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Conceptual underpinnings for transformative research in a service ecosystems context to resolve social issues – framework foundations and extensions

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ABSTRACT

A number of services within society are designed to improve the well-being of its members and transform lives. Some services focus on the protection and support of vulnerable members of society, for example, those suffering the effects of drug use, mental health conditions, violence or poverty. Clients of such social services may also come from minority or marginalised cultural backgrounds. Typically, social services aim to reduce disparities and enhance individual and population well-being. A major challenge for social policy-makers and social service providers is to establish and maintain constructive engagement between the social services and those they are intended to serve. Some of these vulnerable clients are deemed 'hard-to-reach' (HTR) by policy-makers and service providers. Yet, the transformation of lives requires the involvement of the focal actor (client) and their service or activity system, as well as the engagement of other actors, such as the social worker embedded in their service or activity system. This paper aims to further unpack a novel approach, called integrative transformative service framework. This contribution extends its conceptualisation which fuses mainly three different approaches, namely Transformative Service Research (TSR), (Cultural-Historical) Activity Theory (CHAT) and (Regulatory) Engagement Theory (RET).

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Introduction

In society a range of social services have evolved to improve the well-being of its members, and protect and support vulnerable members of society, for example, in regard to drug use, mental health conditions, victimisation or poverty; issues that more recently have also found their way into the domain of service research (e.g. Fisk et al., 2016). Social services aim to reduce disparities and enhance individual and population well-being, especially of minority groups or certain ethnicities. Public policy underpins the design and administration of the social services sector (Anderson et al., 2013).

A major challenge for policy-makers and social service providers is the services' ability to 'reach' and achieve constructive engagement with those they are intended to serve. Hence, some of these vulnerable clients may be deemed by policy-makers and service providers as being 'hard-to-reach' (HTR) or 'hard-to-engage' (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012, p. 210). However, because well-being, service co-creation and consumption amongst actors are intertwined (cf. Ostrom et al., 2015), the focus cannot only be on the engagement (or lack thereof) of the focal actor (e.g. the client) in need, but also has to be on the other actors, for example the ones facilitating the service (such as the social worker).

One goal of this paper is to further advance the topic of social service provision for 'HTR' populations and to increase the engagement and well-being of the parties involved. Another objective is to conceptually ground and further develop an approach which centres on enhancing well-being and could potentially more broadly be applied to different service contexts. This paper draws on Hepi et al.'s (2017) initial conceptual development of an integrative transformative service framework. The paper aims to further unpack and extend the framework. This is to establish a broader conceptual and theoretical basis. This study identifies shortcomings in Transformative Service Research (TSR; Anderson et al., 2013) that necessitate further theoretical development, especially in the light of HTR requirements, by drawing on (Cultural-Historical) Activity Theory (CHAT; Engeström, 2015; Leontiev, 1977) as well as (Regulatory) Engagement Theory (RET; Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009). According to Hepi et al. (2017), the three approaches when used in conjunction enable the construction of an integrative transformative framework that simultaneously focuses on well-being, activities and engagement embedded in one approach. A more detailed understanding of the framework and its extension can then further facilitate the resolution of social issues of HTR clients by improving the engagement and the uptake of social services, improving co-creative activities and providing scholars and practitioners with a framework which might be more universally applicable.

This paper is organised as follows. It starts by drawing on the initial conceptual development by Hepi et al. (2017) and provides a general perspective of the underlying contextual factors of the integrative transformative service framework. Derived from Hepi et al. (2017), these intertwined and embedded elements can be classified as actor context, cultural context, service context and systems context. Next, the conceptual gaps are detailed with a focus on TSR (Anderson et al., 2013) to highlight the necessity to incorporate CHAT's extension (Engeström, 2015) and RET (Scholer & Higgins, 2009). This is done by stressing the conceptual requirements derived from a HTR context. The subsequent section examines the 'fusion' of concepts and establishes the steps towards a conceptual integration more broadly. Based on the theoretical gaps identified, this is followed by an extended integrative framework which infuses further theoretical development. The next section then outlines the theoretical and practical implications. The paper then finishes with a conclusion and outlines future research.

Setting the scene – contextual factors

This section details the four contextual factors relevant for the study of HTR scenarios. These are actor context, cultural context, service context and systems context.

Actor context: HTR clients

HTR populations have been defined in numerous ways. The term is congruent with a number of sub-populations including marginalised, hidden, forgotten, disadvantaged and age-specific populations – arguably macro-population-based groups. Micro-population groups that are deemed HTR are based on ethnicity, sexuality, disability or religious beliefs. It is put forward that HTR denotes groups that are problematic and costly to governments and the community due to the efforts required to engage with such groups (Flanagan & Hancock, 2010). However, some scholars argue that HTR has become a convenient way to denote sub-populations to depict certain characteristics and behaviours as avoidant and intentional (Featherstone, Broadhurst, & Holt, 2012), and are hesitant ‘to label any groups as hard-to-reach, feeling the label detracts from the notion that *client engagement is a responsibility of services not individuals*’ (Cortis, Katz, & Patulny, 2009, p. VI, italics added).

