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ECHEVERRI (Per), « La méthodologie in situ. Tracer une nouvelle direction pour la recherche sur les services »

RÉSUMÉ – Cet article plaide en faveur d'une nouvelle direction dans la recherche sur les services : la méthodologie *in situ*. Il discute les méthodes de recherche existantes et envisage une démarche théorique et empirique plus profonde. Il s'appuie sur trois arguments fondamentaux ontologiques, épistémologiques et méthodologiques. Il s'agit de développer des méthodes plus créatives permettant la proximité vis-à-vis du phénomène et des acteurs impliqués et en mesure de saisir la réalité dans ses multiples facettes.

MOTS-CLÉS – Recherche sur les services, méthodologie *in situ*, recherche *in situ*, cocréation de valeur, développement théorique, ontologie, épistémologie, méthodologie

ECHEVERRI (Per), « In Situ Methodology. Outlining a New Direction for Service Research »

ABSTRACT – This article argues in favour of a new direction in service research: *in situ* methodology. It problematizes previous ways of conducting service research and envisages a more profound theoretical and empirical understanding. It outlines three basic arguments as a scientific rationale, discussing ontological, epistemological, and methodological matters. It is highlights the need to develop more creative methods that allow proximity to the phenomenon and the involved actors with the capacity to grasp the multi-faceted reality.

KEYWORDS – Service research, *in situ* methodology, *in situ* research, value co-creation, theory development, ontology, epistemology, methodology

IN SITU METHODOLOGY

Outlining a New Direction for Service Research

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses alternative ways of conducting service research to get closer to the research phenomenon, with the aim of a more valid representation for better theory building. It relates to the discussion concerning recent thinking in the discipline of service research as regards how to advance existing methodologies in order to create more in-depth theories. Fundamentally, two questions are addressed: 1) what is this phenomenon called service, and 2) how can we learn more about it? The discussion is influenced by the fact that so many service and marketing researchers talk today about "value-in-use", i.e. the kind of value consumers experience while using a service, while still tending to apply research methods that are limited to examining "value-ex-use", i.e. respondent (informant) responses of value before or after the actual service experience. The most obvious evidence of this is the bulk of studies using survey and interview methods beyond the service situation and service experience, a methodological tradition which for quite a few years has been subject to problematization (*cf.* Gummesson, 2000; 2014), in turn leading to an increase in the application of approaches such as practice-theory studies (i.e. analyses exploring linkages between structures and human activity)

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aimed at understanding and explaining the complexities of service processes, service organizations, and consumers' everyday lives. The paper discusses some methodological matters and addresses a slightly new direction for service research to take, here labelled In situ methodology.

Occasionally, researchers prompt reflections on how far a discipline has developed and how far, and where, it still has to go. The field of service research has been established and, over the decades, fertilized by different perspectives. Much influence comes from the broader field of market research (mostly from the private and commercial sectors and less from the public and non-profit sectors). Service research has continuously been changing due to different and changing conceptualizations of what constitutes a service, and how to understand it and grasp the essence of how value is realized. The discussion held here will mainly be based on some of the recent conceptual developments linked to the concept of 'value co-creation', and its implications regarding how to conduct and advance service research.

The specific focus of this paper is the implications for collecting and analysing data. A major implication of the value co-creation and value-in-use argument, as put forward by Vargo and Lusch (2004a), and many others, both before and after the seminal work of the aforementioned, is that customers understand, perceive, or realize value when using services or products; for that reason, research could benefit from staying close to this use situation. This paper will argue in favour of this situation being the crucial point of departure for all types of service research. The situation is the locus of the first order value experience, both positive and negative, and a place where informants (a better word for respondents), in fruitful ways, can contextualize and specify their experiences. Taking the given situation seriously, we have reason to pave the way for different forms of in situ methodologies.

The article is structured as follows. First, six slightly provocative statements are posited as points of departure that problematize how the service research community has historically been conducting service research. Second, the direction towards an in situ methodology for service research is proposed, exploring the need for a more profound theoretical and empirical understanding. Three basic arguments are proposed, i.e. discussing ontological, epistemological, and methodological matters. A short conclusion finishes off the article.

I. STATEMENTS ON SERVICE RESEARCH: A SHORT HISTORICAL REVIEW

In what follows, it is argued that earlier and recent service research is beset with weaknesses, especially in the light of the contemporary notion of service as a co-created phenomenon. The section is structured into six problematizing statements, each acting as a point of departure for outlining alternative ways of doing service research.

