An Exploration of Designer-to-User Relationship from a Care-orientated Perspective

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Abstract. This paper explores the relationship between designers and users from the perspective of care. Methods included a critical investigation of literature about the ideal care relationship, interviews with Hong Kong residential designers about their opinion on "designers as care professions" and analyses of these designers' strategies for interacting with users. The research reveals that designers tend to view themselves as collaborative partners in satisfying users' needs from the user-centered design perspective. This design approach leads designers to focus on each individual's desire. But largely ignored their role as active influencers in changing user's behavior and improving people's relationships. This study suggests that designers consider residential design from a care-orientated perspective to build a more harmonious relationship with users.

Keywords: Care · Relationship · Designer · User · Self-transformation

1   Introduction

Designers can be seen as care professionals as they fulfill people's needs through design actions. However, design has not yet taken a clear stand in the matter of care (Jones, 2013). Design is typically not taught or guided specifically from a caring perspective, and designers are recruited to enhance campaigns that often oppose values of caring (Jones, 2013).

This paper aims to explore the relationship between designers and users from the perspective of care. We believe that better understanding on the care issue will help designers discover new opportunities to take care of users' welfare.

This study started from a literature review to attain a comprehensive understanding on the meaning of care. Care can be explained from three dimensions: universal care, carelessness and becoming care (Jiang et al., 2016). This is a self-transformation process from a careless person to a caring person, and from care to universal care. An ideal care relationship between designers and users implies that designers support users to achieve self-development and improve their capabilities to take care of others.

The residential designers' perspective on the designer-user relationship was examined through an extensive interview survey and document analysis. Semi-structured

interviews with interior designers in Hong Kong were conducted over a period of 2 months, and fifteen in-depth conversations were conducted.

The research reveals three crucial issues which deserve attention. First, all interviewed designers answered questions from the perspective of user-centered design as they have been trained to meet people's needs. A user-centered methodology leads designers to focus on each individual person's desire. In contrast, the ideal care concept guides us to focus on a person-to-person relationship which is very important in a family. Secondly, the designers' conception of the ideal qualities of a good life, above and beyond the expressed needs of users, is a crucial factor in the whole design process. Their beliefs will profoundly influence their design strategies and, in turn, users' response. Thirdly, the care relationship can be built-up incrementally from the pre-design stage through designer-user communication as care is generated in face-to-face encounters.

2   An Ideal Care Relationship between Designers and Users

2.1   The Meaning of Care

Designers can be viewed as care professionals who are concerned with designing for people's needs. The term care as a verb refers to nurturing or aiding someone or something and providing assistance in light of their needs (Hooft, 1995). It is necessary to probe the relationship between designers and users from the perspective of care.

The meaning of care can be understood from three dimensions: universal care, carelessness and becoming care (Jiang et al., 2016). "Universal care" as an ideal state of care relation means care for everything as care for the self, which is a cardinal concept in the Confucian idea of *jen* and Christian Love. "Carelessness" as a negative term opposite to care, can be understood to denote that someone does not seem to concentrate sufficiently on a given task and perform it properly. "Becoming care" refers to a changing and becoming process from carelessness to universal caring. On a basis of understanding these three dimensions, care is also a self-transformation process from a careless person to a caring person, and from care to universal care. This is a process of acquiring the capacity and knowledge of how to care. In learning care, we have to cultivate ourselves in person-to-person relationships.

2.2   An Ideal Care Relationship between Designers and Users

The ideal person-to-person relationship is to care for each other to achieve mutual improvement as a self-transformation progress (Jiang et al., 2016). Mayeroff (1971) states, "To be a caring person is to help others grow – and to grow oneself – through a process of enabling the other (a) to care for other persons beyond themselves, (b) to identify or create their own domains of caring, (c) to care for themselves, and (d) to take responsibility for their own lives." Moroney (1998) asserts, "One's ability to foster another person's human development affects one's own well-being." Care is generated in a relation in which care can inspire care, and designers can not only pro-

vide caring to users, but also help people to improve their capability of caring for themselves and others.