Brackertz (2007) suggests to include demographic, cultural, behavioural, attitudinal and structural characteristics when defining HTR. Boag-Munroe and Evangelou’s (2012) definition entails hidden populations, vulnerable, under-served, socially excluded, disengaged, marginalised, non-(or disinclined) users, high risk or at risk, families with multifaceted needs, minority groups, ethnic populations and those with a reduced likelihood to access services. In some contexts, social exclusion has been used as a synonym for HTR (Mackenzie et al., 2012).

Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012, p. 210) aim ‘to understand and engage with those who are characterised as “hard-to-reach” or “hard-to-engage”’, which they distinguish as the former applying to accessibilities, and the latter focusing on forming a relationship with the service in question. Yet, neither of these two conceptualisations resolve the problem that they place the burden and characteristics of being ‘HTR’ or ‘hard-to-engage’ exclusively upon focal populations (Brackertz, 2007). Hence, Hepi et al. (2017) suggest to regard the issue of HTR as a systems problem rather than trying to put responsibility on a particular group of actors. In the following, the term ‘hard-to-engagedness’ (HTE) is used to denote the systems approach.

Cultural context: ethnic disparities and approaches to well-being

Most countries around the globe display a mix of cultural influences and ethnicities. Ethnicity is often correlated with health and social outcomes. For example, life expectancy of indigenous people is often lower than that of non-indigenous populations (Ministry of Health, 2017). Understanding health and well-being in the context of a focal actor’s culture allows for suitable collaborative approaches of culture-related value and well-being co-creation in the social services (Productivity Commission, 2015). This implies that culture-specific approaches need to be developed, such as the concept of Whānau Ora (Chant, 2011; Te Puni Kōkiri, 2017) highlighted by Hepi et al. (2017), or the Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endemann, 2009). Whānau Ora references the concept of family well-being. It focuses on an approach which includes co-creative acts and engagement of the family and its strengths and capacity (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2017). Comparably, the Fonofale model depicts a ‘house’ with the foundations being family, the roof being culture and the pillars in between being physical, spiritual and mental health and other factors that

influence health, all embedded in environment, time and context. Such culture-specific approaches are relevant to navigating the health and well-being of ethnic populations and to addressing potential disparities.

Service context: social service exchange

To navigate health and well-being, often multiple actors engage in service-for-service exchange to co-create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2016a). Actors, such as client and social worker, are tasked to interact and integrate resources (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2012) for well-being co-creation in social service exchange. For example, clients with drug and alcohol problems need to integrate their resources, such as information and time, to improve their situation by cooperating with social workers who might provide counselling in an Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) social service programme (cf. Hepi et al., 2017).

Social service refers to the diverse range of programmes that have been made available by a mix of public or private agencies to individuals and families who need assistance (Goodwin, 2005): '[S]ocial services aim to improve the wellbeing of clients by broadening access to the things in life they value (or by removing barriers to accessing these things)' (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 31). Important aspects of social services are their perceived value as well as their accessibility to those in need. Mostly, social services engage users on a voluntary basis. However, some in particular involve the government using coercive power. Governments spend substantial amounts per year on health, education and other social services. Yet, resources available are finite and it is not possible to provide every service for anyone to receive (Productivity Commission, 2015). Governments located at the macro level of a health-care and well-being social ecosystem allocate resources towards where they will have the greatest effect.

Systems context: social service ecosystems

Systems thinking has more recently entered the service research domain (see, e.g. Anderson et al., 2013; Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Fisk et al., 2016). A service system is a dynamic and adaptive network of exchange consisting of interactions amongst actors and resources (Spohrer, Maglio, Bailey, & Gruhl, 2007). Different levels of service systems from low to high complexity can be distinguished as micro, meso and macro systems, and '*practices, (...) activities, or processes may be replicated at any of the three levels*' (Chandler & Vargo, 2011, p. 44, italics added). Systems can evolve over time. For that matter, the term service ecosystem (Chandler & Vargo, 2011) has been introduced. These systems are '*relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange*' (Vargo & Lusch, 2016a, p. 10). A service ecosystems approach permits a better understanding of social issues impacting the different system levels and enables the establishment of measures that impact the enhancement of well-being (cf. Fisk et al., 2016). It has been pointed out that service ecosystems have a purpose '*in the sense of individual survival/wellbeing, as a partial function of collective wellbeing*' (Vargo & Lusch, 2016b, emphasis in original).