RESEARCH HAS ONLY HAD A VAGUE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT SERVICE REALLY IS

What is the argument underpinning this slightly arrogant statement, facing the fact that service research is heavily in demand in society and industries are "servitizing", while distinguished scholars agree on the service (dominant) logic? At the time of the acknowledged birth of service marketing, and during the following decade, the common way of discussing services was to distinguish services from goods using a number of attributes (Shostack, 1977). It first appeared in the dissertation of Johnson (1969), where he asked, "Are goods and services different?". Scholars thus shaped the service management thought using the goods and services dichotomy. The intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability (IHIP) characteristics served as loyal companions in several academic battles to establish the research field of services (e.g., Bateson, 1979; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Few of the critics, however, felt compelled to publish their arguments, something which thus appeared to be a verbal criticism from reviewers and conference participants (Brown *et al.*, 1994). One of the few criticisms published argued that the taxonomy of goods versus services was dysfunctional (Wyckham *et al.*, 1975). Others provided more subtle definitions of how to characterize this immaterial product. Relating services to goods could be dysfunctional because it plausibly rules out the inherent characteristics of services that lack a dichotomous counterpart in goods (Lindquist and Persson, 1997). This has also remained a principal argument of service marketing critics, who have frequently argued that services are not different from goods, and that the identified service characteristics are not, in fact, unique to services (e.g., Alvesson, 2000; Hjern, 1990).

Perhaps it was the case that quality, as one early main foothold of service research (Brown *et al.*, 1994), was developed out of the quality management movement in the manufacturing industry (Deming, 1986), playing a significant role in the establishment of the dichotomy paradigm. It was argued that, since services were not produced in factories or consumed later on by the customer, they did not have the same characteristics. For example, traditionally, the role of marketing is to bridge the gap between production and consumption; therefore, having a specialized marketing department is logical and effective (Grönroos, 2000). The gap, however, is not explicit in a service context. The argument in favour of IHIP was logical at first, and pedagogical to use. The argumentation was also necessary as the history had favoured a goods-oriented paradigm, due to the fact that value has been equal to "stuff" for centuries (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, 2004b). Nevertheless, the argument led researchers to indirectly concentrate their efforts on what a service is not, which again could be dysfunctional as it may block out important aspects of services.

Along with this vein of research, there were others that developed more nuanced notions of the fuzzy properties of service, often in terms of characteristics or attributes. Notions of the specifics of services included elements such as 'competence, 'knowledge, and 'technology in different configurations (*cf.* Gallouj and Weinstein, 1997). Rather than addressing co-creation or mutual interaction, they addressed the properties of the resources used. The conceptualizations only implicitly addressed the co-creation aspect using concepts such as 'process', 'processing operations', 'procedures', 'acts', 'competence', and 'involvement' etc. This notion is echoed in the SDL definition of service as 'the application of specialized competences (i.e. knowledge and skills), through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself' (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). However, these conceptualizations were important steps in the evolution of co-creation thinking.

Today, it is not a radical point of view that academic service management thinking, some 15 years ago, moved away from IHIP, although there are examples of researcher arguing that it may still be valid and useful if it is applied to certain points of references (to a particular stage or corresponding resources) and not to the single entity of services (Moeller, 2010). However, the attempt go beyond the crucial dynamics of the inseparability of interactants during transformation of resources and usage. In the current service (dominant) logic era, after the value co-creation turn, it is sad to hear service researchers still using the standardized list of IHIP, or components thereof, when presenting motives for conducting their research. Not many years ago, Grönroos (2003) argued that the introductions of journal articles began with some of the IHIP arguments in order to justify the special service research approach to a situation. At the opening panel session at the AMA ServSig Conference, held in Reims in June 2003, several influential service researchers argued that service research had not had a great impact on practice, expressing disappointment over the misunderstandings occurring in early service research thought. If this is a correct description, it will indicate that a large amount of service research has failed, implicitly blaming IHIP for not delivering enough insight worth companies' consideration.

This is a discouraging reality for a research field whose contributors are believed to be working closely with practice with an express interest in having a direct influence on management (Brown *et al.*, 1994). Some of the ballast of service research may be heaved overboard, especially management-oriented research based on anecdotal data and literature-driven a priori constructed conceptual research designs, which may fall into the trap of limiting research efforts to the reproduction of the constructs and models found in the literature ad hoc, with either a vague empirical grounding or none at all. Too many conceptual frameworks are suggested, even though these are based on ambiguous sets of concepts stacked one upon the other. The recent service (dominant) logic paradigm, based on some of the early roots in service research in the late 70s and early 80s, is a renewed attempt to grasp the very essence of what service really is; i.e. the ontological aspect by addressing the fundamental aspect of 'co-creation' or 'interaction' as the main mechanism of value creation. However, as many service scholars have pointed out, the conceptualizations and loci of 'value co-creation', 'value creation', 'co-creation', and 'value-in-use' are still imprecise and under debate (*cf.* Grönroos and Voima, 2013). In particular, the vague and slightly conflicting conceptualizations made within the S-D logic paradigm have come under attack.

