

Is the ‘user’ term adequate? A design anthropology perspective on design for social welfare services

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Abstract

During the last decades, the focus in design has shifted from being object-centered to focusing on design for human experiences. Moreover, service design is expanding design practice from being a project with a finite material deliverable to becoming a process of ongoing change within a social context. Although service designers are increasingly considering people involved as ‘partners’ or ‘co-producers’, the term ‘user’ remains widely applied. This article aims to explore how the term ‘user’ fits within the context of design for public services. It argues that a design anthropology perspective can help designers become more aware of people as actively shaping services and that the ‘user’ term in public welfare services could be reconsidered through concepts such as contextualization, human-centeredness and design as grown. Designers might then facilitate for infrastructures where design happens through people’s participation in services, rather than services pre-designed for ‘consumption’. In light of the shift toward human-centered design, this exploratory review builds on a timely question and discusses concepts and considerations that are relevant for design researchers and practitioners alike.

Keywords: User-centered design, human-centered design, service design, social welfare, design anthropology

1 Introduction

Service design is becoming increasingly known within the field of public services as a driver for innovation and organizational transformation grounded in a user-centered approach (King & Mager, 2009). The notions of ‘user involvement’ and ‘user-centeredness’ are relatively new to most public services, like the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), but have been well known within the design field since the 1980s (Kim, 2014; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). However, as the design field takes on more complex challenges, a ‘user-centered’ approach might not address the high complexity of relationships between people and technology (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Designers are now taking a more holistic ‘human-centered design’ approach with a ‘collaborative design’ process (Akama & Prendiville, 2013; Lee, 2012). Designers are moving from designing objects to co-creating with people (Polaine, Løvlie, & Reason, 2013; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), and they are

increasingly seen as facilitators in an ever-lasting iterative process (Akama & Prendiville, 2013).

Service design emerged in the early 2000s (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Even though much of the underlying knowledge comes from the business and technology side (Akama, 2009; Gasson, 2003), a lot of critique has come from precisely these disciplines – highlighting service designers’ ignorance of implementation and measurement of results (Bechmann, 2010). On the other hand, voices from anthropology emphasize the importance of context and complexity in service design. According to Blomberg and Darrah (2014), service designers often are adopting concepts and strategies from product design, without questioning whether fundamental assumptions from one field are directly applicable to the other. The user term risks being such a concept. When transferred to design for public services, it leads to several paradoxes.

1.1 Structure and method

This article explores how the term ‘user’ fits within the context of design for public services, highlighting why this term can be problematic in design for public welfare services. To illustrate such a service, examples from a design project in collaboration with the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) are presented. The article looks at the background for the ‘user’ concept in design and in public services. Finally, it discusses implications that design anthropology can have on designers’ understanding of the ‘user’ in social welfare services. The article is based on an exploratory literature review of articles and books in the fields of design, sociology and anthropology. Literature searches were mainly conducted by assessing and cross-referencing scientific papers available on Google Scholar and through Bibsys.

1.2 Definition of services

This article adopts an anthropology approach to *services*, seeing them as an entangled “process of doing something for another party”, rather than mere economical transactions (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014). Services only make sense in relation to a social context, are not easily demarcated, and embedded in social institutions. According to Blomberg and Darrah, services are fulfilling a larger social purpose than simply the immediate individual benefit of the recipient or the provider. This perspective resonates well with public welfare services. Several definitions of *service design* exist. This article stays close to the perspective of Oliver King, describing service design as a “collaborative process of researching, envisaging and orchestrating experiences that happen over time and multiple touch points” (King & Mager, 2009). A key characteristic of services is that they are *co-produced* by the people involved (King & Mager, 2009).

