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Social Hierarchy in Design and Social Innovation: perspectives from Thailand

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Our knowledge of how design and social innovation works outside of the Europe and the US is still insufficient, due to the limitations that are inherent to the prevailing perceptions, methods and tools, developed in and for this context. Although the importance of social relationships has been acknowledged, how social hierarchy, which is firmly rooted in many non-western societies, interacts with the design and social innovation process is scarcely documented. In this paper, we wish to expand on existing knowledge by sharing the experiences of practitioners and stakeholders involved in design and social innovation initiatives in Bangkok, highlighting the various ways that social hierarchy influences their practice.

design and social innovation, Thailand, social hierarchy

1 Introduction

Underneath Bangkok's skyscrapers an undercurrent exists of like-minded professionals from various backgrounds who actively use design in various initiatives geared towards social change. Often involving the participation of stakeholders, such as (local) governments, commercial parties and local residents, it is a practice known as design and social innovation (Hillgren, Seravelli & Emilson, 2011; Manzini, 2015). The sheer amount and variety of initiatives active in Bangkok and the rest of Thailand stand in stark contrast with how little is known regarding the context and conditions in which they operate. The European approach to design and social innovation, which currently dominates the field of study, is characterised by the exporting of methods and ideas developed in Europe and adapting them to local contexts (Jégou & Manzini, 2008). However, whether these best practices are suitable for, or even desirable in, other contexts is questionable (Brown & Wyatt, 2010), with the additional threat of replacing knowledge and solutions developed locally (Bala-Miller et al., 2008; Akama & Yee, 2016). As local, culturally specific factors are rarely included in design and social innovation studies, information about their effects is limited.



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Field studies conducted in Bangkok during 2016-2017 found a multitude of individuals, collectives, project teams and organisations addressing a wide range of local issues, using various types of design, operating on different scales and collaborating with a variety of stakeholders. Data collection using Activity Theory, a framework that enables the study of initiatives together with their respective ecosystems, provided new insights into how local initiatives function by examining their inner workings as well as the (power) relations between stakeholders. Preliminary findings indicated the influence of the Thai context on the design and social innovation process through the importance placed on issues surrounding education, religion and the local government, among others (Tjahja, Yee & Aftab, 2017). Social hierarchy, in particular, appeared to be a recurring theme and was reported by several interviewees to have influenced their practice or involvement in different ways and on multiple levels. The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of social hierarchy in Thailand in relation to design and social innovation, highlight when, where and how it interacts with the process and lay a theoretical foundation in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon.

2 Background

The current study is part of a larger on-going PhD research project which aims to determine what constitutes design and social innovation initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region through the construction of case studies based on data collected from initiatives in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. The research focuses on *why* design and social innovation projects are initiated, *for whom* they create value and what role *design* plays in creating this value.

3 Design and social innovation in a Thai context

The field studies conducted in Bangkok indicate that the use of design methods in social innovation is rapidly becoming commonplace in Thailand, evidenced by the increasing amount of initiatives that could be characterised as design and social innovation, although practitioners might not always subscribe to or identify themselves with this term. Local issues and concerns, such as education, urban renewal, heritage and social activism are addressed or promoted by using design approaches, such as community architecture, gamification, co-creation and graphic design. Most initiatives appear to be bottom-up, although many receive indirect support from the government. The Thai Health Promotion Board is a frequent funder of projects as design and social innovation initiatives are often perceived as beneficial for the general health and well-being of citizens. Unfortunately, academic research on design and social innovation in Thailand is rare. A notable exception is a study conducted by Natakun & Teerapong (2014), in which they found that contributing time or skills to solve social issues has become particularly popular among young Thais and commercial organisations, the latter often providing support through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. In addition, professional reputation and existing networks were deemed to be important sources for acquisition and support for Thai organisations involved in design and social innovation.

