BROADENING HORIZONS OF DESIGN ETHICS? IMPORTING CONCEPTS FROM APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a thought experiment: we explore how certain ethical considerations of applied anthropology might contribute to the evolving body of work on design ethics. To begin to consider ethical analogies between these two fields, we first align them on a conceptual level by scrutinizing how they both change relationships. Further, we introduce three central concepts and related debates of applied anthropology that could supplement discussions on contemporary design ethics: beneficence, collaborative approach and advocacy. The authors are specialized in (design) anthropology, architecture and human-computer interaction (HCI); in this paper, we draw from our respective fields and backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on design ethics have substantially increased in recent years. This is, at least partly, caused by the development of digital technologies and their vast social, political and economic power in societies. (e.g. Chan 2018; Verbeek 2008.) In addition to tangible, singular products, designers are involved in the devising of ever more complex and larger-scale socio-technical systems, such as platforms for social media, or smart environments, such as smart homes, where the digital and the material interact in profound ways.

Furthermore, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data in the service of both global corporations, for example Google and Facebook, and government surveillance and citizen control practices, such as those in Singapore and China (Helbing & al. 2019), give rise to an urgent need to delve deeply into design ethics, as the very purpose of AI is to aid and replace instances of human decision making in favour of automated processes.

It has been claimed that design has not always paid enough attention to its implications (Miller 2014). However, design can be understood as a process that profoundly engages ethics: according to Jeffrey Chan (2018, 184), "Which problems designers choose to solve – and why – and who to include or exclude as beneficiaries of this design not only presume choice preferences but also more fundamentally, value positions on the good or worthwhile life." This implies that ethical considerations should be an integral part of design theory and practice.

Design and anthropology have a long joint history. In the influential field of technology design, for example, ethnographers and anthropologists have been involved for over 40 years. The central approach of anthropology, *ethnography*, enables getting close to users and real-life contexts, which has made it a useful partner in design endeavours. Well-known design companies began to adopt ethnographic methods in the 1980s and 1990s, attracting attention from the press which further expanded the appropriation of ethnography (Wasson 2009). This phenomenon was accompanied with the shift that turned designers' attention from the 'object' to the 'user'. Over the years, this partnership has taken many forms (these are many; e.g. Clarke 2016; Dourish & Bell 2011). It has also led to the birth of distinctive approaches that do not greatly resemble conventional ethnography. This, in turn, may has led to a situation where some basic ethical concepts of anthropology have vanished from the sight of designers.

Nowadays activities merging anthropology and design – both in academia and in practice – are increasingly labelled under the rubric of *design anthropology*. Generally, design anthropology forms a research and design approach where the aim is *to create ideas, conceptual solutions and applications* for certain needs and situations; at the same time, the goal is *to understand larger frameworks of the design and*

experiences new technologies are producing. (e.g. Otto & Smith 2013; Smith & al. 2016). The central idea is that anthropological methods are not separated from larger theoretical foundations of the field, including ontological and epistemological standpoints. Rather, anthropology, ethnography and design are coupled in more comprehensive ways. Explorations presented in this paper can be seen as contributing also to design anthropology. To summarize: despite the long joint history of the fields, there exists plenty of space for more nuanced discussions on ethics.

ETHICS IN DESIGN AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Design has by no means been completely ignorant to ethics; theoretical and philosophical discussions on design ethics have a history that extends over several decades (e.g. Chan 2018; Verbeek 2008). Victor Papanek's influential book *Design for the Real World* (1971) was among the first voices demanding that design must be accountable to society. He promoted co-design, an activist stance, and interestingly, anthropological modes of inquiry (Clarke 2016). Currently, there exist strands of design that intend to explicitly incorporate ethics into the practice, such as value-sensitive design (VSD) that has been popular in the field of HCI (Friedman & al. 2014). Furthermore, professional associations, such as *the Industrial Designers Society of America* (IDSA 2010) and *the American Institute of Graphic Arts* (AIGA 2009) offer ethical guidance to practitioners. Yet, discussions on design ethics tend to be dispersed and there is a need for new perspectives, also due to new design trajectories that are developing alongside technological advancement. As Chan (2018) puts it, at the moment design ethics remains a greatly underdeveloped area.

However, in anthropology, ethics has been a central topic for decades. We concentrate on the tradition of *social and cultural anthropology,* which is mostly concerned with studying contemporary societies through qualitative, empirical research, employing approaches such as ethnography. Especially relevant perspectives for design can be found from the field of *applied anthropology* that explicitly aims towards practical goals and towards social change. Overall, we understand applied anthropology as a general label for practical activities carried out by anthropologists, conducted in numerous contexts from development cooperation to medical and technological domains. (Van Willigen 2002.)