2 The ‘user’ in design

Historically, the people making the products and the people using them were closely related to each other, within time and space. With the industrial revolution and globalized markets, the people using products and the ones producing them became more distanced from one another (Veggel, 2005). Mass production made it possible to fully conceive and plan a design before producing it. Thus, production and use – and design and production – became more separated, leaving a gap of insecurity when trying to understand the ‘users’. With Modernist movements, the idea of social responsibility became increasingly important in design, as a

reaction to decorative traditions (Redström, 2006). Design became a matter of designing the ‘use’ of objects. During the last decades, there has been a shift from a rational, systematic design approach towards a more human-centered one, which has its roots in mainly two directions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008): The user-centered design approach within the field of human-computer interaction (HCI) (Kim, 2014) and the participatory design movement relating to the democratization of the workplace in Scandinavia (Bjögvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2012).

2.1 The ‘user’ in user-centered design

With the emergence of HCI in the 1970s it became more common to focus on human aspects in computer technology (Kim, 2014; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). These early approaches to human-centered design were linear and logical processes with specific steps to follow, and with a focus on usability (Lee, 2012). According to Jung-Joo Lee, people were in these steps reduced to *users* of technological systems, where the design goal was to make the interaction between people and systems efficient. Three periods of HCI can be outlined.

This first period can be characterized as the *user interface* phase (Kim, 2014). Here, the approach to involving people was quite narrow, and the research was often based on studying specific computer scenarios with one single ‘user’. The concept of ‘user-centered design’ became widespread by the 1990s (Kim, 2014; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). In this second period, *user interaction* became increasingly important, exploring how a ‘user’ could respond to the user interface, and get a meaningful reaction (Kim, 2014). This more holistic approach was laying the ground for a focus beyond efficiency and strict usability. The third period, which can be termed *design for human experiences*, is characterized by a focus on people’s perspective, holism and strategy (Kim, 2014). Today’s design for human experiences goes beyond the mere ‘user experience’, because experiences are complex and encompass a wide range of products and services, such as physical space and web-based communication.

2.3 The ‘user’ in participatory design

With the rise of automated processes, Scandinavian democratization movements in the 1970s were stressing the importance of letting the workers have their say in how their workplace should be shaped by participation and joint decision-making (Bjögvinsson et al., 2012). Compared to the HCI approach based on utility testing, the direction of participatory design has a tradition of seeing the user as a partner, rather than a subject (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

In mapping the landscapes of human-centered design, Sanders and Stappers show how both the tradition of participatory design and user-centered design can be encompassed by human-centered design (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The two concepts are mapped on the basis of their approach to design as *for*, *with* or *by* the ‘user’. User-centered design is characterized by having an expert mind-set, designing for ‘users’ (Sanders, 2008). Typically, data is collected and analyzed to guide the design process by specific principles, to meet the ‘needs’ of ‘users’. On the other side of the scale, the participatory approach favors design with and by the ‘user’, and includes concepts such as co-design, co-creation and co-production. Here, people are actively involved as partners in the design process.

2.4 Paradoxes of the ‘user’ in service design

As seen in the two previous sections, both the HCI field and the participative tradition are moving towards a mutual emphasis on design for people's experiences. Within the field of service design, people are no longer seen as mere sources of information, but they are increasingly involved in the design process and referred to as stakeholders, actors, participants and partners. But mostly however, designers are still talking about 'users' or 'the user *as partner*' (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). There is a risk of transferring the 'user' term directly from product and interaction design to service design without considering how this might lead to a language full of paradoxes. At least three challenges that may follow when speaking of 'users' within the field of service design have been identified.