To become a caring person, many scholars emphasize inner motivational orientation (knowing) as being essential for behavioral care (doing) (for example Mayeroff, 1971; Hooft, 1995; Noddings, 2002). "Inner motivational - Knowing" indicates that we want to do something dispositional for people, although we cannot care directly for them. "Behavioral care - Doing" implies that a caregiver provides care directly for another in a face-to-face encounter through their actions. "Knowing" as a precondition can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing "Doing".

According to the critical ideas mentioned above, an ideal care relationship on how designers care for users is proposed as shown in Figure 1. The framework contains four elements:

1. Designers have to know the meaning of care and cultivate themselves as caring people.
2. Designers convey care to users through design practice.
3. Users perceive and receive care.
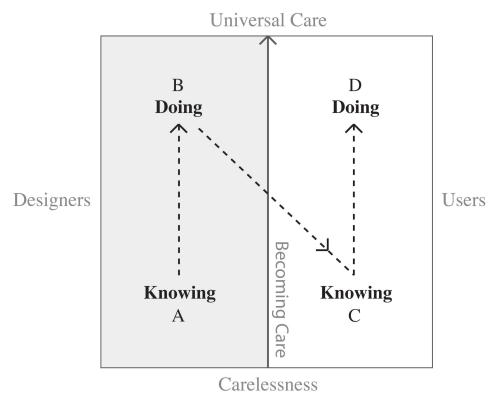4. Users react on care. They may care for themselves and others as a response.

Fig. 1. An Ideal Designer-User Relationship (*Adapted from Jiang et al., 2016*).

In this caring relationship, the designer has dual goals: the growth of the care recipient and the growth of self. Designers see themselves in a position of being needed by users, to facilitate the users' personal growth. Users' personal growth, in turn, is seen as a condition for designers' own personal growth and development. Both designers and users grow and self-develop through this process. The research presented in this paper examines the relationships and processes embodied in this framework from the designer's viewpoint.

3 Designers' View on Designer-User Relationship

3.1 Research Method

In order to understand how designers work with users and how their understandings of care influence their design practice, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Hong Kong.

The interview took 2 months. In total, in-depth conversations were conducted with 15 interior designers, most of whom have experience in residential design. To achieve a broad range of perspectives from different facets of interior design practice, we engaged interior designers from a variety of backgrounds, including: living design, hotel space, shopping space, workspace, exhibition space, public space and visual identity design. They range from independent designers to design company directors.

3.2 Interview Questions

The questionnaire designed for the interview includes two parts: general questions and in-depth questions. Short general questions were asked about the interviewee's design business and their perspective on the design profession. Four in-depth questions explored their views on how the issue of care is reflected in design practice. These four questions were developed according to the four steps of the ideal care relationship between designers and users mentioned in section 2, as follows:
1. Knowing: Do you think designers can be seen as "care professionals"?
2. Doing: How do you think designers care for users through design practice?
3. Knowing: How do users perceive care from designers and design?
4. Doing: How do designers or designed environments support people in providing care for one another?

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Knowing: the Interpretation of Care

In a broad sense, the designers expressed their understandings on the issue of their role as "care professionals" in different ways. For example, designer 3 argued: "*Not all designer are caring. It depends on the designer's belief*." Designer 4 said: "*People do anything that has care. That's human nature*." Designer 5 stated: "*Even before the project, we care about people*." Designer 6 commented: "*I just care about what I do. I care about my project and objects*."

In the design context, all designers agreed that care is a relevant concept for designers, concerning the fulfillment of users' needs, although they used different language to describe it, such as supporting people, helping people know what they want, or caring about users' physical and psychological demands.