The notion that design and social innovation is built on relationships (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Baek & Cho, 2012; Manzini, 2015; Akama & Yee, 2016) is particularly meaningful in this context as Thais attach great value in maintaining 'smooth' social interactions. This is accomplished by avoiding hurting others' ego, not to overtly criticise them nor reject their good intentions, and maintaining a disposition that is flexible, polite, calm and humble (Komin, 1990). As Thai society is ordered in a hierarchical fashion, where criteria such as age, education level family background and professional rank manifest itself in all social relationships, awareness of relative place in the social hierarchy and deference to those higher in rank is expected (Boyle, 1998; Wetprasit, 2016). Subsequently, the smoothing of relations also entails being aware of and acting according to social hierarchy (Mulder, 1996).

4 Social hierarchy

Social hierarchy, also known as status hierarchy or social stratification, is commonly understood as an implicit or explicit order of individual or groups according to a social dimension and is pervasive to the extent that it is considered a fundamental type of human relation (Fiske, 1992; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). It has been studied in sociology, social psychology, organisation studies and developmental studies, among others, in relation to topics such as collective action (Simpson, Willer & Ridgeway, 2012), cognition (Zitek & Tiedens, 2012), self-perception (Anderson et al., 2006), social identity (Doosje et al., 2002; Cunningham & Platow, 2007), social dominance (Sidanius et al., 2003), occupational stress (Bacharach, Bamberger & Mundell, 1993), gender (Hays, 2013), prejudice (Rudman et al., 2012; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014) and inequality (Charoensy, 2012; Kerbo, 2012). Although the underlying premise that there is some kind of differentiation made among individuals or groups is generally agreed upon by scholars, theories on what basis this difference is made vary. Gould (2002) distinguishes two schools of thought in social sciences: differentiation based on the quality of individuals' personal characteristics or differentiation based on the quality of the social positions they occupy, regardless how these positions were obtained. Thye (2000) and Magee & Galinsky (2008) consider power, based on control over resources, and status, conferred by others, to be the primary dimensions of social hierarchy. Sidanius & Pratto (2001) view human social systems as group-based social hierarchies where the dominant social groups possess a disproportionate amount of positive social value compared to groups who possess mostly negative social value.

4.1 Social hierarchy in Thailand

The origin of social hierarchy in Thailand can be traced back to the 15th century, where the feudal *sakdina* system stratified individuals into ranks according to the size of their allocated land or rice field (*sakdi* = power and *na* = rice field). This hierarchical system of patronage helped maintain the flexible and interdependent Thai societal structure and determined an individual's rights, wealth, political power and public responsibilities (Boyle, 1998; Kitiyadisai, 2005). Life in modern Bangkok is still characterised by the constant appraisal of whether someone is considered higher or lower than oneself in the social hierarchy. Status differentiation has evolved to become increasingly complex and is not necessarily based on existing objective social structures but can include variable subjective interpretations depending on contextual and situational variables, such as wealth, seniority and urbanity (Vorng, 2011). It is important to note that Thais generally do not have negative associations with social hierarchy (Mulder, 1996), which differs from the view that is particularly prevalent in western society, where it is perceived as an intimidating force instead of recognised as a type of relationship (Fiske, 1992). Another notable difference is the fluidity of Thai interpersonal social relations, characterised by the constant shift in social status depending on the situation, which do not fit the western, rigidly structured notions of social hierarchy (Vorng, 2011).

4.2 Social hierarchy in design and social innovation

There are currently few studies that explore the effects of social hierarchy on the process of design or design and social innovation. Akama & Yee (2016) highlight the approaches two initiatives in Singapore have taken in relation to social hierarchy. The founder of *The Thought Collective*, a group of social enterprises, interprets hierarchy as respecting and recognising experience from seniors rather than focusing on the role itself. In a similar fashion, the *Ground Up Initiative* promotes an environment where one can learn from elders. A small number of studies have examined social hierarchy in relation to participatory design. Puri et al. (2004) observed in their study, in which they adapted District Health Information Software for use in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh using a participatory design approach, that participatory processes originating bottom-up, common in Scandinavia and the UK, were unlikely to succeed in India. This was perceived to be due to the traditionally strong hierarchical society. Participatory activities therefore will have to be initiated top-down by high-ranking government agencies, such as in this case, the Chief Minister's office. Yasuoka & Sakurai (2012) sought to determine to what extent participatory design would be successful in Japan, which also possesses a deeply-rooted hierarchical culture. In a series of

