

Toward an Anthropology of Services

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Abstract

This paper proposes an anthropology of services with implications for service science and design. Contemporary services are often presented as a rupture with previous economic regimes such as manufacturing, a discontinuity that allows services to be conceptualized as a professional domain. We argue instead that services have long characterized the human condition and that they are always embedded in local contexts. An anthropology of services explicates these social contexts to develop more varied and grounded approaches to service encounters, notions of co-production and co-creation, value propositions, and service systems. Paradoxically, an anthropology of services draws attention to the conceptual and methodological messiness of service worlds and in doing so it contributes to expanding our understanding of the variety of services, the limits to their conceptualization as objects of design, and the possibilities for intervening in and around them to contribute to human betterment.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, service concepts, human condition

Introduction

Many of the concepts that have been developed to distinguish services and service innovation from products and their design (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2003; Teboul, 2006) are both alluring and deeply problematic when viewed through the lens of anthropology and practice approaches (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 2006) more generally. The notions of service encounter, touch points, co-production, and co-creation take us immediately to the realm of interaction, conversation, and dialogue – concepts very familiar to those schooled in anthropology and those who look beyond the individual to understand the meaning and motivation of human actions. Value propositions in the service research parlance often stand in for the meanings that service encounters have for the participants which raises questions about what is not accounted for or acknowledged in descriptions of services that rely on cost benefit calculations for rationale or motive (Spohrer & Maglio, 2006; Alter, 2008; Basole & Rouse, 2008; Vargo et al., 2008). Recent formulations that combine services into service systems find resonance with notions in anthropology of holism, functionalism, and

structuralism and equally open the door to many of the same critiques that have been levied against anthropological views of systems as bounded unities (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Segal & Yanagisako, 2005; Bubandt & Otto, 2010). Finally, service dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2008) which has been proposed as an alternative to economic characterizations of services as distinct from and secondary to products directs attention to networks tied together by actions and interactions that co-create value. The focus is on service as “a process of doing something for another party,” with emphasis on relationships, instead of transactions narrowly defined. Here too there is a resonance with the anthropological focus on enactments and performances.

Anthropology also calls upon us to address fundamental questions about design as a human activity as it relates to services. The field of service design is still relatively new and growing and for the most part it has adopted concepts and strategies from product design (Holmlid & Evenson, 2007), sometimes without fundamentally questioning whether assumptions made about products and their design transfer easily to services. As user centred design firms and departments within larger enterprises shift to emphasize service design (Evenson, 2005; Kimbell, 2009; Strickdorn & Schneider, 2010; Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Polaine et al., 2013), the focus often continues to presuppose a designed object. However, there are new challenges for service design, which are tied to the fact that services are more than the objects (technologies, tools, artefacts, physical spaces) that enable them. Since services include intangible elements that manifest through interactions between providers and recipients, questions are raised about our ability to control service outcomes, the limits of intentionality in design, the status of ‘unintended’ consequences, and the role of the designer qua designer in service design.

These conditions, we argue, open a space for an anthropology of services that can contribute to understanding both how services are affecting everyday lives and institutions, and how services can contribute to human betterment. The purpose of this paper is to explore the space that an anthropology of services might occupy. It proceeds by first grounding service worlds (Bryson et al., 2004) within a larger understanding of the human condition (and its diversity) which is a primary domain of anthropology. Second, it provides an overview to some basic service concepts and how they are both problematized and enriched by anthropology. Third, we discuss the essential ‘messiness’ of service worlds that stands in stark contrast to the clear representations of services that are often encountered in the service literature. Finally, we foreshadow some of the issues that we believe an anthropology of services should address.

The Human Condition and Contemporary Service Worlds

Services can be understood from a broader, anthropological perspective, as part of the human condition that existed long before there was a formal service sector. Part of the human condition and a basic way humans adapt involves providing services to one another. Services broadly construed have always characterized societies. For example, shamans and herbalists have long provided healing services and artisans have offered services such as boat making, decorative painting, or flint knapping. While service worlds are seemingly new, they are also firmly grounded in a human past where services were fundamental to human adaptation and to the organization of societies. From this perspective, humans have always inhabited service worlds, although these worlds have taken very different forms throughout human history. Today as in the past, people live in service worlds. The services within these worlds are seldom clearly bounded and precisely because they are embedded in social

institutions and the wider practices of society, they are difficult to clearly demarcate. For example, universities provide the service of education, but they simultaneously provide dating services by bringing together potential romantic partners. A failed university course may be viewed as successful if the right partner is found, although it is unlikely that official university descriptions would list this service.