The interview data suggest that designers have different understanding of what entails to fulfill users' needs. Their typical standpoints are two folded (Figure 2): meeting users' expectations (low-level) and going beyond users' expectations (higher lev-

el). For instant, designer 11 said: "*Designer create two kinds of things: fulfilling needs and doing something new beyond what they expect.*" "Fulfilling users' expectations" as a lower level implies that designers give what users want based on users' current status and explicit desired. In this sense, users guide designers to design their ideal living environment. As Designer 7 described: "*My role seems like users' hands, who draws and gives what they desire*". The higher level "Going beyond users' expectations" implies that the designer guides the user towards a more ideal life which embodies the values and aspirations of people within a given socio-culture context. At this level, designers seek to add more value to design than merely meeting the needs and desires explicitly expressed by the user. Designer 3 said: "we do not just get paid. We want to do more. This is caring." The factors influencing a designer's choice differ. As shared by Designer 9 "*It depends on the company's policy and designer's intention. They want to complete projects easily or attain a good quality design result.*"

Ideal Life Status

↑

Beyond Expectations

↑
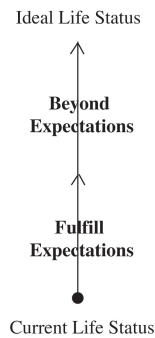
Fulfill Expectations

●

Current Life Status

Fig. 2. An Understanding of Care.

Designers shared different understandings about how to find value, which depends upon their design philosophy or beliefs. To take two examples, designer 2 emphasized: "*Getting to know people is a very old statement. It's understating the problem. It is not just getting to know people. Actually you need to find what is the real issue. It is more like understanding the nature of problem. It goes beyond understanding the clients. Something behind the clients.*" This designer seeks to dig out the potential and real problems behind the basic requirements given by users. Designer 5 expressed a similar stance in a different way: "*Design is not only solving problems for my clients. Problem is a very low level. As human beings, if they have [satisfied their basic] needs and requirement for shelter, they will start to think [in terms of] mindfulness and spirituality. A good designer will take care of the whole pyramid. I think a good design, especially in residential projects, has to take care about the top level.*"

Additionally, the ideal designer-user care relationship which has been introduced in Section 2 can help the user to become a caring person, and motivate the user to take care of other people. Designer 5 pointed out: "*My satisfaction comes from users' change. This makes me [feel] fulfillment. I think residential projects are very amazing. Something you will feel you really see the change. This change is very touching. A lot of simple design can change people. [If you] put a TV in the living room, [then you can] make a bonding to the living room. Push people together.*" However, not

every designer executes their design from this viewpoint of changing people and reconciling family relationships. Designer 7 said: "*If we can change people, we must be too arrogant.*" implying that it is presumptuous for designers to put themselves in the role of change agents in people's lives. A small number of other designers agreed with this idea.

4.2   Doing: the Means of Designers Caring for Users

A user-participatory design process can be summarized into two parts: the designer has to first understand the users, and then create solutions for them. Designer 10 explained this process, "*Clients usually have a first primitive idea of what they want to do. The designer will try to understand what is the aim behind the concept. For example, if they want to make a simple house, which characteristic of the house would be most central? Which relationship do they want to emphasize or what do they want to care for in their home?[Once you] understand this kind of idea, then you can put forward the new design concept to them.*"

Correspondingly, the means designers caring for users also include two aspects, i.e. "understanding users through communication" and "creating solutions by design practice" (Figure 3).
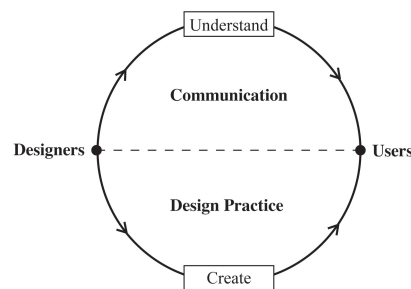

Fig. 3. Two Ways of Designers Caring for Users.

Understanding Users through Communication.

