

Staging for Empathy

How Service Design Can Change Today's Public Service Towards a More Empathic Version

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ABSTRACT

The public services today might not sufficiently answer to the needs of the public, as it were designed for the public a long time ago. The focus in this article is to explore how service design can change the existing public services to a more empathic version. This exploration starts with building an outline of policy design and service design as likely teammates and looking further into how and why empathy gives the service an increased value. Findings suggest that underlying social structures in the service systems must be taken into consideration in order to stage for empathy in public services. In addition, the service design approach provides methods and tools to tackle the challenge of gaining empathy with users.

KEYWORDS: service design, empathic design, social structures, public service, policy design, TPD4505

1. INTRODUCTION

It could be said that today's public services as transactional and permeated by bureaucracy. The language used in letters and statements might leave the readers with a feeling of not having been heard or seen by a human. Others might claim that public services are moving away from this and towards a more empathetic way of relating to its users. Can service design and empathic design be used in a process to change the way public services work today? Can looking at the social structures be sufficient for changing the public service to a more empathic version? Or is it necessary to go into the way public employees see the people they are supposed to help? These are the questions this article explores.

The public services we see today are a result of what the people before us created in response to what they needed at the time [1]. Due to this, the

processes and the structure of social services reflect the work to improve efficiency and save money more than it caters to today's citizen lives and needs. The welfare system in the UK, which Scandinavian system also builds on, originates from a report written by Beveridge in 1942 [2]. In his report he claims that in order to have a functional welfare system which benefits all equally, one must remain objective and keep a certain distance when prioritizing money. This may be what he saw as a need at the time, but according to Cottam [3], he has later written other reports expressing his regret as he saw what the result of his initial report was. Today's public services are somewhat transactional in nature and uses object-oriented reasoning. According to Ulloa & Paulsen [4], a shift towards focusing on relationships between people has begun, and the role of the service staff is shifting from provider of service to enabler of relations.

Helping people build their own capabilities makes them more independent and less in need of

social services. That is one of the goals the councilmen in Trondheim municipality are working towards in their “Municipality 3.0.” [5]. In their report they acknowledge that the municipality may, for too long, have thought they knew what is best for people, and are looking to include the public in improving the services to their benefit. One way to do this, is changing the structures and service systems. According to Cottam [3], today's structures leaves no choice but to keep as many as possible out of the system, a new way of working within the system should be found. The frames of the current system could be utilized to stage for more empathic encounters between the services and the public. Thinking long term for our society, changing the employee's view of the public seeking help and creating beneficial services could be the preferred future. There is, however, the question of scalability and costs, which may pose a greater challenge than expected.

This article aims to shed light upon the design of public services and explore how a preferred future can be built. It examines how service design, policy design and empathy together can illuminate social structures which shape public services, and how these can be used as tools to influence the way designers work towards a preferable future for public service design.

The exploration of the research questions above is going to be achieved by looking into the different topics before discussing them in the end. First the article will explain service design, policy design and service design in public services, before focusing on empathy in design and relational welfare. Case studies are then presented as examples of the design concepts in practice. Finally, the article finishes with thoughts on how to design public services in the future, considering what the discussions has revealed.

1.1 Method

The findings in this article is based on a literature review. The articles were found using search words such as “public service”, “service design in

public service”, “empathic design”. After an overview of the literature was obtained, the search was extended to include “policy design”, “compassionate design” and “relational welfare”. The databases used in the search were google scholar, Oria and ResearchGate. Additional sources, such as websites and seminar talks were used to get more recent examples on cases as well as practicing designers views on the topic. Articles referred to in this paper has the aim to explore practical uses of design in public services, what makes public services differ from private sector services, and how empathy plays a role in design. The timeframe of the articles referenced are from 2007 and until today, but the fields of service design, policy design and empathic design date back much further.

