



The Emotional Neglect in Recent Service Design Developments

Den emosjonelle forsømmelsen i tjenstedesigns siste utvikling

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Abstract

Service design research has recently undergone a systemic turn, transitioning from the aim of improving user experiences toward catalyzing service system transformation. This development has resulted in a neglect of actors' emotional experiences in the research. To understand the roots and implications of this emotional neglect, this research combines a critical review of the research developments with interviews with expert service designers. We identify three main shifts within the literature: from customer emotions to actor configurations; from service situations to service systems; and from practice-based to theory-driven research. Our analysis highlights how these shifts relate to practitioners' challenges in addressing the emotional complexity inherent in systemic change processes. To counter what the systemic turn may have left behind, we call for integrating emotions and systems in both service design practice and theory.

Keywords

service design, service system, transformation, emotion, experience

Sammendrag

Forskning på tjenstedesign har de siste tiårene gjennomgått en betydelig systemisk utvikling. Der et tidlig uttalt mål i denne forskningen var å forbedre brukeropplevelser, har den nå et fokus på transformasjon av tjenstesystemer. Denne utviklingen har imidlertid ført til en neglisjering av folks følelser i slike prosesser. For å undersøke denne forsømmelsen nærmere, kombinerer vi i denne studien en kritisk gjennomgang av forskningens utvikling med intervjuer med erfarne tjenstedesignere. Vi identifiserer tre skift i hva forskningen vektlegger: fra emosjonelle kundeopplevelser til konfigureringen av mange aktører; fra tjenstesituasjoner til tjenstesystemer; og fra praksis-basert til teoridrevet forskning. Vår analyse synliggjør hvordan disse skiftene er sammenvevd med utfordringer tjenstedesignere opplever når de møter den emosjonelle kompleksiteten i transformativ prosesser. For å adressere det som den systemiske utviklingen har oversett, foreslår vi en retning for videre forskning som bedre integrerer følelser og systemer i teori og praksis.

Nøkkelord

tjenstedesign, tjenstesystem, transformasjon, emosjoner, opplevelser

Service systems are essential in coordinating societies and enabling people's capacity to flourish (Vargo & Lusch, 2007). Addressing pressing societal issues such as health inequity, climate change, and demographic shifts requires the transformation of existing service systems (Fisk et al., 2018). Service design is increasingly adopted to support the transformation of service systems to be more sustainable and equitable (Sangiorgi, 2011; Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021), and scholars argue that the human-centered and cooperative nature of these approaches can nurture bottom-up change that addresses multiple actors' needs (Anderson et al., 2018; Fisk et al., 2018; Sangiorgi, 2011).

In recent decades, Nordic countries have actively incorporated service design into their transformation efforts. Several initiatives, such as MindLab in Denmark, StimuLab in Norway, and ExperioLab in Sweden, have been initiated to foster more action-oriented approaches to complex, cross-agency challenges within the public sector (Szücs Johansson et al., 2017; van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2017; Wildhagen & Strålberg, 2021). As the scope of the challenges addressed by service design has expanded from the traditionally narrower focus on service offerings, so has the discourse surrounding the field, now embracing systems theories and multi-level approaches (Patrício et al., 2011; Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017; Vink et al., 2021). While this development has its advantages, practitioners are faced with the challenge of integrating a systemic perspective with the original orientation of service design as an experience-centric practice.

In service design research, systemic and experience-centric orientations often diverge. While experience-centric approaches typically "zoom in" on individual experiences, systemic approaches often "zoom out" to work with larger structures spanning across service systems. Because of this forced divide between systems and emotions, service design risks jeopardizing the very promise of being a human-centered, holistic, creative, and iterative approach to creating new service futures (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011) when embracing more systemic approaches. As recent research developments tilt toward systemic orientations (Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2022), we argue that actors' experiences, particularly people's emotions, are increasingly neglected in the field of service design. This neglect is concerning because emotions are fundamental for how people assess what matters to them and for how they navigate complexity (Russell, 1980; Scarantino, 2016). Because emotions influence how people comprehend, engage, adapt, and shape their world around them, they should be fundamental in efforts to transform complex service systems, rather than taking the backseat in such pursuits.

As design research primarily focuses on the activity of designing, its relevance to practice is at the core of its aims (Zimmerman, 2008). To hold research accountable for its practical implications, we ask what implications recent developments in the literature have on service designers' work with the emotional aspects of service systems. Through an abductive analysis, we problematize developments within the research literature on the basis of challenges identified from interviews of service designers engaged in transforming child welfare services in Nordic countries. Given the complexity and emotional intensity of this context (Bekaert et al., 2021; Colvin & Miller, 2020), empirical research on service design practice in this context helps to make visible some of the most pressing issues at play in service design for transformation. Based on our analysis, we outline future directions for research and practice that integrate emotional and systemic perspectives in service design.

To begin, we summarize how the aim of service design has evolved in academic literature over the last 40 years. Then, we conduct an abductive analysis that illuminates the implications of key shifts in the literature on how service designers work with emotions in their

practice. Finally, we outline an integrative, action-oriented direction for future research and practice that better supports the realization of the transformative aims of service design.

The Developing Aim of Service Design

Service design was first introduced in academic literature in the 1980s. As an alternative to the prevalent focus on service operations, it sought to improve services by crafting them in relation to customer needs (Shostack, 1984). Since then, service design has been defined in various ways with different aims and associated practices (Kimbell, 2011). Below, we describe the development in the proposed aim of service design over time within the literature, reflected in three different research streams: the user experience stream, the value co-creation stream, and the service system transformation stream. Figure 1 shows the emergence and continuity of the different research streams. While the emergence of these streams is sequential, all of these aims co-exist in the current literature. Consequently, the proposed streams should be viewed as interrelated field diversifications rather than linear developments.

