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THE ANALYSIS OF
NON-TAKE-UP:
BEYOND THE SERVICE
RELATION MODEL

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Introduction

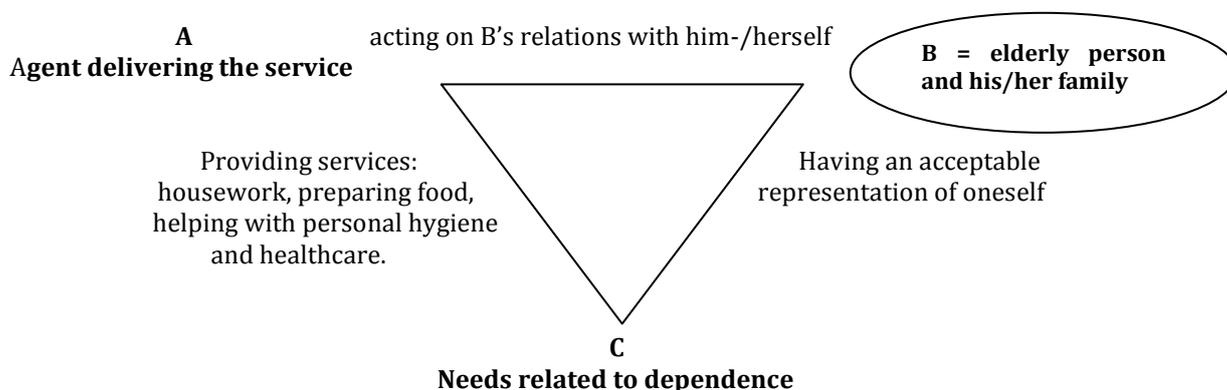
The service relation model enables us to analyse interactions between service providers and users. One would expect that it might afford an understanding of why the service is sometimes not delivered, yet that is not the case. The reason lies in the very construction of the model. Non-take-up – that 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 the public offer.

1. 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 (Cartier 2005). 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. 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 representations and ways of acting in order to activate their capacities for autonomy (B on C).

Graphic 1



The fact that research on public services took into account the notion of service relations and the analytical model stemming from that 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 was then 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. As 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 analysis of administrations' role in the actual delivery of public goods – this sociology questioned above all the dysfunctions of managerial apparatus and the reparatory role of agents, as well as the rationalization of service relations through the formatting of administrative languages and the standardization of communication procedures. It 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 / Jeannot 1995). This renewal seems to be peculiar to France, as British and American sociologists analysed work in services without looking at service relations (Ughetto 2013).

2. 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 (Brodin 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 as consequences 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, that Michael Lipsky highlighted in his work on SLB (Lipsky 1980), is reinforced (Taylor / Kelly 2006). Their 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 that behaviour, and no longer only users' conditions and/or status, determine 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), care (Evans 2010, Petchey et al. 2008), and e-administration (Marston 2006).

While continuing to focus primarily on service delivery agents' work, research on service relations shows that – given the growing role of behaviour-related conditions that determine access to the offer – service delivery per se compels users to adopt the roles and places assigned to them. Hence, the model used to analyse the service relationship has to take into account the fact that service delivery agents also have to obtain users' adhesion if the public offer is to be delivered – and to be delivered it has to have been accepted.

3. 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 "*foi*". In public policy analysis we rarely find an open approach to service relations as the regulation of interests, that is, an approach that implements broader representations 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, 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 (as Wim Van Oorschot, a researcher who played a key role in importing the non-take-up theme into continental Europe, put it¹), in other words, who deliberately do not take advantage of their rights for the above reasons, are largely overlooked. This non-take-up that stems from a conception of the significance of the public offer therefore involves a social relationship and not only a relation with the service provider. 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.

Many public policy actors fail to see the non-take-up phenomenon, or else see it simply as a problem relating to information or the processing of applications. Yet the phenomenon sometimes relates largely to the users themselves and their deliberate non-demand, and to the agents providing the service and their failure, for a variety of reasons, to deliver it². There are numerous reasons for this short-sightedness. As regards the agents, 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 agents 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/publics as regards their expectations with regard to the public offer.

¹ Wim Van Oorschot argues that voluntary non-take up is at play when it is underpinned by principles, values and/or rationally constructed decisions. This is for example the case when people consider social benefits as a form of charity or welfare, and prefer to manage alone, or consider it shameful to ask for one's due. Passive voluntary non-take up mainly concerns people who have been discouraged by the administrative procedures (Van Oorschot 1995). From this point of view, active voluntary non-take up stems from the capacity of an output to provide an incentive for its use; in other words, it refers to its affordance – to use the psychological concept coined by James-Jerome Gibson (1977).

