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Simone de Beauvois Vogue France, 7 may 2020

Epistemological Position

In this essay I consider multiple examples of gender inequality, its specific consequences, and its mitigation. A large part of my personal practice is being culturally competent, defined as "being aware of your own cultural beliefs and values and how these may be different from other cultures—including being able to learn about and [honour] those differences" (Goode, 2009), and designing with delicacy for problems I may not fully understand. Therefore, throughout this essay, I will be considering gender inequality in its many forms and analysing it under my own specific practice in an attempt to find mitigation techniques that can make positive changes while remaining sensitive to a position as an outsider to the problem.

Introduction

The word 'design' encompasses many fields, and its definition can vary depending on the person being asked, or what design may mean to them, or their experiences with design, or their own personal practice, or anything else for that matter. Within the context of this essay, 'design' can be defined as 'a plan produced to show the look and function or workings of a project before it is made'- arguably its widest definition. We will explore the considerations of design: the importance of awareness and context by the parties, people, companies, communities involved. Specifically, we will investigate designing for women. We will delve into the history of the female voice, how the ignorance of the female voice has been perpetuated throughout history and how that permeates into how we design- because "design doesn't happen in a void, design comes from people and people are inspired constantly by their surroundings and their community" (Chieza, 2019). We then discuss how we can design for problems that a designer may not be personally affected by and the how we can ensure better understanding of the communities or people we intend to design for.

Ignorance

An island in the Bay of Bengal is home to some of the last known uncontacted aboriginal people left on the planet. The Sentinelese tribe of North Sentinel Island is as alien as one human can be to another, their community is estimated to have been isolated from the rest of humanity 60,000 years ago (SCHÖNHUTH, 2019). There have documented attempts to contact the tribe, and other times when people have ended up on the island by pure happenstance. The British Administration in India conducted several contact expeditions to the Andaman Islands and North Sentinel Island to "pacify the forest dwelling tribal communities of the island[s]" (Sasikumar, 2018). They proceeded to kidnap children of the Sentinelese tribe, hold them captive in the nearby Port Blair, shower them with 'gifts' and then returned them to their homes in the hopes they would express their 'positive treatment' from the British. The British theorised this method would foster better relations between the notoriously aggressive and protective tribe, instead they unknowingly introduced the population of the island to diseases that they had no resistance towards because they had been physically isolated from outer societies for millennia. It would appear that the British acted in their own interests, seeking

a relationship with the Sentinelese tribe because it may have been beneficial for themselves. The British attempted to contact the tribe using methods that show little consideration for the wishes of the Sentinelese tribe. This example could show that when changes are made to a community that isn't fully understood, it can have drastic negative effects well beyond the scope of the original intention of the agency (the agency in this case being the British Administration). The seemingly 'innocent' action of trying to introduce friendly contact between the British Administration and the tribe resulted in disease and death. Historically the tribe has resisted any forms of contact from outside civilisations with aggression and violence- clearly conveying their intentions of being left isolated (Gerstner, 2019). As the agency to initiate the change, the British bear the responsibility for the consequences of this interaction- such as a designer bears responsibility for their project outcomes.

To contextualise the inclusion of the Sentinelese tribe within this essay, the treatment of the tribe speaks to the danger of an ill-researched or ill-fitting project that obviously didn't consider the effects of the actions to be taken on the tribe. It also speaks to a community's resistance to change.

Pandit, 1991, BBC

Indian Coastguard, 2004

When acted upon by a foreign force, it is can be very easy for that force too be deemed dangerous because it is unfamiliar to the population- even if (from the perspective of the foreign force) the change may be deemed necessary or positive for the intended community or population (Shefer, 2008). For the sake of this essay, we will name this phenomenon 'Community Resistance'. This concept of community resistance runs parallel with the concept of 'xenophobia'. This term has been used in recent years in parallel to racism, but the original meaning of the word was simply "a (rational) fear of the stranger" (Ortona, 2016). Xenophobia is an intrinsic attribute of the human condition, it is a defence mechanism that has developed through thousands of years of evolution- it the most basic sense, our bodies learned that preferring the known and avoiding the unknown results in better chances of survival. The usage of 'stranger' could be literally referring to an unknown person, however it could also be extended to include anything unknown- ideas, ideologies, objects, languages. While, one could argue, that in the modern day being open and understanding to alien concepts is more beneficial, we should not ignore this constant of nature in favour of a more idyllic perspective. We should still design while considering the natural resistance to the unknown.