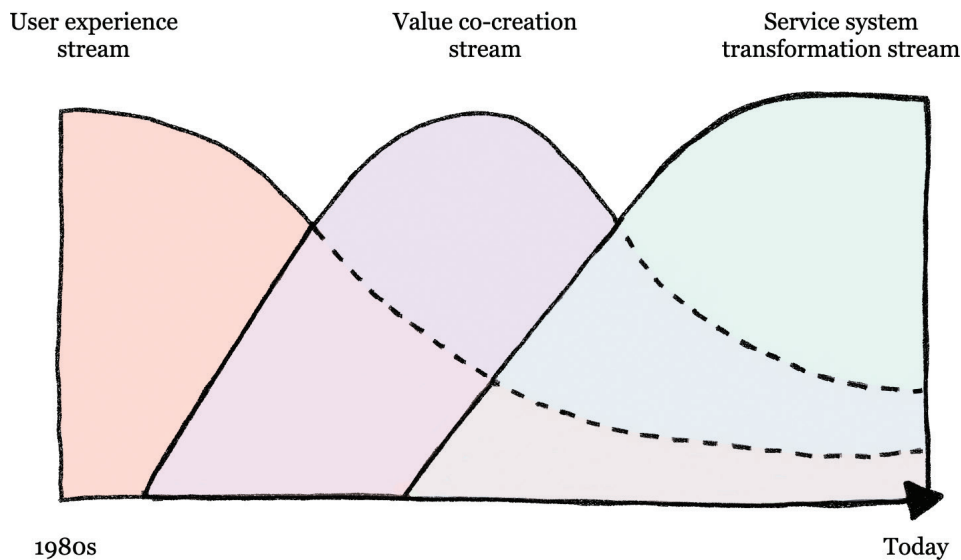


Figure 1. The development of three literature streams with distinct aims for service design.

The User Experience Stream

When it was first established in academic discourse, the term ‘service design’ was associated with a specific stage in the development of new services. This process, generally absent of professional designers, aimed to improve the experienced service quality by identifying and correcting service failures, and focuses on how customer experiences contribute to the market value of a service (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Tax & Stuart, 1997). This involved the introduction of tools such as molecular modeling (Shostack, 1982) and service blueprinting (Shostack, 1984), as well as the later development of frameworks that integrated new service concepts with organizational processes (Tax & Stuart, 1997), culture (Stuart, 1998), and physical locations (Bitner, 1992).

During the 1990s, the booming service economy recognized experiences as a distinct economic offering (Grove & Fisk, 2004; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). To create desired emotional user experiences, professional designers entered the field, incorporating design approaches with concepts from other disciplines, such as the behavioral sciences (Beltagui et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2002) and sacred theory (Matthews, 2017). This prompted the development

of numerous tools, methods, and concepts focusing on customer experiences, including experience blueprints (Patrício et al., 2008), customer journeys (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010), touchpoints (Clatworthy, 2011), sacred service experience methods (Matthews, 2017), personas (Holmlid & Evenson, 2008), and collaborative mapping (Trischler et al., 2018). Some research also acknowledged the influence of contextual and organizational factors on user experiences (Karpen et al., 2017), often addressed through methods for working with technologies (Teixeira et al., 2017) and firms' architecture to enhance these experiences (Patrício et al., 2011). The user experience stream introduced an action-oriented practice that predominantly centered on supporting commercial services in designing for the desirable emotional experiences of service users. This perspective continues to shape how service design is understood and practiced today (Penin, 2018; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2016).

The Value Co-creation Stream

The early emphasis on improving user experiences in service design faced criticism for providing a narrow understanding of services (Kim, 2018a, 2018b) and a simplistic view of the embodied practice of design (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). Critics argued that a user-centric focus overlooked alternative ways of seeing the world, non-users, future generations (Sevaldson, 2018), and service providers (Penin, 2018). These critiques, along with a transition in the broader service research literature from a goods-dominant to service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), led to a stream of service design research emphasizing value co-creation as the aim of service design. This stream sees value as co-created by beneficiaries and other actors through resource integration (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014).

Based on the aim of supporting value co-creation, approaches grounded in phenomenology emerged, emphasizing the engagement and participation of multiple actors through co-design processes (Akama & Prendiville, 2013; Kim, 2021; Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009; Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). These approaches seek to understand how service propositions can support value in context by understanding the relationships in which people are embedded (Aguirre-Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017; Čaić et al., 2019; Patrício, et al., 2018; Trischler & Trischler, 2022), as well as how these relationships evolve over time (van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2022). The value co-creation stream offered a broader view of services and service contexts, including commercial, public, and community-based settings. This stream expanded the understanding of value and the actors involved in its creation. However, this view also downplayed the previously dominant experiential focus of service design.

The Service System Transformation Stream

Over the past decade, a transformative aim has emerged in service research, with aspirations to improve well-being through the transformation of service systems (Anderson et al., 2018; Ostrom et al., 2015). This perspective holds that service systems are dynamic and interdependent configurations of people, technologies, and other resources that interact to create mutual value (Maglio et al., 2009). Here, services are seen as a means of fostering a more collaborative and sustainable society (Sangiorgi, 2011). In this emerging service system transformation stream, service design is regarded as a critical means for transforming services toward inclusivity (Fisk et al., 2018), people-centered approaches (Patrício et al., 2020), equity (Goodwill et al., 2021), enhanced well-being (Anderson et al., 2018), and relief of suffering (Alkire et al., 2019). As a collaborative and bottom-up inquiry, service design is proposed to uncover and challenge core assumptions and worldviews in organizations (Junginger, 2015; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018; Sangiorgi, 2011) and service systems (Vink et al., 2021).