workshops, a variety of stakeholders from different backgrounds were asked to brainstorm social and economic solutions to the destruction caused by a massive earthquake and tsunami which took place the same year. Although social hierarchy has always been a major issue in Japan with any kind of participatory activity, their findings suggest that the occurrence of a disaster enabled a change in social dynamics, creating a more favourable environment for a participatory approach. As such an extreme situation was unprecedented, senior participants could no longer rely on their superiority based on previous experience, which stimulated the creation of a 'flat' community. In another study by Yasuoka (2012), in which participants in Denmark and Japan played a participatory design game in a workshop setting, the rules were modified to minimise the effects of social hierarchy as this time the workshop took place in a 'normal' situation.

The examples from India and Japan illustrate that social hierarchy exert considerable influence on the design process. Design and social innovation initiatives, in particular, are prone to be affected, due to their frequent use of participatory processes, such as co-creation, and their reliance on the involvement of stakeholders, whose social status can vary. Despite the fact that social hierarchy has been studied extensively in other academic disciplines, existing theories are not entirely relevant, do not sufficiently take the local cultural context into consideration or only partially address the issues that occur in the context of design and social innovation, necessitating the development of alternative perspectives. Failure to acknowledge and understand the role of social hierarchy in the design and social innovation process could result in the implementation of solutions that do not sufficiently address the needs of the stakeholders, or worse, render the entire initiative useless.

5 Methodology

The findings that are presented in this paper are based on data collected during two separate field studies in Bangkok, conducted in 2016 and 2017. Within a period of three months (both studies combined), 19 stakeholders of 7 different design and social innovation initiatives were interviewed about their involvement. The interview questions were loosely guided around the Activity Theory framework, the primary data collection method in the main PhD research project. Subsequently, an approach based on Grounded Theory was adopted to generate theory from the data obtained.

5.1 Activity Theory

Design and social innovation practice is deeply rooted in its specific context and locality. Activity Theory (AT) departs from the assumption individuals should be studied along with their surrounding social structures by focusing on the activity that is generated by them (Engeström, 1999). Using the AT framework to analyse design and social innovation initiatives can therefore provide insight into their unique ecosystems, along with the specific factors which exert influence on them. For a more in-depth discussion regarding the suitability of AT in the study of design and social innovation, see Tjahja, Yee and Aftab (2017).

The AT framework, or *Activity System*, is usually visualised as a triangle with six interrelated concepts (see figure 1). The upper part of the triangle, consisting of *subject*, *tools* and *object*, represents an activity by a subject, using certain tools to achieve a particular outcome (Tan & Melles, 2010). The bottom part consists of implicit or explicit *rules*, the local or broader *community* and the *division of labour*, linking the activity, symbolised by the upper triangle, to the wider social context (Chatzakis, 2014).

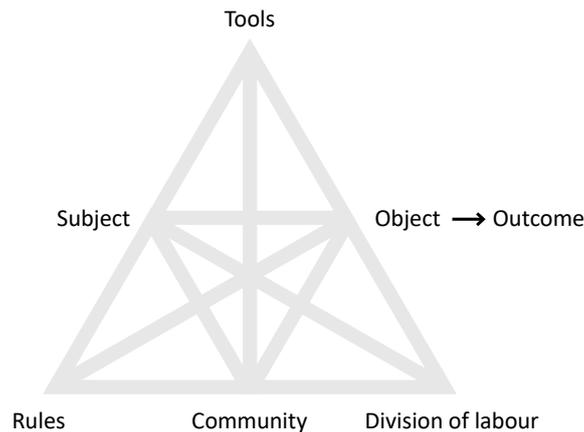


Figure 1 The activity system – adapted from Engeström (1999)