First, *user-centered design does not equal human-centered design*. Still, designers tend to mix user-centered design with human-centered design, that is talking about 'users' although they claim to have a human-centered design approach with participatory methods. But as underlined by Redström, 'humans not users are the ones inhabiting the world' (Redström, 2006). In theory, the 'user' only exists when there is an object to be used. As such, one can argue that a user-centered approach is per se an object-centric approach, and not a human-centered one. Second, *a service is not an object*. A service is not a singular object in itself, but created in the encounters, interactions and relations between people, objects and systems in time and space (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014). This idea of intangibility, mutuality and co-production questions whether it is possible to 'use' a service. Third, *a service is not a pre-designed entity*. However, as services become more complex, there has been a need to align the overall experience that encompasses its different functionalities (Kim, 2014). But as an experience is subjective, it cannot be designed. What is possible however, is to design the components of a service and to plan the relationship between them so that a service is likely to evoke certain aspects of an experience in people. Service design is in that case closely related to design *for* human experiences, rather than user experience design. The active role of people in creating a service questions whether we can distinguish between 'users' and 'designers' of services.

3 The 'user' in public sector

As in the field of design, the understanding of the user concept in public sector has evolved and changed during the last decades. There has been a shift from seeing people as passive receivers of welfare to 'active users' and 'welfare actors' (Sandbæk, 2001; Storø, 2003; Williams, Popay, & Oakley, 1999). The following chapter briefly describes the evolution of the user term in the public sphere. This creates a background for discussing differences between private and public services, and to what extent the 'user' term is adequate in social welfare services.

3.1 Consumerist and democratic traditions

The concept of user involvement in the public sector has evolved from two different angles: the 'consumerist' tradition and the 'democratic' tradition (Langergaard, 2011; Sandbæk, 2001; Williams et al., 1999). The welfare state was object of criticism from both the left and right wing in politics during the 1970s in western countries like the USA and Great Britain (Langergaard, 2011; Williams, 2001; Williams et al., 1999). The Right claimed that it was too bureaucratic, inefficient, and that it should be more focused on individual choices, while the political left stressed its power over people, with their lack of possibility to influence it.

The consumerist perspective linked to the Right was calling for freedom of choice and the public as a *provider* (Langergaard, 2011). It was influenced by the private sector, and saw innovation as a key to develop flexible public services, responsive to the individual needs of the ‘user’, like customer-centered business (Langergaard, 2011; Williams, 2001). On the other hand, the democratic tradition stressed the importance of letting the users have a say, as it was anchored in the movement of empowerment, both in individual cases and in collective political issues (Williams, 2001). Although they had different motivations, both the consumerist side and the democratic user movement were breaking with the traditional hierarchical model and were calling for a bottom-up approach. They emphasized the citizens as actors capable of articulating their own needs as active users in stead of passive recipients of welfare services (Langergaard, 2011; Eriksen, 1993).

3.2 Terminology for people in public services

From the different political ideologies, various terms have evolved to designate the roles of people (Eriksen, 1993). The development of ‘the active welfare subject’ puts an emphasis on the shift towards individual differences, personal experiences and agency, and in the British system, people are described as ‘active consumers’, ‘active wage earners’ as well as ‘active citizens’ and ‘users’ (Williams, 2001). Similarly, in the Danish system, citizens are described in terms of ‘consumer’, ‘active user’, and ‘co-producer’, and the responsiveness concept from private sector is exchanged by *collaboration* (Langergaard, 2011).

On the whole, people are increasingly seen as autonomic, creative individuals who are capable of being reflective and actively engaged in their own life (Williams et al., 1999). This has led to the notion of ‘actor’ (Sandbæk, 2001; Williams, 2001). Where ‘user’ describes a person in regard to her relation with a service, ‘actor’ is applied in a wider sense than ‘user’, also referring to the person’s life outside of the service (Sandbæk, 2001). However, all terms have their limits, and are applied to underscore different perspectives: ‘Client’ to underline the relation between the professional and the person seeking help; ‘user’ to give people more influence; and ‘actor’ to show the idea of people as acting individuals (Sandbæk, 2001).