Service design aimed at transformation often targets the building of awareness and reflexivity around embodied habits (Wetter-Edman, 2018), institutionalized social structures (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022), logics (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018), and mental models (Romm et al., 2020; Vink et al., 2019). By nurturing such capabilities, the aim of these efforts is often to support multiple actors in developing more collaborative, participatory, and equitable service systems (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021; Sangiorgi et al., 2022; Ulloa Aguirre, 2020; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021). To achieve these promises, service design integrates multidisciplinary ways of working (Joly et al., 2019) and adopts an ecosystem perspective on value co-creation (Vink et al., 2021). To confront the inherent complexity in service systems, research in the field has adopted a variety of system theories, including service-dominant logic (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014), complex social systems theory (van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2022), and institutional theory (Vink et al., 2021). Consequently, the service system transformation stream can be considered as the most systemic development in the field (Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2022), concentrating on broad service systems that include multiple services, organizations, and actors. Within this stream, the aim of service design is to foster bottom-up strategies, building transformative capabilities within these service systems.

The Emotional Neglect in Research Developments

Amid all these developments, has something crucial been lost? While the turn toward systemic perspectives has advanced engagement with complex structural and societal issues (Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017), it has also downplayed the pronounced focus on emotional experiences, which was central to early service design research.

Because both the nature of service (Kim, 2018a) and systemic change (Burnes & Jackson, 2011) are value-laden, they elicit a range of emotional responses from the actors involved (Klarner et al., 2011). To support an understanding of the role of emotions in such contexts, we draw from an evaluative perspective in emotion theory (Scarantino, 2016). From this viewpoint, emotions serve as signals that aid individuals in navigating the world and its various social settings. Through momentary integrative evaluations of our bodies, minds, and sociocultural context (Barrett, 2017), emotions can be understood as a fundamental way we interpret the complex world around us. They are an essential part of social systems and have thus received increased attention in fields adjacent to service design, such as change management (e.g., Carr, 2001) and strategic management (Brundin et al., 2022).

We argue that neglecting actors' emotions when service designers aim to support service system transformation jeopardizes the very promise of service design as a human-centered, bottom-up, and collaborative approach. This oversight may unintentionally reinforce actors' emotional attachment to the status quo, or force transformation in directions that cause harm and distress for certain actors. Therefore, amid the evolving service design landscape, there is a need for a deeper investigation into the relationship between the developments in service design literature and the lack of integration of emotional lenses in service design practice working toward transformative aims.

Method

To understand the implications of research developments on practitioners' work with emotions in service systems, we compared the academic literature on service design with insights from interviews with experienced service designers. This was done through an in-depth abductive analysis that drew on problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) and mystery-focused research approaches (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Problematization

refers to the process of unveiling and challenging underlying assumptions in a specific domain of literature. In mystery-focused research, empirical material is used to question, doubt, and challenge existing theories. This approach involves identifying discrepancies, referred to as “mysteries,” between empirical material and theory. As shown in Figure 2, the review was conducted through recursive cycles of questioning and inference from empirical materials and literature (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This allowed us to ask practitioners questions based on the literature and, conversely, to question the literature based on practitioners’ responses in the interviews. In addition, we actively incorporated our own personal experiences into the problematization process. Adopting this approach, we assume that the material from the interviews could illuminate struggles faced by practitioners, albeit interpreted through our own pre-understandings and experiences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Followingly, we made inferences from the interviews and literature sample by continuously comparing and problematizing, while we refined our understanding.

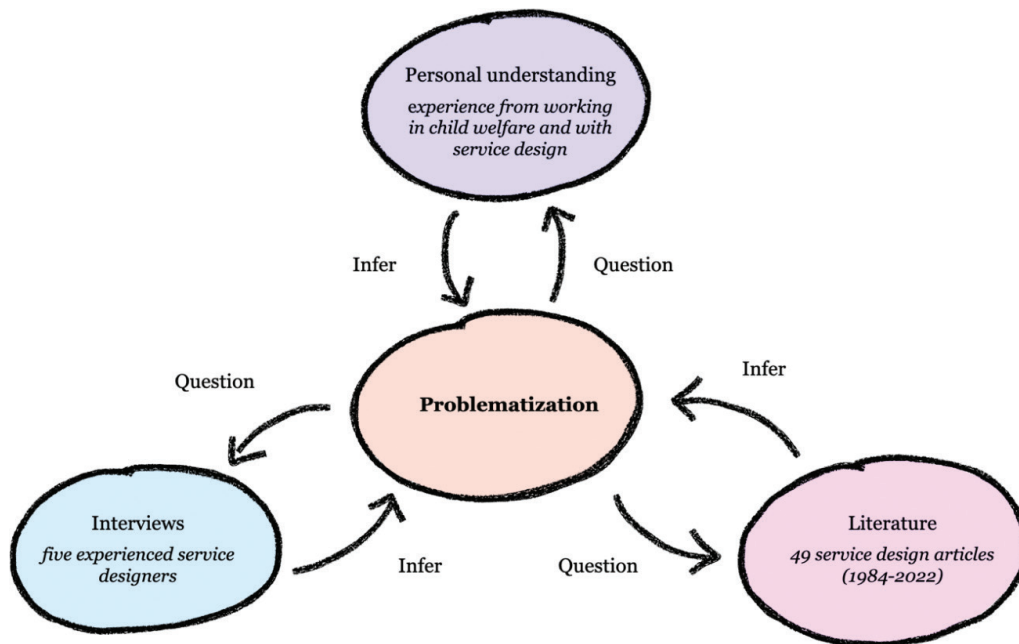


Figure 2. Recursive cycles of the abductive analysis.