The issue of social hierarchy was brought up by thirteen interviewees from six different design and social innovation initiatives, on most occasions when asked about limitations, challenges and restrictions that influenced their work, in other words, the *rules* governing their initiatives. In the first field study, this occurred without any form of prior prompting from the researcher. In the second field study, however, social hierarchy had already been noted as being one of the recurring themes in design and social innovation in Thailand. Interviewees were therefore occasionally prompted by the interviewer to elaborate on the topic, although in some instances the topic of social hierarchy was still brought up without being solicited by the interviewer.

5.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a methodology that enables the development of conceptual theory from systematically collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999). The theory, along with its hypotheses, is generated simultaneously with the gathering, coding and analysis of the data, thereby ensuring the theory's relevance to the phenomenon studied (Howard-Payne, 2016). During this process, concepts emerge which are grouped to form broader, more abstract categories. The establishment of relations between categories, eventually leads to the forming of the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

6 Findings

6.1 Co-create Charoenkrung

The Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC), a public organisation under the Office of the Prime Minister, focuses on the promotion of design and creative practice in Thailand. *Co-Creat* *Charoenkrung* is a large-scale top-down urban renewal project that was initiated in 2016, accompanying their relocation from the centre of Bangkok to the historical Grand Postal Building in the Charoenkrung neighbourhood. The relocation marked the beginning of TCDC's ambition to initiate a creative district in Thailand that has been co-created and co-designed with its residents and other local stakeholders. Several of the co-created proposals were prototyped on true (1:1) scale, a first in Thailand. TCDC's policy manager, who initiated and oversaw the overall project, and the project manager in charge of design, noted several aspects related to social hierarchy. Both respondents mentioned the significance of high level gatekeepers and influencers within the local government. As (lower-ranking) civil servants are generally reluctant to be involved in issues they perceive to be outside of their authority or interests, failure to convince these key figures could cause a bottleneck, effectively ending the project. Therefore, taking advantage of existing networks in order to bypass the traditional hierarchy or bureaucracy was found to be beneficial, and often necessary. In addition, negotiations with high level officials from local authorities were carried out by the policy manager's superior to increase the likelihood of cooperation. As such, TCDC believes that a top-down approach is a must for a design and social innovation project to be successful in this

context and on this scale. Moreover, the status and seniority of some participants in the co-creation workshops was reported to have inhibited those who perceived themselves lower in hierarchy. Consequently, custom tools had to be designed to ensure the participation of all participants.

6.2 Deschooling Games

A collective that aims to solve problems by equipping their clients with the (design) skills to gamify learning experiences, Deschooling Games consists of multi-disciplinary team with three core members: a training facilitator, a teacher/activist and a designer, occasionally enlisting volunteers to facilitate during their sessions. The collective views social hierarchy in relation to education and sees it as their challenge to empower the bottom (students, parents and teachers), while at the same time giving ideas to the middle (management and HR) with the ultimate aim of creating movement in the Thai educational system, which they perceive to be stagnant. Two other stakeholders have offered their views on social hierarchy: One of Deschooling Games' volunteers, an engineer who often helps out as a facilitator or game designer, and one of their clients, a faculty Dean at a university in Bangkok.

