Designing Good(s)? Exploring the Politics of Social Design Processes

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As design shifts from designing objects to designing for social transformation, there is an increasing need to address political dimensions within the design process. This paper explores those dimensions by drawing insights from the field of Science and Technology Studies. In doing so, we bring forward issues of ontological politics within social design processes, including: the recognition of situated knowledges, the multiplicity of reality, and the performative nature of methods. The implications of these issues are investigated through the examination of two practice examples in which different methods were used to support reflection on politics in social design processes. This research highlights the need to be more critical of the “good” that social design processes are working towards and the methods used to support political awareness. It also opens-up a host of new questions about how to address political issues amid the complexity and multiplicity of reality.

keywords: social design; politics; science and technology studies; social good

Introduction

All design is, arguably, a socially significant activity, ordering and forming the world through its process (Dilnot, 1982). Although issues of politics have been discussed within design research for several decades (e.g. Ehn & Badham, 2002; Nygaard, 1979; Papanek, 1973), there is increasing recognition of the need to better address these issues as the design process becomes more explicitly motivated by social causes within the emerging area of social design (Koskinen, 2016; Tonkinwise, 2016). As design shifts from a focus on
objects to cultivating societal transformation, the role of non-designers in the co-design process becomes prominent (Manzini & Coad, 2015; Sangiorgi, 2011). Thus, it is not only important to discuss the influential role of designers and designed objects, but also how issues of politics can be thoughtfully addressed within complex, participatory design processes working to realize social good.

As design processes are seen as a means of creating preferred futures, there is a pressing need to think critically about the political implications of these futures (Buwert, 2015; Willis, 2013) and establish a foundation for debate that is currently lacking (Manzini, 2016). To position politics within design, many design researchers have borrowed from Rancière’s conceptualization of politics (Keshavarz, 2015; Kimbell, 2011; Markussen, 2013). For Rancière, politics is fundamentally a question of inequality - forming society by distributing, partitioning, assigning and attributing parts, roles, identities, and so on (Keshavarz, 2015). With implications for discussions of inequity, the focus of this paper is on ontological politics, or how reality is enacted through practices, drawing from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS).

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the political dimensions in social design processes and reflect on how these might be addressed within the design process. To achieve this, we draw on the writings of three prominent scholars in the area of STS - Haraway (1988), Mol (2002), and Law (2004). Insights from these authors are used to guide the critique of two practice examples in which methods were used to catalyze conversation and reflection on political issues within social design processes. In doing so, this research opens up a host of new questions regarding how researchers and practitioners should respond to ontological politics within social design processes, without becoming paralyzed and unable to act.

This paper begins by reviewing the entangled issues of politics in social design brought to light by design researchers. Then we look to research done in STS to strengthen the dialogue within social design in relation to ontological politics. Armed with new insights from STS, we describe and critique two empirical examples of how methods were used to address political issues within the social design process. We finish by summarizing our reflections on how we might move the issues of politics in social design forward by highlighting questions for future research.

A Crisis of Conscience?

We open up the discussion by reviewing some of the extant literature on politics in design. Here we highlight the desire to do good through design, touch on the added political complexities in social design processes, and discuss existing responses.

Doing Good through Design

Design has a long and ambitious tradition of wanting to do good - of having the best of intentions - in projects ranging in scales from city planning projects to creating tableware (Fallan, 2013). At the same time notions of good and bad abound. In philosophy, it is suggested that the term ‘good’ serves to assess the way in which certain behaviors enable the realization of goals (MacIntyre, 1981). To that end, there are many varieties of goodness, including: instrumental, technical, medical, utilitarian, hedonic and the good of man (von Wright, 1963). Ylirisku and Arvola (forthcoming) relate these varieties of
goodness to six different design traditions and argue that designers and design researchers would benefit from a more explicit perception of the good that underpins different design processes.