3.3 Traditional and radical user participation

User participation in public sector can be divided into two types: the traditional model and the radical one (Solheim, 2001). The traditional model focuses on the *individual* case, stressing that the ‘user’ should have their say when discussing their own situation (Solheim, 2001). For example, if a long-term unemployed man consults an advisor, the advisor will not just tell him what to do, but let him give his point of view on the alternatives to achieve pre-determined objectives. The radical model, on the other hand, is more concerned with *collective* user participation (Slettebø & Seim, 2001; Solheim, 2001). ‘Users’ are seen as people who can influence the political processes to shape the services according to their needs, not only the decision-making in their individual case (Langergaard, 2011; Slettebø & Seim, 2001; Solheim, 2001). The radical model is criticizing the expert role (Solheim, 2001), as the user’s own experiences is an equally important source of knowledge (Aamodt, 2006; Storø, 2003; Williams et al., 1999).

3.4 Paradoxes of the ‘user’ in public sector

As private services often are seen as more responsive, innovative and customer-centered (Langergaard, 2011), it might be tempting to imitate them when designing for public services.

However, there are some fundamental differences between public and private services. Public services are inherently collective, as opposed to private services, and this influences the role of people and how designers are working with services. The following paragraph highlights three fundamental differences between private and public services.

First, the ‘user’ is not always right in public sector. Public services might be moving towards an ‘active user’ approach, but they are still *two-sided services* characterized by an asymmetrical power relation between the people working for the services and the other citizens (Slettebø & Seim, 2001; Solheim, 2001). On the one hand, the aim of welfare services is to help people, while on the other hand, people working for these services are managers of power and control, as they are expected to administer the collective resources of the welfare state in an efficient way (Sandbæk, 2001). Second, public sector is *not solely a provider* of services covering individual needs (Langergaard, 2011). Although the lack of flexibility might be seen as a weakness of public sector, bureaucracy represents a uniform model that embodies procedures to ensure values like equal treatment, justice and fairness. It does not privilege personal preferences. Third, public services are *not ‘consumable’*, as they rely on expectations about mutual responsibility and engagement (Langergaard, 2011; Storø, 2003). On the one side, the ‘welfare actor’ is responsible for her own life, having individual freedom, but equally a duty to actively engage in the service as a co-producer (Langergaard, 2011). Public services are paid for by collective resources, and unemployed people must therefore make the most out of these resources by being genuine job seekers (Vågeng et al., 2015).

4 The ‘user’ in design anthropology

We have now seen how concepts from sub-disciplines like product and interaction design cannot be directly transferred to service design, and how public welfare services are different from private services. This chapter aims at explaining how principles from design anthropology may change the perspective of the ‘user’ term when designing for public welfare services.

4.1 Design anthropology

Generally, the aim of anthropology has been to *describe* reality, to “produce generalizations and theorizations of human societies” (Otto & Smith, 2013), while design’s purpose has been to *transform* reality. Designers are concerned with creation, innovation and future making (Bjögvinsson et al., 2012). They translate abstract insights into tangible, material solutions (Otto & Smith, 2013). Design can be seen as a process of simplification, where a rich material is boiled down to a finalized product. As a contrast, the aim of anthropology is to “show how the world is richer and more complex than it is usually assumed to be” (Eriksen, 2004).

Design anthropology is an emerging academic field that combines theories and practice from the two disciplines (Gunn & Donovan, 2012; Otto & Smith, 2013). This new field represents a shift, as anthropology is not just about informing design, but about reframing it (Gunn & Donovan, 2012). An example is the use of ethnography, as it is not seen as just a method, but as a way of engaging *with* people as a source to transformation (Gunn, Otto, & Smith, 2013). The focus is shifted away from problem solving and towards engaging with people, where a problem is not always given (Gunn & Donovan, 2012). Design anthropology brings theory from anthropology into design practice, and vice versa (Gunn et al., 2013). It is concerned with the institutionalization of insights, and how these are made tangible (Gunn & Donovan,

2012). It explores how designers can work towards transformation without sacrificing depth of understanding and empathy (Otto & Smith, 2013), and how anthropology can become more directed towards change, not just description (Gunn et al., 2013).