RESEARCH HAS CONFUSED THE SERVICE SECTOR WITH THE SERVICE PERSPECTIVE

One original aim of service research was to offer management an alternative strategic approach to the new and competitive situation. Service marketing was mainly to be conceived of as a perspective (*cf.* Grönroos, 2001; Levitt, 1972; 1976; Shostack, 1977), not just something that could replace the word 'product' in the 4p marketing mix model. Unfortunately, practice seems to have adopted service marketing as a special case of product marketing, while marketing, according to a service perspective, has for many years been viewed as the mission of everyone within an organization (Gummesson, 1991). It is a way of thinking and behaving, not just an issue of assigning responsibility, such as establishing a separate marketing department (Grönroos, 2000). It is a strategic perspective that starts out from, and is structured in relation to, the benefit offered to the customer. This is a slightly different ontology, with complicated organizational issues.

A perspective is open to every organization to adopt and use, something which in turn is quite different to the view that service marketing principally concerns a service sector and its special conditions. The definition of a service sector has mostly been based on an economic and political science point of view[2], having been used by service research to, for example, justify the study of services. In the beginning, that definition was differentiated from both the marketing and the service perspectives, intended to handle the competitive aspects that traditional marketing did not (Shostack, 1977). It has even been suggested that the defining of services, as provided by a certain type of organization, is not only outdated but also misleads business managers (Grönroos, 2000). Today, we can trace conceptual shifts in service research, from perceiving services as specific cases in the marketplace, via perceiving service aspects from a given viewpoint in different kinds of business, to addressing service as a perspective of viewing business as services, and more recently viewing the service (dominant) logic as a perspective of value creation in all types of sectors (private, public, nonprofit). These shifts are linked to different conceptions of our socially-constructed

2 While there are definitions of the service sector in service research, it remains an area suggested to be in need of improvement due to being inconclusive (Menor *et al.*, 2002).

reality. All conceptions, new or more or less new, of the object of study will have implications for research and R&D activities.

SERVICE RESEARCH NEEDS TO FOCUS ON THE INHERENT NATURE OF SERVICE

Even though few efforts have been made to develop complementary approaches to IHIP or the dichotomy notion, there have been suggestions as to how service research could move forward. Researchers have pictured services as being contextual and situationally dependent on a continuum, where a product is closer to one end, i.e. an offering is composed of tangible and intangible dimensions (Bateson and Hoffman, 1999). Shostack, in the late 70s, acknowledged the difficult task of defining a pure service as separate from a pure good, instead arguing in favour of a different view of how to market a service (Shostack, 1977). Exactly how a commercial product is recognized, which in this case inhibits physical or mental elements, will affect how to market it. A Bang & Olufsen stereo, for example, can be as intangible (the feeling of owning an extraordinary piece of audio equipment of an artful design) as any service, such as a restaurant, which in turn often relies on goods (the place, the primaries, seating comfort, etc.).

Another argument made is the notion of the ‘missing product’, which starts out from the service itself (Grönroos, 2001; Lindquist and Persson, 1997). The question raised in this approach is: What does the customer experience in a service if there is no physical product? The notion suggests that customers experience the process they are involved in as a user or consumer of that service. The notion of involvement in the process is characterized as an interaction between the customer and the company (Cook *et al.*, 2002; Lindquist and Persson, 1997). This description of a service is defined here as a departure from the inherent characteristics of a service and not of a good.

Probably, most researchers have viewed a service as an interaction between the customer and the company, which follows from services being simultaneously produced and consumed (Normann, 1984), the inseparability aspect of the IHIP package. The interaction (i.e. the moment of truth) means that the customer plays an interesting and multifaceted role in the service organization in serving as a participant in production and delivery (Normann, 1984). Thomke (2003), for example, argued for a different view of service development vis-à-vis product development, when emphasizing that service development needs to be considered live and at the moment of truth. In line with this, most scholars state that services are activities, deeds, or processes and interactions (Lovelock, 1991; Solomon *et al.*, 1985; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000); however, such conceptualizations are quite imprecise. In relation to the amount of scepticism that the 'IHIP package' has been subject to, the 'prosumtion' nature of services (Toffler, 1980) is appreciated by the research community as an argument in favour of service research, one of the roots of the contemporary notion of 'co-creation' such as interactions with resources (e.g. resource integration). Instead of concentrating efforts on what a service is not, the face-to-face meeting (i.e. the moment of truth) as the archetype of services has implicitly been proposed as enfolding the service nature as an interaction (Lindquist and Persson, 1997). Service encounters have even been defined as the interaction process between the server and the served (Cook *et al.*, 2002).

