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The analysis of non-take-up: beyond the service relation model

Abstract

Service relations are not systematically fluid, and resistance is sometimes encountered in cases of non-take-up. The service relation model fails to take this into account. Therefore, as service agents' work consists in dealing with users' relations not only with themselves, but also with the offer, the analysis of non-take-up of rights and services requires a specific analytical model. This model would need to take users into account along with their relations to the offer and the normative content of that offer, over and above its delivery. In this respect, the social relation to the service model is more appropriate.

Introduction

The service relation model enables us to analyse interactions between service providers and users. One would expect that it might afford an understanding of why the service is sometimes not delivered, yet that is not the case. The reason lies in the very construction of the model. Non-take-up – that is, the fact that a person does not receive all or part of a monetary or other benefit to which they are entitled – therefore requires a specific analytical model. The “social relation to service” concept seems best suited to modelling non-take-up – at least partially –, since it provides a framework for analysing beneficiaries’ relation to public policies, particularly to social policies.

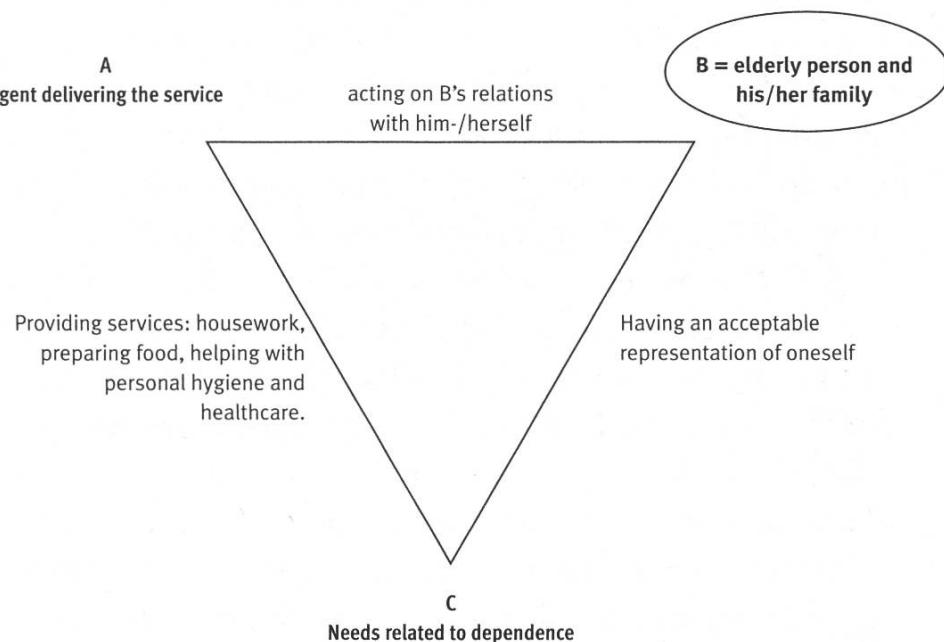
Short presentation of the service relation model

The service relation concept was theorized by Erving Goffman in the 1960s, in his study on interactions in a hospital (Goffman 1961). In the 1950s, Everett Hughes, also a sociology professor at the University of Chicago, had introduced it to highlight the sociological interest of service occupations. Based on Hughes' precursory research, Goffman conceptualized service relations as a process of transformation: a service relation aims for the production of

a change, by a service provider (A), at the request of and often in relationship with a user (B), in a reality (C) concerning that user. Goffman's innovation consisted in the introduction of "*a relational dimension in the very course of service delivery, there where the production of goods could be seen without taking that dimension into account*" (Ughetto 2013). The service relation was subsequently modelled by economists, including Jean Gadrey, among others. They followed in the footsteps of Peter Hill (Hill 1977) who presented it as a triangular relation between the service provider, the user, and the needs that brought them together (Gadrey 2000). This framework of analysis indicates that the service provider has to take two dimensions into account: the user's needs, and the user's relation to those needs. For the provider, the service relation is therefore both a "technical relation," one of defining needs and mobilizing resources, and a "personal relation" in which the user is involved in the production of a response to those needs.

The following graph applies this model to the work of professionals delivering home care to dependent elderly persons (Gucher et al. 2011). It shows that this type of relation is not simply one of service delivery (measurable in hours of service delivered) aimed at meeting the elderly person's daily needs (A on C); it is also a social relationship between the agent and the elderly person (A with B and often their family), to act on their rep-

Graphic 1 Service relation model applied to home care for dependent elderly persons



resentations and ways of acting in order to activate their capacities for autonomy (B on C).