The desire to do good through design is especially evident in recent projects focused on social transformation, such as projects by the British Design Council (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006). As design moves into the space of social innovation, design researchers have highlighted the fact that power and politics are significant blind spots in the design process that need to be addressed (Keshavarz, 2015; Kiem, 2011; Sangiorgi, 2011; Tonkinwise, 2016). It has been suggested that there is a recurrent pattern of periodic concern for society within the design field that has been dubbed a “crisis of conscience” (Soar, 2002 p. 34). Recent calls within design research and evolutions of design practice suggest that we are again amid such a crisis of conscience as social design continues to gain traction (Keshavarz, 2015; Tonkinwise, 2016).

These more recent calls are part of an ongoing dialogue about doing good within the design discipline more generally. Early on, industrial designers were called out as being among the most dangerous professions in the world - enabling overproduction and overconsumption (Papanek, 1973). Some researchers suggest that design is a servile activity with the purpose of improving things for others (Buchanan, 2001; Nelson & Stolterman, 2003). For many years, the design profession has also acted in this way, adding value at the end of a production process to an idea ultimately produced by someone else for their economic benefit (Heskett, 2017). However, it is argued that design must not be analyzed based on its intentions to serve, but rather what it does and does not do to people and the environment (Keshavarz, 2015). Furthermore, it is suggested that we must not only focus our political analysis on the results of a design process, but we must also consider the process itself, as this already manipulates the environment (Keshavarz, 2015).

Koskinen (2016) proposes that social design sees social forces and processes as its material, making design processes an explicit means of cultural production. It has also been noted that design brings with it its own culture, which tends to focus discussions narrowly on solutions - that is, the techniques used and the effectiveness of the results (Manzini, 2016). Design activities are infused in the social and economic structures within and for which design functions, and its relationship to existing power dynamics and capital are often taken for granted (Julier, 2013). Design carries with it legacies of colonization and imperialism, often ignoring alternative ways of thinking and knowing (Tunstall, 2013). Issues of cultural production, design culture, relationship to capital, and colonization, become central in the discussion of politics when designing with societal ambitions. If social design wishes to do good in society, this inevitably requires careful consideration of these political issues.

Responding to Political Complexity

While social design carries with it many of the same political issues as other areas of design, it also must address added political complexities. Seeking to do good amid socio-cultural systems, social design is faced with the extreme political complexity that is inherent in wicked problems (Norman & Stappers, 2016). Rittel and Webber (1973) suggest that it is “morally objectionable for the planner to treat a wicked problem as
though it were a tame one, or to tame a wicked problem prematurely, or to refuse to recognize the inherent wickedness of social problems” (p. 160-161). Wicked problems create a challenge when designing as practitioners within the design process are faced with conflicting priorities that emerge from multiple root causes becoming interconnected over time (Jones, 2014).

Amid such complexity, it is difficult to make judgments on what is good both within a social design process and the results thereof. How can you navigate appropriately amid such landscapes where it is likely impossible to sort out the political implications of one’s actions? One common path to dealing with this complexity and acknowledging design’s own limitations is to open up the design process for participation by a variety of stakeholders as partners in the process. In fact, co-design processes seem to be taking an increasingly central role within social design (Manzini & Coad, 2015). Accordingly, the need to grapple with politics and further complexity within these participatory processes comes to the fore, raising questions of identification, representation and subjectification (Keshavarz & Maze, 2013).

In the literature, it is acknowledged that participatory design is a political process with conflicts (Greenbaum & Kyng, 1991; Simonsen & Robertson, 2012) and power imbalances (Nygard, 1979). Still, while politics is a central issue in participatory design (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998), the political aspects within the discourse have become subtler in recent years (Halskov & Hansen, 2015). However, it is recognized that politics in the interaction between stakeholders and personal agendas influence the decision-making processes. Akama (2009) suggests that “whether agendas are disguised, mystified or openly shared” (p. 4) has a significant impact on the design process. Especially as participatory social processes often engage with marginalized populations in a variety of settings, an equal playing field cannot be assumed (Hussain, Sanders, & Steinert, 2012). This political complexity certainly demands attention within social design processes.