A system designed to alleviate social issues can be labelled a social service ecosystem. The interplay between the actors within the system is governed by institutions, including local, state and national governments and other geopolitical governing organisations (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2013) on the macro level, as well as less formal institutions, such as family on the micro level.

In social service exchange, in particular two micro-level service systems, namely the client's and the social worker's, constitute important networks relevant for well-being co-creation and these are integrated into higher level systems included in the social service ecosystem. This social service ecosystem comprises

a complex system of organisations, institutions and relationships (...) through which social services are funded, coordinated and delivered. (...) Government is a[n] (...) element of this system. Other important elements include non-government providers, philanthropic organisations, volunteers, family (...) and community-based bodies (...). (Productivity Commission, 2015, pp. XIII, 36)

Key conceptual underpinnings for an integrative transformative service framework

Having more broadly established the contextual factors for social service provision of HTE, the following sections draw and expand on Hepi et al.'s (2017) integrative transformative service framework. The authors suggest that to improve engagement between a social service provider and a client, as one pillar, RET (Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009) is of relevance, as improving engagement will enhance well-being co-creation of the actor in focus. Hence, as another pillar, the authors connect engagement to the notion of well-being as addressed in the research stream of TSR (Anderson et al., 2013). Improving engagement and well-being through co-creation is then viewed in a systems context focused on the service exchange between actors. It can be argued that actor engagement and well-being are linked through 'inter-activity'. In other words, any activity to co-create well-being requires the engagement of actors. The notion of 'activity' is central to CHAT (Engeström, 2015; Leontiev, 1977), which serves as the final pillar to the framework devised by Hepi et al. (2017). Yet, Hepi et al.'s (2017) work falls short in identifying the conceptual gaps in TSR, which leads to the integration of CHAT and RET. Therefore, this paper outlines TSR's conceptual gaps and HTE requirements and provides a systematic overview of the three approaches. These are paralleled in Table 1. The theoretical shortcomings of TSR, the requirements related to 'HTE' and the importance of an integrative approach are highlighted below.

TSR shortcomings and requirements of HTE

TSR emerged from an integration of consumer and service research (Anderson et al., 2013), based on more established concepts, such as Transformative Consumer Research (Mick, 2006) and developments in service research (Ostrom et al., 2015). Hence, this newer conceptual development (TSR) with a focus on service and well-being appears to be a suitable starting point for the investigation of social issues where actors are tasked with transforming their attitude and behaviour and ultimately their lives by improving well-being. More specifically, the challenge of navigating actors deemed 'HTR' or 'hard-to-engage' towards

Table 1. Overview of key concepts and requirements of HTE.

