

A Service Perspective on Work with Vulnerable Children: Frontline Staff's Perceptions of how Management Affects Value Creation

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Abstract

This article investigates frontline staff's perceptions of how management affects their view of value creation during day-to-day work with vulnerable children. The empirical data is based on dialogues during 15 meetings with 8 welfare professionals from education, social services, and children's and adolescent psychiatry. The analytical approach used in this article makes use of the service dominant logic (SDL) as a conceptual framework for studying frontline staff's perceptions. The findings indicate that perceptions of management affect the staff's view of value creation in orientations such as: (1) the delivery of ready-made expert solutions, (2) the simplification of value-creation processes, and (3) disconnected service systems. Overall, one conclusion drawn is that the SDL can be used as an analytical approach to understanding and exploring value creation in welfare services, thus contributing towards developing managerial applications for supporting frontline staff to a greater extent from a service perspective; however, there are some definite limitations.

Introduction

Many researchers argue that welfare services are all about services and thus need to be understood using a service perspective (Berry & Bendapudi, 2007; Grönroos, 2019; Higson, 2017; Källström, 2016; Osborne, 2018; Sweeney, Danaher & McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Tisdall, 2017). Some researchers emphasize the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) as a relevant meta-theoretical concept and the inspiration for managerial applications (Quist & Fransson, 2014; Skälén, 2018; Storbacka, 2018; Trischler & Charles 2018; Vargo, 2018). The SDL focuses on the customer's value creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2014) which, right from the beginning, has been a theoretical concept in marketing theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). However, since the 1980s, in welfare services such as education, social services and healthcare, managerial applications have been inspired by ideas based on reforms coming under New Public Management (NPM). NPM consists of a number of management- and market-based reforms that have been applied with the intention of using resources more efficiently (Christensen & Lægred, 2007; Karlsson, 2017; Walsh, 1995). NPM has inspired management models for improving efficiency and effectiveness, e.g. management by objectives, quality management, and the balanced scorecard. Furthermore, models like lean production, or lean management, have also been applied as ways of mitigating the unwanted effects of NPM. Common to these management models is the fact that they are based on value creation as

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that is produced by the organization itself (Erlingsdóttir & Lindholm, 2015; Liff & Andersson, 2012; De Vries & Nemeč, 2013; Osborne, Radnor & Strokosch, 2016; Tsui & Cheung, 2004).

As requested by management-in-use, frontline welfare staff are increasingly needing to show what they produce (Osborne, Radnor, Vidal & Kinder, 2014; Persson & Westrup 2009; Wällstedt & Almqvist, 2017). Social workers, special-needs teachers, psychotherapists etc. have to document their cases and efforts, and their measures, and to quantify their time and resource consumption as a result of their own production. This form of control through measurement and documentation is often criticized for making it difficult, or even impossible, for frontline staff to jointly utilize their resources efficiently with other professions when serving those who are to be served (e.g. Blom, Evertsson & Perlinski, 2017; Hasenfeld, 2015; Persson & Westrup 2017). For example, a vulnerable child often has complex needs, meaning that he/she is forced to meet many different frontline staff (Dudau, 2009; Machura, 2016; Seim & Slettebø, 2017), because a single profession tends not to match that child's entire need for services (Jacobsen & Kiland, 2017; Julkunen & Willumsen, 2017; Perrault, McClelland, Austin & Siepert, 2011; Rose, 2011).

In contrast to management that is inspired by NPM, the SDL is based on the idea that the customer is the expert and that the customer's value is created by means of different actors (including the customer), and their resources, being integrated within one service system (Holttinen, 2010; Skälén, 2018; Hardyman, Daunt & Kitchener, 2015; De Vries & Nemeč, 2013). Lately, a theory based on the SDL, for public services, has emerged (see, for example, Osborne, Radnor, Kinder & Vidal, 2015; Osborne, Radnor & Nasi, 2013; Osborne, Radnor & Strokosch, 2016; Osborne, Radnor, Vidal & Kinder, 2014). Most of the studies are conceptual and mainly focus on either co-production (service users help the organization to produce value for them) or value co-creation (service users create value while using services) (see, for example, Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016; Tisdall 2017; Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015). Only a limited number of studies are based on empirical studies, with these tending to focus on the service user's perspective (see, for example, Eriksson, 2019; Strokosch and Osborne 2016; Sweeney, Danaher & McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Westrup, 2016).