The fact that research on public services took into account the notion of service relations and the analytical model stemming from it served as a basis for explaining the technical and relational nature of interactions between service providers and users. This in turn was valuable for improving the quality of the services delivered. This research field was developed in France in the 1990s under a large research programme on “Service Relations in the Public Sector,” supported by several government organizations, ministries and public-sector businesses. The aim was to study situations of interaction between service providers and users, in order to analyse the competences and power deployed in the actual delivery of services to the public. The ultimate goal then was to improve the effectiveness of procedures and the use of resources, in order to support the modernization of administrative functioning by making it more efficient and less costly. Because the offer put to users in the form of actual individualized output was not always suited to systematically meeting their needs, the study of service relations provided both a framework of analysis and the sociological methods for this praxeology. Inspired by English-language studies on street-level bureaucracy (SLB) – used in public policy and even in social policy analysis (Lipsky 1991) of administrations’ role in the actual delivery of public goods –, this sociology questioned above all the dysfunctions of the managerial apparatus and the reparatory role of agents. It also examined the rationalization of service relations through the formatting of administrative languages and the standardization of communication procedures. This was explicitly at the service of administrative reform. Researchers produced a general presentation of “front-office activities” that showed how public-sector structures could be modernized through agents’ daily practices (Weller 1998). They thereby contributed to some extent to the renewal of the sociology of work (Joseph et al. 1995).

This renewal seems to be peculiar to France, as British and American sociologists analysed work in services without looking at service relations *per se* (Ughetto 2013). The service relation model was imported into France in the 1990s by the sociologist Isaac Joseph, through Erving Goffman’s work. Some of the researchers participating in the research mentioned above found this strange, insofar as the work of reparation described by Goffman and the exercise of discretionary power highlighted by Michael Lipsky (1980) were combined in the same presentation – to the extent that it was easy to confuse them. Although these two sociologies had neither

the same disciplinary origins nor the same scientific subjects – micro-sociological analysis of interactions on the one hand and socio-political analysis of administrative work on the other – the scientific advantages of reconciling them was apparent, even including certain criticism levelled at Lipsky's work. In particular, in his analysis of professional discretion in social work, Tony Evans considered that Lipsky's theory took only organizational identity into account, and disregarded professionalism. Yet different professionals have different approaches to users, based on their training, profession and activity, as well as their age, gender or ethnicity, and not only on their position in the organization (Evans 2010). Evans defended an idea that was subsequently adopted by many, when he said that the "*degree of discretion*," which varied between different welfare areas, countries and social work professions, was subject to changes, and evolved over time. The reparation work of the caseworkers directly in contact with the public would thus be resituated in its institutional and professional context.

Broadening the question of users' take-up of the public offer

Following public policy changes induced by the gradual inclusion of actors other than public administrations, notably associative actors but also private businesses, the focus of research extended beyond SLB, to street-level organizations (SLO). The broadening of the research subject was intended to examine the impact of forms of governance and intervention induced by these mixed public-private arrangements on services delivered to the public. This work, undertaken more recently, notably at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, studies the actual effects of contractualization on organizations and professional practices (Brodkin 2011).

When the implementation of public policies is investigated from this angle, the tensions generated by the rationalization of objectives and the means induced by these institutional arrangements lie at the heart of the on-going analysis of service relations throughout the world. In French studies, these realities are examined in the social sector, in particular. This sector provides personal aid to individuals. It is attracting a growing number of employer organizations that operate according to a market economy model. The demand for rationalization – weighing on social and medico-social work in particular (delivered at home or out-of-home) – has been analysed as a consequence of a general process of "*marketization*" that both modifies the organization of the field and its mode of financing, and seeks to overturn the meaning that the actors in the field give to their

work (Chauvière 2009). By taking into account a diversity of sectors, some authors stress the responsibility left to service providers, who are expected to submit to expectations and increasingly to users' behaviours. Hence, the "discretionary power" of agents in most direct contact with the public, which Michael Lipsky highlighted in his work on SLB (Lipsky 1980), seems inevitable (Maynard-Moody et al. 2000) and may be reinforced (Gillson 2015). Street-level bureaucrats have limited resources (time, money, etc.) and cannot enforce all the rules. They therefore need discretion. In many circumstances, discretion makes it possible to adapt the policy to users' individual needs, which increases the meaningfulness of the policy for them, and therefore the value of social benefits as public services (Meyers et al. 2003). That is why discretionary power is essential, as much for street-level bureaucrats as for caseworkers. Discretion can furthermore positively affect professionals' willingness to implement outputs and thus policy (Tummers et al. 2012).