The dependency of social hierarchy on role and context was mentioned by both respondents. The engineer reported to be more inclined to challenge social hierarchy in his workplace, as in this role his professional expertise is grounded in empirical facts. In the context of a Deschooling Games co-creation workshop, however, as a game designer and one of the interested volunteers, he does not have an expert role, making it more difficult to challenge social hierarchy. According to the Dean, who actively encourages co-creation and implements its practice in his own faculty, how social hierarchy is perceived depends on the design of the organisation and the division of labour; It is a matter of being able to separate different roles and communicating to each other effectively. For example, when it comes to negotiations with or presentations to clients, the Dean will take the lead. When discussing projects, however, he will join his staff and discusses with them as an equal. One role does not necessarily have to interfere with the other in participatory practice – everyone takes on different roles in different contexts. Moreover, the Dean perceives the argument surrounding social hierarchy to be an ideological one, in the sense that the common consensus appears to be that society should strive towards a flat hierarchy. He argues that this is not an accurate representation of what happens in real life. Instead of criticising the existence of social hierarchy, the focus should be on sensitivity towards it by being able to detect when relationships are not smooth.

6.3 CROSSs

A social architecture agency which started out as a volunteering organisation, CROSSs developed into a team of four architects and one designer, formalising their initiative into a professional agency in 2016. CROSSs often works in rural areas of Thailand on a wide range of projects, from the redesign of interior spaces to city-wide urban renewal. Aside from being architects, they often take on different roles within their projects, such as connectors and facilitators. Two team members elaborated on the methods the agency uses to actively eliminate negative effects of social hierarchy. For CROSSs, the major issue with hierarchy is that it can prevent some people from being involved in the co-creation process. For example, if citizens feel reluctant to voice their honest opinions in front of their mayor, it becomes a problem; Sometimes a 'recalibration' of hierarchy is necessary to stimulate the sharing of ideas in an open manner. CROSSs realised that the conscious shaping of the space, often by arranging the seating positions before a meeting takes place, changed the way people communicate as well as the hierarchy within that space. So instead of facing the front, listening to one speaker, CROSSs encourages the levelling of social hierarchy by having the participants in their meetings and workshops sit in a circle. In this way, the mayor of a town will sit at the same level as its citizens, with everyone seeing eye to eye. Another tool that is often used by CROSSs is to let participants write their ideas on paper instead of saying them out loud to avoid overtly challenging figures of authority. The team members emphasise that the existing social hierarchy can also be used as leverage in certain contexts. If high-ranking individuals, such as

community leaders, grant their support to an initiative, they can convince people to go along with him, facilitating the flow of the process. Moreover, communicating directly with those on top of the hierarchy prevents the dilution of the ideas that the agency wishes to get across, as the initial message will no longer be 100% accurate if it needs to travel up through too many levels.

6.4 Pom Mahakan

Built against the wall of a historical fort, the village of Pom Mahakan consists of a small community living in wooden houses, located in a prime location near the Grand Royal Palace in the middle of urban Bangkok. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) has been trying to demolish the village since the 1960s and its residents have been resisting ever since. The community has contacted various outsiders, such as academics, designers, architects and others who are sympathetic to their cause, as well as the government itself, to co-create a solution for the current situation. The direction they are currently pursuing is that of a 'living heritage museum' which may convince the government to keep what is left of the village intact. Three stakeholders who were interviewed regarding their involvement with Pom Mahakan commented on issues surrounding social hierarchy: A local social entrepreneur who is actively involved in the co-creation activities surrounding the village and two architects who are members of the Association of Siamese Architects (ASA).

Two interviewees mentioned that the community leader is a forceful character, with strong opinions which are not always shared by the other villagers. The aim of the co-creation activities in this context was to enable the voices of the community to be heard and be considered. Subsequently, the leader was asked not to be present during the co-creation activities to ensure villagers could share their thoughts freely. In this example, the negative effects of social hierarchy had to be neutralised to ensure that the view of an individual does not override the view of the community. Furthermore, the strained relationship between the villagers and their leader could potentially weaken their position when negotiating with the BMA. Both architects emphasised that support from the authorities is crucial in order to succeed. Initiatives have to be viewed by the government as benefitting their own policies or they have to be backed by those high in the hierarchy, such as members of the Thai royal family. Although they are not able to help directly, they can be referred to as being sympathetic to the cause.