The Female

To understand the state of modern feminism and gender equality, we first must understand the past. While the female voice has been present since the dawn of humanity, one could argue that its documentation has been historically neglected. Written in the early 20th century, 'An Introduction to Philosophy' seemingly intends to brief the reader on philosophy and its basic principles. One would assume the book would be suitable for any reader wanting to learn about philosophy because of the use of 'Introduction' within the title. Within the first chapter, Fullerton states that "[t]o tell all that philosophy has meant in the past, and all that it means to various classes of men in the present, would be a task of no small magnitude, and one quite beyond the scope of such a volume as this" (Fullerton, 1906). The quote presents an excellent point – to summarise a field as wide as philosophy in one book would be to reduce its necessary complexity. Therefore, while what is written may be true it should be taken as simply a starting point rather than an all-encompassing summary of the field. Parallel to the context of what is written within the preface to the book lies the subtext in the chosen language. The words chosen within the quote tells us much more about the position of philosophy at the time it was written. "I must warn the reader at the outset that the title of this chapter seems to promise a great deal more than he will find carried out in the chapter itself" (Fullerton, 1906). The author has decided to use only male pronouns within the quote and in the wider text- with zero uses of female pronouns found within the book. The complete lack of female considerations within the book speaks to the authors ignorance and the apparent value of the female in the wider academic framework the book sits within. Academic works are checked by editors and publishers before being released to the public- none of which saw issue with the lack of female direction within the text. One may think that addressing the reader in a gender-neutral matter may be more appropriate for an author who is intending their book to be read by beginners in a field rather than a specific audience or person. It could be argued that the author's use of male-directed

language was a simple biproduct of the male domination of academic philosophy at the time of writing. He may have been writing the only way he knew how. If the decision to write his book in this manner was subconscious, not an active thought but rather a continuation of the status quo that surrounded him, then was Fullerton to blame for his lack of female inclusion? One could argue that a subconscious decision is still a decision. Seemingly no effort was made to extend the basic knowledge of philosophy to the female mind, or even the neutral mind, just the male mind.

To contextualise the inclusion of Fullerton's book within this essay, one could consider his book a project and Fullerton its designer. To design a project for someone other than oneself it is of the upmost importance to consider their views foremost. Fullerton has not only failed to consider women's views on philosophy or their place within it- he hasn't even considered them at all.

Through time, the field of philosophy slowly progressed to allow female voices to be more acceptable within the academic community. Simone de Beauvoir was a French existentialist philosopher, considered by many to be a trailblazer in defining contemporary feminism; Beauvoir's most notable work authoring 'The Second Sex', a book examining history through a feminist lens, could be (and is by many) thought of as a pillar of twentieth-century philosophy. Within her book, Simone delves into her theory of the 'absolute' (referring the male gender) and the 'other' (referring to the female gender) (Beavoir, 2023). In general philosophy, 'the other' is a concept which falls within the study of the 'self'. The 'self' is the concept of a person's own being: their knowledge, values, body, and mind. The theory of the 'self' dictates that in every action, decision and thought one may make is a manifestation of the self (SPENCER, 1898). What isn't a manifestation of the 'self' is the 'other' and is defined as "is the state of being different from and alien to the social identity of a person and to the identity of the Self" (Given, 2008). Simone explains that the male gender is considered the 'absolute', through history constantly considered as the standard: the most physically capable and the most mentally competent people were men. And women have been considered only secondary, an afterthought to the 'absolute'.

Caroline Perez's "one-size-fits-men" theory concurs with Simone's comments on the 'otherising' of the female gender. Caroline explores how 'one-size-fits-all' designs often tend to lend themselves to the male body rather than be equally accessible to both genders (Criado-Perez, 2019). An explicit example of the 'one-size-fits-men' theory in practice is with the design of the piano. Hand-size is a huge defining factor in the success of a pianist, the piano's design lends itself better to those with larger hand sizes- which is a physical feature more often present in men. Female pianists are restricted in the difficulty of music they can play because they physically cannot span the area required to play certain music. Men's physicality is considered the baseline, leaving female pianists to struggle using a product that wasn't properly designed in consideration with their features.