These studies have shown that service providers stand to gain from users' adhesion, if the public service offer is to be implemented and justified. Hence, the model used to analyse the service relationship has to take into account the fact that service delivery agents have to obtain users' adhesion if the public offer is to be delivered – and to be delivered it has to have been accepted.

The notion of discretion has been discussed between defenders of both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective on policy implementation. From a top-down perspective (Sabatier et al. 1979, Pressman et al. 1984, Hogwood et al. 1984), policy implementation is seen solely as a mechanistic process that is completely isolated from policy making, without feedback. In this approach, discretion is not welcomed and must be controlled (Polksy 1993, Brehm et al. 1999). Conversely, from a bottom-up perspective on discretion (Lipsky 1980, Barret et al. 1981, Hanf 1982, Hjern et al. 1982, Elmore 1985), street-level bureaucrats' action appears to be no longer simply a matter of reparation/adaptation with a view to delivering a service. Instead, it is a matter of assessment – usually without adequate pre-established criteria – of users' behaviours, where this behaviour, and no longer only users' conditions and/or status, determines their eligibility for financial or non-financial benefits. That is why the interpretation and implementation of constraints is left up to the front-line agents, for this work is at the heart of the "*individualized governance of behaviours*" (Dubois 2010). More broadly, the importance of this work is apparent in a diversity of studies on social protection (Keiser 2010, Rowe 2002), health insurance systems

(Hägglund 2012), child welfare (Duffy et al. 2010), care (Evans 2010, Petchey et al. 2008), and e-Administration (Marston 2006). But the sociology of social or medico-social intervention goes further. It considers that the discretionary power of caseworkers is the keystone of highly complex professional practices. This is because they have to take into account simultaneously the logics of social politics, the conditions in which users and their needs are taken into account, family cultures, and the resulting conceptions of intimacy (Dajoui 2014).

Non-take-up: a phenomenon often overlooked

The sociology of service relations has tended to study users only in terms of “what agents do.” Users have therefore remained a sort of “foil.” In public policy analysis we rarely find an open approach (Warin 1999) to service relations as the regulation of interests, that is, an approach that implements broader representation, in which users project their expectations of the administration, policies and even politics. The sociology of service relations does not take this political dimension into account, in that it does not consider the fact that the relationship between service provider and user consists not only in involving the latter in the production of a response to their own needs, but also in creating consent in the rules of the social game instituted by public policies.

This is a micro-sociology, as Urghetto says, the main concern of which is to create a detailed corpus of interactions in order to ascertain how the actors in the relationship construct a situated result. It therefore does not aim to identify and to study the significations of interactions in terms of social relations, that is, confrontation with an issue of social signification of the public offer, from which the protagonists (notably the users) affirm their individuality (particularly as actors and citizens). In the sociological debate there is a core difference between “the relation” and “the relationship,” and therefore between their respective studies. “The relation” concerns pre-existing elements between which a link is established, whereas the concept of “relationship” implies that *“it is in the relationship that the protagonists are created and produced.”* In a relationship, ...

... it is not about a role, a functioning defined in a hypothetically integrated global society. One does not take part in a social relationship in the same way as one takes on a social role or function [as in a relation]. One participates as a protagonist, that is, as someone who is going to contribute to the very existence and development of the relationship. (Zarifian 2013)

In the sociology of service relations, individuals who “actively and voluntarily” practice non-take-up, in other words, who deliberately do not take advantage of their rights for the above reasons, are largely overlooked. This non-take-up, which I call “intentional,” stems from a conflict over the meaning of the public offer, due to disagreement with its norms (Warin 2016). To understand what is at stake, we can distinguish between “use value” and “exchange value” as did Marx and, before him, Adam Smith and Ricardo, and already established by Aristotle. In the case of intentional non-take-up, assessment of benefits or services goes beyond the value related to the assumed or actual advantages of their use. It primarily concerns their exchange value, the standard of which is not money but a type of social relationship established as a general norm, or perceived as such. This non-take-up, which stems from a conception of the significance of the public offer, therefore involves a social relationship and not only a relationship with the service provider. Likewise, but from the perspective of “moral economies,” other authors talk of “reasoned” non-take-up (Tabin et al. 2016).

The very existence of this social relationship is usually not seen. In the French conception of the administrative system, citizens are supposed to be satisfied with the services and social benefits that are offered to them, and the agents providing those services are supposed to systematically deliver them. Because of this path dependency, many public policy actors fail to see non-take-up as intentional. They argue that this is necessarily something that users are victims of, relating largely to themselves, or else see it simply as a problem relating to information or the processing of applications.