6.5 Bangkok Chinatown

The neighbourhood of Talat Noi is part of Bangkok's Chinatown and borders the Charoenkrung district. The *Bangkok Chinatown (Yaanjean Thin Bangkok)* initiative predates *Co-create Charoenkrung* and was initiated in 2012 by a group of architects and sociologist, with one of the initiators born and raised in the area. Similar to its neighbour, local residents were brought together in the rejuvenation process, which utilises various design methods, such as co-creation and the prototyping of ideas. As the agency needs to arrange the funding for each individual project separately, they accomplish their aim of urban renewal by doing one project at the time.

As some of the other initiatives, Bangkok Chinatown experiences effects related to social hierarchy during the co-creation process. The agency's founder attempts to reduce these negative influences by creating many levels of meeting. For example, some groups consist mainly of people who occupy higher social status, such as policy-makers, representatives from the government, landlords and big business owners, who can often offer a broader vision of what would benefit the community as a whole. Other groups consist of community leaders, local citizens and small business owners, who can give more detailed insights into how and what should be done to improve the current situation. Usually, individuals with a high social status will not participate in the co-creation sessions as they do not have the time. Instead, they will often join the first meeting to give ideas and the last meeting to witness the results. In other instances, they will send their subordinates to attend the meeting, who will only observe and report back to their superiors. However, when high status people do attend the workshops, their opinions tend to dominate the opinions of (lower-ranking) neighbourhood committee members, who feel inhibited to express their thoughts in front of those they respect.

Therefore, when organising large workshops, participant groups are separated along 'horizontal lines', with members of the same hierarchy in the same group, allowing the participants to open up and feel more at ease. All groups use the same co-creation tools and after discussion the results will be shared between the groups. The founder perceives social hierarchy to be natural and not considered a major issue. Instead, he tries to focus on combining the ideas that are generated in the meetings in order to benefit all stakeholders involved.

6.6 *The Rambutan*

Consisting of two partners who are graphic designers, *The Rambutan* aims to promote graphic design as a means to raise awareness for social issues. They organise workshops and events for graphic design students to show them the possibilities of graphic design as a means for social activism.

The partners state that although social hierarchy is particularly present in Thailand, they try to emphasise equality instead. They believe that knowledge is needed to accomplish this, as people of any hierarchy will listen if the message that is being conveyed makes sense to them. The duo does not attach any value to social hierarchy in their practice, but does acknowledge its existence, noting that the creative industry in Thailand is dominated by designers who are well-established. Even though *The Rambutan* operates in a completely different area, they are indirectly affected by these authoritative figures as their voice is louder and carries more weight. Even if information is wrong or outdated, the opinion of a professional graphic designer is valued far less than a design professor, who is often seen as the 'expert' in the subject, even by his clients. This isn't helped by the fact that the general public does not possess sufficient knowledge to judge what is right or wrong and will therefore rely on traditional notions of expertise based on educational status. Hierarchy also manifests itself when the design students, inspired to pursue a social approach for their school assignments after participating in their workshop, are often overruled by lecturers who are uncomfortable with the idea of using design for social causes.

7 Discussion

Although perceived and/or experienced differently, all respondents acknowledged the fact that social hierarchy exists and that it is an integral part of Thai society. Moreover, the majority of the interviewees view social hierarchy as a permanent feature of Thai society that does not necessarily have to be challenged but has to be dealt with accordingly. Based on the respondents' observations regarding the effects of social hierarchy in relation to the design and social innovation process, the following categories were identified.