These conceptual and empirical studies indicate that the SDL contributes to understanding and exploring public services, but emphasizes that the SDL must be carefully adapted to the circumstance and context of the public service, which Osborne (2018) and Grönroos (2019) have referred to as the Public Service Logic (PSL). Osborne (2018, p. 228) emphasizes: "The elaboration of the PSL and its implications for public services is only beginning. Many important questions remain to be asked." The theory formation of the PLS has only just begun and still relies mainly on statements made in the SDL literature. Studies based on the SDL have so far hardly paid any attention to questions regarding value creation from the frontline staff's perspective (Osborne, Radnor & Strokosch, 2016). An interesting question, thus, is what an SDL framework can bring to light as an analytical approach to interpreting frontline welfare staff's perceptions of how management-in-use affects their view of value creation during their day-to-day work with vulnerable children. This question is important because it highlights what needs to be taken into account in developing management in supporting a service perspective within welfare

service organizations (Greer, Lusch & Vargo, 2016; Lusch, Vargo & Gustafsson, 2016; Storbacka, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to analyze frontline staff's perceptions of how management affects value creation during day-to-day work with vulnerable children through an SDL framework. In addition, we also discuss whether or not the SDL could contribute towards seeing welfare services from a service perspective. In this way, the article contributes to the debate on the potential of the SDL in the public sector, and the emerging theory formation in public service management. The empirical data used in this study has been gathered from a research project focusing on advancing knowledge of the opportunities and difficulties of collaborating around vulnerable children. An interactive research approach is used (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006), consisting of meetings and dialogues (Lahdenperä, 2014; Persson, 2009) between researchers and frontline staff from education, social services, and children's and adolescent psychiatry. Using dialogues where frontline staff from different welfare organizations jointly discuss and reflect upon their collaboration, in order to relate to how management-in-use, e.g. control systems per se and administrative systems, and the vocabulary in use, affect them during their day-to-day work. They are exposed to all of this in their day-to-day work; as such, this does something both to them and their perceptions of value creation (Lipsky, 1980; Karlsson, 2019). These recorded dialogues gave us valuable empirical data.

In the next section of this article, we will present the study's theoretical SDL framework, followed by a description of the study's method and empirical data collection. After that, the empirical data is presented and analyzed using the framework, ending in a findings-based discussion of the conclusions and implications.

A theoretical SDL framework

During recent decades, the literature in the field of service research has generated a considerable body of work on the value creation occurring between the customer and the organization (Grönroos, 2008; Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014; Normann & Ramirez, 1993). In introducing the Service Dominant Logic (SDL), Vargo and Lusch (2004) took the service research field a step further, for instance by means of emphasizing that value is co-created and by using the concept of value co-creation. Value is an expression of utility, of the customer's life improving – an increase/decrease in wellbeing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2018). A customer or a service user is the end-user whose wellbeing will benefit from the service. Lusch and Vargo (2018, p. 4) describe the SDL in the following way: “It represents a shift from a focus on firm output with sort of embedded ‘goodness’ (utility) to a focus on the process of actors reciprocally using their resources (e.g., applied knowledge and skills), with other actors, for mutual benefits – that is, for mutual value creation.”

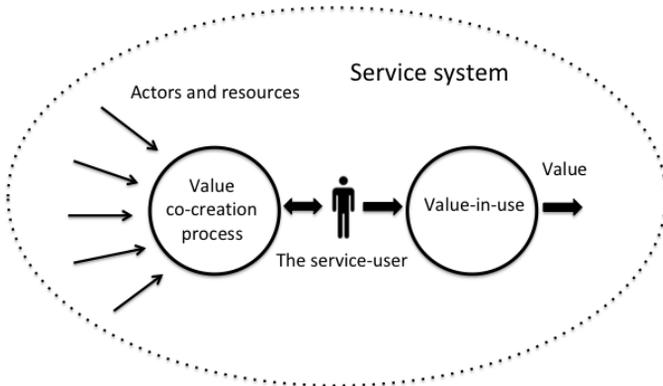
The SDL is based on the service user being the one who creates his/her own solution as regards improved circumstances, and the one who obtains help with this when other resources are supplementing the service user's own competence and activities (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). When this exchange occurs, and the service user makes use of these resources, value-in-use arises, entailing that the service user then has the opportunity to create his/her own value by using the resources. In order for this to become possible, the service user must take part in co-creation as a co-creator, assuming the role of both the producer and the

consumer (Edvardsson & Witell, 2012; Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). Organizations do not provide services, they provide the prerequisites for services. In other words, they provide opportunities for services; there is no value in a service until it is used.