There are numerous reasons for this short-sightedness. As regards caseworkers, it is important to note that the growing individualization of social policies precludes all reference to a differentiated approach to users, due to the multiple criteria and procedures. This leads to differentiation according to administrative norms, but does not take into account the possibility of simply “not wanting” as a criterion of differentiation of potential users. The caseworkers delivering the service are not able to see that non-take-up also raises the question of the relevance of the public offer. In a sense they maintain a culture of bureaucratic domination based on the negation of any differentiation of individuals/public concerning their expectations with regard to the public offer.

Studies on non-take-up show why potential beneficiaries may refuse the public offer and how this refusal (reflected in non-take-up, non-demand or exit) has political meaning, when it is explained in terms of

disagreement with the principles, norms and values underpinning the content of the offer and its conditions of implementation. Whereas the sociology of service relations, which bases its analysis on SLB or SLO, fails to see this political dimension, work on non-take-up, and particularly on intentional non-take-up, is of great interest. The latter research shows why and how the refusal of the public offer sometimes stems not from a (single) calculation of interests, but from disagreement on the meaning given to the central objectives of the public offer or/and elements of its implementation (rules, procedures, practices).

Without going into a general explanation of the political dimension of the non-take-up phenomenon presented elsewhere (Warin 2016), my intention here is to show why the study of non-take-up cannot be contained in the service relation model. Consider the empirical case introduced above.

The oversight of the service relation model

The research on which I draw here primarily concerned take-up of home care services by the elderly (and their families). Home care is a professional practice characterized by tension, because it requires a caseworker to reconcile all of the following: unavoidable intrusiveness with respect for intimacy; a professional approach with a code of hospitality; normalizing control with support for individuals; and being homebound while maintaining a social link. It is a category of social and medico-social action that enables a firm grasp of the place of the service relationship in social work. Elian Djaoui highlights the paradoxical objectives for which practitioners have to strive: both support for highly vulnerable populations, and control of "deviant" behaviours; thus, maintaining the social link but also the risk of "social withdrawal" at home (Djaoui 2014).

By looking at an SLO type of service that was largely informed by the service relation paradigm, well before it had spread to France, I show that this model as it stands does not include all the dimensions of taking up the offer. I have found the following to be true. First, it appears that take-up concerns two related dimensions: services delivered, and elderly people's relationship to themselves. In this respect, the service relation model is clearly useful. Yet the take-up of home services is not based on the same expectations, if the aged individual is still autonomous or, on the contrary, dependent on outside help, whether professional or by the family. Many interviews bear witness to a wish to "*control the vagaries of biology*" which Dominique Memmi talks of (Memmi 2000), since elderly people carry on

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own needs, but rather one of their relation to the offer. The case used as an example – and many others that would yield similar results, such as the minimum income support allowance (RSA), food allowances, and holiday allowances (Warin 2018) – indicates above all that users' relations to their needs are linked to their representation of the offer.

The relation to the offer is usually considered to depend on the individual's needs. This indicates that the consumer paradigm still carries a lot of weight. However, the analysis of non-take-up enables us to see things differently. Although users have needs, they may refuse the offer because of their assessment thereof. This assessment may concern the satisfaction which the potential beneficiary thinks they may derive from use of the offer to meet their needs (its "use value"); or it may also concern the general "global sense" that he or she attributes to the offer in terms of social progress, protection, solidarity, assistance, etc. (its "exchange value"). Yet the advantages of the offer in terms of use value (utility) are not always enough if its exchange value (social significance) does not seem acceptable.

This process of assessment of the offer is at the heart of "the reception of policies by their public," to which research on non-take-up is contributing to introduce as central to public policy analysis (Warin 2016). This research subject renews the study of the implementation of policies from the angle of the offer's relevance to its recipients. It also opens the interesting possibility of policy feedback analysis, if our objective is to verify the existence of relations between constrained/voluntary non-take-up, the formation of political judgements, and political behaviours.

An uncomfortable postulate

The service relation model is not designed to describe the case of intentional non-take-up and certainly does not explain how agents can remedy these situations. The model is limited to the agent's intervention to meet the user's need, and to the user's relation to his or her own need. It excludes the user's perception of the content of the offer, over and above the act of the service delivery (the user is simply the "*foil*"). To incorporate this type of situation, which is by no means the only one (non-take-up in general is a massive phenomenon and intentional non-take-up is not residual), the model would need to introduce what it presently excludes: the social significations of the public offer to users; even if the sociology of service relations aims to show how service providers are able to support interactions through relationship (politeness), techniques, and contractual means (rights and duties pre-established for each party) (Joseph 1998).