2 DESIGN OF PUBLIC SERVICES

A public service is provided by the government, and usually paid for by taxes. For instance, healthcare, public transport or removal of waste which is organized by the government and are to the benefit of the public. The focus in this article is on the services which directly involve people, like healthcare, caring for the elderly, and employment.

2.1 Service Design

Service design is often described as a human-centered, collaborative, creative, and iterative approach. There is usually a process involving several stakeholders, different methods and tools are used, such as ethnographic research, visualizing user experiences, idea generating, prototyping and user testing. Service design aims to include more than one or two aspects and perspectives of whichever service is designed or transformed [6]. One advantageous trait of service design is the use of representations to move the insight out of the designer's head and make them understandable to others. Representations meaning anything visual or tangible that can be shared and discussed. It can

be text, drawings, models made of different materials and so on [7]. Designers must also know when to use which methods. When designing for service innovation it is understood that including non-designers in the process is necessary for a collaborative design process, also known as co-design [8]. Increasingly, service design is seen as important for organizational change and transformation [9].

2.2 Policy Design

According to the Cambridge dictionary [10], a policy is “a set of ideas or a plan of what to do in particular situations that has been agreed to officially by a group of people, a business organization, a government, or a political party”. This means it must contain a set of fundamental elements, or an architecture, text and practices which can be observed [11]. This architecture, or elements, could be viewed as the design. The components and the qualities of the policy can be evaluated according to a variety of dimensions, in the same way a physical design can be evaluated in terms of aesthetics, user friendliness, sustainability, efficiency and so forth [10].

According to Sabine Juninger [12], “a policy in design terms is a guideline or framework that delineates the kinds of services and products, the relationships and the manner of the interactions that are possible, encouraged or discouraged within and by a particular human system.” A public policy can be defined as a series of decisions and actions taken by public authorities to resolve a public problem (e.g. pollution, unemployment, price instability, urban violence, gender inequality) which is identified as a priority on the political agenda [13].

Making policies in the public sector is complex, as there are a large number of dimensions to consider and designing them is a central concern of governance [14]. According to Howlett [15] policy design “entails the conscious and deliberate effort to define policy aims and map them instrumentally to policy tools that aim to

achieve those goals”, as he describes policy design in itself to be complex. Mark Considine [16] describes the policy designer as one who has the capacity to make decisions while looking at new possibilities and scenarios. Her emotional resilience, meaning that she is more comfortable with uncertainty and with different possibilities, is important to be able to respond creatively and with high level expertise to complex issues.

2.3 Design of Public Services

To see how service design can benefit the public sector, looking at the public services which require the most interpersonal skills, the “soft skills”, are interesting. This is because the complexity is clearest in the encounter between policy design and the most vulnerable users of services. This means healthcare, education, geriatric, - and social welfare.

Service design has been used successfully in services where a user can choose to participate in the service, but when it comes to public healthcare, education, geriatric services and so forth, the user often has little to no choice in receiving the service and often have to accept whatever care they are offered. Looking at how service design can be used anew is vital and considering whether the design processes used in public services differ from the ones effective in private services. [17]

Policy design has been recognized since the 1950's, and when it comes to governance and the public sector, its popularity has gone up and down through the years. [11]. Recently design thinking has increased in popularity as an alternative way of approaching policy making. Several articles critical of design has emerged arguing that design thinking in itself cannot run the innovation and transformation of the public sector. Clarke & Craft [14] claims policy design and service design together must create “public sector design”. They state that design thinking's shortcoming is firstly that it does not “know” anything about politics of the policy process. When dealing with “the public” there are too

many different stakeholders along the way when making a policy to choose one group as the users.

Policy design on the other hand, has more “knowledge” of the political aspects of public sector design, and are more open to bending for the constraints which it brings with it. Another shortcoming depicted by Clarke & Craft [14], is that design might not be as scalable as policy design, and because of design thinking’s process and time-consuming nature, the method is not always possible to use given the limitation at play in the capacity of government. What the article fails to mention is that service design and design thinking are quite different in several areas, and that service design includes many stakeholders and it looks at the system level. Service design can to a larger degree be scaled and focus as much on the forming of policy as implementing them.