General ethical codes of anthropology, renewed in 2012 (AAA 2012), have been discussed together with design ethics by some authors (e.g. Miller 2014); however, it is difficult to find literature that would connect critical ethical debates specific for applied anthropology with design ethics. We have begun to explore this domain but our work is in its early stages. Rather than presenting polished results, the intention of this short paper is to launch new discussions by introducing some ethical concepts typical for applied anthropology. We also ponder how *change* is conceptualized within applied anthropology and design.

We would like to challenge readers to step back and reflect on *what* is actually changed through design, *towards what direction* and *why*? What does it mean for design ethics if design is understood as an intervention that alters social relationships as well as material ones? Further, what would it mean to appropriate the principle of *beneficence* to design? What would it mean to "*design for control*" – not just with the participants of the study but in order to eventually give them the control – over their technologies, buildings, everyday life objects? And finally, how should the concept of *advocacy* be understood in design?

ALIGNING FIELDS OF DESIGN AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Sometimes debates surrounding anthropology and design seem to draw a strict line between anthropology and change. For example, it is claimed that anthropology (or ethnography) does not want to have any kind of impact on the subject of the study. The only goal is to understand the human phenomenon under scrutiny. For design, however, change is at the heart of its project. This, of course, is due to practical and historical reasons; design usually begins with some kind of a brief or intention, within which the desire for change is embedded. Designers, then, work under circumstances where non-action most often is very undesirable; this can introduce ethical dilemmas into design work. This represents a major difference from the anthropologists' situation.

Yet anthropology includes many branches that are explicitly engaged with *change, intervention* and *impact*. In fact, applied anthropology is always aiming at change as it seeks to solve practical problems in human communities by utilizing anthropological skills and knowledge. Nevertheless, the fact that anthropology can be practiced also *without* inducing change of any kind, has led some scholars to criticize actions that have an intended impact, and others to search for justifications for causing change. Naturally, similar debates have not been central in design.

We claim that in order to align the ethical projects of applied anthropology and design, we must understand the similarities between these fields and find some common ground. As we have presented, change and intervention are central parts of both, but what is actually the subject that is changed through intervening? In applied anthropology, the probable answer would be social conditions. A designer, depending on the more specific field, could say that s/he changing working or living conditions, or a brand of a company, or a national voting system. On the surface, these instances can look very separated; however, following Adam Drazin (2013), we can understand that in all cases *relationships* are changed. He writes (2013, 36) that "Design is not socially or politically neutral space. Concepts are

increasingly phenomena that mediate what kinds of relationships individual people, citizens, consumers and users have with governments, corporations and international bodies". Design, as well as applied anthropology, is necessarily inducing *social transformation* by changing relationships. We take this perspective as a starting point that allows bridging ethical thinking in anthropology and design.

CONTEXTUALIZING CONCEPTS: REMARKS ON APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

The practice of applied anthropology can be said to be as old as the research discipline of anthropology, as early anthropological knowledge was meant to solve practical human problems. Unfortunately, applied anthropology (like the whole discipline) played a role in some problematic historical events; for instance, applied anthropologists worked in the service of colonial administration providing information on local people. This somewhat dark history has made the whole discipline particularly self-conscious and aware of the impact that dominant structures and ideologies can have on research. It has also spurred ethical discussions within the field. (Low & Merry 2010; Rylko-Bauer & al. 2006.)

It has been popular to give differing names to newer branches of applied anthropology, partly in order to separate them from the abovementioned suspicious history. This has also led to some confusion, as it can be difficult to comprehend how vast the practice of applied anthropology actually is. (Rylko-Bauer & al. 2006.) These branches include, e.g., *collaborative research*, *engaged anthropology*, and *action anthropology*. All of these branches are somehow dealing with social change. Historically, the practice of anthropology which aims at *community-directed change* dates back to the late 1940s and 1950s. This novel approach involved from the start *clearly expressed values*; furthermore, it created space for *advocacy*, which is still a much-debated concept. The most radical forms of this type of anthropology have promoted revolutionary community change to support human rights (Doughty 1987).

