Developing Identities Oriented Toward Social Justice

Colin M. Gray  
Purdue University  
401 N. Grant Street, Room 355  
West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA  
gray42@purdue.edu

Austin L. Toombs  
Indiana University  
901 E. 10th Street  
Bloomington, IN 47408, USA  
altoombs@indiana.edu

Abstract
In this position paper, we frame social justice in the context of identity formation, exploring the ways in which criticality is foregrounded in design and technology education and making practices. Prior work of the researchers in maker culture and HCI education is explored to identify barriers to the development of an ethically-centered, social justice-aware identity.

Author Keywords
Social justice; critical theory; care ethics; design education.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction
Ethical awareness is increasingly vital for success in the digital economy, yet the majority of students exit their baccalaureate programs with a limited ability to understand the ethical impact of their work [7]. While the discourse surrounding ethics and values as one path towards ethical awareness is promising in many respects, current models for thinking about and acting upon such issues in technology and design disciplines presuppose the ability for designers to engage in position-taking [2]—the ability to imagine and
understand communicative acts from the position of another [1].

In our work in higher education [4,6] and makerspace [9] contexts, we have found the lack of efficacious position-taking—often described under the umbrella term of “empathy”—to be a substantial barrier to understanding, valuing, and taking action in relation to marginalized groups in a design situation. While ethics and values extend beyond the limited ability of students to advocate for marginalized groups in microcosm, many societal impacts that designed artifacts or experiences either contribute to, create, or undermine are at the center of design activity when viewed through a social justice lens. We argue that such societal impacts are at the center of a designer’s identity—a portion of what Nelson and Stolterman [8] refer to as a designer’s character.

Interrogating ethical content as an expression of one’s identity allows us to understand more deeply how attitudes towards ethics and values are formed and shaped by specific disciplines. HCI and related technology and engineering fields are primarily populated with individuals who have not been trained to empathize or position-take with members of marginalized communities, limiting the ability of many practitioners to envision or even value the societal impacts their designs may produce. Perhaps even more concerning, these fields are dominated by individuals who, more likely than not, enjoy a multitude of privileged positions based on their socioeconomic status, gender expression, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Not only is it difficult for people who benefit from these intersecting privileges to imagine, at the start, what it is like to be discriminated against, it is also unsurprisingly difficult for them to become engaged in such discussions. Discussions of social justice, feminism, privilege, or economic disparity can, from their position, seem very much like an attack on their (tacitly constructed) intersectional identities.

If we desire a higher level of ethical awareness from design students and practitioners, leading to design activity that transforms oppressive social structures, we must address the ways in which core values and ethical considerations are introduced and scaffolded in the identity formation and maintenance process. This requires the generation of competency-building techniques to teach individuals who have never had to feel systemically marginalized what it feels like—and how they can cognitively generate and assess such standpoints through position-taking—so that they can more deeply understand such needs. This requires effort beyond merely facilitating experiences of racism or feeling like a minority one or a handful of times, to creating a cognitive ability to understand and act upon systemic marginalization.

**Examples from Our Work**

To ground our understanding of social justice as being always already entangled with issues of ethics and values in the performance of one’s identity, we will share brief examples from our primary research contexts.

"Treating everyone the same" reproduces inequity in hacker and maker culture

In Austin’s research on maker communities, many participants believe that “treating everyone the same” is the only action that is needed to ensure that everyone is treated justly and equitably. In this


research context, Austin has engaged with a population that is primarily comprised of middle-aged, Caucasian, males. These men often play a management role in their communities, and engage in listserv discussions on safe space and anti-harassment policies. These discussions are complicated by the identities as hackers and makers these individuals have developed, as there is often a large nostalgic push to prevent drastic changes in what has become maker culture. Through these conversations, it has become clear that additional modes through which social justice needs are communicated are needed to initiate those who are not yet familiar with them. It is easy for a researcher to talk about safe space policies with people who already internalize the understanding for the need for them (often because these individuals have already been marginalized in one or more ways), but for those who have never cognitively engaged with the marginalization of others, how can such a need be communicated? Inequity is often experienced quietly, or through the splintering of marginalized groups that go on to form their own communities [e.g., “feminist hackerspaces,” 3,4], but might there be other ways of building a shared understanding of social justice concerns that can build cohesion through understanding?

Austin has addressed this gap, in part, by mobilizing care ethics as an analytical lens for HCI research, but such techniques could also be used by non-academics for analyzing their processes and their end products. When social systems such as hacker and maker communities are analyzed in a deconstructive manner (as advocated in care ethics and related critical qualitative inquiry techniques), the normative commitments that drive inequity are foregrounded, making them available for conversation by research participants as well as the research community.

Engineering identities systemically discourage investigation of social justice concerns

In Colin’s research on design and technology education, the role of the discipline in defining appropriate identity commitments has become evident. While engineering and technology disciplines have publically embraced the need for ethical awareness in decision making, the pedagogical structures involved in educating future practitioners often do not support the development of empathy or awareness of position-taking as a core identity commitment [4]. Even in human-centered approaches to design or engineering that have historically valued the “other” in their research and design commitments, students can “shut down” or avoid thinking in different ways. Some students (predominantly Caucasian and male) that Colin has studied feel threatened when they are exposed to feminist theory or gender inequity, even when their knowledge of these characteristics are crucial to them solving a design problem. The threat they feel is often not, as one would assume, a result of the content they are taught, but rather the context in which they are walked through the content; e.g., when they are “subjected to” feminist theory but are unable to share their thoughts and concerns due to the power relationship between them and their instructor.

While existing theories and methods attempt to bring values and ethics into design activity, many approaches fail to address the identity-related barriers that are raised when considering disciplinary identity and current pedagogical practices. When attempting to build a designer’s awareness of their design character,
Colin has used ethical awareness not as an analytic endpoint in design activity, but rather as a launching point to motivate students to think in generative ways. With a reformulation of the popular “cognitive walkthrough” method, he has used empathy (as one proxy for ethics and value awareness) to facilitate ideation, encouraging students to understand the design situation better through explicit position-taking on behalf of the end user [6]. This method is just one pedagogical step to encourage position-taking as a core part of an ethically-aware identity, but additional work will be needed to understand how methods like this encourage a long-term development of design character.

Conclusion
We propose that the construction of one’s identity—and the kinds of identities that are supported by the broader social system the student or practitioner works within—allows a window into how an ethically-informed design character might be fostered. In our research, we have found that generating awareness in a non-threatening way, concomitant with the development of a cognitive ability to position-take, is critical to beginning the conversation about the importance of social justice in design environments, practices, and outcomes.

References