Optimally, public sector design should consist of aspects from both service design and policy design to utilize the full capacity of both methods and to create satisfactory services in the public sector [14] those master products by adopting their features and consequently adopt the same style, as well as stepping into the same category. Think for instance of how military aircrafts lend their styles to commercial drones. Medical equipment could be called the master products of many current mobility devices, for instance walker and wheelchair models [22 as cited in 11]. Designers can skew the image of mobility devices by referencing new master products, and bring them closer to categories which are more suitable outside of a healthcare context, for instance sports equipment [11].

2.4 Social Structures

Social structures are the norms, rules, roles and beliefs which are shared and lasting. It is something not visible, but definitely something affecting the way we do things. In public service, these social structures could be created by policies which the staff has to follow, and then it

might evolve into norms and “how we do things”. It might also come from the staff themselves via their earlier experiences and their interactions with each other and the users of the services they provide.

Vink [18] proposes that these underlying social structures are what designers need to focus on when hoping to change any system or service. Vink [18] posits that an assumption we have, is that actors are different from the system they operate in. She argues that we are a part of the system, and we are the system that needs to be re-designed. She claims we need to look at our own behavior which is upholding the social structures and are putting public services in silos. Furthermore, if we do not consider the invisible structure, we are going to reproduce the same thing over and over.

What one can gather from this is that instead of solely examining the touchpoints in a service or the framing of the service that is created with policy design, one must also look at the underlying social structures. Imagine an iceberg. The service with the touchpoints and the stakeholders, and the context from the policies are the tip of the iceberg that we can see. Changing and designing these are certainly not wrong. However, if we do not pay attention to what's beneath the surface and look at how the underlying habits and structures can be changed, the processes might not change, and people can carry on with what they are used to doing.

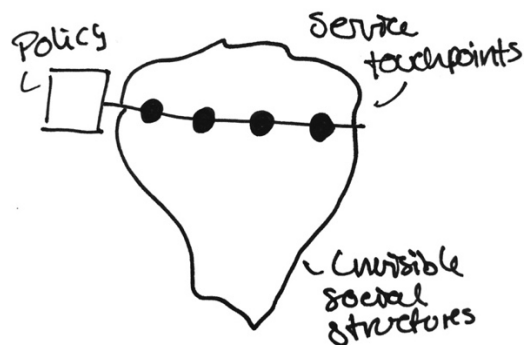


Figure 1: Iceberg model showing visible and invisible structures of a service. Inspired by Josina Vink [18]

Malmberg et al. [6] uses the context of healthcare to look at the social structures and how design can be used to shift them. The healthcare system has a substantial need for change as the system today will not be able to handle the amount of people in need of healthcare in the future. There is a lot of literature on why such a change is needed, but not a lot on how to support it within the system. Involving users and patients through service design may be one way to change the culture.

One way to shift the social structure in healthcare is to look at roles. The role of both medical personnel and patients can be changed, where the patient's own knowledge and experience are treated equal to the medical personnel's knowledge. This way the new system becomes more user centered and co-creative, and the medical personnel become tools to give the best care possible instead of just doing what the rules say. In order for this to be successful, the personnel need to be highly competent and committed to their job, as well as develop the necessary interpersonal skills. This also makes the process more subjective, and the personnel needs to reflect on their own values and beliefs to preserve the quality of the relationship [6].

3 EMPATHY IN DESIGN

It is known that emotion and especially positive affect is associated with the performance of creative tasks [16]. A lot of literature exists which research the subjective bias of policy making. Instead of trying to keep the subjectivity out, might there be a way public services can benefit from the people making policies using their subjectivity? If the service staff or administration can use cognition to understand, respond and be creative in their jobs, it might not be a negative thing. [16].

