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Social design as normative inquiry

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Abstract: This paper gives a stipulative definition of social design. It argues that there is a distinctive field of design practice, and design practice research that can be labelled 'social design' but that this distinctiveness cannot be spelled out directly in terms of the relation between design and the social, which has been the dominant view up till now. Rather, social design is defined in terms of the kind of knowledge production that it is — as a form of situational normative inquiry. This means that it is conducted empirically by responding to problems identified in specific situations and according to the ends-in-view that can be collectively warranted, and thus responding to the norms of justification and standards of criticism of those affected. This stipulative definition not only has the advantage of delineating and orienting the fields of practices of social design, it also opens some interesting considerations with respect to knowledge claims made by social design research.

Keywords: social design, normative, inquiry, knowledge

1. Introduction

Setting aside the sweeping generalisation that all designing is social in as much as it intervenes into social worlds (Dilnot, 1982), no unitary definitional basis for social design has been proposed. Social design has been used as an umbrella term to span such diverse names as: William Morris, Walter Gropius, Buckminster Fuller, through Victor Papanek, to Richard Buchanan, John Thackara, Nigel Whiteley and Bruce Mau, more recently, Victor Margolin, Enzio Manzini and Alastair Fuad-Luke (Melles, et al., 2011; Gamman & Thorpe, 2011; Chen et al., 2016; Resnick, 2019). It has also been deployed more narrowly to indicate interest in specific 'social topics' such as sustainability (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016) and social justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020). The meaning remains disputed (e.g., Chen, et al., 2016; Julier, 2013) and has now prompted a critical discussion of what constitutes a 'legitimate' use of the term (Koskinen & Hush, 2016; Kimbell, 2020). All this against the backdrop of growing scepticism about the usefulness of the term (Markussen, 2017; Tonkinwise, 2015).



The paper makes an original contribution by offering a prism which can be used to identify the instances of social designing against the backdrop of other forms of designing. The key argument is that there is a distinctive field of design practice that can be labelled 'social design' but that this distinctiveness cannot be spelled out directly in terms of the relation between design and the social, which up till now has been the dominant line of inquiry (Chen et al., 2016; Koskinen and Hush, 2016; Markussen, 2017, Kimbell, 2020). Rather, social design is a form of situational normative inquiry. This means that it is conducted empirically through engagement in situations and, more specifically, by responding to problems identified in specific situations (Dewey, 1938; Clarke, et al., 2005). Being situated is this way can be said to apply to many forms of designing, but only social design is normative. Normative means that the inquiry responds to norms of justification and standards of criticism (Wittgenstein, 1968; Williams, 1981; Radder, 1992). More explicitly, what makes an inquiry normative is that it is performed with a view to improving existing situations with ends-in-view that are collectively justified and collectively warranted (see explanations below). Thus significantly, the claim is not that social design is based on some 'right' values (cf. Friedman, et al., 2013) nor that some notion of the 'right' outcome can fix the meaning of social design (cf. Papanek and Fuller, 1972). Rather, social design is defined by how actors employ their practical judgements in problematic contexts, acting together and using the materials at their disposal with a view to improving their current situation according to the warranted ends in view.

This conceptualisation, as the paper shows, is indebted to Dewey's notion of inquiry but interpreted through some more recent perspectives in valuation studies (Lamont, 2012; Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Stark, 2009), philosophy of information and epistemology more broadly (Floridi, 2017; Ammon, 2017) and a field of sociology referred to as science and technology studies, or more recently, science, technology and society studies (Latour, 2004; Marres, 2007) – all this in conversation with design research (e.g., Daalsgard, 2014; Dixon, 2019; Molnar & Palmås, 2021). Conduced by mobilising these different discursive bodies, this paper presents an outsider's attempt to penetrate design practice research, rather than offering what Vear recently dubbed an 'in-vivo perspective' (Vear, 2022) - an understanding originating from within design research practice. This recourse to external perspectives can be productive insofar as it gives access to new set of concepts, notably those in pragmatic philosophy, philosophy of information and science and technology studies whose primary preoccupation is knowledge production and epistemology. This approach can be productive because not only does it eschew too easy a solution to fall on the notion of tacit knowing in explaining the knowledge claims made through design (Niedderer, 2021); it also offers a way of conducting analysis in a new way that does not reproduce the entrenched divides in design research (e.g., the disputes concerning the limits of scientific and rationalistic thinking in design and the role that artefacts and materiality play – see for instance, Forlizzi, et al. (2009) vis-à-vis Gaver & Bowers (2012)).