In determining a design strategy, communication is a necessary step of coordinating with users to consider their experience and demands. Designer 8 said: "*Care is communication.*" Designer 14 said: "*You have to spend more time with users. Talk with them to know what they want. If you care, you would like to spend more time with them.*" Designer 13 said: "An *interview is among the first few things we need to do. Ask them a lot of questions, as many as we can. We just learn about them. What do they want? What do they need? What don't they like? What don't they need?*" Designer 5 emphasize it is also important to know users' past needs, he said: "*I have to know what kind of things you liked and disliked in the past. And then we study now and project the future. If I know the now but do not know the past, perhaps I will make mistakes and do something they do not like anymore. A good designer cares about the past, present and the future, all three ways.*"

Additionally, many designers mentioned that providing advice to users is a form of caring. Designer 3 said: "*We give users new options, not just telling them our decisions. We engage clients in decision-making processes through discussion: a process in which we define options and confirm options together.*"

Create Solutions through Design Practice.

Design practice as another aspect of caring for users refers to meeting their requirements, solving problems through the application of design skills relating to layout, furniture, material and color design. Designer 11 said: "*Use care elements, furniture, color, light, texture. Make them work together. Everything can be a care element.*" Designer 4 said: "*The space function is care. Design for people's special needs, such as considering children's safety and older people's comfort.*" Designer 1 referred to caring acts as: "*Choosing furniture with rounded corner and soft material for children. Using wood instead of glass and stone.*" Designer 13 said: "*Functionality is the efficiency of how everything is arranged. Like in the kitchen, where is the fridge? how to get the pan and everything? To make the activity more efficient for the user.*" Designer 10 gave an example of layout design: "The *designer can combine the dining room and living room with the kitchen in a more connected and interesting way, so users can do activities together to emphasize the human relationship.*"

Some designers mentioned that designed environments can change people for the better. For example, designer 8 said: "*A newly designed home can make people have good living habits because they want to keep the home clean.*" Designer 13 said: "*they will get changed. A good design gives people a better mindset. Through accumulation of experience they will be changed. It can affect their mood gradually and affect their way of dealing with others.*"

Doing Follows Knowing.

From the interview, we find that each designer's practice is unique. How they communicate and what they design is a result of what they know and believe about their responsibility towards the user. For instance, if a designer aims to meet users' expectations, they will just listen to what users tell them. If they have ambitions to pursue more design value beyond users' needs and expressed desires, they will ask more detailed and projective questions, and to seek to identify unexpressed potentials through the application of their knowledge and experience in interpreting and extrapolating beyond users' explicit statements. Such designers would like to put themselves in the family web to explore more problems and identify more design opportunities. As Designer 5 said: "*What we need are not only the facts. Facts are very superficial. We need to [get] inside of their mind and [make] future projections.*"

Two examples from the interviews demonstrated that different interpretations of the same design intention of reconciling relationship could lead to different results. The first one is about how to reconcile two sons' relationship. Designer 5 is very proud of the project, expressing:

"*We put ourselves in their family web. We communicated with two sons. Before the renovation, they always fought. The elder son did not want to sleep with his*

little brother. We asked the elder son to participate in the design, asked him to be a helper. For example, help me to take the photo, help me to hold the ipad. We chose some colors from the color card, and let him to pick one. After the renovation, he thought of himself as a designer. He tells friends and other people 'I chose this green and this yellow'. He likes the room very much. His mother told me that the punishment is tonight you sleep with mother. You cannot sleep in your room by yourself. But in the past, it was not. In the past, he always wanted to sleep with his mother. Now he wants to sleep with his little brother every night. He sees himself as a designer for his little brother and has attained a sense of pride and ownership over their shared room."

Another project reconciled two generations' relationship in a different way. The designer of the project explained:

"I designed a four-generations home last year. I put the kids and parents together, and put the grand grandparents far away. I know they always give trouble to my clients. This home has many small homes, very peaceful and harmonious. The relationship is related with distance. How to connect two rooms? Is it far away or too close? That's very important."

The two cases have the same intention of reconciling family relationship, but result in two very different solutions: resolving conflict between two brothers on the one hand, and accommodating the conflict between two generations on the other.