Value co-creation, in the SDL, is an expression of the fact that it is through interactions between actors and their resources that value is created (Lusch & Vargo 2014). Individual actors do not have access to all resources. Instead, they have to exchange their resources with other actors. It is through these exchanges between the service user's resources (his/her own capacity and competence), the organization's resources (e.g. professions, knowledge, technology), and the physical outside world's resources (premises, environments) that value is co-created.

The major challenge facing the organization is understanding what creates value for the service user and how he/she can obtain support during his/her value creation process (Hilton, Hughes & Chalcraft, 2012). Based on a knowledge and understanding of the service user's needs and situation, the organization can adapt, develop, or provide resources, originating from the home organization and other actors, in order to create a functioning service system; organizations intertwine actors and resources into service systems (Trischler & Charles 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2018). Lusch and Vargo (2014) express this in terms of being about shaping and designing a service system that focuses on creating the right, or the best, density for the service user. Density refers to the volume of information, knowledge, and other resources that are available in order to solve the problem. Resources are bundled and re-bundled to achieve the optimum density in order for the service user to be able to create his/her value. The illustration below shows how the service user, within the service system, creates his/her own solution using other actors' resources which complement the service user's own skills and activities, see Figure 1:

Figure 1: An illustration of the service user's value creation within a service system.



When these changes accompany value creation, value is no longer something that can be delivered by the organization to the customer (Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox, 2009). Instead, this view is based on the customer creating his/her own value (his/her own solution) with the assistance of other actors (Grönroos & Ojasalo, 2004, 2015). This perspective puts the service user's needs in focus and

assumes that it is he/she who creates his/her own solution (his/her own value) and that he/she is assisted in this when others' resources supplement the service user's own competence and activities.

Based on the above, we identify three core statements which, in our opinion, signify the SDL framework. First, the theoretical framework highlights the fact that the service user creates his/her own solution by using other actors' resources which complement the user's own resources; the value co-creation process. Secondly, the framework indicates that actors and their resources are integrated in order to create the right, or the best, density for the service user. Thirdly, it emphasizes that the service system includes all the relevant actors. These three core statements form the basis of the SDL framework, giving us the following three analytical themes for examining the empirical data: (1) the creator of value, (2) the value co-creation process and (3) the service system.

This theoretical SDL framework and the three analytical themes are used here to interpret frontline staff's perceptions of how management affects the view of value creation during day-to-day work with vulnerable children, additionally discussing SDL as an analytical approach in order to improve the management of welfare service organizations from a service perspective.

Method and data

The study's empirical data is drawn from a project lasting 2½ years (2015-2017), which was conducted in Sweden. During this project, researchers and frontline staff met a total of 15 times to reflect upon and develop their knowledge of the opportunities and difficulties facing frontline staff when collaborating around vulnerable children who are faring badly, experiencing social problems, unable to cope with their schooling, and/or sliding towards substance abuse and criminality. The method used during the project was creating either a systematic dialogue or a critical reflective community (Holmstrand, 2008; Otterup, Wahlström & Andersson, 2013). During this dialogue, increased knowledge and insights raised new and relevant issues to continue with and to become immersed in. A systematic dialogue between researchers and practitioners is an interactive research approach (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006; Svensson, Ellström & Brulin, 2007) which is both useful in practice and of interest to researchers when developing general theories (Persson, 2009).

The research project involved a total of 11 participants: three researchers and eight frontline staff. One important criterion for the research project was the fact that participating frontline staff each had many years' experience of working with vulnerable children. Another criterion was for frontline staff to be curious and interested in understanding the opportunities and difficulties of collaborating across professional and organizational boundaries. The participants were nominated to participate by managers of the relevant public sector organizations at two municipalities and one local healthcare provider. The selection process for the frontline staff focused on their representing several different professions within welfare services. From the municipalities, there was a headteacher (first-line manager) and two special-needs teachers from education and social services, as well as one first-line social services manager and two social workers. From the local healthcare provider, there was one psychotherapist and one psychologist from children's and adolescent psychiatry. The reason why we chose to include two first-line managers was that we felt they were operative in

their management-role and very close to day-to-day work with children. In the organizations where these two first-line managers work, there are at least two levels of management above them, and an additional level of political governance.