In terms of its structure, following an exposition of the key concepts used in the argument, the paper offers a brief overview of the most relevant discussions bridging the key terms identified and design research. These two sections provide a basis for setting out the implications of the proposed argument for social design and knowledge production more broadly. The paper closes with a summary and an outline of possible future research topics and avenues.

2. Introducing the key terms of the argument

This section puts the foundation for the argument of this paper by introducing the conceptual building blocks used. These need explaining because - imported, as they are, from pragmatic philosophy and science and technology studies - they are technical terms that are far from obvious. The following discussion explains thus what is meant by situational inquiry, what is meant by normativity and the role of warranting in this, extending the discussion to the notion of *matters of concern* and *issue publics* which are helpful in explaining the specific notion of localised normativity which, this paper argues, defines social design.

2.1 Situational inquiry

In its classical formulation taken from Dewey, an inquiry starts with an experience of an indeterminate and problematic situation and it 'ends' with a transformation of a situation into a determinate one. In the Theory of Inquiry, John Dewey defined inquiry as:

The controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole (Dewey, 1938 p. 108).

Indeterminacy arises in experience when the understanding of the situation as a foundation for action cannot be achieved because there is a sense of incongruence and incoherence. The resolution seeking characterising inquiry is sometimes cast in terms of a pattern of Dewey's six-step technique: 1. Identify the problem 2. Plan possible solutions 3. Evaluate and test the various solutions 4. Decide on a mutually acceptable solution 5. Implement the solution 6. Evaluate the solution. This is in some way misleading as resolving the issue involves a certain back and forth: an exploration of what in one's conception of the situation matters for action, and what in action matters for the conception of the situation. Progress and outcomes of an inquiry are ultimately determined in some observable real-world consequences (Talisse, 2003; see also Cronen, 2001, p. 19). Thus, inquiry does not happen in the head but in experience and through interaction with the material world. Indeed, what is being negotiated are relevant understandings of facts and norms but also, the material constraints of specific situations (see more in 'Matters of concern'). Here Dewey speaks of the need to transform indeterminate situations in naturalistic terms, as simply something

that purposive organisms do. This however raises questions as to how actions are directed and oriented.

2.2 Normativity and collective warranting

Dewey uses the term *ends-in-view* to describe these 'foreseen consequences which influence present deliberation' (Dewey, 1930, p. 223) and emphasises that they are not things lying outside of inquiry but something that arise and function within it. In other words, they are part of the situation. They make it possible to 'understand the actual in light of the possible' (Alexander, 1993, p. 371) and in this sense orient the inquiry. Importantly, while Dewey notes that ends-in-view have to be understood in the context of an evolving grammar of each situation, they are not by any means arbitrary (1925, p. 161). The setting of the direction of inquiry is necessarily normative: is requires choosing which value orientations are to be pursued and thus, judging some to be better than others. These judgements can be wrong or right: either helping to resolve the problematic situation or exacerbating difficulties. A different way to put this point is that they can be criticised and justified. In the words of Hogan, 'the problematic situation has a deeply normative character [because it is primarily an action situation where] something must be done and there are better and worse things we can do' (Hogan, 2009, p. 286). As such, inquiry can be performed with good or bad practical outcome. But how is the course of inquiry to be decided?

Dewey is adamant that social and cultural norms, what are sometimes referred to as 'values', are a necessary part of the process but they are not sufficient in explaining the normative orientation of inquiry. They can shape ends-in-view but do not exhaust them, not least because values held by individuals as well as the broader norms have to be situationally renegotiated. A different way of putting this point is that value orientations have to be situationally and intersubjectively warranted. To be warranted means to be shown right through a collective, ongoing, self-correcting processes of inquiry which is necessarily relational. To be warranted means to be agreed collectively and situationally demonstrated to be right. Normativity in this sense is therefore generated from within situations. This in turn raises the question of how expansive situations are – 'what is in and what is out' as relevant in determining this *localised* understanding of normativity?

