for the research to also include "innovation" or "new opportunity" findings for a well-established tool. Product claimed method agnosticism, though the key stakeholders many times said their goal was to explicitly "find new pain points that aren't obvious." Via negotiations whose inner machinations were never made entirely apparent to the researchers, management had decided these two projects could indeed be consolidated into one and pursued in tandem. Researchers were left to mediate the resulting tension.

Thus, a circuitous itinerary ensued. What was the project about? Alas, details need to remain opaque to protect privacy and confidentiality. But at a broad level it involved the way American "digital workers" collaborate with one another in (and out of) offices. To understand this problem, and in doing so to develop both persona-level insights and discrete pain points, a first phase comprising fifty 60-90-minute interviews was conducted by phone and Skype. Following a month of analysis, this was followed by a second phase that entailed two, week-long, in-person workplace ethnographic studies I conducted independently. The first study was at a major health focused non-profit in Washington DC. The second was with a large financial services corporation in the Midwest.

After both phases, nobody on the team was confident that our findings were immediately actionable, even if the final ethnographic study had generated a few promising leads. That is, while we had found various aches and pains, nobody involved was convinced

they were the elusive "pain points" that senior product leadership had explicitly asked for. However, in the final days of our collaboration, we put aside our differences and trepidations, and collectively developed a taxonomy of "use cases," framed through a series of explicit "pain points." We hoped they would prove sufficient for the innovation work that a design team would lead subsequently, while we were on vacation recuperating.

In our final meeting as a team, I asked my colleagues to briefly reflect on the project that was concluding:

"If we're finished talking about everything we need to discuss today, can I ask you all a favor?" I said. "I'm doing a paper for a professional conference, EPIC, and…well…can I ask you all to define what you mean when you say 'pain point.'? It has been such a central term for us throughout. Now that we're done, I'm still not sure I totally understand what it means. Can you all help me?"

A few smirks appeared on my screen in response and then utter silence. Finally, a junior product manager responded:

"Oh wow."

"Why don't I start with you, then," I responded jocularly.

"Let me think then," he said, laughing. "Actually, I think I've spoken too much already. Someone else go ahead first"

"Don't over think it," I said. "Just explain what a pain point means to someone who doesn't know what a pain point means, like me sort of, since I'm still new to this world, but somebody who had never even heard it before," I added, followed by more silence.

"I don't know how to do it concisely," another, senior product manager said eventually.

"Don't worry about concise, then, we still have ten minutes," I responded.

"Ok, um. I guess it's something that takes a lot of effort. Or, uh…Yeah, maybe it takes a…" he hesitated and paused for a few moments before continuing. "It takes a lot of effort or prevents me from being, um, efficient at doing what I need to get done."

"And why do we call that 'pain'?" I asked in response.

"Well, that's why I was trying to, um…" he paused again. "I don't know, I think it's an emotional thing. It's painful because I'm doing something that I believe doesn't need to be done or could be done in a better way."

"Really interesting. Thank you. Alright, you're next," I said to the marketing consultant.

"Oh, so when I think about a pain point it is something that takes, it takes…it's an inefficient way of doing something for me. Like there is a problem. It…it makes me uncomfortable. It gets me, it gets me…It makes me unproductive. And it's something that I'm looking to solve for. Like it's a problem that occupies my mind and my work and I want to find a solution to it. To me, that's a pain point."

"Awesome, next," I said to the junior product manager, who had originally passed the question off to his colleagues.

"I think a pain point is something I don't want to do or don't like doing but I have to do. And I'm very open to trying out new things or new ideas in order to have it either completely eliminated or mitigated."

"Great, alright. Excellent. Fellow researcher, you're last. Do you have any thoughts?" I said to Chris, my mixed-methods user research colleague from design research.

"Yeah, I think of a pain point as something that blocks me from achieving my goal and leads to an unpleasant experience. I usually think of them as things that cause people some kind of discomfort. And, yeah, pain is kind of an extreme word. But if I was talking to

someone outside the company, I'd say a pain point is something that blocks someone from achieving their goal. It's kind of the opposite of delight. You know, designers are always like, 'oh, we want to design a delightful experience.' Well, pain is the opposite. It's like, this is really unpleasant. But the problem is that pain point doesn't really have a level of severity associated with it. Like I'd like to say a 'pain point' is a problem that triggers someone to look for a solution. The reality is that we see lots of people with inefficiencies and what we would call pain points. But they seem to be OK with that. Because they either don't know there's a better solution. Or they're just too busy. It's not important enough of a problem for them. There's not enough at stake. So, I don't know, I guess I just think it's something that's preventing people from achieving their goals. And it's probably, I don't know guys, what do you think? For me, it's kind of like our perspective looking at them. Like, I would love to say, pain points are usually self-acknowledged pain points. But I feel like, sometimes we look at what people are doing and say 'wow, I can't believe they are not complaining about that, that seems like a real pain point to me, since it's so inefficient.' But to them it's fine. So, pain point is how we describe a problem, not necessarily how the user describes it to themselves."