The meetings took place approximately every three weeks, for two hours, in accordance with a fixed schedule. There was a written agreement that regulated the frontline staff's efforts in terms of time and work, within the research project. For each meeting, there was a predetermined agenda. Persson (2009) calls these frameworks a symbolic contract. Using this symbolic contract, we were able to create a safe and trustful environment that made it easier for the frontline staff to articulate their experiences, thus making it possible for us to obtain "close and rich" data. The researchers' responsibility was to drive the dialogue forward, to participate in and summarize the discussions, and to ensure that any knowledge gained was formulated and that it constituted a basis for creating new and relevant issues to continue working with. To achieve this, a key task for the researchers was creating a democratic dialogue whereby frontline staff talked about and presented their thoughts, ideas and suggestions without their discussions being dominated by us researchers (Lahdenperä, 2014; Svensson & Aagaard Nielsen, 2006). As researchers, we took the initiative to introduce and summarize the discussions during each meeting. In this way, we were active and influenced the discussion. However, we did not participate in the frontline staff's "professional discussion"; instead, our role was to ensure the dialogue continued.

All the meetings were documented in audio recordings (using a voice recorder), enabling us to transcribe the data and later analyze the dialogues according to three core statements of the SDL. When analyzing the data from the dialogues, the aim was to interpret how the frontline staff experienced their day-to-day work (Patton, 1987). In order to illustrate these perceptions, the analysis was done in several stages (Johannessen & Tufte, 2003). Step one was to identify their experiences, interpreted as perceptions of value co-creation in relation to management. During the second stage, similar perceptions were categorized and combined into the three themes on the basis of the core statement of the SDL framework: (1) the creator of value, (2) the value co-creation process and (3) the service system. The transcribed data was perused and reflections on the core statements were marked and later extracted according to the relevant theme. Step three was to search for the recurrent perceptions in each theme using the question: 'What is revealed in the information?' The findings were subsequently linked to and interpreted by the study's theoretical framework and categorized according to the most prominent perceptions.

Findings

The creator of value

The first core statement in the SDL relates to the creator of value. This can be identified in the data where the frontline staff discuss their view of how value is created and reflect on their own role during value-creation. All the frontline staff frequently stress that their work is increasingly about filling in documents in the administrative system, e.g. individual development plans, action plans, care plans, case notes, etc. Their perception is that documentation takes up too much of their day-to-day working time. What they emphasize is that they do not have anything against documentation per se, but that this is a matter of the vast extent of the documentation. Their general experience is that their work more and more

is being manual based or to follow routines, and they feel that this is causing their professional knowledge and skills to be used less and less in their work, which one of the social workers expresses thus:

We're supposed to be brave and thoughtful employees who put the child first and who have a high level of collaborative competence, and who dare to be flexible. The system tends, however, to create frightened employees, or rather social administrators, who like to do things right instead of doing the right thing.

According to the frontline staff, the administrative system has had a major impact on their own descriptions of their work processes, explained thus by the psychotherapist:

I was working with a family and had invited social services and the school to attend a meeting for all of us. Then there was this 5-page form. I thought to myself, now this has to be filled in.

The psychotherapist then changes the perspective and looks at the effect of this when meeting with the family:

It became almost an obstacle. You lose something in your encounter with the family when you have to fill in forms. I have to appease the system by filling in forms.

The psychotherapist is not alone in having this view; they all feel that the descriptions of their work processes are moving further and further away from the practice that is actually applicable to working with vulnerable children. Their perception is that things are becoming unreasonable, with the first-line social services manager saying that things have become "completely absurd" and then saying:

Our working time goes into feeding the administration, which is increasingly looking like the core operation.