The 'otherising' of the female is shown in design by the lack of considerations for the physicality of the female body. In many products, the design favours male physical characteristics, where one could argue they should all be designed in a gender-neutral consideration. A question you may ask is: how can one develop a product that is intended to be used by everyone and only design the product to suit half the population? Not only could this decision be considered ignorance of a large proportion of the population (depending on the case this could result in lower sales or even negative press), but it could also be considered a failure of a designer to properly design a product to suit its intended user. Again, just like the writings of Fullerton, it could be argued that the designer may not have intentionally disregarded the needs of

women- it could be explained as a simple overlooked consideration. But if a designer has produced a product that doesn't align with the user- even if the reason if the reason for the misalignment was unintentional- the misalignment remains, and the product has failed to complete its intended purpose.

The above argument is making a massive oversimplification of the design process. It could be argued that if a product is specifically being designed for a male, then the product should obviously favour the male physicality and the same for a female. Additionally, creating a gender-neutral product also presents its own challenges, finding a compromise that is applicable to both male and female anatomy in a way that's useful or profitable might not always be possible.

To explore people's everyday experiences and interactions with sexism present in our society, I asked my female peers what ways their lives have been affected by sexism. One interesting response highlighted how male-centric thinking also extends into medicine. One person detailed their experience with their ADHD diagnosis and how was made increasingly difficult because of the way ADHD is treated differently in young girls compared to boys. "I struggled through school because I was unsupported. I was told afterwards that because I didn't present with the typical symptoms my diagnosis was delayed by a long time- I found out later that this was because the diagnosis criteria are based on the behaviour of boys with ADHD and largely ignores the differing symptoms for young girls. I only found proper treatment after pursuing it myself in adulthood". In the medical field there have been multitudes of studies about the differing treatment and diagnosis of women compared to their male equivalent. It could be argued that these examples show another field in which women are left as a second thought, an 'other'. As a fact and statistics-based field, one could imagine medicine would be more immune to bias in any form. But (as previously discussed) where people are present, human nature will prevail and rear its head.

To contextualise these writings within the framework of this essay, all the previous discussion about: the Sentinelese tribe, the position of women's voices in the field of philosophy, the theory of the 'otherization' of women, and the examples of male based design and thinking - were given as examples to the impacts of ignorance within varying contexts. And to further emphasise the impacts that the ignorance of women's specific needs are extremely widespread and touch upon many fields.

what every girl should "NO"...

Awareness

In poorer regions across the globe, communities still rely on inefficient stoves for completing domestics tasks (Radojcin, 2021). Many areas lack the developed infrastructure required for consistent access to power and clean water, meaning families must use traditional cooking methods (such as three stones around an open fire, burning bio-matter harvested themselves) to boil water for sanitation and produce meals. Methods such as 'three-stone cooking' use more biomass, present higher risks from fire, and do not protect the user from the fumes of the naked flame and fuel used compared to modern cooking methods. To reduce carbon emissions, multiple non-government organisations (NGOs) such as the 'Clean Cooking Alliance' have been created to distribute efficient cooking equipment to poorer

regions in developing nations (Radojcin, 2021). In using these new cooking methods, people use less fuel and therefore produce less carbon. The NGOs calculate the typical amount of carbon produced by a family during a year and compare that to the carbon now produced using the efficient stoves provided- the decrease in carbon production is considered a 'carbon saving'. A carbon offset is "a reduction or removal of emissions of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases in order to compensate for emissions made elsewhere" (Goodward & Kelly, 2010) and a carbon credit is a "transferrable financial instrument, that is a derivative of an underlying commodity" (Courtnell, 2023), the commodity usually being removed carbon. To give context: if a company wanted to reduce their total carbon emissions, they can either reduce their production of carbon from their operations (by changing materials in products or changing shipping methods etc.) or they can buy carbon credits from another company which represent a reduction of emissions. The carbon credit allows a company to legally deduct carbon from their production, allowing companies whose operations aren't yet carbon neutral to be a carbon neutral company. This system allows developing communities to benefit from capital investment from companies looking to achieve carbon-neutrality.