7.1 *The negative effects of social hierarchy on the co-creation process*

As the studies in India (Puri et al., 2004) and Japan (Yasuoka, 2012; Yasuoka & Sakurai, 2012) have shown, participation in co-creation activities is not a given in societies where social hierarchies are engrained in everyday life. This was also the case in Bangkok, where in four out of six initiatives the co-creation process had to be modified in one way or another to minimise the negative effects of social hierarchy and maximise the participation of stakeholders. In *Co-create Charoenkrung*, custom co-creation tools were designed to encourage participation of those lower in hierarchy. Co-creation sessions at Pom Mahakan were characterised by the absence of the village chief, to ensure the views of the other villagers would be heard. The team of Bangkok Chinatown grouped people of similar standing together during their sessions in the hope that participants would be more open in the company of those they perceive as equals. The architects of CROSSs actively shaped the space in which their co-creation sessions will take place by requesting participants to sit in a circle, thereby breaking down the hierarchy and encouraging the sharing of opinions, thoughts and ideas as equals. Awareness of the fact that social hierarchy and participation can interact with one another in co-creation processes is imperative to effectively negate its effects.

7.2 The necessity of leveraging on existing social hierarchy

Several respondents mentioned the dependence on the higher tiers of the social hierarchy. Support from above was reported by stakeholders from Pom Mahakan and Co-Creato Charoenkrung to significantly increase the likelihood of success. In addition, having direct access to high-ranking people ('knowing the right persons in the right place') was considered to be an asset in the Co-creato Charoenkrung project and by CROSSs, who added that it enabled them to communicate their message more directly to the decision-makers. CROSSs also noted that 'a good leader who makes good decisions' can be beneficial as they can considerably streamline the process. However, a leader can also create tension within a community which can harm the overall process, a concern voiced by some involved with the Pom Mahakan community. The founder of Bangkok Chinatown observed the dominance of those high in hierarchy in co-creation sessions over those who were considered to be lower, although the former contributed in a positive way by possessing the vision needed to push the initiative forward. Although they were not affected by social hierarchy directly, the team of The Rambutan expressed their difficulties in spreading their message due to resistance of the established designers and academics in the local industry, whose opinions are deemed to be of greater value because of their perceived higher status. Identifying key individuals and understanding the role that the higher echelons of the social hierarchy play, in particular in terms of support and facilitation, can greatly contribute to the success of design and social innovation initiatives.

7.3 The importance of understanding social hierarchy in the Thai government

A previous study has shown that the respective (local) government departments can have different attitudes towards design and social innovation, ranging from supportive to indifferent (Tjahja, Yee & Aftab, 2017). The insights gained from the respondents in this study support the notion that the organisational culture of public sector might be one of the underlying reasons of this ambivalent stance. As almost all initiatives in this study had some form of government support, an understanding of hierarchy within the government context is essential. The policy manager from TCDC, itself a government organisation, expressed considerable frustration in dealing with other governmental departments. Although some might be willing to cooperate, they are only able to do so within the limits of their jurisdiction, with a reluctance to be involved in issues perceived to be outside of their authority or interests. This experience was echoed by one of the architects working with Pom Mahakan, adding that Thai civil servants in general are not brave enough to stand up to their superiors out of fear of professional consequences. Although this is a common characteristic of those working in public service in other parts of the world, in Thailand it appears to be exacerbated by the effects of social hierarchy. Thai civil servants tend to avoid conflict and uncertainty, and are reluctant to voice their opinions towards colleagues or superiors. Pimpa (2012) attributes this behaviour to the concept of *ti tum ti soong* in which Thai people are perceived to be destined to occupy in a certain position in society. This position ('ti') is fixed and determined by their familial and social status. Therefore, superiors at top of the organisation or social hierarchy tend to be accepted due to their position, and not necessarily their professional merits. Those who follow the supervisor's orders and do not challenge their authority are traditionally perceived as being effective employees (Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999). Furthermore, even when key figures are present that are sympathetic to the initiative, support in the long-term is never guaranteed due to the continued shifting of positions within the government. Additional supporters are needed to mitigate the problem of relying too much on a single key person. Therefore, an understanding of the influence and position of supportive key people in order to know who to lobby for support is necessary to ensure the long-term survival of a project.