Much of the existing design literature calls for increased reflexivity and reflection among practitioners (Keshavarz & Maze, 2013; Sangiorgi, 2011). There have been a variety of explicit attempts in the area of social design to engage directly with politics through aesthetics, such as through design activism (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Markussen, 2013), adversarial design (DiSalvo, 2012), and critical design (Dunne, 2005). In participatory design processes, the emphasis has been on integrating methods and tools for prompting change from within the design process (Lenskjold, Olander, & Halse, 2015). A number of methods have been discussed within design literature that range in scale and scope, including: scaffolds for dialogue (Akama, 2009), anecdotes (Whitcomb, 2016), minor design activism (Whitcomb, 2016), and dialogic design (Manzini, 2016).

Still, the conversation about how we can prompt such reflection on politics within co-design processes aimed at creating social good is only just beginning. Do methods such as those mentioned above support the desired level of reflection and cultivate the political wisdom necessary to navigate amid the complexities of societal transformation? Does the integration of methods for opening up political discussions aid practitioners in realizing social good? We explore these questions by drawing on discussions in the field of Science and Technology Studies.
Drawing from STS

As the design discipline seeks to advance a more critical debate, but lacks the language for discussing the political dimensions of design processes (Keshavarz, 2015; Manzini, 2016), it seems pertinent to look to more established dialogues in related fields. To help unpack the approaches to politics within design processes, we turn to the field of Science and Technology Studies. The origins of STS can be traced to the mid-60s, when discussions in research on science and its relationship to technology, economic development and society ensued. One thread of the discussion that emerged was the critical sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK). SSK research held a radical, relativistic view, with a humanistic aim of developing an empirically informed understanding of the social nature of scientific knowledge (Edge, 1995). In parallel, the rise in civil rights, environmental and feminist movements as well the influence of the Vietnam war, spawned research interests in these subjects and justified their study in academia (Kaplan, 1991 as quoted in Edge, 1995), leading to a political sociology of science.

The field of STS has evolved significantly since then. According to Hackett and colleagues (2008), STS “may be characterized by its engagement with various publics and decision makers, its influence on intellectual directions in cognate fields, its ambivalence about conceptual categories and dichotomies, and its attention to places, practices, and things” (p. 1). STS scholars engage a multitude of stakeholders in issues concerning equity, policy, politics, social change, national development, and economic transformation. von Wright (1963) highlights how the distinction between norms and values on one hand and fact on the other has led to the idea of science being value-free. However, the critical reflexivity that SSK research spawned acknowledges the inseparability of value and fact, and continues to drive scholarly STS debate (Edge, 1995).

Given the economic, social, political and environmental crises we are mired in today, insights from STS are more relevant than ever. In particular, we highlight discussions on ontological politics (Law, 2002) within STS. We see ontological politics as fundamental to the discussion in social design as assumptions about the nature of reality underpin how we choose to conduct a political analysis. From the writings of Haraway (1988), Mol (2002), and Law (2004), we focus on three key issues: situated knowledges, the multiplicity of reality, and the performative nature of methods.

Situated Knowledges

In early STS discussions, Haraway (1988) brought forward the insight that there is no objective knowledge, there are only highly-specific, partial ways of organizing the world. She argues that all knowledge is situated - tied to a particular human body and a particular circumstance. Haraway suggests that people must be accountable for their positions, which significantly contributes to how they form meaning and their own partial knowledge. In this light, claiming that there is a universal knowledge which is not located is irresponsible. She also highlights the politics of location and situation - calling out that no position is innocent, as everyone builds their knowledge within a web of power-differentiated relationships.

Additionally, in her discussions, Haraway stresses that the positions of the oppressed are not exempt from critical re-examination and deconstruction. These positions are not neutral, but rather they are preferred because they are least likely to deny the interpretive
nature of knowledge. Haraway advocates for the split and contradictory self that can interrogate positioning and be accountable, while constructing and participating in dialogues and imaginings of the future. In relation to social design approaches, this poses questions about how practitioners can seek to gain knowledge from different perspectives, while maintaining accountability for their own positionality and partiality.