The notion of the co-creation of services is not new; it may be identified under various concepts, e.g. co-production, interaction, encounter, interface, prosumption, servuction (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987), the social regulation of relationships (Gadrey, 1992), [collaborative] change of state in reality (Gadrey, 2000), service relationships (De Bandt, 1995), and others. This notion has its roots in early philosophical discussions on what constitute production and consumption, during the 18th century (Ramirez, 1999; Say, 1836) but have been called by post-modern writers an 'artificial disjunction' (Baudrillard *et al.*, 1976, 112) or a 'superficial distinction' (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993, 236) that questions the distinction between production and consumption in itself. In line with this, the social roles of the 'employee' and the 'customer' also overlap (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008), both providing resources to the other, and both producing and consuming each other's resources. Customers do not just add value at the end of the (production/consumption) process (value chain), they are also 'an operant resource' for the firm, a collaborating partner who co-creates value with the firm (Lusch *et al.*, 2007, 6). To conclude with Gadrey (2000) there have been major difficulties in defining a general definition of what service is that includes all social and institutional conditions and covers all forms of services. The academic discussion has been extremely complex and more or less ended up in a blind alley. For the purpose of this article, it is concluded that a crucial mechanism for creating value in service is 'interaction' meaning that actors co-act with different resources, fully aware of that there are services with a minimum of interaction.

There are, arguably, substantial conceptual developments that underpin the arguments in favour of the contemporary service (dominant) logic conceptualization of the service phenomena as being co-created. This is not just another view of the phenomenon. Rather, it is a more profound and better ontology, with different conceptual roots, not only in the notion of inseparability (one of the 4 aspects of IHIP), and early service marketing thinking (e.g. Grönroos, 1982; Gummesson, 1987), but also in other disciplines.

A SERVICE EQUALS INTERACTIONS

Services are inherently relational in character since any service organization always interacts with its customer (Grönroos, 2000). If we start out from the service in terms of being an interaction, we will probably come up with different research questions than in the "this-is-not-a-good" paradigm. For example, researching a healthcare service without having a clear understanding of the 'nature' of service, or viewing it as some kind of mystifying holistic entity, may lead to research questions concerning how this 'entity' is perceived and managed by organizations, service employees or customers, as well as how it will in turn influence their well-being, satisfaction or end-states (e.g. health). While researching this service as an 'interaction', other research issues may be elicited, e.g. what constitutes the actual interactivity between actors, how is the interaction structured and produced, which interaction elements, actions, configurations of sub-activities, environmental cues, or other 'touch-points' etc. create value, and which elements destroy value on the customer, employee, or organizational levels. Value is surely not always co-created (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011).

Viewing these aspects as crucial to success is probably one important factor explaining the ever-growing interest in servitization (see Baines *et al.*, 2009 for an overview), a term coined by Vandermerwe and Rada (1988) and implying the "increased offering of fuller market packages or 'bundles' of customer focused combinations of goods, services, support, self-service and knowledge in order to add value to core product offerings".

This definition is close to the view of services as a performance, rather than as produced (see also product-service system approaches with clear similarities). Services are becoming the main differentiating factor, or even the core business identity, reducing the product to just being a part of the offering (Gebauer *et al.*, 2006). Although slightly 'delivery' biased, up-holding the production-consumption dichotomy, this servitization movement in manufacturing addresses the conceptual turn towards service thinking and greater in-depth interaction with the customers.

As the traditional and conceptual boundary between 'pure' services and manufactured goods gradually fades away, the rationale of service research has been called into question. The above-described 'nature' of services, however, brings the interaction between a customer and an organization into focus, and also serves as a key, distinguishing impetus in service development (Bitner *et al.*, 2000; Grönroos, 2000; Lindquist and Persson, 1997; Thomke, 2003). Consequently, the heart of service operations and service management lies in how the interaction is managed and how the production and consumption processes are matched in order to satisfy the actors involved, and not just the customer. Certainly, what is "processed" during the interaction is more than time. It includes issues such as sensemaking activities and the construction of symbolic meanings.

The service-centred logic implies that value is ultimately defined by and co-created with the customer and determined by the customer on the basis of value-in-use, defined as "an interactive relativistic preference experience" (Holbrook, 1994; 2006), rather than being embedded in predefined output (Vargo and Lusch, 2004a). The service-centred model describes an active customer involved in the service performance, interacting with staff, the service script, and/or supporting tangibles, entailing a need to develop close and trusting relationships. Relations and processes are based on and constructed by interactions, and not vice versa.

INTERACTIONS ARE IN SITU EXPERIENCES

Once upon a time, before any service research had been conducted, people's needs were identified during the actual interaction between buyer and seller. This interaction was done in the marketplace. However, as ideas about achieving scale developed, companies and customers were forced apart and the need to "investigate the customer" then arose. Market research was born. The task was to be informed by the customer using different methods, especially before and after purchase and consumption. It became difficult to get access to the actual interaction.