The frontline staff say that terms borrowed from the forms in the administrative system, like 'production' and 'productivity', are commonly used in their day-to-day work. In their opinion, these terms have slowly made most of them view their work as if it were a matter of production. During the dialogue, there is some reflection on how the support given to the child is seen as a one-off product, and the fact that today we do not talk about endurance and sustainability when it comes to providing support for vulnerable children. They emphasize that more and more frontline staff actually believe that it is really a matter of products being produced and delivered as solutions. How they have been able to receive and use these terms is something they reflect upon. There appears to be a frequent calling into question and many critical voices wondering what is happening to them. They state that the terminology affects their perceptions of the children and families they encounter. One of the special-needs teachers expresses it like this:

The terminology gives us a strange view of the child and family, and how we talk about them. The terms do something to us.

During the dialogues, where they discuss their use of vocabulary, they begin to reflect on the growing limitations to their work. The emphasis of the discussion is on their administrative work being deemed more important than their work

with the children and their families. A shared perception is that, if someone has not filled in the documents correctly, then that person is not doing his/her job properly. As such, the experience that evolves is the documentation reducing the professional scope for action. A strong feeling among them is the fact that this influences their own driving force, enthusiasm and creativity with regard to what they do at work. One social worker says the following:

I feel a sense of resignation. My brain has been molded into thinking in a special way. My way of thinking is not especially free. Here, I know what applies. In some ways, you've had to make a choice - am I going to stay here or am I going to do something else? The long-term consequence is that your brain disengages.

Many references in the dialogue indicate a fear of how they are going to view their own work in years to come, if they feel limited and reduced even now to doing administrative work under this current management.

What emerges from the above description is that the frontline staff's experiences are affecting them negatively in their day-to-day work. They convey a feeling of their work being more about producing and delivering products to the child, as ready-made solutions, rather than including the him/her as an actor involved in his/her own individual development process. The criticism by the frontline staff also draws on production being seen as a closed system that is under complete control, i.e. the organization sees itself as an expert organization that can define the problem itself and utilize ready-made solutions without the inclusion of the child and his/her family.

According to the framework of the SDL, social workers, teachers, psychotherapists, and other involved frontline staff are unable to create or deliver solutions (developments or changes), as the creation of value, to the child. The child is the one resolving the situation, assisted by frontline staff (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). With the help of the professionals, the child creates his/her own solution by taking part in value creation on the basis of his/her role as both the producer and the consumer (Edvardsson & Witell, 2012). The child is his/her own value creator, entailing that value is not created until he/she uses resources, referred to as value-in-use (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). On the other hand, the frontline staff must feel that they have the prerequisites to help and support the individual in his/her own value creation. The above examples from the dialogue, show that the frontline staff feel that they have a large administrative burden forced upon them which traps them into having power by filling in forms, with the vocabulary reinforcing perceptions of their role as experts and their creativity stagnating.

Via the framework of the SDL, the frontline staff's experiences can be explained in terms of feeling cramped by management, which can be understood on the basis of the child and family being excluded (to certain extent) from the value-creation process. A consequence of this is that each individual professional is forced to see him-/herself as the deliverer of solutions, i.e. he/she does not create any solutions with the child and nor does he/she experience having the ability to create solutions, simply delivering ready-made ones. As such, he/she carries a negative perception of work in that it delimits his/her creativeness during day-to-day work.

The value co-creation process

The second core statement concerns the value-creation process. In the data, this becomes apparent in the dialogue regarding the frontline staff's view of how management makes visible and mirrors the integration of resources during the value-creation process. All the frontline staff frequently stress that their work is increasingly about filling in forms in the administrative system. The forms referred to here relate to the child's development process, e.g. 'individual development plans', 'action plans' and 'care plans'.

The frontline staff explain that documenting their efforts in various forms hardly reflects what is actually being done when working with vulnerable children, which actors are integrated into the process, whose resources are being used, and how these resources are used during the child's development or change processes. At the same time, there is a feeling of having covered one's back by documenting things in the administrative system; thus, the professional is at least able to say, "Look, we did what we were expected to do". According to the frontline staff, focusing on the forms is yet another part of the production view put forward by management. The social worker puts this as follows:

It's like a product that we deliver and once we've delivered it, then it's all done. Next! It's all very industrial.

At the same time, it emerges that the staff are worried about their use of terminology. They emphasize that the terminology affects how they express themselves, both at work and when talking about it and they fear that the vocabulary they use may narrow the scope of their day-to-day work. Another social worker describes this as follows:

In our workgroups, we need to talk about our meeting with the family and about what happens there. What is it that makes things turn out well? Today, there's so much discussion about production and productivity, and all that stuff instead.