2.3 Matters of concern and issue publics

As Marres (2007) argues, Dewey had a 'socio-ontological' conception of situations when he argues that 'people's involvement in politics [and issues more broadly] is mediated by problems that affect them' (2007, p. 759). Marres herself develops an understanding of how situations in the context of political involvement are formed through participatory ways of working around issues which affect people. This, Marres points out, links with a host of considerations around 'the performance of concerns', establishing a link with Latour's idea of 'matters of concern' (Latour, 2004). Matters of concern are assemblages of ideas, agents

and things which persist because they are linked through emotional and affective commitments and material proximity. A different way to put this point, as Marres does, is that 'issues spark a public into being' (2005) and emotional connections and material contiguity make them persist.

Matters of concern (Latour, 2004) and issue publics (Marres, 2007) are useful when thinking about normativity as evolving across situations. In simple terms, they offer a way of connecting the ends-in-view, agency and materiality which are negotiated in each situation when the value orientation is being set. Matters of concern can be said to be co-extensive with the warranting networks relevant to the given situation. As such, they can be said to offer a way of delineating the networks and objects relevant to the localised normativities in each situation (Zuiderent-Jerak, 2015; Mol et al., 2015; Kaszynska, under review).

Alongside the Deweyan term of situational inquiry and the idea of achieving normativity through warranting – the matters of concerns and issue publics are the key concepts mobilised in this paper to define social design and to comment on the nature of knowledge production through design more broadly.

3. Relevant discussions in the existing design literature

Needless to say, this is not the first time that Dewey's thinking has been brought to bear on design. Schön called for 'new forms of scholarship (..) closer to practice' that 'proceed through a design inquiry, in the Deweyan sense' (1995, p.34). Buchanan evoked Dewey in relation to the 'integrations of knowledge that will combine theory with practice for new productive purposes' (Buchanan, 1992, p.6). Alas, there has been a renaissance of pragmatism in design research in the recent years with a number of authors using Dewey as an interpretative lens into design (e.g., Melles 2008; Dalsgaard 2014; Dixon 2019, 2020).

3.1 Explicitly Deweyan positions

In the context of this work, Deweyan inquiry is used predominantly to elucidate the process of designing from the point of view of epistemology: the theory of knowing and knowledge production. For instance, Melles suggests that inquiry could be understood as 'design's natural epistemology' (Melles 2008, p.5), Dalsgaard looks at inquiry as part of 'a conceptual scaffold for design thinking' (Dalsgaard, 2014, p. 143) and Dixon discloses to be motivated by wanting to understand 'knowledge as contingent and ontologically transformative' (Dixon, 2019, p.16). Though some of this work acknowledges the ethical implications of designing – be it in relation to the demand for articulation of 'more "enduring and extensive" values by the research design community' (Dixon, 2019, p.16) or the aspiration to unpack the implications of inquiry for collective action (Dixon, et al., 2021) – normativity is not considered in any systematic way in the context of this work. Nor are these authors concerned with understanding social design specifically.

3.2 Implicitly Deweyan positions

Outside of this self-proclaimed Deweyan strand in design research, other attempts to link inquiry and design have been made against the backdrop of the growing dissatisfaction with how the relationship between design and value has been conceptualised. In this context, an interesting intervention by JafariNaimi, Nathan and Hargraves uses Dewey's inquiry to criticise an approach to understanding the role of values - aka norms - in the main stream VSD (Value Sensitive Design) approaches (JafariNaimi, et al., 2015; see also Le Dantec et al., 2009). In this context JafariNaimi et al. point out that 'the static nature of value classifications as well as the focus on values of ethical import, even though fulfilling a heuristic role in VSD, does not allow for value discovery in the design process' (p.92). To gain a more accurate understanding, they suggest, values are to be used as 'hypotheses' developed though inquiry. Julier's and Hodgson's more recent call to see value as 'multiple, unstable, emergent and contingent' (2021, p.96) and to account for this value with a new approach articulated from within design - could be seen to support the argument for an inquiry-based approach to understand value and values in design as situationally unfolding. A Deweyan undertone also resonates in some nascent approaches with the ambition to understand value of and in design through the lens of valuation practices (Whitham et al., 2019; Molnar & Palmås, 2021; Kaszynska, submitted for publication). What these approaches have in common is wanting to see value - and values - not as static nor universal but as dynamic and contextually embedded, indeed as 'performed'.