Using this arrangement, managers faced a wide range of problems. There was a need to develop methods of communicating with actual and potential consumers. This was rendered most effective using a priori categorized schemes of questions (surveys), in a written and standardized format. Scripted communication became a 'tunnel' to the consumer. A rich flora of literature on how to construct surveys, scales and items in a manageable way was developed. Although such manuals are of great merit, managers developed a tradition of constantly neglecting the type of communication provided during interpersonal interactions and in specific situations. The wide range of non-verbal modalities, multimodal communication and contextual cues was not used for information about, or an understanding of, what is important for consumers. Consumer analysts and researchers were forced to simplify the life worlds of consumers and to use a priori constructs for measuring their so called 'behaviour'. This was in spite of the knowledge that humans normally use a myriad of other modalities when expressing themselves. Many aspects of consumption experiences are difficult to express in words, or by clicking on a predefined response. Interviews, focus groups and case studies have more useful capacities for grasping the 'authentic' individual or the social reality of the customer. Nevertheless, methods such as these have weak links with the implicit situation being investigated. The contextual factors of the situation are not fully captured, with opportunities for more in-depth analyses and theory-building being lost.

The obstacles to understanding the customer, because of ineffective research methodologies, have implications for industry, and service developers in particular. These obstacles are associated with the distance between an organization and the actual users of its products and services. The concept of mass production often results in separating the researcher from the researched, with a dialogue that is either non-existent or very constrained. Service organizations may argue that they are customer-oriented; however, in reality, they are quite distant to their customers or have distorted theories about them. In order to transfer knowledge, as in product and service development, it is thus essential to overcome this gap that has emerged (Griffin and Hauser, 1992; Li and Calantone, 1998). A consequence of this gap is the separation of market information from market communication – two sides of the marketing management coin. Going back to the situation, and taking a closer look at what is happening while using methods that can be applied in situ, is one way of collecting more relevant and contextual data (*cf.* Echeverri, 2005; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2012). Services provide excellent opportunities for such studies and developments due to the proximity of the customer, the provider and other actors. The richness of the situation, its actors, its discourse, and its meaning all provide potential resources for in-depth analyses, better interpretations, more relevant hypotheses, more insightful explanations and, ultimately, more valid theories.

SERVICE RESEARCH OVERLOOKS THE THEORETICAL PREMISES INHERENT IN THE METHODS USED

In the service research literature, we find descriptions of different methods relevant to collecting data. Such descriptions are implicitly based on some kind of understanding of service phenomena. Here, the reasoning enfolds the idea that individual researchers and developers always have a theory about the phenomena they are working with. However, in published research, such premises are infrequently made explicit, and are often overlooked. The relationship between 'data' and phenomena is not self-evident. Managers and researchers will have validity problems if the gathered 'data' (based on a set of main stream a priori concepts) does not reflect the intended phenomena. All concepts (constructs) have a history and are, explicitly or implicitly, used as a mental grid for interpretation. In article reviews, we find, all too often, propositions and theoretical models to be tested which are, to varying degrees, based on earlier literature, with either no or limited grounding in the empirical field in which they are said to have explanatory power. Blaming limited access to data or earlier literature is a poor excuse. The result is a flora of preliminary knowledge with either a vague or no proper empirical grounding. The actual choice of research approach determines what can be found. Traditional quantitative approaches are very productive in investigating and constructing the consumer reality, but validity will always be a problematic issue.

Blind tests have serious weaknesses when we seek to understand the consumer. In laboratories and blind test experiments, the natural context is excluded. This is a problem. The naturally occurring context has important keys for proper understanding and valid interpretation. When aspects important to the consumer in naturally occurring situations are excluded from a study, important aspects of the phenomena will be missing. Such approaches produce or verify distorted theories. What is measured before, during and after a situation does not amount to the same thing. Perceptions, meanings and opinions differ due to when the respondents respond. Yes, the separate perceptions (results) are overlapping to some extent, but they correspond to different parameters.

A common notion among researchers is that if we triangulate (using different methods of fixing the phenomena), we will be able to compensate for not being close to the situation. This, however, is based on ontological assumptions regarding stability; the 'object' does not change when other techniques of data collection are used, or in other situations. Sometimes, results are inconsistent; they do not overlap in the desired way. It looks like different methods have different capacities for determining phenomena and therefore different capacities for producing good theory, i.e. an empirically-grounded and consistent "statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs" (Corley and Gioia, 2011, p. 12). One can even argue that different methods grasp different phenomena, or at least grasp different levels of them. This is because each method is bound to a specific choice of communication, e.g. the formulation of items, questions, scales etc. Whatever types of communicative modalities are used, specific discourses are addressed and/or used, specific premises are used which are in turn linked to specific discourses. It is extremely difficult, maybe impossible, to use exactly the same construct in different items or questions. Even if the same construct is used, the meaning will differ with the cognitive context it is being used within, and the specific social context at hand. Contextual factors that influence the response situation are clearly described in standard textbooks on methodology. However, the existence of these influencing factors results in that which is being measured, using different methods, not being the same thing. When the situational context is more or less the same, there will be a higher level of correspondence between the chosen constructs. However, changing the situation entails changing the studied phenomena.