Aligned with a mystery-focused research approach that draws from researchers’ subjective preconceptions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), our own experience was the starting point of the analysis. The first author has ten years of professional experience working in a variety of roles in child welfare, while the second author has over ten years of experience practicing service and systemic design. In this work, both faced struggles navigating systems change in complex, emotional settings. These firsthand experiences prompted us to question current theory from a practice perspective, and to engage more deeply with practitioners about their related experiences.

To explore practitioners’ struggles, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five experienced service designers in Norway and Sweden. The interviews ranged from 75 to 110 minutes. We recruited interviewees based on our professional connections in service design and child welfare. Their participation in two child welfare projects prompted their invitation, given the inherent complexity and emotional intensity of this context. In both projects, the service designers engaged youths, families, workers, managers, and

collaborative partners within a child welfare system to improve the experiences of youths and families through various forms of systemic change. Ethical considerations informed the development of the interview protocol, including: establishing informed consent, ensuring that no personal information about participants from the child welfare service design projects was exposed, and mitigating potential distress when discussing emotional struggles with the interviewees.

Before the interviews, we prepared questions and themes that served as a flexible conversational framework (Alvesson, 2003; Brinkmann, 2018). Aligned with a mystery-focused research approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), the prepared, open-ended questions were informed by our preliminary understanding of the tension that practitioners face when trying to integrate experiential and systemic perspectives in design processes. For example, one of the interview questions was: “In terms of people’s emotions, were there any particular dilemmas, challenges, or contributions that stood out?” On occasion, we used elicitation and mapping techniques (Henggeler et al., 2009; Hogan et al., 2016; Kara et al., 2021) to encourage the interviewees’ meta-reflections on their responses.

Three practical challenges related to the systemic development of service design emerged from our interviews. We saw connections between these practical challenges and the developments in the literature. Our initial interpretation was that while the service design field has embraced systemic theories to support transformative aims in service systems, it might have neglected the emotions of the various actors involved in these processes. Following this, we conducted a review of academic articles on service design to examine this interpretation more systematically.

To construct a sample of relevant literature, we searched for articles on Web of Science using the keywords “service design” combined with variants of “experience” and “systemic” or “transformation” in the abstract or title. The scope of the search was eleven top international journals in the service and design research fields. In doing so, we sought service design articles that encompassed either an experiential, systemic, or transformative focus or a combination thereof. After reviewing the abstracts, 35 articles were chosen. In addition, we included relevant literature from our own knowledge and through the recommendations of expert scholars in the field, giving a preliminary sample of 57 articles that were reviewed. After excluding descriptive literature reviews and articles that used the words but were less relevant to our focus, 49 articles were included in the final sample used in the analysis.

To examine how the literature might have changed over time, we adapted Whetten’s (1989) questions regarding theoretical building blocks to inform our reading of the articles in the literature sample. Consequently, the following questions guided the development of our initial codes:

- What is the proposed aim of service design?
- How is service design proposed to help achieve this aim?
- What is the research approach?
- What theories are drawn on?
- Who, where, and when is the focus of this research?

For each article in the sample, the first author made preliminary notes and codes, which were refined through discussions with the second author. This preliminary process resulted in the identification of three distinct literature streams, each of which proposed different aims for service design. The literature was evenly distributed across these streams, each

containing 16 or 17 articles. The differentiation between distinct literature streams allowed us to revisit all the articles and re-code their theoretical building blocks by constantly comparing them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through these comparisons, we uncovered shifts between the literature streams in terms of the actor focus, study scope, and research lens that the research predominantly emphasized.

To better understand the link between these shifts and the challenges reported by interviewees, we re-examined the interview transcriptions for specific statements and reflections that mirrored the divides identified in the literature. This both helped clarify practitioners' struggles and honed our understanding of the shifts in the literature. Furthermore, we identified and outlined the underlying assumptions of the development in the literature contributing to these practical issues. Finally, we inferred the broader implications the shifts in the literature have in relation to service design practice.

Findings

In this section, we outline the three key shifts occurring in service design research, as identified in articles across the literature streams. The user experience and service system transformation streams reflected polarities in all identified shifts, whereas the value co-creation stream reflected a mix or middle ground, making trade-offs between the first and last streams. As such, for clarity, we present the development of the field mainly by comparing shifts between the user experience stream, the first stream to emerge, and the service system transformation stream, the last stream to emerge. We examine these shifts by illuminating their underlying assumptions and connecting them with the struggles voiced by the service designers in interviews.

Figure 3 summarizes our analysis by showing what the developments in service design research imply for service design practice. The three shifts identified in the developing literature are driven by distinct underlying assumptions, and each has shortcomings in informing service designers in their work with service system transformation.

First, the analysis highlights that the actor focus within the research has shifted from customer emotions to actor configurations. This shift in emphasis is based on an underlying assumption that emotions are individual phenomena. As a result, service designers experience a knowledge gap in how to navigate the emotions of multiple actors, limiting their effectiveness in facilitating service system transformation.

Second, we identified a shift in the study scope from emphasizing service situations to service systems. This expanded scope is built on an underlying assumption that systems thinking implies zooming out. Due to the perceived individual nature of emotions and experiences, zooming out has resulted in a division between experiences on one hand and systems on the other. Furthermore, this division relates to the challenges service designers face when trying to translate experiences from specific situations in ways that are both relevant and suitable for addressing system-wide changes.