**The Multiplicity of Reality**

Further to Haraway’s understanding that all knowledges are situated and embodied, research in ontological politics reveals that reality itself is multiple and that realities do not pre-exist, but are continually shaped through our practices (Mol, 2002). Mol (2002) suggests that, “reality is done and enacted rather than observed” (p. 77). In her research, Mol followed a disease through the hospital, attending to the ways this disease was enacted, or put into practice. Her research suggests that an object, like a disease, is singular in theory, but multiple or fractional in practice. Mol calls out the coexistence of multiple entities that go by the same name as an object is understood and approached in various ways, but at the end it is one. Amid this multiplicity in singularity, Mol suggests that any certainty about reality is manufactured as reality is in fact varied.

Mol suggests that when considering multiple ontologies, the question about “what to do” will forever come with tension and doubt. A particular notion of good, for example, will always be contested. Understanding multiplicity opens up and keeps open the possibility that things might be done differently. Thus, when designing, Mol’s work seems to uplift the value of confusion and uncertainty. While reinforcing the necessary persistence of doubt about what is good, we must still act. Mol (2002) concludes that, “doing good does not follow on finding out about it, but is a matter of, indeed, doing. Of trying, tinkering, struggling, failing, and trying again” (p. 175). Thus, perhaps addressing politics in social design should be reimagined as a constant sense of doubt and humility while acting on one enactment of good, among multiple.

**The Performative Nature of Methods**

Law (2004) echoes Mol’s emphasis on the importance of uncertainty suggesting that methods are not sufficient for dealing with the complexity of the world. Law argues that methods focus on clarity and represses the possibility of mess. Further, he suggests that while methods are traditionally used for observing what happens in the world, they are actually a means of “world-making”. Methods are indeed performative, constructing realities through the representation of realities. Law (2004) states that a method “unavoidably produces not only truths and non-truths, realities and non-realities, presences and absences, but also arrangements with political implications” (p. 143). Thus, methods in themselves are not neutral, but rather make certain political arrangements stronger or more real, while eroding others.

While Law’s main focus is on research methods, much of his thinking can apply to methods for cultivating reflection on politics within the design process as well. As methods bring forward incomplete representations of the world, they leave behind the complexity of the world itself, “othering” aspects which are inconsistent with the chosen method (Law, 2004). As such, this raises questions about what design methods are silencing or refusing to enact and how these methods might be reshaped. Similar to Mol, Law
suggests that we need to imagine and practice “world-making” as flows and spirals, where partially connected “goods” are made and remade.

Insights from STS extend the understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of reality that social design is grappling with and embedded within. Amid such a mess, practitioners and researchers in social design can only have a partial understanding of these realities, a perspective which is intrinsically linked to their own position and power within a network of relationships. Furthermore, as social design seeks to enhance dialogue and reflection amid design processes, it is important to remember the methods of doing so in and of themselves have significant political implications.

Examining Examples from Practice
To help make the implications of STS discussions about ontological politics more tangible for the area of social design, we present and critique two promising examples of efforts to aid practitioners in integrating critical perspectives into the social design process. For each of these examples, we briefly highlight the foundations of the methods used, then describe how they were put into practice, and proceed to unpack the approach using insights from STS.

Cultivating Critical Reflection
The first example of a response to engaging with politics in social design processes involves the use of methods of critical reflection in Peer Positive, a co-design project in Toronto, Canada. Critical reflection involves a set of methods that support practitioners to examine assumptions and power dynamics within situations to improve one’s practice (Fook, 1999, 2007). It has roots in pragmatist writings on the careful consideration of beliefs (Dewey, 1997) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983). It also links to critical theory - encouraging social and political analysis to enable transformative changes (Fook, White, & Gardner, 2006). Research and practice relating to critical reflection is increasingly common in the fields of social work and education (Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, & Charlin, 2014). Here, we describe, and then later critique, how critical reflection was cultivated within the co-design process of the Peer Positive project.

