Editorial: Designing Social Innovation in Cultural Diversity and with Sensitivity

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Most places where we live and work are becoming, if not already, culturally plural due to movement of people, ideas and practices over decades or even centuries. This is signaling a need for greater openness and curiosity on one hand, and a questioning of judgment and hegemony on the other to curb the surge of intolerance of ‘others’ in the context of increasing global social, political and environmental challenges. Design and social innovation has been an active and willing field in addressing such challenges, yet we have also identified how little is known or shared on complex and entangled conditions that shape how different people are coming together to catalyze changes to occur. This has been noted and reflected in discourses in postcolonial HCI that ‘speak at once to the highly local and contingent practices that we see at work in different specific sites of technology design and use, while at the same time recognizing the ways that those localisms are conditioned and embedded within global and historical flows of material, people, capital, knowledge and technology’ (Irani et. al 2010: 1317).

When design/designers enter into existing circumstances to enable social change, they can disrupt existing practices, reconfigure local power-dynamics and shift gender relations in intentional or unknowing ways. In other words, design/designers are implicated in becoming a constituent of transforming cultural practices. Yet nuanced and detailed understanding of cultural heterogeneity in social innovation have not been emphasised in design research as much as generalizable to tools, methods and technique as knowledge (Akama & Yee 2016). Several reasons are speculated, such as the lack of theoretical and methodological knowledge that addresses the challenges of understanding their complex forms. Another factor could be a deferral to other fields (such as sociology or anthropology) to study cultural dimensions and thus excluded from the scope of design research. In foregrounding cultural nuances when designing with others, what issues, questions and concerns are significant to keep in view? What can help those who intervene, including stakeholders with certain agendas and existing practices as well as the ‘local community’, become aware of and work with existing and morphing cultural logics? This Special Track is convened to build dialogue and understandings of design and social innovation in cultural diversity. We seek to trouble literal and static distinctions of cultures that are assigned to countries, nations or groups of people to explore how we can develop greater sensitivity and nuance when working with people and intervening in designing our futures together.
This Special Track is facilitated by colleagues who are co-founders and participants of a research network called Design and Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific (DESIAP). This network has hosted multiple gatherings in Southeast Asia since 2015 to celebrate the heterogeneity of Asia-Pacific region that consists of a constellation of islands, countries and continents where many Indigenous and traditional cultures have been resilient in spite of colonization. Our events have so far gathered researchers and practitioners who are initiating change in Australia, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand to examine how change-making practices are enabled and conditioned. The embodiment of cultural plurality is a shared condition that characterizes the conveners as well as all DESIAP participants who have taken part. In this way, they are ‘multi-local’ and have diversity in heritage, language, upbringing, education and in places where they have chosen to live, study and work. Following prominent scholars in postcolonial theory, feminist studies and cultural theory, we have begun to explore ‘what aspects of our humanness a cultural tradition tends to emphasize, enhance, and preserve as central’? (Kasulis 2002, 20). This is a view of seeing cultural difference that is not defined by fundamental distinctions but to see what is ‘foreground in one culture may be background in another’? (Kasulis 2002, 20) to side-step any dualisms of West/East or North/South. There is a tendency and entrenched legacy of research towards replicable, generalizable knowledge, especially coming from the social sciences to ‘evacuate the local by assimilating it to some abstract universal’ (Chakrabarty 2000, 18), but many notable scholars have already reminded us that this framing of ‘knowledge’ is just one of many worldviews. In other words, we must be vigilant of replicating dominant logics that are embedded in certain fields and discourses like design to respect and accommodate that for other worldviews, words, ideas and knowledges cannot be detached from places, people and practices in which they are located so they cannot be moved to another ‘context’ (Law & Lin 2017). Following such scholars, we seek to acknowledge and understand the multiple and invisible dimensions that are inherently entangled within a term like ‘culture’ and enhance our abilities in nuancing the heterogeneity that constitutes design and social innovation.

The papers to be presented in this track are situated in diverse contexts including China, Greece, Kenya, Thailand, Sweden, and the UK. In the first paper, Cyril and Joyce note that our knowledge of design for social innovation outside Europe and the US is still insufficient. As part of an endeavor to investigate what constitutes design and social innovation initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, they report the workings of social hierarchy in design and social innovation in Bangkok. Reflecting on the experiences of practitioners and stakeholders, they highlight the effects of social hierarchy in design and social innovation initiatives. The second paper presented by Nilsson and Hansen Ottsen introduces a method called the Co-archiving Toolbox developed with an aim to increase the diversity in public archives. In co-design workshops, they used the method to explore and prototype different ways to document and archive refugee stories. Although the effectiveness of the toolbox is yet to be validated, this paper demonstrates the potential of an inclusive approach to designing public archives and creating opportunities to discuss and re-think the archival mission in multi-cultural societies. The third paper by Pschetz et al. discusses "the situated energy values" in rural Kenya. Through an interview and probe-based study, they investigate how culture influences the interaction between peoples’ values and energy systems. In particular, they explore "how values influence the perception of energy needs, how boundaries between business and home contexts are less defined than often assumed, and how widespread narratives of profit creation based on appliances may conflict with communal interests and aspirations of energy users." The fourth paper presented by Vlachaki et al. is about prosthetic preferences in the UK and Greece. It aims to understand people’s preferences towards prostheses and cultural influences on their preferences so as to design more suitable prostheses for them. The similarities and differences between the two countries are presented and interpreted based on existing culture models. The last presenters Guo and Ji use food as a medium to address immigrants’ loss of ethnic heritage and identity in the process of acculturation. With a case of designing a food delivery service for young second-generation Chinese
Americans, they explore food as a design object that addresses conflicts and contradictions related to culture and identity.

The cultural portfolios presented by the aforementioned papers are diverse indeed. Not only is there a diversity in the cultural identity of people involved, but also in the culture elements addressed by the authors, i.e. behaviors and attitudes in the use of a product or a service, technologies and surrounding environments, and values and assumptions underlying peoples' needs. We thus look forward to sharing with the audience a wide spectrum of issues to contemplate and discuss design, social innovation, and culture.

References
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