² We find the main forms of non-take-up defined by ODENORE: *not knowledge*, when the offer is not known; *not proposed*, when the offer is not activated by the service provider agents despite the applicant's eligibility, whether the latter knows the offer or not; *non-reception*, when the offer is known and requested but not obtained or used; and *non-demand*, when the offer is known but not requested, or else a right that is granted but not used or a service that is accessible but not requested.

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 active voluntary non-demand, is keenly interested in it. 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, 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.

4. 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). By looking at an SLO type of service that was largely informed by the service relation paradigm, well before it had spread to France³, I show that this model as it stands does not include all the dimensions of take-up the offer.

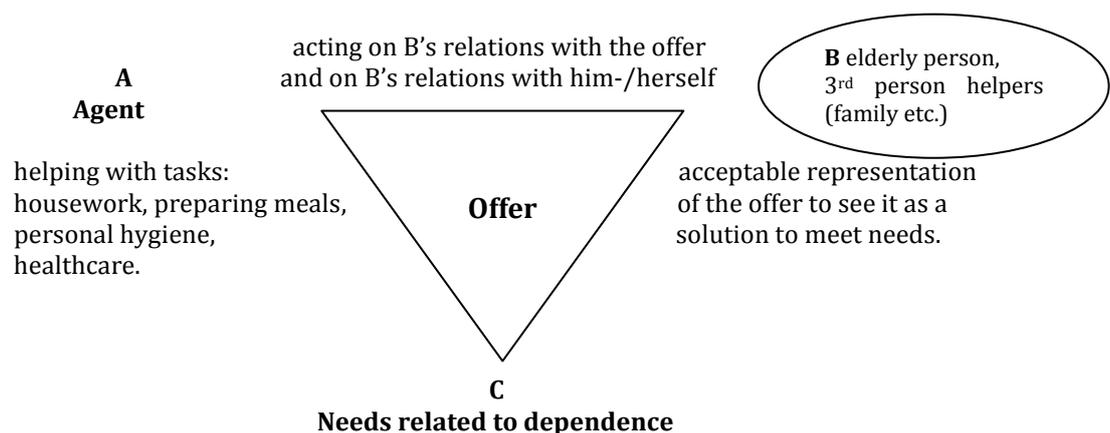
I have found the following to be true. First, it appears that take-up concerns two related dimensions: services delivered, and elderly people's relationship to themselves. In this respect, the service relation model is clearly useful. Yet the take-up of home services is not based on the same expectations if the aged individual is (or considers themselves to be) fragile or dependent. Many interviews bear witness to a wish to *"control the vagaries of biology"* that Dominique Memmi talks of (Memmi 2000), since elderly people carry on seeing themselves on a life path (even if theirs is the repetitive daily pattern of a life's end). This is their only way of expressing the wishes or demands through which they can continue to have some control over things or themselves – or at least to have an impressive of having some control. Depending on whether the elderly person is fragile or dependent, the wishes or demands on which their take-up of home care services are based, are not the same. From what they say, it seems that behind their wishes and demands, fragile elderly people need to be reassured about their aging, whereas dependent ones need to be respected as they are. Fragile elderly people take up home care services when these services guarantee them physical integrity and recognize their social role. Dependent elderly people take up home care services when they respect their disabilities.

³ Based on the official texts, home care workers' professional competencies correspond here to their ability to act on the elderly person's relations with him- or herself, as well as his or her condition and needs, through constant, kind and caring attention (solicitude), yet without sharing sentiments and emotions (sympathy). This competence is expected from "family workers", defined as, "social workers who perform household and family tasks": Article 1 of Decree n° 74-146 of 15 February 1974 – *Journal Officiel* dated 25 February, cited by Jeannine Verdès-Leroux (1978, p. 123). In her study thirty-five years ago on social work, this author pointed out how official documents issued by the French Ministry of Health at the time defined home care workers' competencies in terms of *"attraction and aptitudes for relations with others: warm, relaxed relations that induce a feeling of safety", "adaptability", "proven social motivation"*. The goal was thus to have *"natural authority"* in order to effectively perform the prescribed activities, that is, according to the criteria of time and common sense (*"an equally important quality"*).