The interactions, transformations, and meanings that characterize services accordingly require understanding them in the variety of social contexts where they are performed through people's day-to-day practices. If we take this broader view of services as deeply entangled in social life then many of the assumptions and limitations of contemporary conceptualizations of services are uncovered and new directions for how to affect service worlds are identified. The grounding of service worlds in the human condition is not simply an academic exercise, but a practical one that enables broader descriptions of services, viewing them integral to societies, including non-western ones. In so doing the scope of alternatives is expanded and the consequences services have on how people live is brought into focus.

Value more than cost benefit

As we examine the human condition we realize that services cannot be described simply and unproblematically in terms of 'value propositions' expressed as economic transactions between individuals or firms. Services figure prominently in context of human adaptation through the millennia and across cultures where value is fashioned at the interface between people and social institutions. Value infuses all that humans do rendering it irreducible to economic value propositions alone. Instead services only make sense and are comprehensible in relation to particular social contexts. Value is not intrinsic to the service, but must be understood in relation to broader societal concerns. Service transformations or outcomes are neither equally comprehensible nor similarly valued in different societies. For example, an expedition to the top of Mount Everest may only be valued among populations where people value risk to individuals. In a related way, massages given to people with a history of injury, for example athletes, will be valued differently than by those who seek stress reduction or relaxation.

Services perform larger social purposes beyond the immediate and individual benefit gained by the recipient or provider. For example, partaking in particular services can mark membership in certain categories of people. Attending an opera can indicate a kind of sophistication and designate association with a particular 'class' of people. Similarly, attending a gun show can reinforce and denote certain political commitments. As we look to understand and participate in designing services, we need to see the broader societal implications that attend the growth of the service economy, including what we value not only as individuals, but as a society.

Multiple perspectives

In addition, the 'value' of a service will depend on characteristics of those benefiting from the service and their active participation in enacting the service (Edvardsson et al., 2011). The perspectives of the people involved in services matter since it is they who define the interactions and encounters that characterize the service and the value that is created. Reducing the definition of a service to a single one agreed upon by all participants is unnecessary and often misleading. A rich literature in the social construction of technologies (Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Kline & Pinch, 1996; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) has shown how, despite the intentions of designers, their material creations are assimilated and reworked by users. Kline & Pinch (1996, p. 765) write, "...the use of an artifact or system has not only resulted in unforeseen consequences, but that users have helped to shape the artifact or

system itself.” Bricks may have been designed to be mortared into walls, but generations of students have stacked them to support wobbly book shelves. Designers may decry these ‘repurposings’ but they are nonetheless ubiquitous – so too with services. There is no privileged definition of the constituents of a service and participants will make of them what they will, despite pleas for consensus.

Shifts in where services performed

Anthropology has long understood that human societies do not stand still. Earlier notions of fixed, unchanging ‘cultures’ of indigenous peoples have given way to the realization that change (which should not be read as unilinear progress) is a constant. Change is always a part of the human condition. If we look at how activities in families have changed under modernity and over time (Harrell, 1997), we can see shifts in the services performed by and for families. While many of the services provided by families are not described in the contemporary language of services, they reveal a human past characterized by rich and complex services long before services were placed in an industrial sector and deemed the object of professional design and marketing. In effect, people performed services for each other in families that now are performed elsewhere and marketed as services. For example, there was a time when it was essential to be in a family in order to procure goods and have access to meals. Today there has been a huge shift in how provisions (e.g. clothing and household goods) are procured (through complicated supply chains) and increasingly meals are being provided not by family members but by fast food chains and grocery store takeout. The implication is that services in the context of the expanding service economy should be understood not so much as reflecting a change in what it takes to get on in the world, but as an expansion in the marketization and of services and in the ways technology reworks divisions of labour. As such services might better be analysed less as distinctive activities (e.g. meal preparation, job training) than as activities occurring in specific social, technological, and economic contexts.