Therefore, the designer's doing follows the designer's knowing. If the designer aims to put more value on the design, their communication and design practice have to correspond to this intention. It requires designers to build a closer bonding with users. The cause-and-effect interaction between knowing and doing is illustrated in Figure 4.
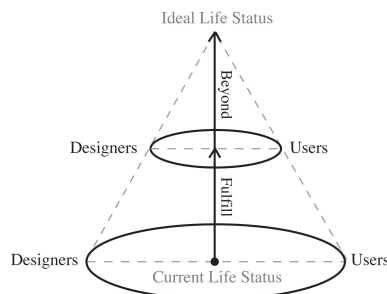

Fig. 4. The Cause-and-Effect Interaction between Knowing and Doing.

4.3   Knowing: User Perceives Care from Designers.

Perceiving Care from People.

Care is generated in relationships. Whether the user can perceive care from the designer first depends on whether the two can build a relationship. Some of the younger

designers said that they could not build a good relationship with users as they did not have chances to meet directly with users in the design process. In cases such as these, users are unlikely to perceive that the designer is providing them with care.

Perceiving care also depends on whether designers care for users' known needs, and unknown needs or both. It is about how many of the users' demands and requirements the designer is able to understand and satisfy. One designer thinks that helping users to find more needs can make the user perceive the designer's care for them. Designer 10 said: "*Caring [is expressed when] someone would like to know you more. Change is the next step.*" Designer 5 said: "*Before we talk to them, they may not realize their needs and opportunities. When you talk to them, you explore the needs together. I provide some possibilities to them.*" This designer also shared his viewpoint on how to investigate more needs. He said: "*Before the project starts, we have to make a very strong bonding in order to have trust between us. Otherwise they will not feel comfortable [to] tell you their needs and their very personal things. So a lot of clients become my friends after the project. We keep the friendship. We still have dinner together. Some of them even invite me to play basketball.*"

The sense of care also can be enhanced by the designer caring for the user's family. For example, Designer 5 said: "*When I talk with clients, my girlfriend plays with their kids. This is very important because the client starts to think of our team as not only earning money. At the same time we care about the whole family, not only the one who pays us money. We care about all people.*"

Perceiving Care from Environment.

The user also can perceive care from a designed environment. First, care can be perceived if the functional and aesthetical design has satisfied the user's physical and psychological demands. Secondly, the designed environment can remind users of the care relationship and support them in maintaining care relationships between the user and the designer, and between the user and family members. Because the design proposal is derived from the designer's consideration, and also determined by the family together, a well designed environment serves as a constant reminder and evidence of the caring process through which it was designed, and the relationships that were established and strengthened through this process.

The user's consciousness is also an important factor. Designer 10 said: "*If they are conscious about this kind of design, maybe they can learn about care. We understand that maybe not everyone is conscious about these kinds of details.*"

4.4 Doing: Users Care for Others

Regarding whether users can learn care for others from a designed environment, some designers shared their opinion. Designer 12 said: "*The point is that the user wants to use it.*" Designer 10 said: "*If people want to know the concept behind the design, they can learn care. It is difficult because the product itself is very neutral. Of course we can design very good quality [environments and] appeal to people to come, but we cannot force people to come. What we can do is let the people know how this space is intended to be used. Whether they come, it depends on the user. Design is only a stage*

for them to provide the drama. What is the drama? What is the theme? This all depends on users' decisions. As a designer we can provide the place for things to happen. Every character is a part of drama. We provide the hardware and we need people to come in and interact. And then care will happen."

Many of the interviewed designers believe that physical space is a condition for people to care for each other. They can take care of each other through sharing the space. Designer 4 said that design can "*Create more opportunities to make people meet and stay in one space.*" Designer 15 said: "*Communication and interactions will be in the space. When talking about care, that would be a better way. [I am concerned with] person-to-person communication through space.*" Designer 11 believes that "*sharing is caring. When people are together in one open space, they can look at each other. It is a visual connection. Awaring other people's needs.*"

As mentioned before, care is generated in relationships. In a design process, users build new relationships with designers, and maintain and enrich old relationships with family. From these relationships, we can analyze how they care for designers and family members.