Action anthropology is one of the best-known examples of value-explicit anthropology. Overall, it is depicted as an approach in which the anthropologist is committed to assisting communities in achieving their goals and meeting specific needs. Besides pursuing science, action anthropologists are 'co-explorers' who help the communities/people to identify challenges and seek ways to meet them. (Butler 2009, 101; Tax 1975.) Within the original approach, researchers formulated a set of broad values themselves, including "truth" and "freedom" (Tax 1975) and those created the basis for all actions taken. Nowadays debates concern, for example, taking action based on "universal principles of justice", which is in itself a very contested area (Low & Merry 2010, 212).

The activism evidently present in the abovementioned forms of anthropology has also been widely criticized within the field, as all scholars are not comfortable with advocacy and intervention. Critics state, for example, that understanding the world is more important for an anthropologist than changing it (e.g. Hastrup & al. 1990). Nevertheless, change, intervention and impact are a solid part of anthropological discussions and practice. Debates over justifications of change, desired nature of impacts and roles of researchers and participants of the study can offer important fuel and perspectives for ethical discussions in design.

APPROPRIATING CONCEPTS?

We would argue that design fields, while accomplished in the development of various methods and visual-material concepts, could gain significant benefit from conducting more theoretical conceptual work; from not only identifying but also naming phenomena, which is at the core of the social sciences, such as anthropology. In this work, re-inventing the wheel is, of course, undesirable; thus, we argue that designers might benefit from the following three anthropological concepts relating to ethics. It must be noted that this is definitely not a comprehensive account of central ethical principles of applied anthropology (see SfAA 2019).

One of the basic ethical principles in applied anthropology is *beneficence* which is used to determine the risks and benefits of research. Patricia A. Marshall (1992, 3) summarizes that "Minimally, the principle of beneficence obligates applied anthropologists to conduct research only if some benefit could be derived for individuals or society. Like other investigators, anthropologists must decide whether the benefits of conducting a particular study outweigh the potential risks imposed on research subjects." Following this principle requires that the researcher has an ability to recognize social challenges, understand the context of study already beforehand and consider long-term social and scientific consequences. Adopting this concept in design might mean that a "do no harm" principle might be better integrated into even the commercial realms of design, supported through regulation and citizen action.

Another principle, typical for applied anthropology and deeply connected to the above introduced ethical principle of beneficence, is a *collaborative approach to research and practice*. Similar approaches are commonly utilized within design as well, such as *co-design* and *Participatory Design* (PD). However, applied anthropologists' take in early days was something very profound, and currently many applied anthropologists are returning to similar, even radical ways of doing research and producing impact: "applied anthropologists increasingly 'work[ed] with those studied in a collaborative or participatory mode' so that the community or group became transformed 'from object to be known to a subject that can control' (van Willigen 2002:43). In many cases, this involved some level of advocacy and a commitment to confront

differences in the distribution of resources, statuses, and power" (Rylko-Bauer & al. 2006, 181). Sharing control with the (former) subjects of the study can make following the ethical principle of beneficence easier as direction of changes is steered by the community. Taking this approach a step further in PD would, in our estimation, mean the adoption of coaching attitude into design practice; where the professional educates the clients through the process so that, at the end, they are, within the limits of safety and reason, able to design for themselves. This would apply especially to issues of function which tend to have a profound social influence.

The last concept we present is *advocacy*, which is at the same time central to applied anthropology and very contested (e.g. Hastrup & al. 1990). Rylko-Bauer & al. (2006) envision that advocacy should be understood as a continuum: From sheer understanding of human societies we move towards "general advocacy, widespread among anthropologists, for subordinated populations, ranging from teaching about the dangers of ethnocentrism to writing articles exposing social inequalities and structural violence" (ibid., 186). They continue by explaining how advocacy can be manifested by supplying data to officials such as lawmakers, or advocating for the rights of groups who are oppressed but face risks if claiming their rights. "Finally, at the other end of the continuum we have direct use of anthropology in the service of the Other, that may involve participating in direct action and promoting rights and needs of specific groups in conflicted situations" (ibid., 186). Advocacy demands that designers first familiarize themselves with issues of the underrepresented and the underprivileged, and then take a stand for those groups and individuals, utilizing the power and prestige that are awarded to professionals in societies. This might also mean that the most influential work of a designer might be outside of traditional studio work, expanding designs' influence into journalism, politics and the third sector.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to explore certain initial and profound ethical considerations of applied anthropology and consider how they could contribute to discussions of design ethics. As the theoretical work behind the paper is in its early days, our intention has primary been to bring new questions on the table. The fact that design and anthropology have a long joint history eases everyday collaboration but sometimes also makes us to forget the somewhat contradictory premises of the fields – that actually can provide fruitful friction, such as their differing relationship with change.

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