Service Concepts

Many of the concepts that have been developed to help understand services have resonance with anthropological perspectives. Because services require that we pay attention to the interactions that people and organizations have with each other and with the material world, our understanding of services can be enriched by a critical assessment of contemporary service concepts through the lens of anthropology. Of particular resonance with anthropology are the concepts service encounter, co-production and co-creation, and service systems. We will briefly discuss each of these concepts and provide a critical reflection on them from the perspective of anthropology, exploring what might be missing or overlooked when these concepts are evoked to describe contemporary service worlds.

Service encounter

Shostack (1985, p. 243) defines service encounter as “a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service.” These interactions include with the physical facilities as well as the people involved in delivering the service. Clatworthy (2010) more recently adds, “Each time a person relates to, or interacts with, a touch-point, they have a service-encounter.” Without diminishing the usefulness of the service encounter concept, we need to ask a set of prior questions; why do some of encounters or touch point interactions get labelled as constituents of a service; for what reasons; and with what consequences? It is overly limiting to label as a service only those encounters that involve the exchange of money

or that imply a formal institutional relationship as between a government and its citizens. Clearly, a service is rendered when a friend gives another a ride to the airport or a family experiencing a loss is comforted by neighbours. As we saw with shifts in the services performed in and by families, services need not be restricted to encounters that involve monetary exchanges. Once we relax the requirement of a financial or institutional transaction, the space of interest expands to include social encounters of all kinds, including those occurring in the emerging world of what has been called the sharing economy (Belk, 2013).

The concept of service encounter as defined in the much of the service literature also focuses attention on the individual, often overlooking the important role social context plays in shaping the encounter and defining possibilities for action and interaction. People come to service encounters with expectations that are learned through their experiences and those of others. This makes service encounters understandable to them. Some of the failures in providing quality healthcare services for example stem from a lack of understanding of recipients' social and cultural contexts, including the role other family members and the larger community play in health related activities (Saha et al., 2008). King et al. (2007) show how managing and treating coronary artery disease for First Nation people in the Americas is influenced by the relationship patients have with their ethnic community, this in addition to individual socio-demographic characteristics. The service encounter is best understood in relation to what it means to be a member of and participate in a particular society or social group.

Co-production and co-creation

One of the fundamental characteristics used to distinguish services from products is the inseparability of service production and consumption. As Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry (1985) have argued, because services are simultaneously produced and consumed, they position the service recipient in an intimate relationship with the production process. In essence service recipients become co-producers of the service as they mobilize knowledge and other resources in the service process. Later Vargo & Lusch (2008) made a distinction between co-production and co-creation where co-creation is not focused so much on the production process, but on the outcome of the service and the value that results for both provider and recipient. Customers or service recipients are viewed as the co-creators of value because their actions affect service outcomes and the attending value received by provider and recipient. In this sense service recipients along with providers are both co-producers and co-creators of services and their outcomes. More recently Vargo & Lusch (2011) have stressed the interchangeability of provider and recipient roles, choosing to use the "more abstract designation" of actor-to-actor relationships.

But if we accept that services are defined and valued in social contexts, then precisely because services are co-productions, people must learn how to participate in service encounters by identifying characteristic elements of the service. Part of being a competent member of society involves learning how to perform. This can include such things as when members of post-colonial societies are taught how to present themselves as good hosts for different categories of tourists (Hall & Tucker, 2004) or when Latinos are trained to perform appropriately as Benihana chefs (Hirose & Kei-Ho Pih, 2011). The 'co' in co-production and co-creation often conceals the complexity of provider-recipient relations, including the unequal character of some of these partnerships. An anthropology of services insists that these complexities be acknowledged and understood in order that we might transform these relationships to achieve societal or community aims that go beyond the immediate outcome or value delivered by the service.

Additionally, because services are enacted by people who participate in different institutions and lifestyles and bring different expectations to the service encounter, their role in the service process varies. As others have noted this introduces a significant element of unpredictability into services and service outcomes (Bitner et al., 1997; Grönroos, 2011), which argues for the need to recognize a level of openness and modesty in the ability to definitively define and specify services or to design them.