The headteacher describes this as follows:

I do a lot that isn't quantifiable in my contact with others, work that's necessary in order to be able to engage with the children.

The perception is that the descriptions provide a simplified image of the practice that does not include complexity, dependencies, and unpredictability. They seldom recognize their own activities when these are described as production. The headteacher formulates the loose-fit between how work is carried out and what becomes documented like this:

They're demanding so much now, we have to be so precise. It has to be clear what we're doing, and precise in the implementation plan. We really don't work like that.

The frontline staff experience their work as having become manual-based and simplified to the point of ridiculousness. They stress that their day-to-day work goes on without any discussion about what the simplified work descriptions really add to it, or how they help the children. One of the special-needs teachers formulates this thus:

Exactly how reality genuinely looks is something we're now distancing ourselves from in some way.

The consensus in the group is that, by simplifying day-to-day work, they are excluding the very concrete and factual parts of their work. They are of the opinion that their work with children has not been taken into consideration in the descriptions; instead, it is a matter of doing things right according to the administrative system. One of the social workers describes this thus:

Our entire craft is disappearing. It's as if they could actually bring someone straight in off the street. This is straightforward administrative work. If you can follow this manual, everything will be "alright".

Another popular example in the dialogues is that of the service map. The purpose of the service map is to ensure the quality of the services; however, the frontline staff feel that these are yet another example of how to simplify the descriptions of their work. One of the special-needs teachers expresses it this way:

I must say that I feel they've thrown out all the humane parts of our work. What governs us today is an administration that has a different intelligibility and reality than the one we have. It's the service map that governs us.

The first-line social services manager continues:

The service map describing our work, which we use today, describes the child as an object, unaffected by his/her various contexts.

The psychologist reflects on how this was able to happen in all the organizations simultaneously:

Now we're starting to think about service maps. How have all of us working in schools, children's and adolescent psychiatry, and social services fallen in love with service maps? How did we end up here?

In the description above, the frontline staff emphasize the problems with the simplified descriptions of their work processes. Their perception is that these descriptions of the work do not help when it comes to understanding work with vulnerable children. Instead, they feel that the documentation in the administrative system provides simplified images of what is being done to the extent that the concrete and actual content of the work is not included in the descriptions.

Through the framework of the SDL, these perceptions can be understood such that the important challenge facing the frontline staff is the acquisition of knowledge of what creates value for the child, and how he/she can obtain support during his/her own value co-creation process (Edvardsson & Witell, 2012). Based on knowledge and understanding of the child's needs and entire situation - the complex patterns - the professionals can adapt, further develop, or allocate resources, originating from themselves or other actors, to the work processes. It is thus necessary to clarify the link and the dependency between the actors and their resources, which resources are exchanged between the actors, and which relationships bind them together, in order to be able to shape or design the optimum prerequisites or density that will enable children to create their own value (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). The documentation in management's administrative system does not include the complex patterns of actors and relationships forming part of the work processes, instead forming the basis of

how authorities are evaluated. One consequence of this is the description simplifying how actors and resources are integrated during the value-creating process, i.e. the description does not make explicit how they involve the child and other actors, in turn making them lose knowledge. As such, they convey a negative perception of work in a way distorting the description of their day-to-day work processes.

The service system

A third core statement in the SDL is that it emphasizes that the service system includes all the relevant actors. In the dialogue, we find examples of this where the frontline staff discuss how management makes visible and mirrors the integration of resources into the value-creation process. The frontline staff indicate that professions and organizations have to collaborate more when it concerns children. They all agree that working with vulnerable children needs to evolve in a direction whereby considerably more collaborations take place between the various professions and organizations. As one of the special-needs teachers puts it: "The resources must be organized around the child." The headteacher remarks on the need for collaboration in the following way:

On many occasions, I form a very good relationship with the parents, but I don't have the competence to tackle the problems. Maybe I'm well aware of the problems. But I don't have the knowledge and experience to deal with them. I need to pass them on to someone who has that competence. Often, we have a lot of awareness, but we lack the skill to deal with things.