In both cases, elderly people hope that they will not be disqualified. They wish either to be recognized as individuals who are unable to do the work delegated to the care worker only because of their own physical fragility, or else to be respected despite their state of dependence. The avoidance of this disqualification is both the crux of the service relation and the core of the care worker's know-how. It is also the criterion on the basis of which elderly people take up home care services or not (that is, help defined in terms of actions and time). They assess home care services through widely varied scales of value, even if their evaluation of the offer generally revolves around a few main normative expectations: the body, social interaction, respect. Elderly people may therefore not take up the full number of hours for which they are eligible⁴ if they consider that the content of the services does not suit them – aside from potential inconveniences related to their actual realization (notably the turnover of care workers). In other words, the service may conflict with their perceptions of their own needs and with their representations of the treatment of old-age and of dependence as it is perceived through the services proposed. In this case, the failure to use all the services proposed can be explained by conflicting representations and norms as to what it means to help individuals to be autonomous. Non-take-up stems explicitly from this issue of signification. As an act of signification it is – with reference to Roland Barthes – a profoundly social act.

This example shows that the act of service delivery is by no means systematic nor something that stands to reason. Its realization sometimes encounters users' resistance. That is why interactions between service providers and users necessarily lead to the regulation of norms and principles. The service relation model should therefore be formulated differently if we are to take into account the resistance that produces non-take-up. In particular, the work of the service delivery agents (the home care workers and the medico-social team) consists in acting on users' relations not only with themselves and their needs, but also with the offer:

Graphic 2



⁴ A preliminary study in 2005, carried out for this research by the Odenore on the scale of a French *département*, showed that the gap between the number of hours invoiced and the number of hours granted by the home care service plan amounted to 170,000, which represented €2.7 million not spent. Research subsequently undertaken in three *départements* showed that over half of the beneficiaries of the at home APA consumed less than 50% of the recommended hours. Yet massive needs still exist, as do the budgets to meet them.

A general finding emerges from this example. When we take into account the fact that the service is not necessarily delivered, the initial service relation model no longer works, simply because it cannot integrate such a hypothesis into the technical and relational relationships comprising it. In particular, active voluntary non-take-up leads us to consider that the question is neither only nor even primarily that of the users' relation to their 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 – 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. The analysis of non-take-up enables us however to see things differently. Although users have needs, they may refuse the offer because of their assessment thereof. This assessment may concern the satisfaction that 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" that research on non-take-up is contributing to introducing as central to public policy analysis. 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 for policy feedback analysis⁵ if our objective is to verify the existence of relations between constrained/voluntary non-take-up, the formation of political judgements, and political behaviours.

5. An uncomfortable postulate

The service relation model is not designed to describe the case of active voluntary 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 "foi/"). To incorporate this type of situation, which is by no means the only one (non-take-up in general is a massive phenomenon and voluntary non-demand 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).

For the same reason, other forms of the phenomenon likewise defy the model. Non-knowledge through a lack of information or a difficulty in mastering it, which is statistically the most common

⁵ The study of the consequences of the individual experience of public policies and relations with provider organizations on trust in institutions.

form, is *de facto* absent from the model because the model is situated at the level of engaged interactions. The very idea that for these reasons the service relation does not happen is not taken into account. Non-reception would be an incident, at worst, since the main aim of the model is to illuminate the practical competencies of the service providers. And the fact of not delivering, for whatever reason, cannot be fitted into the service relation model, which only sees agents busy delivering the service to/with the user. With this focus, the sociology of service relations (in France) has contributed to promoting the concept of *servuction* to signify the systematic and coherent organization of all the material and immaterial elements of the agent/user interaction necessary for the realization of service provision (Eiglier / Langeard 1987). The systematic and coherent organization, that is, formatted or at least industrialized, here, is far from being guaranteed. Consequently, we cannot doubt that inequalities in access to outputs also lie in service relations when the agents have to regulate the demand by rationing the offer or even creating a shortage.

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 firstly 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, 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.

The service relation model imported into France thanks to the translation of Erving Goffman's work therefore seemed strange to some researchers participating in the research programme mentioned above. In the same presentations it combined the reparatory work described by Goffman, with the exercise of discretionary power highlighted by Michael Lipsky – at the risk of confusing them. Yet the two had neither the same disciplinary origins nor the same scientific focus: the micro-sociological analysis of interactions, as opposed to the socio-political analysis of administrative work.

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, on the use or not of 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 active voluntary 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 see its difficulty in conceiving of the possibility of active voluntary non-take-up, even though the other forms of the phenomenon reveal its existence. As resistance to social work that aims to prevent non-take-up shows, the oversight is therefore largely shared among researchers and deciders, as well as service providers themselves.

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 framing of 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 structured 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); and from 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 of providers and recipients with an issue (that may partly be common) of social signification of the public offer (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 (Zarifian 2013), in terms of exchange value, social needs, (moral) concepts of "fairness for all" and ethical concepts of "good for oneself".

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