4. Implications for social design (and knowledge production more broadly)

The thinking underpinning both – the explicitly and implicitly Deweyan - strands is brought together in the context of the present paper. The central focus is however different. This paper uses the specific understanding of normativity to define social design in ontological terms – and so, with reference to matters of concern by seeing it as performed in specific situations. This paper thus makes a distinctive and novel contribution by asking what it means to take Dewey's situational and normative inquiry to be ontologically constitutive of social design.

4.1 Implications for social design

The implications of this are many and varied. The following are central from the point of view of the present paper.

From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is empirical, it
follows that social design should be anchored in genuine problems that are
experienced in specific situations. In this sense, social design can be said to be
anchored in matters of concern that can be clearly identified by the affected

- stakeholders within the agreed boundaries and networks. This brings to the foreground the questions of who is at the proverbial table and this makes exclusions transparent (Dewey, 1938; Marres, 2007).
- From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is collectively warranted, it follows that social design should be conducted in a way that encourages deliberations and public resolution. A simple way to put this point is that deliberation about 'which purposes are advanced and why' (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, p. 129) and how the inquiry is directed are subject to criticism and approval by those who belong to the relevant situations. Here social design might be seen to cross ways with political theory, democratic innovation and other related endeavours aimed at articulating a way of co-ordinating action based on collective decisions reached on the basis of public reasons (Bohman, 2004; see also Elstub & Escobar, 2019).
- From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is practical, it follows that social design intervenes into and changes empirical situations in ways that can be assessed as improvements or deteriorations by those affected. Practical reason in the context of social design, and in a general sense, is concerned with action and with the consequences of this action insofar as this is the basis for action, and accounting for forms of 'material participation' (Marres, 2007). Accordingly, social design can be said to direct action and behavior in ways that implement material changes in given situations according to the situationally warranted ends-in-view (Anscombe, 1957; Brandom, 2001).

The points above, conjointly, can be used to distinguish instances of social designing from those that are not. Notably, the approach is not prescriptive in the sense of fixing the right values and the right process. In this sense, it is consonant with Pedersen's call for 'a more pluralistic and descriptive understanding of [...] how designers and relevant stakeholders in actual practice work together' (2016, p. 182). This in line with the ontological defining and wanting to see design not in terms of what it is but how it is performed by those directly affected.

4.2 Implications for knowledge production more broadly

While the objective of this paper is to focus on social design, it would be a missed opportunity not to comment briefly on the implication this proposal has for thinking about epistemic claims and knowledge production in design in general. In line with Dewey's assumptions that 'valuations exist in fact and are capable of empirical observation so that propositions about them are empirically verifiable' (Dewey, 1939, p.189) – it could be argued that the knowledge generation mechanism in social design applies to knowledge generation in more general terms. Knowledge production in this sense is necessarily experientially grounded in the relevant situations and it presupposes actual interaction across the given

matter of concern. This understanding is in line with the proposal originating in the philosophy of information which sees design in terms of the 'maker's knowledge' and as 'an independent epistemic praxis through which one can acquire genuine ab anteriori knowledge' (Floridi, 2017, p.508; see also Ammon, 2017). These perspectives challenge the traditional epistemology which sees knowledge production in terms of producing accurate representations, theories and models at a distance. In contrast, the interactive and experiential standpoint presupposed here means that knowing 'has to be performed' (Antal, et al., p. 2), to borrow a phrase recently made current in valuation studies.