Finally, our analysis identified a third shift, this time in the research lens: from an emphasis on practice-based to theory-driven research. This shift sheds light on an underlying assumption that more complexity demands more theory. Although the literature with transformative aims provides useful theoretical frameworks and principles, these often fail to account for the complexity of the situated, embodied navigation of service systems change. Consequently, practitioners lack practical and action-oriented strategies for navigating these challenges in their work. To unpack these links between practice and theory, we provide evidence of each of these shifts within their literature, and discuss implications in further detail below.

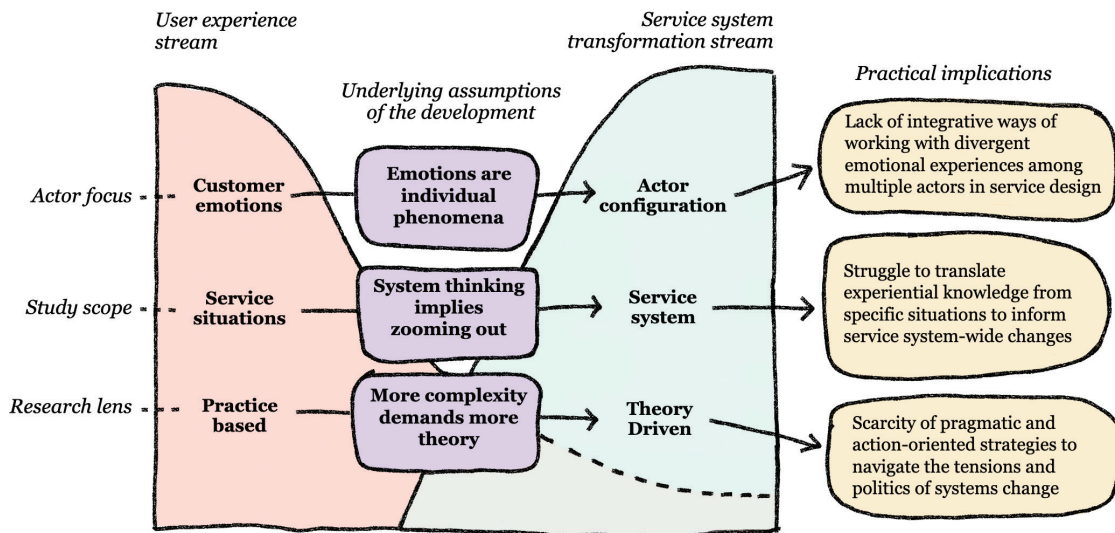


Figure 3. Developments in service design research literature and implications for practice.

Shift in Actor Focus – From Customer Emotions to Actor Configurations

In our sample, most of the articles in the user experience stream centered on the emotional experiences of individual customers, whereas most of the articles in the service system transformation stream emphasized the configuration of multiple actors within service systems. Articles in the user experience stream typically focused on the emotional experiences of individual customers, covering methods for gaining customer insights and how various aspects of organizations and service systems were connected to supporting the enhancement of these experiences (Beltagui et al., 2016; Clatworthy, 2011; Matthews, 2017; Patrício et al., 2008; Secomandi & Snelders, 2011; Teixeira et al., 2012; Trischler et al., 2018; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). In contrast, the service system transformation stream underscored how service design focuses on the configurations of multiple actors, including the influence of social structures, mental models, and design practices within service systems (Junginger, 2015; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018; Romm et al., 2020; Sangiorgi et al., 2022; Vink et al., 2021; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022; Wetter-Edman, 2018).

The shift taking place within this literature, from emphasizing customers' emotional experiences to the broader configuration of actors, illuminates an underlying assumption of emotions as individual phenomena. Here emotions take center stage when focusing on individual actors, but receive significantly less attention when examining the relationships between multiple actors. However, our interviews challenged this assumption by highlighting the importance of addressing emotions in service designers' work with multiple actors and their relationships. The interviewees reported challenges addressing these aspects in practice, as actors typically had different emotional experiences due to their roles and perspectives within the service systems.

The interviewees all reported that they started their projects by exploring how youths and families experienced interacting with the child welfare system. Interviews, workshops, user journey mapping, and other designerly approaches were employed to develop these insights. All the service designers stated that they were able to engage youths and family members in telling rich stories about their emotional experiences within the child welfare system. However, the interviewees also said that they typically approached professional actors differently than non-professional actors: they focused less on the emotions of actors

who were not considered “users” in the service system. As noted by the service designer below, conversations with professionals tended to focus more on structures, processes, roles, and mandates than on emotional experiences:

It’s a bit interesting ... I think the way we do it makes it less human than it might have been ... When I have an interview with a case manager I kind of ask: Yes, how are interactions with other stakeholders here and ... what kind of processes do you have ...? But it is not natural to ask: Can you tell me a little about your feelings when dealing with such a young child? You may have children of the same age, and how does it feel for you to meet such a vulnerable kid? Can you tell us a little about it? I rarely get access to such things when meeting professionals. And that is ... it’s a pity.