The frontline staff comment on the fact that they actually do not know so much about what other organizations and professions do, or do not do. They feel that, today, they do not resort to collaboration until every one of the organizations has tried different measures, or something, as a last resort, which the psychologist describes as follows:

Often, when following up on something, it turns out that the various endeavors have been implemented, but that the desired result was not achieved. The measure which is then taken is new programs of endeavors, methods, or programs of measures. It is not until several efforts have been attempted, within the respective organization, that the co-workers try to coordinate their work.

Simultaneously underline, the staff, the fact that it is not easy to collaborate, as this is not something that management either stimulates or encourages. Instead, they feel that their own forms and templates, within their respective organizations, limit their possibilities of conducting collaborations. On that subject, one of the special-needs teachers says:

How many times haven't we reflected on concepts like collaboration, the importance of everyone pulling in the same direction? During this collaboration, all of us seem to be in agreement about collaborating. What we often encounter is internal, and at times administrative, resistance.

One constantly recurring theme in the discussions is that resources are being held onto increasingly vigorously by each organization, as they put it, instead of jointly developing endeavors with other organizations and professions centered

on children. The opinion of the frontline staff is that there is a strong focus on internal work processes and that these must be optimized as much as possible within their own organizations. Each professional is also focused on sticking to the organization's main mission, instead of what is best for the child. This is expressed in terms of having become "introverted", as in the following statement by a social worker:

Day-to-day work is becoming increasingly introverted. We're occupied with holding onto inner structures and routines during transitions between different organizational sections. We talk more about how the internal process should look than about how we set out from the child's needs and jointly shape the help being provided to him/her.

They constantly return to the necessity of being able to utilize each other's profession-based competence and skills in order to help the child in the best way possible. This is also a necessity for being able to function and develop in the best way possible as professionals at work. When the frontline staff reflect upon their own professions, they verbalize concerns about what is happening to their competence and skills, and what the different organizations and professions will be able to offer each other in the future. They ask themselves what resource integration they will offer each other while spending more and more time on administrative duties. The psychologist expresses this concern as follows:

Of course, we have to collaborate, we have to talk to and help each other. Absolutely! But what will we be able to offer?

The frontline staff's descriptions emphasize that professions and organizations focus on their own responsibilities. Each respective organization is solely responsible for its own part in the service process, but nobody is responsible for linking up endeavors based on the child's perspective so that his/her combined needs and situation can be catered for in the best possible way. Instead, management is forcing the frontline staff to focus on ensuring and showing the different organizations' efforts.

Given the framework of the SDL, actors and their resources need to be brought together in order to take part in value co-creation (Lusch & Vargo 2014). In this context, the child, his/her family, and the frontline staff (within education, social services and children's and adolescent psychiatry etc.) are not actors belonging to separate and independent systems; rather, they co-exist within one and the same service system in order to be able to manage the child's current needs and situation. One consequence of this is a disconnected service system, i.e. in management, work with the child does not stand out in terms of being based on a cohesive service system. Yet again, the frontline staff convey a negative perception of what they consider examples of "introvertism", whereby the organizations encourage them to focus more on internal processes rather than on seeing themselves as actors with many organizations in the same service system.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings above identify frontline staff perceptions of how management affects value-creation in the frontline staff's day-to-day work with vulnerable children, and provides the opportunity to discuss the SDL as an analytical

approach to improving management in welfare service organizations from a service perspective. The first affect from the frontline staff's perceptions, regarding the creator of value, is that management is delimiting the frontline staff's creativeness in their day-to-day work. This is connected with the entrapment of the professionals as the deliverers of solutions, rather than co-creators together with the child. This perception can be understood on the basis of the frontline staff's perception that management makes them act as though children are to be the recipients of ready-made expert solutions. The SDL helps to shed light on children as key, active actors during the value-creating process, which they are, rather than the passive recipients of help in the form of ready-made solutions.

The second affect concerns the simplification of the description of the value-creation process. This may be understood on the basis of the frontline staff's perception that their work is being described in an all too banal and simplified way in the documentation. Currently, most work done by the frontline staff is evaluated in the documentation, making this difficult to change. If the solution, instead of removing some of the administrative system burden, will entail involving the value creation process in it, then it will be important to understand that the frontline staff themselves cannot create the prerequisites for value-creation without the involvement of the child and his/her family. The SDL helps as regards showing that value-creation is composed of complex interaction processes between the child/family and the professionals and their resources. The perceptions appearing in the dialogue show that the professionals feel that their day-to-day work is being described in a distorted way.