Performance is at the bottom of the pragmatic action-based philosophy and could arguably be said to underpin all design; what makes social design a special case of designing is that the performance in question consists of normative warranting. It is in this sense that normative inquiry is ontologically constitutive of social design. Thus, while it can be suggested that the case of social design offers a productive basis for understanding knowledge claims made in design in general, not all design is social design.

5. Concluding reflection and future opportunities

The paper brings different bodies of literature - including the philosophy of pragmatism and of information, valuation studies, science, technology and society, and design research - in order to contribute to an on-going but arguably stale debate concerning the meaning of social design. This paper argues that inquiry – as normative – is central and fundamental to understanding and defining social design. In social design the parties involved in situations come together to articulate, negotiate and warrant the ends-in-view or how their coordinated action is to be directed. Because this orientation is subject to criticism and justification, it is normative in character: simply put, there can be good and bad orientations according to those affected. Significantly, this localised understanding of normativity does not presuppose some universal, prescriptive standards that apply across all cases of social designing; rather, it develops ontologically as negotiated in specific situations.

The proposed definition of social design is novel because, instead of seeking to pre-empt the nature of the relationship between the social and design - which has been the mainstream approach until now (see Section 1) - the paper focuses on the terms of engagement and involvement and the practical judgements of those affected. Thus, it is sensitive to the 'invivo' accounts (Vear, 2022; see also Section 1) of design practitioners and how design process is experienced by those affected, even though the argument is articulated largely from a philosophical standpoint. Moreover, consistently with the 'ethos' of praxis characterising the in-vivo accounts, the approach proposed has the advantage of eschewing epistemic reductivism, that is, reducing the thing being defined to some sufficient and necessary properties that are said to exhaust the thing being defined. Another benefit of the proposed approach is that the stipulated ontological definition appeals to facts about

natural human capacities when making normative arguments. It thereby situates normative argumentation in the broader naturalistic account about human beings and their place in the world (Dewey, 1938), while at the same time retaining the interpretivist perspective on human action which sees collective interpretation, deliberative argumentation and warranting as central human action (Bohman, 2004; Williams, 1981).

Besides, or in virtue of, offering a definition of social design, the proposed approach has the following implications for social design practice (detailed in Section 4.1):

- From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is empirical, it
 follows that social design should be anchored in genuine problems that are
 experienced in specific situations.
- From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is collectively warranted, it follows that social design should be conducted in a way that encourages deliberations and public resolution.
- From assuming that the normativity constitutive of social design is practical, it follows that social design intervenes into and changes empirical situations in ways that can be assessed as improvements or deteriorations by those affected.

These implications well be familiar to the practitioners of social design but the paper grounds these in the overarching argument concerning the nature of social design. Moreover, it links these points with discussions outside of the design discourse. This crosscutting can advance design practice and design practice research by injecting new perspectives and establishing dialogues with some well-established approaches outside of design.

The paper also argues that the definition of social design it offers - and the empirical entanglement of facts and values it presupposes - gives a good basis for reconceiving knowledge production more broadly (see Section 4.2). The ontological defining proposed signals the need to move beyond knowledge as representation to knowledge as acting in information systems with material consequences (Floridi, 2017) and how this relates to 'thinking through making' (Ingold, 2013). This, to borrow a formulation from the context of science, technology and society, positions knowing firmly as 'a matter of incommensurable practical human-cultural ways of being (ontologies), not only of different human epistemologies or preferred ways of knowing' (Leach et al., 2005, p. 8).

This positioning of social design can be a good foundation for a number of strands of future work. These may include reconstructing the norms of collective justification from actual practices and understanding how normativity is situationally constructed, and in relation to valuation concerns arising where collective practical judgements are formed out of the interaction of norms, cognitive claims and feasibility constraints (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Stark, 2009). These concerns have been central to the historic but live efforts of the pragmatists in the U.S. (e.g., Dewey, 1938) and Europe (e.g., Habermas, 2015) and also

challenged by the recent perspectives from science and technology studies (Latour, 2004; Marres, 2007) but never adequately interrogated in the context of design. Nor have they been understood as central to social design. While a lot more work is needed, the potential of exploring social design as a normative inquiry should be apparent.

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