Category	TSR	CHAT	RET	Requirements of HTE
Key concept or objective	Creation of uplifting changes and improvements in consumer entities' well-being through service(s). (Anderson, Ostrom, & Bitner, 2011)	Activities that realise a person's actual life in the objective world by which they are surrounded. (Leontiev, 1977)	Engagement as a psychological state as well as behaviour. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Scholer & Higgins, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activation of psychological state of potentially disengaged actor(s). • Focus on activities within life sphere of actor to stimulate willingness to engage and contribute to improvement of own and other well-being.
Theoretical focus	Integration of consumer and service research. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Meta-theory or framework to explain human activity. (Foot, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978)	Theory which focuses on value as a motivational force experience. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HTE or 'hard-to-engagedness' is a systems problem. • Application of an integrated approach to improve impact of measures for HTE.
Practical focus	Application to solve real problems. (Mick, 2006)	Application to a range of disciplines and areas to analyse actors' activity systems. (Engeström & Sannino, 2010)	Explaining the value creation process and value from experience and engagement. (Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Scholer & Higgins, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolution of social issues of disengaged actors within focal system(s).
'Logic' of approach	NS; consumer-centric; branding is service-centric. (Kuppelwieser & Finsterwalder, 2016)	NS; activity-centric view of human actor in the systems context. (cf. Engeström, 2015)	Value experience-centric with engagement strength contributing to value experience intensity. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Scholer & Higgins, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on activity-centric view of (dis-)engaged focal actor as well as 'other actors' to increase value and well-being.
Actors	Service and consumer entities. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Subject engaged in the activity. (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015)	Actor deriving value. (Higgins, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centrality of relation to (dis-)engaged actor(s). • Identification of engagement level of focal and other actors.
Other actors	Collective. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Community as the set of actors involved in an activity. (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015)	Other actors can be endogenous or exogenous to focal actor's goal pursuit. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of other actors in the vicinity of the focal actor as important contributors to actor engagement and well-being.
Resources	NS; different types of resources, such as tools. (cf. Skälén, Aal, & Edvardsson, 2015)	Material and immaterial instruments used to deal with the object(ive) of the activity. (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015)	Proper means of goal pursuit. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of resources relevant to improving actor engagement and value co-creation in the actor's activity system.
Value	Eudaimonic and hedonic well-being outcome. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Outcome of an activity. (Engeström & Sannino, 2010)	Value experience as a force of attraction to or repulsion from target. (Higgins, 2006; Scholer & Higgins, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify value creating and value destroying (routine) activities for (dis-)engaged actor that lead to or distract from achieving well-being.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Category	TSR	CHAT	RET	Requirements of HTE
Target of value co-creation	Consumer entity's well-being. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Object(ive) as the common, collective purpose and societal motive for an activity. (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015)	Goal object or value target, that is, the subjective pleasure/pain properties of the desired end-state. (Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to focal actor's well-being.
Co-creation	Co-creation. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Activity. (Engeström, 2015)	Goal pursuit activity and regulatory fit, that is, whether goal orientation is sustained by the strategic manner in which it is pursued. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enablement of targeted co-creative activity using appropriate resources and actors. • Institutionalisation of transformative activity and routinisation as practice.
Actor's contribution to co-creation	NS; customer effort in value co-creation activities. (Sweeney et al., 2015)	Division of labour in the performance of activity. (Engeström, 2015)	NS; engagement and resource integration. (cf. Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulation of actor's contribution to own well-being transformation.
Interactivity	Creation of well-being as an interactional process. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Subject-to-object via mediating artefacts (instruments, rules, division of labour) and in context of the community. (Engeström, 2015)	NS; interaction between actor and value target. (cf. Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigation of focal actor to interact with system-related resources, actors and constraints.
Impact	Facilitation of well-being can have positive and negative impact on other entities. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Accomplishment of an activity may lead to a negative outcome or experience for the subject. (cf. Leontiev, 1978)	Pursuing a goal in a proper way could also impact the value of the original goal object. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase of engagement, willingness to co-create and transform own well-being.
Intentionality	Directional and non-directional well-being processes possible. (cf. Rosenbaum et al., 2011)	Transformative agency to form and implement intentions that change routines and conditions of an activity. (Engeström & Sannino, 2013)	Goal pursuit. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of target and direction of value co-creation. • Negotiation of target of value co-creation to achieve fit. • Negotiation of value proposition to achieve fit. • Pursuing target by changing routines and conditions of activities of focal actor. • Monitoring and planning for potential effects on other actors.
Institutions	NS; organisations as service entities. (cf. Anderson et al., 2013)	Rules as formal and informal conventions, guidelines, contracts, laws and other societal norms regulate activity. (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015)	Attraction or repulsion towards a target due to shared beliefs, that is, norms and standards. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of important institutions in co-creation processes for transformation which influence focal actor's well-being.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Category	TSR	CHAT	RET	Requirements of HTE
Unit/system level of analysis	Micro to macro system. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Activity system in relation to other activity systems. (Engeström, 2001)	Agent-to-object. (Higgins, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on activity system(s) of (dis-)enaged actor(s).
Time/evolution	NS; transformation of service systems. (Skålen et al., 2015)	Activity systems shape and transform over lengthy periods of time; they realise and reproduce themselves. (Engeström, 2001)	Strengthening/weakening engagement in goal pursuit can influence the value intensity of an object at a later time. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of transformation of actor within activity system. • Monitoring of transformation as contingent to actor's interaction with system. • Identification of accelerators and decelerators within system.
Relation to environment	Macro environment influences well-being. (Anderson et al., 2013)	Subject changes the environment with the external activity and affects own behaviour. (Vygotsky, 1997)	Environment as force which can act as an opposing interfering force in goal pursuit. (Higgins & Scholer, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering actors' environment and interrelation.

Note: NS = Not specified in original approach, but expanded on or introduced by other scholars.

adopting a new 'logic' in life seems to be a fitting context where the TSR framework (Anderson et al., 2013) can be applied. Yet, while TSR in its current form provides a framework and assistance to resolving HTE problems, complementary concepts or theories are required to properly cater for social issues relating to HTE.

While TSR focuses on creating change through service, the concept appears to be focusing on the provider enabling such transformation. Although TSR can be classified as consumer-centric, the concept and its branding are service-centric (Kuppelwieser & Finsterwalder, 2016), driven by provider entities for the benefit of consumer entities. Yet, transformation might best be brought about in the life sphere, that is, what *happens* within the *service system* of the *focal actor*, as outlined in the actor and systems context sections above. Thus, a focus on the 'doing' is required (Leontiev, 1977). In CHAT, activity as key concept is understood as 'processes (...) that realise a person's actual life [and well-being] in the objective world by which [they are] surrounded' (Leontiev, 1977, p. 2). Here, and very fitting to complement TSR, CHAT's focus is on explaining human activity, such as behaviour related to HTE.