4.2 Anthropological principles for service design

What happens then when the aim of design is no longer simple products but highly complex services that are entangled, ongoing processes of interactions between people, objects and technologies (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014; Akama & Prendiville, 2013)? Design anthropology focuses on central anthropological principles which may help designers gain a deeper understanding of design for public services. The following paragraph present three key perspectives from design anthropology, with the aim of discussing how they contribute to reconsider the ‘user’ term in design for public welfare services.

First, design anthropology stresses the importance of *contextualization*. Services are complex as they are intertwined in people’s life in a chaotic socio-cultural society (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014). Design deals with simplification in the translation of insights and anthropology might serve as a counterweight to this simplification (Eriksen, 2004). Also, with the focus on local life and the concept of cultural relativism, anthropologists argue that every culture has to be understood on its own terms. Second, anthropology is about understanding people (Eriksen, 2004), it is thus inherently *human-centered*. Several authors within the field of design anthropology are concerned about the ‘stickiness’ of object-centric approaches as designers are starting to work with services (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014). Or as Akama and Prendiville pertinently ask, “what is holding back service design from making a distinct departure from a product-centered to a socio-material human-centered framework?” (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). Third, design anthropologists see design as *continuously grown*, rather than built (Gunn & Donovan, 2012). This co-creation of services implies an ongoing process of transformation, which means that there is design during planning time but also ‘design in use’, referring to the active role of people in shaping the service in ‘use time’ (Bjögvinsson et al., 2012). When breaking the distinctions between designing, using and producing, the user goes from being a passive ‘consumer’ to a skilled practitioner of systems and products, learning as she goes along – the ‘user-cum-producer’ (Gunn & Donovan, 2012).

5 Discussion: Implications for design practice

In the formal service sector, there has been given a prominence to the rational, professional and linear approach to the way services function and are developed. Design anthropology offers an alternative lens on service design (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014; Prendiville, Jung, & Yu, 2014), privileging improvisation and design in collaboration with the ‘user-cum-producer’, rather than the idea of passive consumers (Gunn & Donovan, 2012). What implications does design anthropology have on designers’ understanding of the ‘user’ in social welfare services? Service design as a human-centered, contextualized and continuously grown process lays the ground for this discussion.

5.1 Service design as human-centered

How does design anthropology argue for a human-centered approach to service design, instead of a user-centered approach? If humans are reduced to users that interact with products or technological systems (Lee, 2012), designers might risk to focus on what *can* be designed, instead of taking a human-centered approach which is concerned with what *should*

be designed and why (Gasson, 2003). Design therefore needs to be anchored in an understanding of the culture and context of people. Here, design anthropology can contribute, as it concerned with ‘Things’ as socio-cultural assemblies (Bjögvinsson et al., 2012): How people relate to the surrounding environment, sense-making and relationships between people.

The answer to why service design is intrinsically human-centered can be summarized in three aspects, as highlighted in the chapter about the ‘user’ in design: 1) The ‘user’ term is by definition object-centric, 2) Services are not objects, but created in intangible encounters and interactions between people, objects and systems, and 3) Services are not pre-designed entities, because there is a limit to what can be designed and planned out in advance. The three aspects clearly show that services are dealing with *people* as *co-producers* or *co-creators* of value, prior to *users* of objects. This resonates well with the idea of services as socio-cultural ‘Things’. As a consequence, services cannot be designed in the traditional way that focuses on material outcomes and ‘users’, but ‘co-created’ together with people that are involved in the service.

5.2 Service design as contextualized

We have seen how services in public sector differ from those in private sector, and how design anthropology underlines the importance of contextualization to understand every culture on its own terms. Public welfare services are per se collective and an organization such as NAV can be considered a culture (Wright, 1994). This has several implications on how designers should understand the concept of ‘users’ in the context of public welfare services: 1) Public welfare services are two-sided services. This leads to an asymmetrical power relation. 2) The role of public welfare services is not primarily to cover individual needs. 3) Public welfare services are not ‘consumable’, as people are expected to be active ‘welfare-subjects’.