Normally, the data collection phase is followed by a quite fuzzy process of shaping the results and interpreting what they mean. Thus, arguing in favour of triangulation, on the basis of using different methods, has slightly false foundations. The argument may not be empirical, but philosophical or epistemological. Maybe we can prove there are empirical differences between the different methods. Comparing the methods and the results produced in a systematic way could shed light on this issue. However, such attempts will also be limited by the relevant empirical and contextual situation. Thus, the argument against triangulation may be merely philosophical.

In the methodology literature, researchers focus on discussing the strengths and weaknesses of different methods. Problems are highlighted and acknowledged. However, it seems that the relative weaknesses of methods are seen as something manageable (and acceptable). Traditional research methods (specifically, quantitative survey techniques) are supposed to have the capacity to compensate for such problems. This means accepting a given (lower) level of data quality. This entails not taking these matters seriously. In both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, there are techniques for taking care of "major distortions", and these measures are often looked upon as sufficient, in the sense "It's the best we can do." Well, that may be true, but we could also add "…within the framework of the chosen research approach." If the argumentation posited in this paper holds, there will be a need to discuss and problematize the methodological issues in greater depth. As a research community, we may reach a more authentic understanding of our studied phenomena by getting closer to service interactions. Grasping such authenticity, followed by analytical work, will unearth the crucial mechanism describing and explaining both the service phenomenon and its outcomes.

II. TOWARDS AN IN SITU METHODOLOGY FOR SERVICE RESEARCH

In what follows, there is a discussion regarding the need for better and more profound research into services, which will drive both theoretical and practical developments. Initially, it touches on issues of research hegemony, paradigmatic traditions and the possibilities of gaining better theories regarding social reality. Then, it continues with a discussion about three basic arguments, providing the rationale for this development of research methodology.

THE NEED FOR A MORE PROFOUND THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL UNDERSTANDING

This paper argues that we should consider a slightly new direction for empirical service research, based on the notion of a service (dominant) logic wherein value is co-created (or co-formed) during interaction (mutual reciprocal action or influence), during usage (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), and in a dialectic relationship with different socio-cultural, physical, mental, temporal, and communicative contexts (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Epp and Price, 2010; Helkkula *et al.* 2012) and their field-specific actions, including thinking, considering, imagining and reflecting (Ellway and Dean, 2016). This may take the form of self-service, firm-scripted staging, co-designing, or co-producing (Prahalad, 2004). The specified ontology urges us to develop methods and to use methodologies which (better?) account for the service phenomenon as co-creation, its character, and its links with other elements. The question mark indicates the philosophical question of whether or not it is possible to reach a better scientific understanding or whether such attempts only provide 'another' understanding. Are changes in scientific knowledge due to changes in our perception of reality or due to changes in perception per se? Do the concepts, narratives and models that we scientists use really correspond to something in reality, outside the very concept? Are all scientific constructions equal as regards validity, or is it just a matter of aesthetics or hegemonic power? Many volumes have been written on how theoretical or political positions, either implicit or explicit, shape the research task. Contemporary postmodern thinking challenges the very basis of what knowledge is, and the possibility of achieving better knowledge. It addresses the limitation of human knowledge, pointing to the link between mental processes (thoughts) and human language (communication). Deconstruction, i.e. the reflective turn of social science texts, made by postmodern anthropologists, denying the possibility of universal laws, could be emancipating from limited notions of our lifeworld as well as a blind alley of the scientific endeavour. Increasing the level of sensitivity to situational and contextual issues is a way of navigating through the multi-paradigmatic field of service research.

In the contemporary service research community, we hear voices calling for an even more profound understanding of the customer, and what really produces customer value-in-use. One problem arising when we formulate ambitions such as "arriving at a better and deeper understanding of the customer's value co-creating" or "getting closer to customer processes and service interactions" is that we deliver a lot of assumptions about which phenomena have priority during investigations. In service research, this concerns issues such as what is to be measured, when it is to be measured, where it is to be measured, who is to be measured, and using which tools it is to be measured etc., and whether or not the answers/responses we get in any adequate way reflect the reality we are interested in. Here, it is argued that service research has made important developments in the complex phenomenon of service production. We think that the field has arrived at a point where the conception of the service phenomena is described in positive terms, being descriptions that focus on what it is rather than what it is not. Service research has been a standard-bearer for a partly different perception of the business reality and it has pointed out new issues of importance as regards creating business value, mainly the notion of service as something that is realized during the actual interaction between the customer and the system of resources, on both the organization's side and the consumer's side. This understanding gives us a more profound platform of thinking and a less distorted theory of what we study. If this argument holds, it might have consequences regarding how we are to assess former research approaches and produced theory. It might also have consequences regarding how to outline research in the future.