3.1 Designing with empathy

McDonagh [19] defines empathy as 'the intuitive ability to identify with other people's thoughts and feelings - their motivations, emotional and mental models, values, beliefs, priorities, preferences and inner conflicts'. One might not be able to understand unless experiencing it oneself. Empathy differs from sympathy in the way empathy makes you feel what someone else might be feeling, whereas sympathy might be when you think and say you are sorry for someone else's loss.

To be empathic is to make an active attempt to understand another person's perspective, to be curious about their emotions and experiences and feeling with them. In that sense one can say as public service providers involve the public in the processes of policy making, they are being empathic. To make an effort to see thing from their perspective, and to include them in making decisions that affect their own future and quality of life is to exercise empathy.

Katja Battarbee [20] states that design is "shaping current situations into preferred ones". But what are these preferred situations? Designers often start their work by gathering information. The lack of information is rarely the problem, but rather from which point of view to look at the information. How do designers know what is most important, and why? According to Battarbee [20], this is where empathy comes in. Designers must align their point of view with that of those they are designing for, and to do this, empathy can be a helpful tool. Thus, when it comes to policy making in public services, empathy can be used as a method to find the preferred situation to design.

How does one proceed to gain this empathy? The methods for achieving insight and empathy with users might be confused with actually having

empathy. According to Battarbee, when you have empathy, it changes you. The way you think, feel, and act. Talking to users and interviewing stakeholders is not equal to having empathy. The changes that occur is what promotes feeling of connectedness and helpfulness, because it alters humans hormonal balance in favor of oxytocin [21].

So why is empathy not everywhere, in every service and relation? There are several things in us which might prevent empathy. People might fear being changed or influenced, be proud or rigid, or they might not think what others think are relevant. People might try to engage but be overwhelmed by emotions, and not be able to proceed with empathy. Battarbee refers to empathy as an “out-of-ego experience”, which implies that you leave your own point of view to experience someone else's, and then return to your own, influenced by the experience. To be able to do this, Battarbee claims it takes courage, confidence and self-control. The environment in which we work also has an impact on empathy. According to Battarbee, the workplace often expects a certain action done in a certain way and does not necessarily stage for empathy. This culture can be changed to actively stage for the expectation of empathy, for example in healthcare, as previously proposed by Malmberg et. al [6].

3.2 Relations

The relations between people are an important aspect of people’s lives and present in everything we do, also at work. A relationship is an authentic sense of belonging, a sense of connection to one another, and it is the bonds that we as humans have in our lives that encourage us to make changes [3]. When we think about making a change for the better there is almost always someone next to us that we think of, someone who supports us. That is the normal human instinct [3].

If the public services need employees with “soft skills” - to be empathic, listen and understand the

people we are talking to - it is interesting to look at relations between people. According to Ulloa & Paulsen [4] we need to move from object-oriented thinking towards relational thinking for many reasons. One is that as public services becomes more complex; their design must increasingly focus on the relationships between people. Another is that governments are transitioning from being passive deliverers of transactional services to enablers of relationships.

The UK's institute for Public policy Research highlights the importance of a 'relational government' that organizes public services on a two by two matrix, from simple to complex and from transactional to relational. We can categorize public services on a spectrum, those who rely on interpersonal social skills depend on the relation capacity of service providers and relational support from peers and family [22].

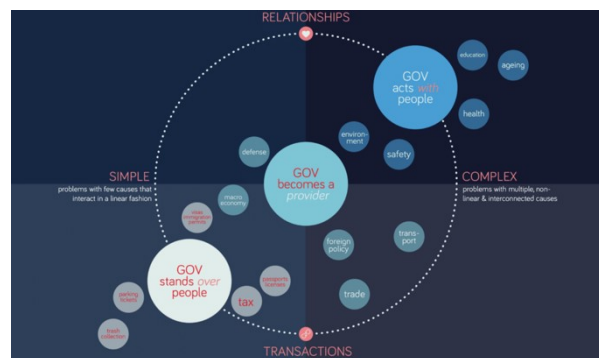


Figure 1: Spectrum to organize public services from simple to complex and from transactional to relational as seen by Ulloa and Paulsen [4].