A paradox, however, was how the service designers also acknowledged that understanding and addressing the emotional experiences of professionals was crucial for service system transformation. These emotions, according to the service designers, significantly influenced how professionals interacted with non-professionals. Upon reflection, the interviewees identified a possible shortcoming in their design approaches: These approaches mainly capture the individual users’ experiences, and less so the emotional experiences of other actors involved. An interviewee stated:

They [the professionals] are people, and my experience is that they are people who give a lot of themselves and are very human in those meetings [with youths] ... We may fail to interview the employees with the same emotional approach as we do with the users. With the professionals, we get a bit like ... you represent the system, and with the users: you represent a human being with feelings. It’s a bit like that.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of emotional experiences in the meeting between actors, the interviewees highlighted how emotions play a significant role in change processes. In this regard, they reflected on how actors’ emotions can be barriers or drivers to transformation by limiting or enhancing their ability to envision alternative service system futures. Understanding these dynamics was considered critical for succeeding in the transformative aims by another interviewee:

They [the professionals] often experience the system errors on their body ... that ... That’s the only thing you see. The feeling of seeing the same thing over and over again. You feel that you are almost underwater and that’s all there is to ... I don’t know if you ... if ... It’s hard to imagine that things are different when it feels like you have ... You’re under so much pressure.

In summary, the literature review revealed a distinct shift in emphasis from customer emotions to actor configurations in the developing literature. This shift illuminated an underlying assumption of emotions as individual phenomena. However, the service designers highlighted how the emotional experiences of multiple actors influenced their practice and that they had difficulties addressing these in their current way of working. In particular, these difficulties became apparent when considering their differentiated approaches towards non-professionals and professionals. Consequently, we posit that the divergence between highlighting individual actors’ experiences and fostering transformation with multiple actors can lead to an inability to work with multiple emotional experiences among a constellation of actors in service systems.

Shift in Study Scope – From Service Situations to Service Systems

The second shift identified was in how the study scope changed across different literature streams. This transition entailed a shift in emphasis from service situations to service systems. In general, articles positioning service design toward improving user experiences tended to focus on specific situations while downplaying the broader service system. In contrast, articles with a transformative aim tended to have a more extended focus on the broader service system without paying attention to specific service situations.

Articles in the user experience stream typically centered on creating specific service offerings (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Shostack, 1984), encompassing their organizational implementation (Stuart, 1998; Tax & Stuart, 1997), especially in commercial services with the aim of gaining a competitive advantage of delivering emotionally compelling experiences (Beltagui et al., 2016; Clatworthy, 2011; Cook et al., 2002; Teixeira et al., 2012;). While some articles in the service system transformation stream were organization-centric (Junginger, 2015; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018), most had a scope emphasizing broader service systems, including commercial (Patrício et al., 2011), community-based (Cipolla & Manzini, 2009), or notably non-commercial service systems, such as healthcare and other public sector systems (Anderson et al., 2018; Aguirre-Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017; Čaić et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2022; Patrício et al., 2020; Romm et al., 2020; Sangiorgi et al., 2022; Vink et al., 2019; Trischler & Trischler, 2022).

We posit that this shift in scope reveals an underlying assumption within the systemic development of the service design literature: systems thinking necessitates zooming out. However, this assumption hides the many scales in which systems exist and, thus, how they manifest in specific situations. During the interviews, the forced division between the situation and the system was brought to the forefront as a translation challenge. Interviewees found it difficult to oscillate and make inferences between a narrow scope of experiences within service situations and a broader scope of the service system.

All interviewees reflected on how systemic factors impacted the experiences of youths and families when encountering the child welfare system. In their projects, they began by gaining insights into how specific service situations were experienced, and then broadened their perspective to understand how the service system configuration influenced these experiences. However, they encountered difficulties in effectively communicating the situationally dependent experiences of youths and their families to others. Moreover, they struggled to capitalize on these experiential insights to advocate for necessary changes within the broader service system. Upon reflection, some service designers said that one reason for this was the tendency of professionals to use less emotionally charged language than non-professionals. They found it difficult to balance experiences from specific situations and a broader system view, as they had to navigate different people and ways of talking that were hard to bring together:

[Talking about an experience of a service situation] civil actors say, “So this is terrible. It cannot be like this. This is completely fucked up.” So, the civil society actors talk more in that way. Meanwhile, the system stakeholders ... they’re like: Yes, yes, hmm, but it’s like this, we don’t have time, and we can’t do anything, and we have, like, a piece of legislation so, there’s some kind of ... some kind of emotional management there I assume. They’re not like, this is how it is, we have to do something about it. We have to change things. It’s more a sigh: Yes, unfortunately ... Unfortunately, this is how it is.

When reflecting on these language rifts, some interviewees emphasized how they played a part in reinforcing this shift in language themselves; they often altered the way they talked about experiences when zooming out from the concrete service situation to a focus on the service system. In part, this was driven by a need to adapt to the different actors involved, but it was also influenced by their own position and need for legitimacy in their work:

To do a little self-criticism, I think it might be a bit our fault too ... Sometimes it can be a bit strategic maybe, call it what you want – but you, you have to, you wrap it in a language that shows you understand the system ... You learn something that is very emotional – for example about a youth going to bed with a stomachache before a meeting the next day. Then you both write and tell it in a more professional way in order to be taken seriously. To show that you know the system, you know their language. I think this was interesting to reflect on... that you end up saying, “We have seen examples where the users can feel emotional discomfort at the thought of a service meeting the next day.” And then you have killed what the youth was telling you.

As the latter quote highlights, the service designers faced complications when they alternated between zooming in on service situations and zooming out on the broader service system. This discrepancy was also evident in the literature sample, where researchers writing about service design with a user experience aim tended to have a scope emphasizing service situations, whereas those with transformative aims tended to have a broader scope on service systems. This divide highlights an underlying assumption in recent research developments: that systems thinking equates to zooming out to a large scale. We propose that such an assumption, coupled with the previous assumption that emotions are an individual phenomenon, leads to a failure in guiding service designers how to use firsthand emotional insights to drive systemic change.