The third affect relates to the disconnected service system and can be understood on the basis of the frontline staff's perception that vulnerable children are often entitled to special initiatives being carried out in parallel by schools, social services, and children's and adolescent psychiatry, but that management is forcing them to focus solely on their own organization's efforts. The SDL helps to clarify how the child and the frontline staff (actors) and their resources are instead brought together in one service system in order to create the best possible prerequisites for creating value. The perception conveyed by the frontline staff's perception of the consequence of their day-to-day work is highlighted via words such as "introvertism", i.e. that their own organizations focus on internal processes.

Overall, one important conclusion to be drawn is that possibilities exist of using the SDL as an analytical approach to frontline staff's perceptions of how management affects their view of value creation during day-to-day work with vulnerable children in orientations such as (1) the delivery of ready-made expert solutions, (2) the simplification of value-creation processes, and (3) disconnected service systems. These affects are important to consider when developing the management of welfare service organizations from a service perspective.

However, an assertion like this needs to be made with caution. There are limitations to how the SDL can be used as an analytical approach, especially as the "customers" in this case are vulnerable children. One such limitation is that frontline staff also need to consider value on the basis of a societal perspective. From the beginning, the SDL has been a theoretical concept in marketing theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Welfare services aimed at children do not thus constitute a market consisting of independent customers who create value through their choice of services and service providers. Instead, there exists here a

professional responsibility to assess value on the basis of political goals and aims (e.g. in accordance with ordinances like curricula and special legislation like the Education Act, the Social Services Act, and the Health and Medical Services Act). A further limitation is that the SDL does not take into account the fact that there are important and fundamental differences between the actors, e.g. the child (and his/her legal guardians), and the frontline staff, who exist in order to help the child in respect of his/her societal rights and obligations (Osborne et al., 2016). The relationship between the child and the frontline staff is not an equal one. Children are seldom the recipients of efforts on the basis of their own choices and cannot thus be equated with volunteers or independent customers in a marketplace. Neither may the child choose to remain outside of his/her societal duties (duty to attend school, coercive measures used by social services, care, and children's and adolescent psychiatry etc.). Children are thus both dependent on and at the mercy of various welfare actors, both as children and as vulnerable children, entailing that there is a clear power asymmetry built into the relationship. Another limitation, of course, according to the SDL, is that there is a mutual exchange of resources between conscious actors. However, children do not exchange resources mutually or consciously between themselves and their special-needs teacher, the psychotherapist, their classmates and so on. Instead, it is important for the child to become involved engage consciously in the work that makes him/her motivated to be helped and supported by other actors, resulting in an improvement.

The results of this study contribute to the debate on the SDL's public sector potential and the emerging theory of public service management. At the same time, it can be stated that there are certain limitations when it comes to understanding welfare services based on the SDL when developing management towards an increased service perspective that has to be taken into account. There is another, higher ethic at stake here, so to speak. Ideology, justice, equal treatment, and legal rights and obligations all constitute important quantities and needs that have to be dealt with (Ackroyd, 1995; Fotaki, 2009; Jos & Tompkins, 2009). The fact is that a naive application of the concept can lead to welfare services aimed at children becoming "commodified and servicified" in mental models in order to develop management from a service perspective. In the final analysis, this could transform children into service (value) customers instead of into the citizens of a welfare society. This is in line with what Osborne (2018) and Grönroos (2019) point out when claiming that an increased service perspective needs to be taken into account. They suggest that the public service logic is a better expression of the requirements and conditions of both public value and the end user's value when viewed through a service perspective in welfare services.

However, caution needs to be exercised when pointing this out because this study has its weaknesses. Needless to say, one weakness of this study is the fact that the service users (the children) and their representatives (their legal guardians) have not actually participated. Children's experiences and their perceived access to well-developed services, as well as their ability to convey their needs and desires, are extremely interesting and important to study in a context relating to the SDL. Another weakness of the study is that the findings originate from dialogues involving a small group of professionals in the field of welfare services aimed at vulnerable children, and have been taken exclusively

from a Swedish context. Consequently, more empirical studies are required in order to support these findings.

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