Many interviewed designers implied that they maintain a long-term bond with their clients. The clients become friends or brothers who take care of them in some ways. Designer 5 said: "*Most of my clients are older than me. They are like my elder brother or sister. They tell me how to do business. They are very pleased to tell me their experience.*"

At the communication stage, the user must care about the family as a whole, and balancing the needs and desired of all family members to achieve harmony, as a design strategy is determined by all family members with different needs and personalities. The process of negotiation between different family members' needs and desires during the design process is a way to make family member care for each other's needs and to find the best solution or hybrid solution. Designer 5 points out that as it is not possible meet all people's needs, they have to choose the most significant needs, she said: "*Actually everyone has an expectation of space. The expectation of each member is not necessary to be fulfilled, they just need to talk to each other, and find a proper solution.*"

5 Insights and Reflections

5.1 An Inquiry into the User-centered Design.

User-centered design as a methodology leads designers to focus on the individual's desires and needs. This may result in the designer's seeking to understand what people require and how to satisfy them. The user can be seen as a care receiver. However, user-centered design thinking might have missed the larger impacts that design could have on addressing care. The perspective of care guides people to focus on the individual's self-development and person-to-person relationships. If designers view their work from the perspective of care, they would think about how to change people's lives, perceptions and behavior, and help solve conflicts among people, thus facilitating users in becoming caregivers in their relationships.

In the residential design context, residence is often a design for a family rather than for the individual person who may be the paying client. Designers have to consider all family members and coordinate their relationships. It is thus necessary to reflect on the guiding ideology of residential design from the perspective of care, both in terms of the designer's caring for all users of the designed space, and in terms of the development of caring relationships between users in the design process and the inhabitation of the space.

5.2 Designers' Knowing as a Key Link.

The designer's knowledge of care is a pivotal factor in the whole design process. It will decide the designer's doing and influence the user's response. Figure 8 shows the cause and effect interaction as follows:
1. The designer's knowing determines the designer's doing.
2. The designer's doing affects the user's knowing and doing.
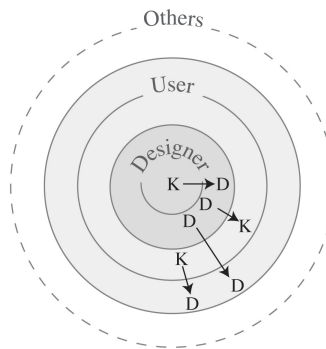3. The user's knowing affects the user's doing.

Fig. 8. The Impact of the Designer's Knowing.

The designer's knowing, as we analyzed in section 4.1, depends on their view of the world and the concepts of the ideal life. As a learning process, this knowing should be explored by designers. Each person can have a different choice and belief. It is a personal explorative journey.

5.3 Care Begins from Communication.

The designer-user care relationship can be established and elaborated at the pre-design stage through communication. Users' care behavior also can be generated when they talk with family members and consider each other's needs. Communication is a good opportunity for designers to take care of users and users' family relationships.

Although the user can perceive care from the designed environment, it largley depends on the user's consciousness. Designers may provide an environment that is designed to facilitate care relationships, as a stage upon which people may enact a

performance of taking care of one another, but designers cannot force people to take such actions. They only can prepare all the conditions and wait for people to appear on the stage.

6   Conclusions

This paper has presented a critique of a narrowly conceived user-centered design approach which leads designers to focus on the individual person and their expressed needs. While this is certainly an aspect of the caring relationship between designers and users, we argue that to be a caring residential designer entails the consideration of person-to-person relationships from the care perspective. Additionally, designers as care professionals also need to be cognizant of their role in bringing their skills and knowledge to bear on striving for environments and processes that can contribute to the engendering of more ideal ways of living, being together, and caring for one another. Care is a continuous learning process for both the designer and the user, and the designer should embrace care not merely as an attitude towards the design process or an aspect of designer-user relationships (although both of these perspectives are valid and necessary), but as a personal developmental journey through their life and their professional development.

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