Service Systems

Services have been characterized as best understood as part of service systems where people, technology, internal and external service systems are connected via value propositions, and shared information (Spohrer & Maglio, 2010). In the service literature, service systems often are described as existing in the world waiting to be discovered by service researchers. Their reification often brings with it an assumption of a bounded entity, the service system, where what's inside and outside the system is to be revealed through study. Agency is often granted to service systems as for example when Vargo et al. (2008, p. 146) state, “service systems engage in exchange with other service systems to enhance adaptability and survivability, thus co-creating value for—for themselves and others.” But here too a set of prior questions need to be asked; where do service systems come from; why are they conceptualized as wholes, why are some components (entities) of the service system called out and others for all practical purposes remain invisible?

While there is comfort in the notion of a service system in that it suggests that the service can be the object of scientific inquiry and can be described and engineered. However the system metaphor breaks down when it neglects to acknowledge the emergent quality of social life. Because services (like social life) are open and fragmentary, the ability to specify design requirements and directly tie those requirements to desired outcomes is imperfect. This in turn suggests that the unity of control and meaning that allows designers to convert intentions into designed ‘products’ is constrained in important ways. This is not to claim that services are random or unstructured, only that they deviate from how formal systems operate. Services are less designed and more assembled from fragments of practices, institutions, lifestyles, technologies, and networks.

The talk of service systems can be misleading as it fails to address where the systems come from and what training is needed to see them. In addition, it leaves unaddressed the question of whether or not everyone will define particular service systems in the same way. And if not, then in what ways are service systems actively constructed by those who study and design them? One of the risks of characterizing services as systems, is that what is *not* included in descriptions of the service system will in fact affect outcomes. While unplanned outcomes are inevitable, service systems’ discourse can give a false sense of completeness, inhibiting critical reflection on the ways the system as delimited has silenced some voices. And moreover by emphasizing the ability to engineer service systems to be efficient and effective as systems, the impact on the lives of people whose concerns fall outside boundaries of the system can easily be overlooked. For example, in efforts to make healthcare services more efficient and effective from the perspective of insurance companies, hospitals, healthcare providers, as well as some patients, their impact on cultural minorities may not be recognized because their particular life worlds fall outside the system engineered for efficiency.

Messiness of Service Worlds

The world is far messier than the concepts we use to impose order would suggest. There is a gap between the messiness of reality and how we think about the challenges and opportunities to understand and design for service worlds. Our interest in service design reflects the human desire to shape the world. However, the complexity of services, their ubiquity and pervasiveness, makes them difficult to design, at least in any familiar meaning of design.

The material and immaterial

People have always lived in social worlds that are simultaneously material and immaterial and they have always been engaging each other to create things, ideas, and interactions. It is only recently that the things we make and do together have been framed as goods or services, and together as products. Societies have always been assemblages of both the material and the immaterial – rendering what we today distinguish as goods or services as inextricably entangled. A nomadic hunter living in the desert of southern Africa plays a flute crafted by his uncle to entertain families gathered around the campfire after a successful hunt (Lee, 1979). This scene could be described as constituted by services; the service of the uncle who designed and built the flute, the service of the musician who performed under the evening sky, the service of the hunters who killed the game and butchered it for distribution. This scene also could be described in terms of the goods that were exchanged, the flute perhaps given to the nephew at a key juncture in his life; the meat allocated according to long standing rules. The record of the human past and of those contemporary societies who participate only peripherally in the so-called service economy remind us that the human experience and the meanings we derive from our interactions with each other and with things depend on specific sociomaterial arrangements (Suchman, 2007). It follows then that it makes no sense to unbundled services from goods or from the specific locales in which they are enacted.

Designing includes participating in a social context

Before there were designers, things were designed. Before there were users, things were used. Design like all activities is embedded in a social milieu. The notion of a user presupposes a particular relation to that which is used just as the notion of a designer presupposes a relation to a designed entity. But we know from an extensive literature on design-in-use (Henderson, & Kyng 1999; Aanestad, 2003; Redstrom, 2006) that the role of user and designer are not so easily demarcated. Problematizing the role of the designer extends the reach of design to include that which is constituted through ongoing social interactions (Clement, 1993). The conceptualization of services as co-productions and co-creations necessitates that service designers acknowledge and reflect on the limits of their role in design. Furthermore the institutional and organizational positioning of the designer with respect to that which is designed defines opportunities and constraints on participation in the service and as such in its ongoing design-in-use. Akam and Prendiville (2013, p. 31) make a similar point when they direct us to, “re-situate services as an organic, co-created process and see co-designing as a journey and process of transformation in how we design our world, and ourselves, with others.” An anthropology of services calls for an examination of the situated practices of designers and their relation to a broad range of actors who animate the service.