The two-sidedness of NAV’s services where job-seekers are both controlled as ‘receivers’ of benefit and expected to be self-reliant as active ‘welfare subjects’ reveals a paradox: the ‘user’ term might be at the same time too radical and not radical enough. When calling job-seekers ‘users’ of ‘user-centered’ services, this may hide the asymmetrical power relation, where people can be forced to follow measures involuntarily. At the same time, it may hide the fact that resourceful job-seekers are expected to be active in their own situation and do most of the ‘work’ on their own.

5.3 Service design as ‘continuously grown’

Design anthropologists understand service design as *continuously grown*. First, service design is not a fixed set of methods (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). As services are intertwined in our complex social world, service design must not be reduced to a generic method with fragmented staged workshops (Lee, 2012). Design anthropology also draws attention to the limits of the conceptualization of services as objects, seeing service design as an ever-ending process of learning with people (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014). Designers should therefore focus more on engaging with people, and less on the ‘users’ and the objects as separated from their social context (Akama & Prendiville, 2013). Lastly, as people are unpredictable, one should question to what extent designers have the ability to control the outcome, and equally how much they *should* control the outcome (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014).

We can underscore three characteristics about service design as continuously grown that affect the adequacy of the ‘user’ term: 1) Service design is not a fixed set of methods, but a co-creative process where there is not a clear demarcation between ‘provider’, ‘designer’ and ‘user’. Calling people ‘users’ might favor a more linear approach to design instead of encouraging improvisation with people. 2) Service design is a continuous process of learning, and focusing on ‘users’ might make designers unaware of their role of engaging with people at all stages in the process. 3) Rather than projecting their own intentions onto the service, service designers should be concerned with how they can align their desires and intentions with the dreams and desires of “those who will be engaging with the outputs of designing” (Gunn & Donovan, 2012).

6 Conclusions

The article has shown how design anthropology can reframe the understanding of the ‘user’ term in design for public welfare services. Four implications follows:

1. Design anthropology argues that services are inherently *human-centred*, and thus not object-centric. Service designers should therefore have a holistic focus on people rather than limiting them to ‘users’.
2. Design anthropology focuses on *contextualisation* as in *complexity*. The emphasis on complexity might serve as a counterweight to a rational, linear process. This suggests that service designers should be open to improvisation and adopt a participatory mind-set, rather than a ‘usability’ approach with ‘users’.
3. Design anthropology focuses on *contextualization* as in *local life*. The importance of ‘local life’ stresses that every service is unique and highlights that its culture therefore should be understood on its own premises. The complex roles of people within a given service context should not be oversimplified by calling all people ‘users’.
4. Design is seen as *grown* rather than built. This portrays service design as an ongoing process of transformation, where the aim is as much designing ourselves, others and the world around us, as creating final material outcomes. The ‘user’ term does not sufficiently cover the roles of people as ‘co-creators’, ‘co-designers’ or ‘co-producers’ of services.

Designers might argue that their understanding of people in services is holistic and not in conflict with referring to them as ‘users’. But if they claim having a holistic, human-centered approach, it can be questioned whether the object-centric ‘user’ term is the adequate word for designating the role of people. It might make sense to talk about ‘users’ of a specific ‘object’ of the service, like a website. As a contrast, applying the word ‘user’ in the beginning of the design process, might limit the scope too much. Consider the example of the unemployed job-seeker: Designers must have an understanding of her life situation and not just how she interacts with the existing web-based service system. Words shape designers’ understandings of reality and their role in design. Thus, terminology should be reviewed and changed if necessary as the understanding of service design evolves. The ‘user’ term is not inadequate by default. However, it is simplifying the world of services, and a variety of other terms might be more adequate and specific, depending on the specific context.

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