"So, the last question for the whole group then: what role did pain points play in this project? Over the last six months of work, were we looking for pain points after all? That's how product presented the project at least."

"I think so," responded the senior product manager after a few moments pause. "Because I think what we're trying to do is look for opportunities to provide a solution and a new solution is to relieve pain points. And to the earlier point, some of those pains may be things that customers already recognize as bothering them, and other things might be things they don't already recognize. But once they see a solution that does relieve that, they recognize, 'oh yeah, I do want that.' So, solution opportunities come from relieving pain points."

"I think from my point of view," Chris, my fellow researcher responded, "the language I've tried to use for the past several years is 'problems worth solving,' By 'worth solving' that means there is some kind of significant consequence to it. So 'pain point' is something I don't tend to use for my own purposes. I tend to just think of 'problems worth solving.' Because those are problems for users, so they're looking for a solution, it's causing a problem for them. But pain points, I feel like, they are almost, like, tactical things within this big problem that we're solving. Like 'I really struggle to do this, coordinate the work necessary to make this work successful.' That's the problem we're solving, but there are all these pain points along the way which, some of which, we have discovered in this project."

"That's very much how I see pain points," the junior product manager added. "It's almost like thinking of Venn diagrams, they don't intersect, problems and pain points, but you can imagine a circle of a problem or problems and there are different circles inside that that are obviously smaller which form those pain points, right? And the way we try to mitigate or alleviate those pain points is how we take steps towards solving the larger problem or sets of problems."

"Yeah, right, cause it's got that word 'point' in it," my co-researcher added. "So, when you think 'pain point,' you think 'wow, that's hurting me right here.' It's not like my whole body hurts, just that point. And when you see someone hurting, you have to help."

And with that, the project, and our work together ended.

The Micropolitics of the Office

Nearly six months prior, during our first weeks of work together, the team faced its first major dispute. In Skype and phone interviews conducted with office workers throughout the United States, I began my slate of these sessions by attempting to build rapport. I asked the interviewees about their jobs in open-ended terms and tried to get a sense, however limited, of the lifeworld they occupied. I asked whether coworkers went to lunch together and what their breakroom looks like. I would ask what was on their desks or playing on their headphones, before moving into a more explicitly technical set of questions about software preferences and daily workflows. Listening in on these sessions, some of my colleagues were perplexed. Why focus on such irrelevant information? In fact, in a tense exchange with a lead product manager on the team, I was told "Don't waste time with all this stuff, just get straight to the problem and ask them about their pain points." While a marketing manager on the team tried to explain that this was how ethnography works, the tension was recurrent. My co-researcher took the side of product management, and through various means, including escalating to management, tried to compel to ask users more directly about their pain. Refusing to weigh in, management thus left us to our own devices. In this sense, we all agreed that we were misaligned.

However, such misalignment proved to appropriate to our findings. As we moved further into the interview phase of the research, and in learning more about how Americans work with one another, it soon became clear that conflict and relations of power were what our interlocutors themselves wanted to discuss. These conflicts could express themselves in information sharing practices or the way documents were stored on shared drives. Or these conflicts could be expressed in how emails were answered (curtly) or not answered at all (a widely-replicated form of passive-aggression). While we were searching for inefficiencies in software and the kinds of problems that a new feature in a suite of business application might ease, the pain we were encountering was more often about people feeling stuck in the jobs; about the inability of coworkers to find a way to work together; or the sense that the complexity of bureaucratic environments made professional successes impossible. We learned about how subtle forms of domination were enacted at work and the effects of such experiences on the individual worker. Much as in our own disputes about research technique, our interlocutors were suffering -- if indeed suffering was the right term – because of their failures to relate one another or because of the sense of their impatience with their responsibilities.

In this way, our study ultimately became about the micropolitics of the office, entailing a set of problems poorly amenable to representation through a language of "pain points." These were problems about whether and to what degree work was a source of personal satisfaction and how the pressures of the environment impacted their self-understanding. Throughout, prodded to steer conversations back to software, we found that discussions of, say, productivity tools, quickly swerved into gripes about coworkers. And as we proceeded, though we were able to translate some of these complaints into technical problems that we could present to design teams as problems we could solve as a tech company, the real problems encountered were more relational. And thus, the evidence we prepared for the summary decks and thirty-minute read-outs presented to broader stakeholders only pallidly

approximated the real, often purgatory "pain" we had been encountering. Rarely a sharp sensation, instead we were observing dull thuds of dissatisfaction and alienation.

Regarding the Pain of Others

It will be noticed that the title of the present essay is an homage of sorts to Susan Sontag's final work, a book-length essay on war photography. A sequel to her earlier *On Photography* (1977), *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) analyzes the relationship between representations of atrocity, those who produce them, and their reception within broader public sphere. Through her analysis, Sontag suggests that such images suggest a kind of intimacy between the viewer and subject, but that, as "totems of causes" that marshal action, they forestall the complexity involved in actual relationality. In this sense, they produce a *feeling* of sympathy, but on that makes morality too simple and action too tidy.

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