The Peer Positive project (see peerpositive.ca) brought together a diverse range of stakeholders in Northwest Toronto to design and implement a systems-level intervention to improve the experience of individuals with mental health and addictions issues. Participants included service providers from health care, housing, education, social services, justice, immigration, and so on, along with individuals with lived experience of mental health and addictions issues, and their families. The project was facilitated by a multi-disciplinary team (including one designer and the first author of this paper) from the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) with funding from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care in Ontario as part of the Systems Improvement through Service Collaboratives initiative (see servicecollaboratives.ca).

Stakeholders, generally 30-50 people, met monthly for co-design sessions in which they sought to better understand the system, develop appropriate interventions, and guide the implementation of desired changes. The intervention the community designed was focused on enhancing the engagement of people with lived experience in the review, design and delivery of services. Amid the co-design process, both at the community-level
and within individual organizations, there were acknowledged power dynamics and inequities. As such, it was recognized that critical reflection was needed to be integrated as part of the co-design process to support meaningful and safe involvement. Two main tools were developed based on approaches used in other sectors: the Critical Reflective Practice Workbook and the 4A Cards.

The Critical Reflective Practice Workbook encouraged people to unpack and write down the stories they heard about service providers and service users, and their own related identities. For example, one part of the workbook asks participants to deconstruct the myth of the helper - the binary perception that service providers are strong and independent and service users are in need and vulnerable (shown in Figure 1). The workbook asks individuals to reflect on the divisions created between service providers and service users. The workbook became a tool for training and catalyzing discussion within organizations.

The 4A Cards were developed and used as a guide for the process of individual and group reflection. The cards outlined four steps in the critical reflection process (the 4As) - awareness, analysis, action and agency - highlighting key questions for each step. The analysis card is shown in Figure 2 as an example. These tools were used by the Peer Positive project facilitators and project participants in their own organizations to guide
critical reflection as they worked to strengthening the involvement of people with lived experience in services.

### Analysis

- What is involved in your situation and reactions?
- Is your ‘systemic self’ present?
- Are you relating to others as things or real people?
- What are your assumptions?
- How does a PEER POSITIVE lens assist in seeing things differently?

(Unpack)

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2  One card from the 4A Cards for the Peer Positive project

With insights from STS, we can examine this approach to cultivating reflection on political issues within the Peer Positive project. Considering Haraway’s findings about situated knowledges, did the approach recognize the partiality and situated nature of knowledge? Did the methods used help practitioners recognize the politics of their own location? Certainly these methods and tools were aimed at such goals, but perhaps it is difficult to cultivate complete reflexivity. For example, in the Peer Positive project, the 4A cards sought to guide practitioners through questions related to recognizing others’ positions, but still reinforced the importance of a “Peer Positive perspective” as almost an objective reality.

Furthermore, both the 4A cards and the critical reflection workbook aimed to support practitioners in “taking on the perspective” of peers, or people with lived experience, but, as Haraway (1988) explains, the position of people with less power is not neutral either. These methods do not explicitly encourage practitioners to unpack the politics of the underlying assumption that services are better when peers are more involved. Haraway further suggests that one cannot simply relocate to a different vantage point without accountability for that movement. For example, in the case of Peer Positive, one cannot be a service provider and move freely into the position of a person with lived experience without recognizing how being a service provider might influence what one sees.
Additionally, if we look again at the Peer Positive example, we can see a tension between the singular notion of good and its multiplicity as suggested by Mol. The methods encourage practitioners to think about a variety of perspectives on a situation, but they also seem to suggest that doing good is synonymous with one sort of intervention, e.g. engaging people with lived experience. Furthermore, through her research Mol (1999) reveals that the question of “what to do?” is more important than the question of “who should decide?” Suggesting that the focus on profession versus peer in Peer Positive, may be masking the political discussion about what should be done, for example, to change services.

Furthermore, if we look directly upon the use of the methods of critical reflection in Peer Positive with regard to their performative nature, we can see how this approach supports and enacts presence and absence related to the realities of the mental health service system. For example, in focusing reflection on the positional power relationship between service providers and service users, did these methods perhaps erode the realities of other intersecting legacies of oppression at play such as racism, ableism, classism, sexism, heteronormativism and cissexism?

