How does Cultural Knowledge Impact Personas Perception

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The four studies

	Focus	Participants	Description
1	How is the understanding of users formed?	Designers	The designers were asked to consider a particular user's needs when presented with video snippets of users and their work life .
2.	How do designers understand personas used for redesign?	Designers in a Danish branch of a large international corporation	Three interviews with five people involved in the redesign of user interfaces.
3.	How do people from different cultures perceive the same persona description?	6 participants from India, China and Denmark, most young and students.	Description: Participants were presented with a persona written in such a way that there were no cues in the text regarding age, gender, or culture. The participants were asked to: 1) Read the description; 2) Find a photo on the internet that resembled the persona; 3) Write a short comment on why they had chosen this particular photo; 4) Mail the photo and comments to me.
4.		8 participants from Japan, Brazil, France, Holland, Russia, New Zealand, Germany, and USA. All familiar with the persona method and experienced usability professionals.	

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Forming a category

The participants connect persona descriptions to already formed categories.

'I saw a power point about his homepage, so you see these words: warehouse, put away, forklifts. Then the picture comes into your mind of what you have seen on TV. (..) I don't know if you have seen this, "The King of Queens", it's some American sitcom, it's not my favorite show, but that guy is now in my head. And he's not some warehouse guy, he's some delivery guy, that's what I see.' (Designer E).

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Strategies for perception -I

The participants use their own and local understanding and they connect these to a pre-constructed representation.

'Information Technology means he would earn more money than average' (Chinese informant 1).

Strategies for perception - II

The participants interpret the text and use this as an explanation for the choice of photo.

'I don't know why but I tend to associate obesity with reluctance to a new technology mindset. Don't ask me why!'(Indian informant 3).

Strategies for perception - III

The participants look for clues and find a specific description in the text that serves as an explanation for the choice of photo.

'He has no time to do much exercise, so he may be a little fat' (Chinese informant 2).

Rejection of information

The designers constructed the user as:

'She is the type of person that builds a nest. She is really interested in her job and seeks the information she needs herself. She has a lot of breaks from people visiting her in her office. She is competent but boring. She's a mate, but she's got librarian looks.' (Designer 1).

- because the user's environment was neat and well organized.

When it was presented that the user organizes yoga classes for the whole company:

1. The designers first rejected the information .
2. Later they included it to fit into their construction of the user as being self-absorbed.

Cross-cultural stereotypes - I

Both lack of information and cultural knowledge can prompt stereotype creation.

Lack of information (study 2)

That is the kind of information they [the document writers] do not include, how they like to work.' (Designer E)

Lack of cultural knowledge (study 3)

Despite the participants differences in culture they chose a photo of a person with in a business suit, even the only photo of a female.

Cross-cultural stereotypes II

Gender stereotypes

In studies 3 & 4 there seemed to be gender stereotypes at play.

• Men were depicted with their children.

• Women were depicted in business surroundings.

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Forming a bricolage

Participants who has knowledge of the users compare the descriptions with their own understanding of the users and creates a persona that is a bricolage of diverse people.

'I was familiar with the (…) role, but it [the persona] gave us a little more, but I saw things that didn't fit in with our Sophie.' (Designer B)

When the participants spoke of the persona, they referred to encounters with different people and included differences in roles and in culture.

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Conclusion - I

In the perception two strategies are at play
- to look for clues in the text
- to interpret the text.

If the reader has previous knowledge with people similar to the persona, she adapts the information and the persona is formed into a bricolage of people.

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Conclusion - II

If the reader does not have any knowledge of people similar to the persona, she creates a stereotype, a preconceived category.

• There are universal stereotypes that operate cross-culturally

• The reader activates the familiar either as a universal stereotype or as something familiar e.g. as a fictional character.

➢ The categorization might hinder absorption of new information or information that does not belong to the category.

➢ Stereotypes prevent empathy with the persona.

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Conclusion - III

We evidently use our own cultural knowledge when we perceive a persona description.

The more knowledge we have of people similar to the persona, the less information we need in the description.

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Impact on design

• When conducting international and culturally diverse projects it becomes important to check the perception and check if the presented information creates stereotypes.

• If the designer has to create an understanding of the persona that is as broad as the bricolage of multiple persons, the initial material presented should reflect the bricolage and suppress the categorization.

Material could be:

• Informal material that is not considered findings

• Anecdotes

• Impressions from the people who have met the users.