Furthermore, more so than TSR, CHAT places a very strong focus on the cultural component, which, as outlined above, can be a crucial context to be considered when dealing with HTE.

TSR's conceptualisation further falls short in including a resource perspective. Such resource perspective, which includes the resources available to the focal actor, that is, material as well as immaterial instruments that are used to deal with the object(ive) of the activity (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen, Pereira-Querol, & Engeström, 2015), is lacking. This is particularly pertinent in the case of HTE as focal actors' own resources might be depleted and they might be in need of other (actors') resources.

The latter also directly links to another conceptual gap in TSR, which is actors' contributions to value co-creation (Finsterwalder & Kuppelwieser, 2011; Sweeney, Danaher, &

McColl-Kennedy, 2015) that are needed for well-being transformation to occur, again a point that has been alluded to above as part of the actor and cultural contexts, by highlighting the importance of actor engagement as well as the importance of other actors' contributions, such as family in the vicinity of the focal actor.

Moreover, family and other institutionalised structures, for example, organisations, can play a crucial role in well-being improvements. Here in particular, rules as formal and informal conventions, guidelines, contracts, laws and other societal norms regulate activity in CHAT (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015) and need to be integrated into TSR. For example, certain ethnicities might have different cultural norms and rules that need to be taken into account (refer to the cultural context above).

As much as such widening of the TSR concept by including CHAT might aid in generating a more activity-centric view of focal human actors seeking to improve their well-being, existing activity patterns will not be altered or new activities undertaken if the actors are 'hard-to-engage', that is, disengaged from wanting to transform their lives and giving up engrained patterns of thinking and behaviour. Furthermore, actors labelled 'hard-to-engage' might feel disengaged from interacting with a transformative service (cf. Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012). Activities outside their usual 'set of activities' might not be desired to be undertaken. This is where the concept of engagement can bridge between well-being (TSR) and activity (CHAT). Higgins and Scholer's (2009) concept of RET focuses on value as a motivational force of either feeling attracted (positive value) or repulsed (negative value) from something. Such notion is critical in dealing with HTE issues as focal actors might feel no attraction towards dealing with a social issue or a social worker to improve their situation. Here, HTE becomes a systems approach (systems context) which includes the ability of other actors to engage the focal actor. That is, first, the engagement level of the focal actor needs to be identified. Second, the psychological state of the focal actor needs to be changed by focusing on their life sphere and activities. Third, resources need to be provided that enable the actor with potential resource constraints to engage and co-create value. Utilising appropriate resources (e.g. group meeting spaces) and actors (e.g. social workers) allows to institutionalise transformative practices, that is, to routinise a newly established activity as a new practice.

Rosenbaum et al. (2011) allude to the intended and unintended effects of well-being and caution that negative effects of well-being co-creation might affect other entities. Intentionality is critical in regard to aiming well-being efforts at the appropriate target group in an appropriate manner. Yet, another type of intentionality needs to be taken into account, captured by both CHAT and RET. It is the transformative agency of the focal actor which forms and implements (new) intentions which change routines and conditions of an activity (Engeström & Sannino, 2013). Higgins and Scholer (2009) speak of goal pursuit.

In line with CHAT, the focus remains on the focal actor's activity system. Over time, the transformation of the actor within the system (cf. Skålen, Aal, & Edvardsson, 2015), embedded in the wider social service ecosystem, needs to be evaluated and monitored, and potential accelerators and inhibitors (Hepi et al., 2017) require identification as they might aid in avoiding repulsion and enabling attraction towards the value target (Higgins & Scholer, 2009).

In summary, it can be concluded that TSR offers a basis for resolving HTE issues; yet augmenting this concept is required by the inclusion of approaches which not only

complement but also enhance the TSR framework and close its gaps. Both CHAT and RET offer such features. Hence, Hepi et al. (2017) suggest an integrative transformative service framework to resolve HTE issues. The framework is outlined below.

Conceptual integration of the three pillars

When viewing *co-creation of value* as the core of all concepts, that is, as being constituent of well-being, activity and engagement, it can be derived that co-creation mirrors an *activity* where one or several *engaged actors* apply knowledge and skills in service-for-service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2016a) to improve *well-being*. Applying co-creation language, Figure 1 depicts an adaptation and extension of Engeström's (2015) activity system as the foundation to integrate TSR, CHAT and RET in one framework.