The gender roles assigned within familial structures in some communities tend to dictate that women work as the primary caregivers within a typical household (Iqbal, 2022): working to rear their children, cook for the entire family, clean the home, amongst other duties. This results in the woman's role of cooking for the family exposing her to the harmful fumes produced when using traditional cooking methods, far more than her male counterparts. This exposure can result in increased rates of respiratory illnesses arising within women and the children in their care (World Health Organisation, 2016). So, in changing to safer and more efficient stovetops, the rates of respiratory illness in women and the children in their care has decreased.

The small change of introducing better technology to these communities allows for parallel mitigation of carbon emissions and gendered health inequalities. The designers involved in this project have designed an intervention that addresses two problems simultaneously. It could be argued that to do required a thorough understanding of the problem of carbon emissions and the existing carbon-credit trading systems and the problems faced by the population of developing communities in Kenya (specifically the female population).

This case study is particularly interesting because it challenges the problem of respiratory illnesses arising in women without altering the gender norms it aims to work within. The methods used to tackle gendered health inequalities can be skewed by personal perspective- for example: a person who is comfortable with a more western civilisation may lean towards erasing the gender roles in the community as the way forwards in preventing these gendered health inequalities. While some may agree that erasing these gender roles is a positive it also disregards the desires of the community the project aims to work within, have the designers even considered if the women even want to change? As discussed earlier in this essay, 'xenophobia' is a natural human response to the unknown. If a project intended to come into a foreign community and overhaul their social systems in order to be successful, there may be individuals who will not partake in the proposed changes. However, this case study presents minimal intervention and allows for positive effects to take place with only small, digestible changes to the community- which, therefore, decreases the chance of community resistance.

In the context of this essay, the above case study is a useful reference of how successful a project can be if we listen to women. People working for an NGO (in a western country with a vastly different culture than their project base) designed a project for people in a foreign community because they listened to their target demographic. What they needed was a method of reducing women's respiratory illness deaths and what they wanted was for their community to remain unchanged by outside influences. Carbon credits are created to be sold to other companies, less women die from toxic fumes, and the community don't feel invaded by a foreign entity.

In the article 'Designing for People', the authors detail ways in which we can explore 'people-centric design' with a focus on inclusivity throughout the design process.

Tom May, 2020

Amongst the writings they suggested changing the terminology used within the design process can be beneficial to changing the way the designer may consider their protagonist- specifically (in the context of web design) substituting 'user' with 'people'. They argue that this small change can humanise the audience, and this added depth helps a designer to consider more aspects of how it may affect 'people' than they usually would (Lee & Ho Kwok Leung, 2010).

The word 'user' is a very linear description of what a person is, and even the use of the word influences the design process. They found that following a product from its inception to it's production and shipping, the 'users' were only consulted about the product in the end stages of development- at the 'user-testing' phases. You could argue that the company or designer had oversimplified the buyer's role in the process because they were referring to them as just 'users' and only important at the endpoint of the process. Whereas if we shift to more personified language, a company is more inclined to have "people's" opinions be involved throughout the process - because a 'user' simply uses, "people" are much more complex and they understand what they want and need.

This concept could be extended to many facets of design. Avoiding words that create simplified concepts of our user could encourage one to continually interface with them while designing a project. This could naturally mitigate some of the issues we have discussed earlier in the essay. For example: one could argue that in the early stages of development for Fullerton's "An Introduction to Philosophy" if Fullerton had simply pivoted his intended audience of his book to simply a 'reader' he may have been more encouraged to write his preface using gender neutral language considering a 'reader' had a chance of being a woman.

Additionally, changing one's design process to design for the person rather than the group is an interesting method in removing unconscious bias and misinformation. Designing for one person's needs is much less overwhelming a task than designing for an entire community that one may not understand, but a solution that benefits one person may extend to benefit many others in similar environments. Of course, this method may not be applicable in all circumstances but it does present a method of starting a project with as little generalisation as possible- which may be beneficial as a designer continues.

Portraits Morcelés, 2023

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