Shift in Research Lens – From Practice-Based to Theory-Driven

The third notable development between the literature streams involved a change in the research lens from being practice-based to being theory-driven. Empirical, practice-based approaches were predominantly used in articles within the user experience stream, whereas articles within the transformative service systems stream primarily employed conceptual approaches. Conversely, conceptual studies were less frequent in the user experience stream, and practice-based studies were less common in the service system transformation stream.

Studies in the user experience stream mainly used research through design, design case studies, or pragmatic methods based on authors’ experiences, often integrating theory to support the development of practical methods (Beltagui et al., 2016; Clatworthy, 2011; Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996; Matthews, 2017; Patrício et al., 2008; Shostack, 1984; Teixeira et al., 2012; Teixeira et al., 2017; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). While some service system transformation studies used practice-based methods (Romm et al., 2020; Sangiorgi et al., 2022; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021), most were conceptual, often integrating concepts from other fields to form frameworks or principles for transformative service design (Alkire et al., 2019; Fisk et al., 2018; Joly et al., 2019; Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021; Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2022; Trischler & Trischler, 2022; Vink et al., 2021; Wetter-Edman et al., 2014).

The divergent research approaches between the literature streams perpetuated a strong divide between a lens on service design practice and service design theory. This shift highlights the third underlying assumption of the systemic turn in the literature: increased complexity demands more theory for comprehension. While research in the service system transformation stream offered valuable theoretical frameworks and principles, our

interviews also revealed a shortcoming of this theoretical focus. It often fails to support service designers in addressing the embodied, situated, practical, and political tensions inherent in service design with transformative aims.

What made these challenges complex for the practitioners revolved around the constant need to adapt their approaches to the real-world dynamics they encountered in their practice. For example, some interviewees reflected on their approaches to engaging with managers and professional stakeholders. Just as they adjusted their language, they also adapted their methods in these more formal settings and noted that some of their usual service design methods were not applicable in these situations. One interviewee discussed the need to adapt approaches to avoid these actors becoming uncomfortable and disengaged:

I've been to quite a few design workshops that make senior managers feel incredibly uncomfortable and just want to leave. I think it's difficult to some extent, difficult with the design approach to calibrate it so that it really gets right: it shouldn't just be that you just sit and talk. No, it shouldn't be, but you shouldn't do too radical things either, because then you'll lose half the group, or the whole group.

These efforts to continuously adapt their approaches underscore the context-dependent nature of practice. The complexity of the work was connected to tailoring it to their context and position. When aiming to work with system transformation, the system's internal politics often became central and profoundly influenced the design process:

[There were] things that we thought were interesting to dig further into that the mandate kind of didn't allow us to go ahead with. It was because the policymakers did not have the time or interest or it wasn't a part of their mission ... [W]hen working with these systemic projects, for better and for worse, I think that it opens doors on one side at the same time shuts some. So, I think it limited us a bit. The idea with design is to actually open up to new ideas ... but in some ways we couldn't really do that.

Despite these struggles, several interviewees emphasized the potential in using designerly approaches to address the complexity of conflicting interests and politics in transformation processes. They argued that such approaches could make the intricate hierarchies, relations, and experiences in service systems visible and tangible. For instance, some interviewees had experimented with using physical space in workshops, asking stakeholders to position themselves in relation to each other, or using tangible materials in ways that emphasized the interconnections between them. However, such approaches were often not used because more time was needed to allow actors to feel comfortable engaging with them:

These hierarchies ... You have to kind of break them down to let people be people in their roles, and to make visible different feelings, but also to make visible and manage different hierarchical structures that exist in the system. You can do that, so you can get there, but it takes serious effort. You can't expect to throw fifteen people into a room and say: Yes! Here we go! ... It is difficult.

In summary, the interviews revealed the struggles of service design practitioners in navigating mandates, politics, and established professional practices. These situated aspects of the practice were at the core of what made service designing with transformative aims complex. At the same time, the review of the developing literature highlighted that the predominant research lens had shifted from being primarily practice-based to being

primarily conceptual. This shift coincided with the systemic turn in the research, suggesting an underlying assumption that increased complexity necessitates more theory for comprehension. Consequently, the support offered by service design research to practitioners has shifted from being more pragmatic to being more theoretical. However, the interviews in this study challenged this assumption by highlighting the practical nature of the complexity of this work. Although conceptual frameworks and principles hold importance, they often do not fully capture the embodied, situated tensions and politics within service systems. Consequently, practitioners are left with few pragmatic and action-oriented strategies to navigate these complexities when working towards transformative aims.

Discussion

Despite previous literature reviews (Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017; Yu, 2020), including of the systemic turn (Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2022), no study has yet considered critically the implications of these developments on service design practice. Our research reveals that these developments have resulted in distinct shifts within the literature, and that these shifts are associated with core challenges faced by service designers trying to integrate actors' emotional experiences while adopting a more systemic lens in their practice.

By exploring the influence of literature developments on practice, we highlight critical blind spots related to how service designers work with emotional experiences in service system transformation. These blind spots become particularly pressing in the public sector, as exemplified here by the child welfare setting, where inherent complexities often stem from the political balancing the diverse interests and goals of multiple stakeholders as well as those of broader publics (Skålen, 2022). Such a landscape often fuels emotionally-charged and conflicting experiences during systems change processes.