The *activity system* (Engeström, 2015) encompasses a *focal actor's system*, with the system's core being the *actor's co-creative activity* surrounding a *value co-creation target* (Hepi et al., 2017) related to the desired experience (Engeström, 2001; 2015; Higgins & Scholer, 2009). The *co-creative activity* to achieve this might entail *levels of engagement* depending on the defined targets. Repeating *co-creative transformative activity* as a *routine* can be called *co-creative transformative practice* (cf. Engeström, 2015; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1997), which relates to a bodily and mental routine that could develop out of a *co-creative activity*, but does not necessarily have to. This is indicated in Figure 1 by the dotted lines around the outer circle. A co-creative activity is facilitated by the actor feeling *engaged* (psychological state; Brodie, Hollebeck, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Higgins & Scholer, 2009) when they *actively engage* (behavioural component; Brodie et al., 2011; Verleye, Gemmel, & Rangarajan, 2014) in intentionally pursuing the *target of value co-creation* (Hepi et al., 2017) utilising proper means of goal pursuit (Higgins & Scholer, 2009), that is, the appropriate *resources* (tools and signs) (Engeström, 2015; Vänninen et al., 2015), *co-creating with other actors* who *contribute* to the activity. While doing so, *rules, norms and beliefs* (Vänninen et al., 2015; Vargo & Lusch, 2016a) are followed. While the target of the actor's value co-creating activity might have a *general meaning on the societal level*, there will be a *specific sense making of the target by the focal actor* (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), constructed by the activity system (Engeström, 2001). The *value* derived from the co-creative transformative activity, hence, is

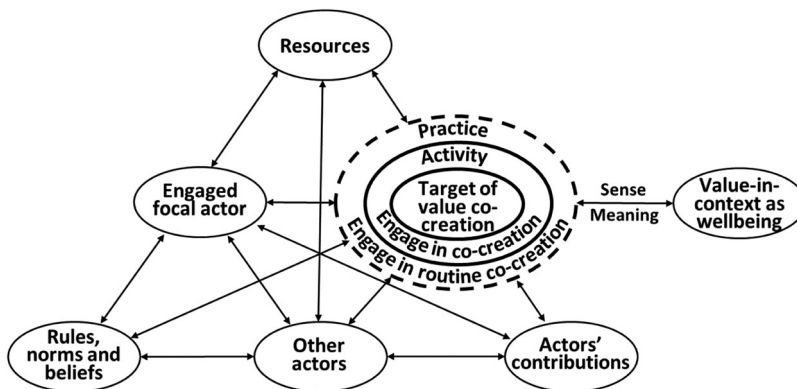


Figure 1. Activity system-based integration of concepts (expanded from Engeström, 2015).

based on the actor's frame of reference and is always *contextual*, that is, determined through the eyes of the *actor benefitting* from the *value co-creation process* (Vargo & Lusch, 2016a) and based on the actor's *engagement and holistic and meaning-laden experience* (Higgins, 2006; Scholer & Higgins, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2016a). For example, through the 'doing', the focal actor might derive value not only from the experience of a primary activity, but also from a secondary activity. Such distinction between primary and secondary activities stems from Higgins, Lee, Kwon, and Trope's (1995) earlier Activity Engagement Theory. For example one resource can stimulate different primary and secondary activities or what actors can do with it (Higgins et al., 1995).

The activity system of a focal actor can be understood as constantly evolving through cycles of expansive learning via contradictions within the system and with other activity systems (Engeström, 2001). Activity systems have been compared to service systems (Wägar, 2011). Multiple activity or service systems would then constitute a (social) service ecosystem (cf. Chandler & Vargo, 2011).

An expanded conceptual integration

Hepi et al. (2017) discuss the intersection of different activity systems by conceptualising two activity or service systems interconnecting with one another. When activity systems 'meet', tensions have to be defused and through meaning making a 'fit' of the two activity systems has to be achieved (Hepi et al., 2017; cf. Engeström, 2001; Engeström & Sannino, 2010) to enable actors' co-creation of value and well-being. Such 'fit' needs to be accomplished by creating a shared understanding of the *targets of value co-creation* (Hepi et al., 2017; cf. Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Higgins et al., 1995). This is vital, in particular when a focal actor interacts with other actors who assist in improving the focal actors' well-being. Agreeing on a joint target of value co-creation then enables the *negotiation of value propositions* (Hepi et al., 2017). Only then, the target(s) can be intentionally and properly pursued, and intended and unintended effects on actors can be identified or mitigated, such as the impact of the actor's absence from home and negative effects on family members due to sessions with the social worker.

Derived from the notion of primary and secondary activities (Higgins et al., 1995), Hepi et al. (2017) suggest that there are also primary and secondary *targets of value co-creation*. For example, the primary target of 'value co-creation' for unemployed focal actors might be to socialise with friends in their peer group and spend time outdoors pursuing hobbies (secondary target), rather than taking care of their own family's social and other needs, and hence this might be quite value co-destructive for the latter actors (Echeverri & Skållén, 2011; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). In the case of HTE, such targets need to be redefined and committed to, to enable value co-creation for well-being.