The public offer is not taken into account in the service relation model, because this model is based on the postulate that the offer is necessarily delivered. The only question then is how that will be done, and how the production process can be improved (a sociology in the service of reform). The problem is that this is far from always being the case. The service is not systematically rendered, for many reasons related first and foremost to the conditions of the offer itself.

Michael Lipsky clearly perceived this situation, even though he did not directly focus on the sociological model of service relations. His whole analysis of street level bureaucrats consisted in studying the ways in which agents went about their work with the public when faced with various constraints. His research fields were essentially large North-American cities such as New York, which were facing financial collapse if not bankruptcy in the 1970s. As Mike Rowe so clearly shows, Lipsky's analysis is of work carried out under conditions of "rationing of resources" to distribute and of the means to do so (Rowe 2012). Rather than modelling or theorizing the service relationship, Lipsky observed and commented on service providers' action in situations of tight budgetary constraints. His pioneering analysis was on the way of delivering regulated benefits to satisfy users' demands, while taking into account not only financial constraints (resources), but also legal (objectives and public policy regulations) and managerial ones (performance of organized systems). It shows that agents' discretionary power stems from a constant orchestration of rules, constraints and demands. This is what gives their activity a political dimension (Gilson 2015).

Following Lipsky, other authors have validated the need for discretion, also from a bottom-up perspective. They stress the importance of management of professional teams. In his book published in 2010, Tony Evans introduced the question with an empirical case study, among others, of a social service team working at the homes of the elderly. This in-depth analysis shows how discretion can work, and in particular the position of managers, not only as bureaucrats in a top-down process, but also as professionals who at least partly share value with the caseworkers. In France, the basic training of caseworkers being what it is, employers and team managers have to help them, through advice, additional training, support, and sharing practices. But this support is situated less in a context creating frameworks for practice than it is in Australia, the UK, the USA, and Canada, for instance, due particularly to the vertical structure of social policies, fields of intervention, and professions. In France, managerial expectations

are very strong, irrespective of the field of intervention (assistance for the dependent elderly, for small children, for disabled persons, etc.). Teams of professionals are subjected to obligations to provide results, imposed by funding bodies (local authorities, social institutions, insurance companies, investment funds), and to an increasingly stringent normative framework of practices.

Conclusion

The short-sightedness of the service relation model with regard to non-take-up is symptomatic of the difficulty of considering, at least, that users (even fragile and dependent ones) can decide, on their own, to use or not to use the available offer, depending on its use value (utility) and its exchange value (the type of social relation imposed on users). Hence, the sociology of service relations does not perceive the political dimension of intentional non-take-up through signified disagreement with the principles and norms of the public offer. My intention is not to criticize this sociology and certainly not to initiate a controversy. I simply wish to point out that we can perceive its difficulty in conceiving of the possibility of intentional non-take-up, even though the other forms of the phenomenon reveal its existence. As resistance to social work which aims to prevent non-take-up shows, the oversight is therefore largely shared among researchers and deciders, as well as service providers themselves (Warin 2014).

Ultimately, the issue is not that the non-take-up phenomenon jams the service relation model, but that, since this model is unable to fully accommodate non-take-up, the phenomenon becomes the object, in its own right, of another analytical framework. Above all, we can consider that the non-take-up approach needs a separate analytical model, simply because the service relation model shows that defining a professional is impossible without involving the user (or client), and that the analysis of non-take-up reveals that there is no user without taking into account his or her relation to the offer and to its normative content, over and above the service delivery act.

In so far as the analysis of non-take-up shows what the service relation model cannot incorporate, it is necessary to examine how both of them, beyond their own objectives and orientations, can be articulated. If, as we suggested, the crux of the matter is the problem of framing the joint relations of service providers and users of the offer, it would probably be advisable for us to revert to the “social relation to service” concept. As Philippe Zarifian, one of its main instigators, explains, this concept is

designed to account for the structuring and partially structuring part of the social relations of the production of services and their delivery (Zarifian 2013). More precisely, he indicates that the social relation to service stems both from the encounter between the agents of service provision, faced with demands to process, and with the financial, legal and managerial constraints of the offer (what Lipsky pointed out); as well as the users' encounter with the normative content of the offer (what the analysis of non-take-up shows). Based on this, it can be seen as the general encounter with an issue (which may partly be common to the providers and recipients) of social signification of the public offer, i.e. of its constraints and of its normative content. The social relation to service concept seems to be fully meaningful for modelling non-take-up as a framework of analysis, since it is based on the understanding that the public has its word to say on the relevance of the public offer, in terms of exchange value, social needs, (moral) concepts of "fairness for all" and ethical concepts of "good for one-self" (Warin 2016).

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