3.3 Relational welfare

Relational welfare [3] fosters social capital and measures human potential and relationships rather than institutional reform and efficiency.

Norwegian municipalities are already interested in relational welfare and have started projects involving recipients of public services. According to Trondheim municipality, they are opening a center for relational welfare in cooperation with NTNU. They state that they might have thought

for too long that they know what is best for kids, and that youth and kids' upbringing are too important for the municipality to do it themselves. They have started attempting to co-create with researchers, citizens and the kids themselves in a project called "Stein, saks, papir" [5]. This might seem to imply that the municipality recognize a lack of empathy in their workplace culture, and that they are addressing the issue through relational projects. This makes the concept of relational welfare interesting and relevant today. NTNU has their own research group [23] focusing on the topic, and their definition is as follows:

"Relational welfare is a human-centered and collaborative approach premised on human rights, social justice and societal sustainable development. Relational welfare means that welfare is a resource that people co-create together, where personal and collective relationships and environments are placed at the center of development. Within this, the public's foremost mission is to build public value as a common good by supporting conditions that support all people to flourish and live a life, they have reason to value and the capacity to sustain. The purpose is to strengthen the resources, relationships and communities to create positive and sustainable life courses, now and in the future."

The welfare system does not have relations in them in the way earlier described as the human instinct would imply, because when the system was designed in the 50's the relations were purposefully designed out. It was as mentioned earlier thought to be best to remain transactional and objective when dealing with welfare. Relational welfare is based on relationships underpinned by technology. The systems today are about managing the people in the line, waiting to get help or those who are already in the system. Instead of keeping as many as possible out, the system needs to work alongside the people, with them, and ask them what they need and want to get their lives in order and have meaningful, purposeful lives [3].

4 CASE STUDIES

Service design in public services is not a new concept, and to learn from earlier projects can be key to find new ways of working towards preferred futures. By looking at actual experiences that designers have had when attempting to gain empathy, change workplace cultures and address public service issues, case studies offer the results of the practical application of design methods. Of course, each project has different designers, service staff and users, and are therefore somewhat unique, but there are similarities to be learned from. Moving on, two case studies from healthcare are first described. They are chosen on the basis of their goals, which was achieve a change in the way the service staff viewed their users. Following that, two projects based on relational welfare are described to give some practical insight to how it can be done.

4.1 Första linjen

A case study was conducted on a project called "First line" by Experio Lab in Sweden and involved a mental health clinic for young people. They used a "strategy of using tangible objects as a carrier for other "hidden" strategic activities when leveraging design to catalyze change in complex systems ". This means that they developed a new web service, and during the process also used design methods to change the staff's ways of working and thinking, without being explicit about it.

The project resulted in, at least temporarily, a change in ways of working catalyzed by involvement of staff members in the design team. Involvement of the user, which in this case was young people, within development of the new service was the key catalyst for shifting existing ways of working. It also shifted the way the employees saw the young people. As they were not there to seek help, the roles changed, and the employees were on the receiving end of help.

Afterwards the staff adopted design methods themselves and went out to schools to conduct workshops with the young people to make contact and deepen the staff's understanding of important issues in the young people's lives [9].

4.2 Chronically Involved

This is also a project conducted in Sweden, which involved patients and service providers in primary care such as nurses and doctors as well as administrators. The goal was to radically improve the care for patients with chronic conditions. The method they used was contextual interviews, and the staff went into the patient's homes to talk to them about how they experienced the care they were receiving. The staff found their view changed with the home visit, as they could see the home set up, smelling and feeling what it was like for the patients living there. They discovered their assumptions were wrong, and started viewing the patients more as friends, partners and colleagues. This in turn made the staff question their habits, and they wanted to change the way they communicated with their patients during medical appointments [8].