Together with the social worker, focal actors (clients) might identify and agree that improving their eudaimonic well-being is the primary target, that is, improving themselves physically and mentally (cf. Waterman, 1984), as well as their hedonic well-being (Anderson et al., 2013). The latter, that is, to feel joy (Ryan & Deci, 2001), can be a secondary target, and in doing so this might decrease the repulsion from the target (Higgins, 2006) of transformative social change for well-being. In other words, pursuing the secondary target could lead to achieving the primary target. For example, activities in group sessions could include hedonic and hence very positive value experiences (Higgins et al., 1995),

such as singing of culture-specific songs, which might prompt focal actors to increase their own contribution towards transformative change, such as giving up alcohol.

In a similar vein to identifying primary and secondary targets and activities, for the accomplishment of value co-creation, it is equally important to identify primary and secondary resources and other actors. Primary other actors could be family members supporting the transformation of the focal actor and might be key to the actor's transformation (cf. Te Puni Kōkiri, 2017), whereas secondary other actors, such as peer group or colleagues, might further assist the focal actor's personal transformation. Equally, resources, such as exposure to nature as a secondary resource, might aid in accelerating the focal actor's transformation (cf. Hepi et al., 2017; see, e.g. Mental Health Foundation, 2016–2017) alongside primary resources, such as the mental capacity to be aware of the situation and willing to co-create for change.

During activities, the actors integrate the elements of their activity systems, and through a process of *sense and meaning making*, value or well-being is co-created in collaboration amongst the actors (Hepi et al., 2017). Based on such a notion, it is put forward here that *co-creating value or well-being* (Blocker & Barrios, 2015) for focal actors facing social issues needs to entail co-creative acts that have a focus on the *activities in the life sphere* of the actors and are meaningful to them.

More recently, the term 'transformative value' (Blocker & Barrios, 2015, p. 265) has been introduced. This form of non-habitual and more extraordinary value co-creation occurs when actors elect to make new choices which challenge previous patterns of thinking and behaviour (cf. Blocker & Barrios, 2015). Transformations to improve one's well-being by removing engrained patterns, for example, reflected in ongoing heavy drug and alcohol abuse, will then create new ways of 'doing things'. Blocker and Barrios' (2015) notion of transformative value aligns with the notion represented in Hepi et al.'s (2017) framework which draws on Activity Theory (Engeström, 2015). As pointed out, it requires transformative agency of the focal actor (client) to form and implement intentions which alter routines and conditions of an activity (Engeström & Sannino, 2013). Other actors, such as the social worker, can assist here by establishing new ways of going about an activity, for example, the social worker applying institutional practices of how to run a session with the focal actor (Hepi et al., 2017).

Hepi et al. (2017) point out that cultural practices might play a role in transforming the focal actor. Here, culture, mentioned as one of the contextual factors above, comes into play. Culture has been particularly highlighted in CHAT (Engeström, 2015) and is also apparent in TSR (Anderson et al., 2013). Equally, Hepi et al. (2017) feature culture in their conceptualisation and relate to the importance of value in a cultural context (Akaka, Schau, & Vargo, 2013) and culture-specific well-being approaches (Pulotu-Endemann, 2009; Te Puni Kōkiri, 2017). Yet, Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber (2011) put forward that value needs to be viewed as created in social systems and propose to use the term value-in-social-context. Hence, viewed through a cultural lens, well-being is co-created and the value perceived can be reconceptualised as value-in-sociocultural-context.

A further noteworthy point is the interrelationship of value co-creation and value co-destruction in well-being which did not receive much attention in Hepi et al.'s (2017) framework. As pointed out above, there might be unintended effects of well-being initiatives (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Work by Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) and Echeverri and Skälén (2011), not related to the well-being context, discuss the possibility of what is

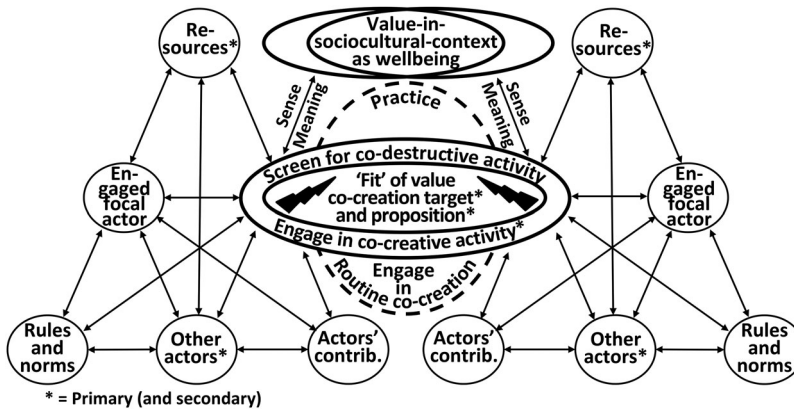


Figure 2. Extended integrative transformative service framework (based on Hepi et al., 2017).