In response, we advocate for a more integrative and emotionally sensitive approach to service system transformation in service design. This can prevent false trade-offs and mitigate the unintended consequences of shifts accompanying the field's development. To address the disintegration of the service design literature that is driving these issues, we outline directions for intentionally integrating experiential and systemic approaches in future service design research. In particular, we call for service design research to embrace a more systemic view of emotional experiences, to build a more emotionally-attuned understanding of service systems, and to better connect theory and practice within research. We argue that this direction will more strongly support balanced ways of designing amid the ecologies of emotional experiences in service systems.

A systemic view of emotional experiences

The shift in actor focus identified in our analysis was linked to an underlying assumption that emotions are individual phenomena. While individuals indeed experience emotions, this assumption downplays the systemic setting within which these experiences occur and their relational nature. As mentioned earlier, emotion theory posit that a foundational function of emotions is to serve as signals that people use to navigate complexity (Scarantino, 2016). In essence, they form systemically, relying on context and social relations, making them especially pertinent to service design with systemic perspectives. We argue that adopting a more systemic perspective on emotions will better support service designers in comprehending and addressing the interplay of emotional experiences among multiple actors in service system transformation processes. This conceptualization of emotions stands in contrast to the motivational perspective of emotions employed in early service design research (see e.g., Cook et al., 2002; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2009), which aimed to enhance competitive

advantages by improving desirable experiences. This earlier perspective views emotions as responses to specific stimuli that motivate individual actions.

We propose a future direction for research and practice that addresses how the emotional experiences of multiple actors are interconnected during service system transformation. Example research questions include: How can service design approaches be adapted to incorporate the emotional experiences of other actors, and not just the emotional experiences of beneficiaries? How can the emotional experiences of multiple actors be addressed in service system transformation? One relevant perspective service design research that might benefit from integrating such a pursuit is sociological views on emotions, which suggest that an individual's emotional experience is influenced by the culture and social structures in which they are embedded (Lively & Weed, 2016).

An emotional view of service systems

The shift from focusing on individual experiences to examining actor configurations reveals another underlying assumption in the evolving literature: systems thinking requires zooming out. Our analysis shows that this assumption affects how practitioners utilize individual experiences from specific situations to drive essential system changes. We argue that this zooming-out perspective overlooks the ways in which systems manifest in specific situations, at small scales, and within the entangled experiences of actors in those situations. Addressing this blind spot could enhance service systems by better integrating emotional experiences.

To address this, we propose that future service design research explores the emotional aspects of service systems, specifically examining the role of emotions in transformation processes. Potential research questions include: How do individuals experience the configuration of service systems in specific situations, and how can these insights be effectively used for system change? What new or adapted concepts can aid service designers in addressing the emotional aspects of service systems? How can emotional experiences be effectively communicated among actors in service design processes? In these inquiries, it can be beneficial to integrate perspectives from ecological psychology, which offer insights into how individuals continuously adapt to and impact their environment, opening for unpacking of the systems of emotions at play (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jason, 2016).

Understanding the Experiential Complexities of Service Design Practice

In response to the challenges encountered by practitioners, we contend that future service design research should embrace more embodied, situated, and practice-based inquiries into service design for service system transformation. Such inquiries are essential to complement and enrich existing theoretical frameworks, providing insights derived from the practical navigation of intricate dynamics in systems change as they are experienced. The shift from practice-based to theory-driven research in the developing literature exposes an underlying assumption of meeting more complexity with more theory. However, on-the-ground navigation of emotional aspects of transformation processes is central to what makes service design complex. Consequently, a contradiction arises: in efforts to capture complexity, the predominant theoretical focus in recent service design research overlooks obstacles arising in practice and fails to support practitioners in their action-oriented approach to transformation. Moving forward, we urge service design scholars to employ practice-based approaches, such as research through design, action research, and ethnographic methodologies, in combination with theoretical inputs to explore the implications of emotional systems within service design practice. Here, we

highlight the value and importance of abductive approaches that integrate both theory and practice (Redström, 2017).

By engaging in such on-the-ground learning, service design research can more effectively experiment with practical strategies for addressing the emotional aspects of systems. Aguirre-Ulloa and Paulsen (2017) offer an example of such an effort in the current literature, where they used research through design to involve multiple actors in adapting conventional gigamapping techniques to better understand the emotional aspects of relationships and hierarchies in service systems through tangible materials. While most of the current service design methods that touch on emotions, such as empathy maps or user journeys, tend to focus on emotions in specific service situations, there is a need to follow such dynamics over longer periods of time and across system settings, especially when aspiring toward transformation. Other research questions that this focus opens-up include: What approaches need to be developed for service designers to attend to emotions beyond the insight phase, for example, during prototyping or implementation work? What skills do service designers need to facilitate co-design processes when participants express conflicting emotional experiences? What ethical considerations are necessary when service designers engage with multiple actors' emotions? How can service designers appropriately address these ethical issues in their work?

A potential opportunity for service design development through these inquiries involves drawing from fields that, in addition to offering systemic theories, have also developed systemic practices. One example of such a field that addresses complex emotional and relational dynamics in a systemic manner is family therapy. Through their ways of strategically intervening (Haley, 1976) or making the structures (Minuchin, 1974) for emotional experiences (Stavrianopoulos et al., 2014) among multiple family members visible, such practices can inspire new, on-the-ground ways of practicing service design in service system transformation.

Conclusion

This article examines critically the developments in service design literature to hold it accountable for the struggles service designers face when working with the emotional aspects of service systems transformation. In doing so, this research fosters more deliberate considerations of the relationship between theory and practice within the field. Based on our findings, we call for future research and development of service design practice to better integrate emotions and systems and more closely connect theory and practice when working with the aim of service system transformation. By pursuing this direction, we contend that service design will more successfully fulfill its promises of promoting equity, participation, and sustainability in society.

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