The sociality of services also reminds us that designers also participate in service worlds where they learn to see problems and opportunities—and construct services as their solution. They do not just discover services in the world that are then described and analysed, much like a natural historian. They participate in communities of practice with their own conventions, which are consequential to their ability to intervene in service worlds.

Likewise, what is designed—a set of symbols, rules, specifications, models—will be enacted through similar social processes. Thus the implementation of designed services, at least in a straightforward way, is dubious because our designs cannot specify all the salient adjustments and accommodations that will be made by differently positioned people as they enact and manage the service-in-use.

Recognizing that designers also participate in service worlds along with those they design with and for also has implications for how we understand the design process. Distinct starting and stopping points that often characterize the design process are typically lacking in service design. Despite the ubiquitous discourse of the importance of service innovation, the various elements from which services are built have histories and as such are less *de novo* productions than modifications to on-going flows of activity. As such the designer writ large is better understood as intervening in interactions and exchanges that are both enduring and partial.

Moving Ahead

While we argue that service worlds in general and service design in particular can benefit from an anthropology of services, much work remains. We propose to orient the steps ahead toward the following issues.

First, the anthropological record of documenting diverse ways of life can contribute to how we conceptualize and engage with services. This record allows us to better understand how specific services are consistent with or complementary to what has been learned about the human condition. By taking a long-term, historical look at services as part of the human condition, the scope of services for human betterment is expanded. By assuming that services past and present are embedded in a social context, we can simultaneously identify resources that the designer of services can draw upon while better recognizing the limits or constraints on any effort to design services. Proceeding here requires anthropologists to reassess the contributions of their discipline with an eye to teasing out the implications for services and then to develop ways to make the results accessible and useable for designing services.

Second, anthropologists must engage service design as practitioners and not merely as external experts providing new data or as critics of the field. Anthropological perspectives on services push us to consider our own practices as members of communities of practice working within specific organizations and settings. This focus on the design of services is fundamentally about designers' relationships to other people, both real and imagined, past and present. The incorporation of anthropology here is about understanding the work practices of service designers and not just about the people for whom they are designing or the services they propose to implement. Here the emphasis is on what sorts of institutions are implied by conceptualizing service design in particular ways and in what manner those institutions include anthropologists.

Third, an anthropology of services argues that people, including designers, populate a world that has been largely designed and built by others and as such the scope for design is both ubiquitous and restricted. There is little that is created *de novo*. Accordingly, service designers must acknowledge and take into consideration that the people they are designing for are already tinkering with their own lives and are always participants in the work of design, although they seldom are viewed as creating the clearly bounded service systems that populate textbooks. If the world we populate is already largely constructed, then designing is

achieved in fragments and managing unintended consequences at the limits of efficacy and power are critical. The call here is for an anthropology of services that depicts everyday life and how it might be different than it is, how ordinary people design in ways that may be ubiquitous and yet unrecognized, how designers themselves enact the activities they believe constitute design, and what else they are doing to realize and manage their contributions to service worlds.

Finally, the question of values in designing is far more complex than that of finding a good value proposition in the business sense. As demands for high-quality services grow into new realms, business models that equate value with price will seem unnecessarily narrow. Of course, this is nothing new – services have always been more than the monetized variants we encounter in today's literature. Yet today services are frequently conceptualized from the perspectives of business and information technology professionals which limits the focus of design, presupposes the skills and knowledge deemed relevant to designing services, and often ignores how the costs and benefits of adopting new services are borne by different members of society writ large. The challenge here is for an anthropology of services to explicate the assumptions, concepts, values, and methods that today seem commonplace and to contribute a discourse that does not assume or naturalize a particular approach to what it means to design services.

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