called value co-destruction amongst actors. Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010, p. 431) define value co-destruction as ‘as an interactional process between service [or activity] systems that results in a decline in at least one of the systems’ well-being’. Value co-destruction in a HTE context can be very present, relating to the focal actor’s activity system and when interacting with other activity systems. When a focal actor neglects their own well-being by, for example, drug and alcohol abuse, and when being under substance influence domestically abuses other actors, such as family members, this causes value co-destruction. Further, the actor might be co-destructive when intersecting with the social worker’s service or activity system. Asking to alter routines and transform might create resistance or repulsion from the shared target of co-creation and transformative social change (Engeström, 2015; Higgins & Scholer, 2009), and, for example, they might refuse to pursue co-creative acts to improve well-being. Moreover, co-creative acts amongst multiple actors, for example, client and social worker, and their service or activity systems might cause ripple effects. For example, when government services coerce power for a focal actor to become a client at a social service provider, other actors, such as children of the client, might have to be supervised or fostered by a third party during the focal actor’s treatment. This might be co-destructive in regard to maintaining family cohesion.

The points mentioned above require an extension of Hepi et al.’s (2017) framework. Figure 2 provides a visualisation of the extended framework where two actors’ activity (or service) systems intersect, taking the factors of value co-creation in a sociocultural context, primary and secondary value co-creation target ‘fit’, value proposition ‘fit’, primary and secondary resources and actors, primary and secondary transformative activities and practices (i.e., co-creation) as well as co-destruction into account.

Theoretical and practical implications

The extended conceptual framework has several theoretical and practical implications relating to social service contexts and beyond. From a theoretical perspective, augmenting TSR’s (Anderson et al., 2013) approach by including Activity Theory (CHAT; Engeström, 2015) as well as RET (Higgins & Scholer, 2009) provides researchers with a stronger

conceptual foundation for the analysis of social issues to improve well-being. This is due to the fact that the extended conceptual framework enhances TSR by two other relevant frameworks. Activity Theory takes into account that the actors in focus might pursue certain activities or routine activities (practices) which require revision and might necessitate potential change by the actors themselves or in conjunction with an intervention by other actors. Yet, the addition of Activity Theory alone is not sufficient for an in-depth analysis and resolution of social issues, as actors might only undertake a transformation of their own lives including their well-being when they feel engaged and are willing to engage in the changes themselves. Therefore, the inclusion of Engagement Theory is vital. The extended framework should better enable scholars to capture and analyse social issues and suggest improvements. Each actor's service or activity system can be analysed from different angles and also in interaction with other actors' service or activity systems.

Beyond the immediate relevance for social contexts, the extended conceptual framework contributes to the theoretical advancement of TSR and provides a broader conceptual basis for the analysis and enhancement of well-being in general. It is suggested that the extended framework could be applied to other contexts and well-being challenges, such as well-being-related issues connected to educational, base of the pyramid-focused or financial services, amongst others. Scholars are encouraged to employ the framework to different contexts.

From an applied perspective, the extended framework allows practitioners a more thorough analysis and understanding of the social issues faced by clients by taking the three aspects of well-being, activities and engagement into account. Further, the fused conceptualisation of TSR and RET in an Activity Systems framework allows practitioners versed in CHAT the application of a very well established but now improved conceptual tool that builds on the existing Activity Systems framework. Hence, applying the extended framework should only require minimal effort for health and well-being practitioners already familiar with Activity Theory. The same should apply to scholars in the field.

Conclusion and future research

The aim of this paper was to discuss the foundations for research on engagement with 'HTR' or 'hard-to-engage' clients with diverse cultural backgrounds in a social service scenario. This work has elaborated on HTR clients (actor context) who can come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds (cultural context), and are meant to engage and co-create a service with a social service provider (service context). The approach focuses on the integration of the different activity or service systems, such as the client's and the social worker's, and applies a service ecosystems approach (systems context). The conceptual gaps in TSR have been identified, HTE requirements have been highlighted and TSR has been paralleled to two complementary approaches, namely CHAT and RET. A conceptual integration and combination of these approaches and contexts were derived from Hepi et al. (2017) and expanded on to establish a broadened research framework.

Despite recent foci of service researchers on social issues (e.g. Blocker & Barrios, 2015) and applications of TSR-related frameworks, such as Hepi et al.'s (2017) case study of an indigenous service provider and its clients, further empirical work is needed. This now

includes the application of the extended conceptual framework that has been introduced in this paper.

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