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# Social Justice, Self-Respect, and Design: Three Challenges

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## **Abstract**

Problems of social justice persist in the face of advanced informational and technological systems. However, not all values relevant to social justice have received the same amount of attention; in particular, the value of self-respect and its relevance for technological design has been relatively unexplored. In the below, I offer a brief overview of the value of self-respect and present three challenges posed by technology for its realization in and through technology design.

## **Author Keywords**

Social justice; self-respect; design; ICTs; privacy.

## **Introduction**

The potential informational and technological systems hold for generating new—and exacerbating existing—inequalities and social injustices is a persistent moral problem. The development, design, and dissemination of these systems force us to continually re-examine important values like equality, respect, and dignity in light of new and emergent tools and practices. Below, I briefly present the value of self-respect—an often overlooked dimension of social justice—and sketch three kinds of challenges that the design of informational and technological systems present for its realization: the challenge of privacy, the challenge of

values and design, and the challenge of computational reductionism. A failure to take seriously these challenges can, I believe, hamper efforts to further social justice through design by undermining important informational and technological bases of self-respect for a range of marginalized groups.

### **The Value of Self-Respect**

Self-respect is important to social justice as it 1) confers upon individuals a conviction that their identities and plans of life are valuable and 2) underwrites the motivation and confidence individuals need to pursue her valued ends [Rawls 1971; Zink 2011]. Conversely, a lack of self-respect can undermine an individual's ability to set, revise, or pursue her idea of a good life. Rather than being solely a matter of individual motivation, however, self-respect is, importantly, socially contingent [Dillon 1997]. The development of self-respect is intimately tied to one's place within a larger culture and whether or not that culture forces particular social roles upon certain categories of people [Okin 2004]. And constrained by normative standards of privilege embedded in social, political, and economic structures [Moody-Adams 1992]—racist, sexual, gendered, or otherwise.

For example, the American civil rights movement of the 1960s was not only a process of winning rights for African Americans but also a matter of liberating self-respect [Boxill 1976; Boxill 1992]—a process of liberation that remains pressing and relevant today. For sexual and gender minorities, structures of heteronormativity shapes possibilities for self-respect for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals while cisnormative standards of binary gender constrain the development of self-respect for transgender or gender-

nonconforming individuals. For people with physical disabilities, a lack of appropriate accommodations for accessing physical spaces (for example, wheelchair ramps) can impinge on her dignity and sense of self-respect [Nussbaum 2004; Terzi 2010]. These sorts of discussions lay bare the relevance of social norms, built environments, and other entrenched political structures for the development and maintenance of self-respect. Despite the robustness of many of these discussions elsewhere, however, the relevance of respect to informational or technological systems has received relatively little scholarly attention [Dillon 2010].

### **Three Challenges**

To begin to remedy the lack of scholarly and philosophical attention the above issues, I briefly present three kinds of challenges posed to self-respect (and, by extension, social justice) by informational and technological systems. Though the following discussion is necessarily inadequate, it is my hope that it at least provides a roadmap for possible future work and discussion in the area.

#### *Privacy and Design*

Privacy as long been identified as important for the exercise of individual autonomy, self-determination, and realization of human dignity [Westin XXXX; Benn XXXX; Regan 1995]. It is important to point out, however, that protecting privacy does not always promote or protect self-respect for all individuals or groups. As feminist critics have argued, defenses of privacy often institutionalize power imbalances in the home— imbalances that traditionally disfavor and disempower women. Consequently, privacy protections developed to promote liberal ideals of autonomy or dignity can actually serve to reinforce conditions of

domestic confinement, traditional social roles, and violence against women [Allen, 2004]. Similarly, privacy protections can undermine human dignity when applied unevenly, as evidenced by the uneven privacy protections afforded to senior citizens residing in many nursing care facilities [Young, 2004]. With regard to technology, the ubiquitous and invasive data-gathering techniques combined with the design of information flows on a website can produce “revelations” of information, unwittingly revealing information about an individual that invites undue scrutiny or has negative social consequences, as when changes to the design of a platform upend previous established information flows (like when Facebook introduced their NewsFeed feature). Most often, these sorts of privacy violations have an inordinate impact on the most vulnerable populations, as when members of the LGBT community are inadvertently “outed” or victims of abuse are made visible to former abusers.

#### *Values and Design*

The problem of self-respect also poses practical issues for the design and development of ethical technology. Scholars and researchers involved in the emerging area of values-conscious design, in particular, focus on the ways in which human values may come to reside in technological artifacts and systems, and—inversely—how the design of technology may come to shape human values [Boehner et al. 2005; Friedman et al. 2006; Flanagan et al, 2008]. The problems of values-conscious and ethical design take on new urgency as sophisticated ICTs pervade increasingly large portions of daily life. As Brey [2007] argues, “technological artifacts make assumptions about the attributes and needs of their users, and when these assumptions are not met, users are not fully empowered by these

artifacts.” Further, “users may even be disempowered...because empowerment is often...defined relative to the empowerment of others” [Brey 2007]. Not seeing one’s self, values, or ends reflected in the systems and structures one must navigate to acquire information or other goods denies one an important basis for developing self-respect. Consequently, the prioritization of values prioritized in design by neoliberal or techno-libertarian technology purveyors—like universality or efficiency—can systematically disempower underprivileged groups whose values or ideals do not align with the values embedded in the most prominent or pervasive technologies.

#### *Computational Reductionism*

The standards and categories imposed by informational and technological systems can also influence one’s sense of self-respect. All informational and technological systems require some more or less complete set of standards, classifications, or protocols in order to function. In some cases, the standards imposed by these systems are relevant to individual identities, an “administrative conception” of identity and identification that can come into conflict with our more comprehensive, reflexive, and moral self-informative identities [Manders-Huits 2010]. Though necessary for the operation of computational systems, practices of computational reductionism cannot take into account “soft information or data, such as contextual and motivational features, background knowledge, and (personal) explanation regarding actions or decisions” [Manders-Huits, 2010]. In other words, it has difficulty accounting for certain social or cultural factors. The relevance of computational reductionism to social justice is reflected in Iris Marion Young’s call to attend

to processes in which certain attributes, comportments, or ways of life are normalized in the world. Normative biases embedded in technological systems can force certain individuals to engage with informational or technological systems that fundamentally contradict one's self-informative identity. For example, the filling out of forms is often a prerequisite for receiving services of varying levels of importance—from joining online social networks to receiving access to medical care. However, a form that asks for one's gender identity and only provides options for "male" or "female" imposes a binary conception of gender that cannot account for non-binary identities. Here, the imposition of a nominal identity goes beyond mere semantics—through the filling out of a form, an individual has little choice but to endorse a worldview that fundamentally conflicts with one's own, a variation on Spade's [2011] discussion of the administrative violences enacted upon transgender identities by legal systems.

### **Bio**

Anna Lauren Hoffmann is a trans woman and scholar working at the intersections of information, technology, culture, and ethics. Her research considers the ways in which the design and use of information technology can promote or hinder the pursuit of social justice. In addition, she employs discourse analysis to explore the values and biases that underwrite understandings of technology, privacy, and ethics as promoted by various stakeholders.

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