THREE ARGUMENTS AS A RATIONALE

To conclude, this paper argues for a slightly new direction for service research to take. There are basically three arguments. The first one is ontological and concerns the nature of social entities, e.g. services. Some of the statements presented earlier touch on this aspect. This discussion exists in a tradition of trying to examine social reality with the aim of grasping the 'real' reality, or at least the best preliminary version of it. It accepts the premise that reality is a social construction and, as such, a dynamic concept for the research community. However, I also think that research has the capability of increasingly achieving a better understanding of the service reality; a kind of critical realism standpoint. Thus, the research community should avoid using literature-based conceptualizations in a routinized manner (reproducing the hegemonic tradition), but it should also avoid the position that any theory goes (the relativist fallacy).

In situ methodologies problematize retrospective reconstructions of what has happened or what normally happens during service provision, or the informant's prospective imaginings of what might happen (buyer intentions). Understanding the situation where value is being realized is crucial. Research activities need to draw close to service production and to how that production is experienced, out there in the field. Assumptions regarding the service reality bring direction to methods of developing new and hopefully better research approaches. They have implications regarding which scientific paradigm and study approach should characterize service research.

The second argument is epistemological. When following the notion of holding a theory regarding how people (researchers, customers, users) attain knowledge of social activities, services, products, we can say that such knowledge is based on the subjective meanings of the individual, continually interpreting the symbolic environment, which includes the actions of others, and acts based on this imputed meaning (symbolic interactionism). Using this standpoint, it is important to capture the process of interpretation through which actors construct their actions. Where would the location for this be? We have outlined some statements concerning this. Building on an anti-positivistic hermeneutic view of social action, as embraced by the vast majority of service researchers (maybe?), we can outline study approaches which take advantage of the social resources used by customers and which are in the hands of the researchers. We think there is an impetus for orienting studies towards the relevant contextual situation. Epistemological assumptions, based on the possibilities of gaining knowledge, need to comply with ontological assumptions regarding the socially-constructed reality. The wide range of cognitive and social resources of the researcher should be used to achieve a better understanding of the wide range of cognitive and social resources of the actor(s) under study, including some reflection on the relationship between the researchers and the object of study, and how this relationship is part of the 'construction' of the phenomenon. Creating and developing different kinds of ethnographic in situ approaches to the study of service research may be promising.

The third argument is methodological and appears to be a logical consequence of the two previous arguments. Some of the statements mentioned earlier concern this. Here, methodology means how concrete methods are consistent with assumptions regarding the possibility of gaining knowledge (epistemology) of a given reality (ontology). This definition shows that methodology can be perceived not only merely as concrete methods of data collection, or data analysis, but also as assumptions of consistency between ontology, epistemology, and the methods used. This means that we face a challenge of using methods that are highly relevant to the phenomena we are studying (*cf.* Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). We, as service researchers, need to develop more 'penetrating' methods that are oriented towards the service situation per se. It is a question of grasping the perceived, relevant and important reality that is 'out there'. Data collecting techniques using naturally occurring data are preferable to retrospective surveys. Customer involvement techniques and real-time data should be prioritized. Against the backdrop of the existing mainstream bulk of retrospective quantitative surveys of a priori-determined constructs or variables, we may have doubts about the methodological relevance. This is not to say that quantitative measures are of no value. Rather, what is being proposed is that the starting point for research (even using quantification) should be in situ. A minor consequence of this is that scientific papers ought to account for the consistency of implicit assumptions and the use of concrete methods. Hopefully, we will see examples of more attractive, relevant and effective scientific narratives. The 'power of the example' is one application made possible by an in situ approach.

Another example is the contemporary attempts to apply practice-theory approaches (*cf.* Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki *et al.*, 2001) in order to identify and unfold practices, i.e. doings and sayings in human action and their relationship with different structures, when endeavouring to theorize our social world. This way of grasping the conditions of human action and social order, in mundane and varyingly routinized practices, or institutionalized solutions (Lusch and Vargo 2014), can be found in the early structuration theories put forth by Giddens (1984:2), or in the recursive triad (practice, habitus, and field) of Bourdieu (1977), as well as other cultural theorists, e.g. Foucault, Garfinkel, Latour, or Taylor. These researchers argue that social practices are seen as key to understanding not merely individual actors, but also any form of social totality. A social system approach allows all activities to take place within social systems and individuals to have the potential to learn, adapt, and make choices based on their perceptions of meanings in their socially-constructed worlds.