4.3 Circle and Backr

Circle is a program where elderly people can join, mainly those without many relationships in their lives. The more that join the better. The administrators use technology to set up meetings between the members and let them help each other, as well as having open meetings to get to know each other. After a while they see that the members start organizing themselves to help each other and no longer need the systems support. This also leads to them using less and less of the traditional services, as they have friends to help them. This program is not like other programs where volunteers are there to hang out with the elderly. With Circle genuine relationships might form because they can find people who they have things in common with and want to do the same things they do.

Backr is a program to help people build a network to help them find jobs. Most people find their jobs through friends or acquaintances, and people without a network has a hard time getting out of unemployment. This project put people together to create this network by themselves and focused on relationships instead of skills. The program set out to assist the participants in finding babysitters, get more confident or exploring new parts of the city. This was an iterative process and underpinned by technology. The program used the government job center to recruit participants and they gathered a group of people who were either employed, unemployed or in between jobs.

After two years, the program was evaluated by an objective party and the results were that 87% of the participants had made progress in being able to find a job, and 53% had found a job. The Backr program also lowered its costs by working with a group instead of individuals. [3] in [25].

5 DISCUSSION

This article aims to shed light upon design of public services and explore how a preferred future can be built for the users of public services with an empathic point of view. The goal is to discuss how service design, policy design and empathy together can illuminate social structures that is shaping the way public services work. How can this have an impact on the way designers can work towards a preferred future for public service design?

Policy design offers a political, framing aspect to a service. It defines the context and boundaries. Compared to service design it offers more insight into the policies and rules of government. Service Design offers the involvement of users and looking at all of the touchpoints and stakeholders in a service. Design thinking offers a different way of looking at problem solving than the "normal" way.

However, looking at the service and the touchpoints might not be enough. One can design an improved touchpoint, stakeholder involvement might be rearranged, but as long as the social structures and the "way things are done" are not changed or uprooted, the new service might produce the same result as the old. If the people involved in the service does not have a new way of seeing things, they might not have enough incentive to change the way things are done. It might seem they need to see the people using the service or the stakeholders from a new perspective.

Designing with empathy makes sure the service is user driven and offers the mindset of stepping into the user's shoes. Staging for empathy in public services may improve the user's experiences, even after projects are done. This is because the mindset and the frames of working for the staff may change towards a more empathetic way of treating users.

To be able to design with empathy towards the underlying norms and structures in a workplace, design offers specific tools. As the case studies shows, ethnographic research and contextual interviews are efficient ways to step into the user's shoes, and experience what they are experiencing. In the service design cases involving healthcare, to be put in the patient's positions changed the care staff's view on their patient and they could see the way they communicated needed to change. If this had not been done, a new service might not have changed their minds on its own.

In the Första linjen-case, the change of view and ways of doing things were done inexplicitly during the process of creating and implementing a digital service. When designers are not explicit in what their goals with a project are, it might destroy the trust if they are found to be concealing something. All in all, the project still shifted the power between user and provider during the project. The same changing of views happened as with the Chronically involved case, both the staff and the young people had their

views changed after the project was finished. The young people ended up seeking counsel and the staff saw young people as a resource. In both cases the designers and staff used methods to gain insight and empathy into their users lives, and the way to know they actually achieved this empathy, is that their thinking and acting changed.

Relational welfare seems to be on a more abstract level, meaning it is further away from reality. It is often smaller projects being executed which proposes entirely new systems instead of working within the current. It is therefore unknown how this will scale, and there is a danger of it not being as cost cutting as it might seem to the government. People becoming independent and helping each other are a positive, but how realistic it is on a scale as large as a whole country, is yet to be determined.

Combining several areas in design seems likely to be a positive way forward in public service design. Policy design provides frames and context while keeping in mind the political aspects. Service design provides the larger aspect including stakeholders as well as toolkits to co-create with users, designers and staff. Teaching staff about design thinking and service design methods might be the start of a changing mindset and focusing on empathic encounters with the people the staff are there to help might change their view even further. This may destabilize the way they think, feel and act towards their users, by having their place of work staging for empathy.

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