7.4 The fluidity of social hierarchy

The notion that Thai social hierarchy is flexible or fluid, adapting to different situations and contexts (Vorng, 2011) was also attested in this study. Two respondents involved in the Deschooling Games initiative suggested that their respective places in the social hierarchy was not static but changes

depending on the situation that they find themselves in. The Dean perceived hierarchy as a product of organisational design and culture. Different contexts require the adoption of different roles, which can be separated from one another if communicated properly within the organisation. The engineer underlined the difference in his perceived status in his role as facilitator/game designer during sessions with Deschooling Games as opposed to his 'normal' professional role.

8 Preliminary ideas

There are several interesting ideas that can be further developed from the categories that have been identified in the previous section. First, hierarchy studies traditionally examine individuals as units of analysis *within* a group or the dynamics *between* groups. Design and social innovation initiatives, however, are characterised by interactions both within and between groups and individuals, sometimes occurring simultaneously. For example, within a project social hierarchy can exert a negative influence on participants during a co-creation process, but at the same time the project manager can make use of social hierarchy to elevate the project to a higher level by involving key people through his or her network. Second, the fluid characteristics of social hierarchy entail that someone can be affected directly or indirectly, depending on which role this person has at a certain point in time. For example, when a designer tries to minimise the effects of social hierarchy during a workshop, (s)he is influenced indirectly whereas the participants are the ones directly affected. Conversely, the same designer can feel the effects of social hierarchy directly when (s)he tries to negotiate with the local government and realises that their place in the hierarchy is too low to accomplish their goal. In turn, the government official, who might try to help by mediating within their own department, is indirectly affected. Third, aside from positive and negative, attitudes towards social hierarchy can also be characterised as being active or passive. An example of an active attitude would be the creation of custom tools by a designer in order to promote participation, whereas a passive attitude would be a neighbourhood resident who feels inhibited to speak their mind in the presence of someone regarded higher in status.

It appears that there are several dimensions of social hierarchy that are relevant in design and social innovation: types of interaction (within/between groups and individuals), degree of influence (direct/indirect) and attitude toward social hierarchy (active/passive). In addition, the dynamic and fluid nature of social hierarchy in Thailand, which might bear similarities to other cultural contexts, needs to be taken into consideration and explored further. The tentative ideas proposed in this paper will hopefully contribute towards a greater understanding of how design and social innovation is practised, particularly in non-western contexts.

9 Conclusion

The inherent reliance of design and social innovation initiatives on the support, facilitation and participation of stakeholders has prompted us to further explore the nature of the social relationships which lie at its foundations. The examination of the six Bangkok initiatives demonstrated that hierarchy in social relationships was present in various areas and stages throughout the process: Opening or closing doors, including or excluding people from participation, shifting and flowing from one social situation to the next. In societies where social hierarchy is an integral part of life, practitioners and stakeholders involved in design and social innovation have developed their own ways to deal with it, either using it to their advantage, or in some cases, attempting to reduce its negative effects. Using a grounded theory approach, a number of categories were identified from the findings, giving rise to ideas that can be used as building blocks for theories of social hierarchy in design and social innovation.

This paper exemplified the effects of social hierarchy on design and social innovation practice in Bangkok. Awareness of its existence and how it can influence the process can be beneficial for both local and non-local practitioners as well as organisations who are operating in contexts where social hierarchy is prevalent or whose work involves stakeholders who are affected by it. Questions regarding the role of the designer become current once again in this context. Do design and social

innovation practitioners need to actively position themselves inside or outside of the social hierarchy? Would this be possible and if so, what would the consequences be for the process? Furthermore, there are many other context-specific factors in Thailand, and elsewhere, that are in need of investigation, such as urban and rural environments, religion, racial prejudice, policies and legislation, to name but a few. Design and social innovation practice is as complex as the societies that they are meant to improve, with seemingly infinite intricacies and nuances. Contextual knowledge therefore is a prerequisite for understanding how and why certain concepts, ideas and initiatives (will) work and others not.

10 References

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