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AN INQUIRY ON PARTICIPATORY DESIGN FOR A DIVERSE, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SECTOR.

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ABSTRACT | Exploring the potential of co-design methodology to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in public sector services, this doctoral research emphasizes the need to integrate vulnerable communities into service development processes. The main objective is to understand whether and how co-design and participatory design methods can address DEI challenges, enhance public service delivery, and effectively involve vulnerable communities and public administration in the definition of public services. The research process started with a literature review, defining the concepts of social diversity, equity, and inclusivity. At the same time, the state of the art in the context of co-design and participatory design methodologies was analyzed concerning the public sector. A selection of case studies of socially relevant practices was conducted to assess the implications and effectiveness of participatory and co-design practices together with a variety of vulnerable categories. The analysis of the case studies highlighted the numerous gaps in the services provided by public administration for many communities, which led to the development of bottom-up services that would fill in the gaps and cater to the needs of disadvantaged citizens. Moreover, it emphasized the social relevance of participatory design and co-design approaches in developing solutions for their specific needs. This research serves as a starting point for a future investigation into how the use of such co-design practices with citizens from vulnerable groups can be relevant at the level of public administration and how the public administration itself can adopt such methodologies to provide citizens with the services they need and ultimately what is the role of the designer in this process.

1. Introduction

Social diversity, equity, and inclusivity are crucial in public administration, yet struggles with their implementation are evident due to indecision and delays in the application of just policies.

Public sector managers often lack a deep understanding of organizational diversity, highlighting the need for incorporating social equity principles. (Dooley, 2020) Achieving equity in the public sector involves more than just ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities: it calls for diverse, equal, and inclusive representation in government and decision-making jobs. This may involve reevaluating existing policies and practices through a gender mainstream (Booth & Bennett, 2002; Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000) and an inclusive approach to identify and eliminate any biases or discriminatory factors. It also requires addressing systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality faced by marginalized communities, such as people of color, individuals with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds, as well as categories of users that are not considered marginalized but still face systemic issues such as women, pregnant people, or members of LGBTQIA+ community. By recognizing these barriers, it will be possible to work towards creating more inclusive policies and services that effectively address the diverse needs of the community.

As this contribution delves deeper into the social implications of diversity, equality, and inclusivity, it sets the starting point of a research on how service design can effectively overcome barriers, promote unbiased approaches, and implement participative strategies to achieve a more just environment for all individuals.

2. Principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are essential principles that uphold the values of fairness, justice, and equal opportunities in society. This group of principles, often abbreviated in DEI, are "organizational frameworks which seek to promote the fair treatment and full participation of all people, particularly groups who have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination based on identity or disability." ("Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," 2024)

Diversity refers to the variety within a group regarding identity (i.e., gender, culture, ethnicity, religion, disability, class, etc.), characteristics, or opinion. Its declinations are numerous, such as gender diversity, the composition of men, women, and nonbinary people; age diversity: differences in age groups and generations; ethnic diversity, sharing of common national or cultural traditions or representation of different backgrounds; physical ability and neurodiversity: perspectives of people with disabilities, whether apparent or not. (McKinsey & Company, 2022) Considering this issue in the setting of public administration, it is evident that each of the above-mentioned characteristics and values must be considered in the definition of public services, as each of them might face barriers in different touchpoints of their experiences.

Equity is intended to ensure that everyone has access to the same resources, benefits, and opportunities regardless of their background or circumstances. In the context of public sector services, it is concerned with the measurement and achievement of fairness in the provision of governmental policies and services and emphasizes the impact of the distribution of opportunities, services, and goods on individual well-being. (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021) In this sense, the term can assume two distinct meanings. With "Horizontal equity (equality), everyone receives the same public benefit following the concept of social equity." (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 2) This approach can be controversial, as offering the same tools to individuals with different means and possibilities will lead to uneven results. "Vertical equity," on the other hand, is "based on the different ability and demand of various social groups, whereby the specific socially vulnerable groups receive disproportionately more benefits." (Yuan et al., 2017, p. 2) This side can also bring to light some issues since it can be argued that providing more attention to one specific category could leave out others. Moreover, providing a service for only one category can lead to a ghettoization of it.

Finally, the term inclusion refers to actively creating an environment that embraces diversity and values the contributions of all individuals, making sure that no one is excluded or marginalized. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on evaluating the social value of public services: as societies become increasingly diverse, it is crucial for public sector organizations to ensure that their services are accessible and available to all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances, and to shift away from "managing diversity" in favor of a more proactive approach that involves "managing for diversity" (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008).

One of the goals of this doctoral research is to inquire into the impact of service design methodologies in the public sector, aiming to assimilate and incorporate the principles just outlined into the definition of proper solutions.

3. Service Design in the Public Sector

Co-design and participatory practices in service design are pivotal in the public sector to foster inclusivity and equity, as they actively involve individuals from various organizations or backgrounds to collaborate, sharing and combining ideas and knowledge (Steen, 2013), and ensuring that services will cater for their needs and desires. This inclusive approach is particularly beneficial when designing services for vulnerable consumers. It empowers them to contribute actively, making policies and service delivery more effective and responsive (Dietrich et al., 2017; Fisk et al., 2018; Jakobsen & Andersen, 2013). In the setting of the public sector, the participating actors would represent not only end-users such as citizens (non-citizens as well) but also public employees, administrations, and institutions. The inclusion of the latter presents certainly a challenge and a limitation, and this study proposes future inquiries into methods and approaches to do so.