While critical reflection was the intended outcome, perhaps the implementation of these methods carry with them political agendas and a construction from which individuals infer what might be good and bad. For example, were issues related to whiteness, such as positional power, made more real through the construction and use of these methods? Certainly, the literature on critical reflection acknowledges that reflection can be used to serve different interests and that the frameworks used influence the process and content of reflection (Fook et al., 2006). There are also lingering concerns that methods of reflection can simply function to reinforce current beliefs or practices (Brockbank & McGill, 2007).

While the approach to cultivating critical reflection in this co-design process supported practitioners engaged in the project to discuss and reflect on issue of power and politics, the methods themselves carried with them certain political agendas that worked to enact a particular reality. Similar issues can be seen in the approach to addressing political issues within the design processes in the example below.

**Encouraging Norm-Creative Innovation**

Another response to addressing politics in social design can be seen in the development and use of norm-creative innovation methods in Sweden. The concept of norm-creativity was coined by Vinthagen and Zavalia (2014), with roots in norm-critical discussions in gender studies and education. Over time it was recognized that feminist and queer pedagogy needed to be opened up to more intersectional perspectives; the norm-critical concept emerged in Sweden to signal a movement this direction (Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2014). Norm-criticism recognizes that what is “normal”, or socially acceptable, gives advantages to those that comply to norms and discriminates against those that do not comply. Furthermore, a norm critical perspective recognizes that artifacts are political; for example, in the sense that they are designed and used in gendered contexts (Berg & Lie, 1995).

Building on this foundation, design researchers worked with VINNOVA, Sweden’s innovation agency, to develop hands-on methods for helping practitioners create
solutions that are inclusive and accessible by working through a norm-creative lens (see Vinnova.se). These adapted design methods were packaged into a card deck called NOVA. They were developed with the assumption that practitioners often create solutions based on a too narrow understanding of user’s needs, excluding those who do not comply with existing norms.

This set of methods has been used in a variety of practice settings, including in a waste management project and a hospital context. In the waste management project, the cards were used to help practitioners designing a new waste management service in Sweden to better consider the needs of those who do not conform to certain mobility or age norms, such as those who do not have a car or the elderly. Within a hospital setting, these methods were used to help health service providers reflect on the normative nature of the services they were providing. For example, using the “body swap” method (shown in Figure 3 in Swedish), staff did role reversals to try and see situations in new ways from the perspective of different patients. The process sparked discussions about normative activities within the hospital, such as gendered prescription practices.

The methods within the norm-creative innovation card deck encouraged practitioners to look beyond themselves and empathize with others. In doing so, it is possible that these methods could be seen as a means of becoming more objective and all knowing, rather than simply extending one’s partial and embodied knowledge. Helping practitioners to recognize the limitations of their own understanding, despite attempts to broaden their considerations, becomes a pressing issue. As practitioners are engaging in dialogues about
norms, it can be easy to forget that there are no independent actors standing outside of reality and thus, what is brought forward and decisions about “what to do” are inherently political.

Furthermore, as Haraway suggests, one must be accountable for their own positionality. For example, one cannot move from being someone who conforms to a particular social norm to fully understanding what it means to be discriminated against by simply acting out a role reversal in the “body swap” method. People and bodies carry with them situated knowledges and location that cannot be erased by “taking on another perspective” as is often encouraged within design processes.

One can also see in the NOVA example, that the methods used amplify certain realities and partial knowledges, while excluding others. The norm-creative innovation methods focus on how to design tangible objects and services with a greater awareness of norms. This amplifies a focus on the design of things, perhaps silencing discussions related to the larger systemic issues of inequality, and issues related to the culture of design itself. By systematizing a process of reflection and action, methods such as these cannot fully succeed in recognizing the complexity and messiness of the world. While a promising beginning, a look at these examples suggests there is a need to further develop our approaches to addressing political issues in social design processes.