In line with this, there are arguments that support the trend towards more creative in situ methodologies, departure from the situation, as composed of different 'elements' or parameters, e.g. dynamic activities, behaviours, experiences, impressions, symbols, meanings, cultures, environmental cues etc. We know that such elements may be important, but only the context and the involved actors can adequately describe what meanings they carry. Some may, in a given context, be more important than others. Methods that allow proximity to the phenomena and the involved actors (whatever perspectives they may have) can grasp this plural reality. The idea that the subjectivity and inter-subjectivity of actors is constructed during interaction, internally and externally, leads to our understanding of reality always being temporary, although we embrace the idea that research has the capability of achieving a more profound understanding of the reality we are interested in.

Examples of collecting and analysing data in situ include using naturally-occurring data about service conversations (conversation analysis), collectively-produced meanings (discourse analysis), recorded observations (video ethnography), and other methodologies for social culture analysis. A common misunderstanding is that these methodologies only represent and reproduce a given (service) reality, having no or limited depth. Rather, these provide analytical material and the building blocks needed to build empirically-grounded theory, not forgetting the provision of rich resources to service developers and other practitioners. For example, observing consumers' actual (not imagined) behaviours in a real service setting, and then involving them in analyses of their own life worlds, or confronting them with different working hypotheses, preliminary research ideas, may enrich analysis substantially. Another example is shadowing consumers while they are using services. In some cases, we as researchers have gained the ability to observe and articulate things that informants (respondents) have difficulties articulating. In such cases, we can use an 'under cover' approach of entering the service situation and using our personal, observational, and analytical sensitivity to uncover important factors. Observations can be supported by video recordings, making it possible to repeatedly observe and ensure descriptive and explanatory models of service realization (production).

One final provocative thought that is in line with the reasoning posited in this paper is that if in situ methods provide a better understanding and explanation of consumers, then the need will also exist to remove inferior methods from the methodological agenda. Not all methods will be worth using anymore. Better methods may provide better theories and, hopefully, provide a better foundation for our theoretical understanding of service production. There is an impetus for ceasing to add new methods to the list. However, this is not the place to point out such methods, merely to address important matters concerning service research methodology. Certainly, research traditions are paradigmatic and the changes follow the people. Is the issue of adopting new contextual and situational methodologies a matter of research generations (Kuhn, 1970)?

CONCLUSION

This article argues in favour of a slightly new direction for service research to take, here labelled in situ methodology, which takes the situation as the crucial point of departure in service research. As a departure point, it posits six slightly provocative statements addressing the rocky road of conducting service research historically, arguing that research has only had a vague understanding of what service really is, that it has confused the service sector with the service perspective, that service research needs to focus on the inherent characteristics of service, that service equals interactions, that interactions are in situ experiences, and that service research overlooks the theoretical premises that implicitly are inherent in used methods. The discussion is mainly based on some of the recent conceptual developments linked with the concept of 'value co-creation', and its implications regarding how to conduct and advance service research.

Three arguments are discussed, providing a scientific rationale. The first one is ontological and concerns the nature of social entities, e.g. services. The second argument is epistemological, arguing that it is important to capture the process of interpretation through which actors construct their actions. It is argued that there is an impetus for orienting studies towards the relevant contextual situation. Epistemological assumptions regarding possibilities of gaining knowledge need to adhere to ontological assumptions regarding the socially-constructed reality. The third argument is methodological and appears as a logical consequence of the two previous arguments. In this context, methodology means how concrete methods are consistent with assumptions regarding the possibility of gaining knowledge (epistemology) of a given reality (ontology). This definition implies that methodology may be perceived not only merely as concrete methods of data collection, or data analysis, but also as assumptions regarding consistency between ontology, epistemology, and the methods used. This means that we face a challenge when using methods that are highly relevant to the phenomena we are studying, something that is often overlooked.

In line with the above, it is argued that the research community needs to develop more creative in situ methodologies that depart from the situation, as composed of a wide range of elements or parameters such as activities, behaviours, experiences, impressions, symbols, meanings, cultures, environmental cues etc. We need to develop methods which allow proximity to the phenomenon and the involved actors, whatever the perspectives, and which have a capacity to grasp this plural reality.

Finally, some examples of collecting and analysing data in situ are proposed, e.g. using naturally occurring data for conversation analyses, analysing collectively-produced meanings (discourse analysis), shadowing consumers while they are using services, recording observations of actual service procedures (video ethnography), along with field interviews and other methodologies for social culture analysis. Observing consumers actual (not imagined) behaviours in a real service setting, and involving them in analyses of their own life worlds, or confronting them with different working hypotheses, preliminary research ideas, may enrich our analyses substantially.

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