A distinction between co-design and participatory design is necessary, as they focus on two distinct aspects of collaboration between designers and actors. Participatory design "entails acquiring feedback as the product is being built" (Peacock, 2022). In this way, the creation process is leaner for designers who hold the role of decision-makers: actors engage in advanced stages of the creative process, and their opinions are picked and selected when needed. This approach presents the risk of ability bias as a "tendency to design based on our abilities, and thus, we might bias the feedback we are given" (Peacock, 2022) and of tokenism showing only symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups rather than allowing them to truly influence the research direction. Co-design, on the other hand, involves the actors from the initial stages until the end of the creative process. In this case, it is necessary to establish an equalitarian relationship between actors and designers, allowing citizens to become designers (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011) and designers to become mediators and facilitators (Melles et al., 2011) rather than leaders.

Many co-design techniques and tools require skills, expertise, and processes that rely on certain levels of communication, cognitive, and creative skills on the part of the participants. (Rodgers, 2018, p. 192) This could lead to the necessity to use specific tools to cooperate with certain vulnerable categories, such as people with mental or physical impairments.

Using both participatory and co-designing techniques allows the designer to access valuable data and knowledge that is ingrained in people's everyday experiences, being citizens, workers, or service providers, granting rich evidence of "real rather than assumed behaviours" (O'Rafferty et al., 2017, p. 16). As described by Blomkamp (2018), "methods such as diaries, collages, card sorts, model building, and various forms of mapping and roleplaying can help to reveal knowledge that is non-verbal, holistic, non-linear, emotional, or intuitive, and which may not be uncovered by other methods." (Blomkamp, 2018, p. 733) Moreover, co-design sessions, such as living labs, provide an open platform for exploring everyday experiences and social phenomena "combined with controlled activities, technical set up, support and data collection." (Kanstrup et al., 2010)

4. Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Services: Case Studies

By examining case studies of successful diverse, equal, and inclusive initiatives at the local level, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive services and practices within public sector organizations.

4.1 CAPE – Civic Agency in Public E-services Innovation (2020, Denmark, Finland, Sweden)

The CAPE project tackles marginalized users who lack digital skills. It grants public libraries a more active role as Civic Innovation Centers (CICs), where citizens can be engaged in the improvement of current e-services, as well as in the development of new services. Through a group of volunteers, CAPE aids citizens, the majority of whom are elderly and struggling with digital services. Although this bottom-up effort began as a research project, it has developed into a communication bridge between the general population and the public administration they interact with.

4.2 PYCIPEDIA (2019, Sweden)

Pycipedia is a participative web-based platform for social workers who are certified in providing parenting skills training and support for parents with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties. This service allows social workers to share, edit, and discuss instructional materials for neo-parents. The adoption of a co-design method to develop an inclusive service for people with disabilities is particularly relevant for research. It serves as a perfect example of how participative design practices may target the individual working on the service itself rather than the vulnerable category.

4.3 GULLIVER (2013, Germany)

Started as a project with the students at Köln International School of Design, in 2001, Gulliver opened as a social facility. It offers a meeting point for homeless men and women to maintain a mailbox and have a dormitory to sleep in during the day and a dressing room for personal hygiene, affordable snacks, and hot drinks. In this case, the co-design approach granted a vulnerable category, such as homeless people, a service that caters to their basic needs but, most importantly, offers crucial support in participating in society with the dignity they deserve. This service closes a gap in the net of Cologne's social facilities.

4.4 HER BARKING (2019, United Kingdom)

Acknowledging the difficulties of vulnerable categories in dangerous areas of the city, a women-led movement was funded, experimenting to collaboratively design and test low-cost interventions to make streets and spaces feel safe. The initiative engaged residents to identify spaces where people do not feel safe and collaboratively design and evaluate several installations. This bottom-up initiative was born from the need of women, older people, and disabled people to safely walk across dangerous streets in the city. Engaging citizens as both data gatherers and solution-providers, this project empowered the community and filled a gap in the urban context.

4.5 CICLOUFFICINA SOCIALE – Social Bicycle Workshop (2013, Italy)

The initiative combines rehabilitation work in supporting people in disadvantaged conditions with manual and cycle-mechanics practice. In the maintenance laboratory, bicycles are repaired and manufactured, emphasizing the recovery of abandoned bicycles. This project's relevance for the community is double since it offers support to vulnerable categories in acquiring manual skills and, therefore, being able to join the workforce. At the same time, it promotes accessibility to cheap means of transport for people in economic difficulties.

5. Conclusions

This doctoral research stems from investigating the public sector under the lens of DEI and its social implications. A study has been conducted on the meaning of these three terms, delving into their declination in the public sector. Subsequently, after a study on the theme of co-design and participatory design, a selection of case studies was conducted analyzing the contribution and the categories to which it is addressed, as well as relevance for research.

The study aims to define how service design approaches DEI issues and how - and if - co-design and participatory design techniques can be a solution for redefining or creating different, equal, inclusive services. There are clear areas for improvement in the inclusion of certain categories in public sector services today. Many of the services analyzed as case studies start as bottom-up projects from academic research or non-profit organizations. In addition, all these projects are either a buffer service (filling the gaps in the public administration) or a bridge service (mediator) between citizens and public administration, highlighting the need for direct government intervention to fill these gaps. On the other hand, it emerged that progress in this direction is possible by including participatory design practices and co-design.

In light of these considerations, how can service design develop empowering strategies in the public sector to support and uplift vulnerable communities without imposing tension on the public administration? The outcomes of this research pave the way for a deep investigation into the role of service designers and participative methodologies in the public sector to define tools and methods to co-design diverse, equal, and inclusive public services together with the citizens and the public administration. Finally, future steps will aim to understand the critical role of designers in this collaborative process, questioning how their expertise and approach can facilitate the adoption by the public administration of such methods to improve service delivery and ensure that it is just and fair to all segments of society.

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