**Re-Muddling the Mess**

In this paper, we have highlighted the pressing need to attend to issues of politics in social design. While all design participates the construction of realities and these concerns are relevant for all design disciplines, we focus here on social design because of its explicit intentions to do “good” in society. Like all design, social design must attend to the politics of design and its culture, but within social design there is the added political complexity of dealing with wicked problems and of engaging stakeholders within a co-design process.

In response to such issues, there have been attempts to integrate methods of critical reflection and dialogue to open-up inherent political issues within the social design process. However, as we have shown in this paper, these responses also have political implications that deserve further analysis and discussion. To aid in moving this line of thought forward, we have examined two examples of specific efforts to address political issues within social design processes. Through the lens of STS with a focus on ontological politics, we have critiqued these practice examples adding complexity to existing considerations within social design processes. This analysis has shed light on a variety of issues including: recognition of situated knowledges, the multiplicity of reality, and the performative nature of methods. In Figure 4, we bring related questions inspired by authors from STS together into a tentative framework for reflecting on the politics of social design processes.
Firstly, the work of Haraway (1988) helps us recognize that all knowledges are particular and influenced by one’s location within a network of relationships. Moving forward, it is pertinent for social design to continue to explore ways of helping practitioners to increase their accountability for their own position, and support a more situated reflection amid the design process. Perhaps, as it has been previously mentioned in design research, aesthetic interventions can support practitioners in more intentionally embodied forms of
contemplation (Buwert, 2015). It is worth considering how social design processes might better tap into aesthetics to cultivate new knowledge that not only helps practitioners to understand things “from others’ perspective”, but simultaneously aids practitioners in recognizing their own positionality.

Secondly, Mol (2002) brings forward the understanding that reality is itself multiple and, as such, all objects and situations are multiple, although one. As social design seeks to realize social good, it must acknowledge that the notion of good is indeed multiple and intertwined in ontological politics. This leaves lingering questions about who should determine what counts as good within social design processes and more importantly what should be done? Social design wants to do ‘good’, to improve situations; but it rarely questions the political back-end context that qualifies what is ‘good’. Still, Mol emphasizes the need to not get paralyzed, but hold on to doubt and to start the process of tinkering.

Thirdly, Law (2004) contributes to this discussion by suggesting that methods amplify certain realities, while suppressing others. As the world is indeed messy and unknowable, Law proposes that it is perhaps a disciplined lack of clarity and finding ways of enacting non-coherence that may be needed. Reviewing these practice examples suggests that social design may need to do more than simply integrating new methods of dialogue and critical reflection that risk reinforcing dominant realities.

This research inquiry has helped to re-muddle the mess of politics in social design processes and in doing so, opened up more questions than answers. These questions have been brought together in a tentative framework for reflecting on the politics of social design processes. In doing so, this paper contributes to the evolving discussion on social design by illuminating the need for meta-level reflection by both practitioners and researchers as well as offering a collection of relevant questions to support this dialogue.

Furthermore, this research highlights important opportunities for future research including addressing questions such as: what notions of good are being enacted through social design processes? How can social design processes support embodied, situated knowledges? How might design methods be adapted to recognize the multiplicity and complexity of reality? How can reflexivity in social design processes be cultivated in a way that fully acknowledges the messiness of reality? We acknowledge the subtle paradox of putting forth these questions and therein enacting our version of reality. The aim of doing so, however, is to avoid political blindness to one’s position and partial knowledge, and be critical towards issues we have raised in this paper.

Social design processes tend to focus on how to do something without necessarily thinking about the politics of the what. Perhaps social design needs to be more critical of the politics of the goods they are working towards, acknowledging that these goods themselves are contested. Furthermore, as social design looks to cultivate political wisdom among practitioners, it must take time to thoughtfully refine its methods, acknowledging their politics and the politics that design brings with it. Amid the multiplicity and complexity of social design processes, perhaps what is most evident from this research is that dealing appropriately with politics involves maintaining humility and uncertainty in the midst of an iterative process of learning.
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