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Designing to facilitate and enrich human relationships for complex societal challenges

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Abstract

Service designers increasingly tackle complex societal challenges, also referred to as social innovation. To address such challenges, a growing group of designers has started to combine their design practices with systems thinking practices. Systems thinking is about zooming out, considering things in relation to a larger system, or indivisible whole, of which they are part. For example, complex adaptive systems theory explains how relational processes of self-organisation lead to new emergent behaviour of the whole, thereby adapting to its environment. While systems thinking zooms out, service design zooms in on human experiences and increasingly focuses on human relationships. In social innovation, it becomes relevant for service designers to examine the impact that human relationships have on the emergent behaviour – and in particular adaptation - of the system as a whole, such as healthcare or education systems. This paper connects service design to complex systems thinking, and shows how designing for certain experiential qualities of human relationships has the potential to contribute to enabling adaptive social systems. This is illustrated by four social innovation project case studies which each addressed particular patterns of qualities of relationships, including learning, motivation, and care and support. The

author speculates when and how those qualities have the potential to enable an adaptive social system, and argues that service design is well-positioned to design conditions that facilitate and enrich human relationships with such qualities. This position is supported by service designers' ability to design for the intangible and focus on human experiences, and their potential to impact people's mental models of relationships.

Keywords: systemic design, relational services, complexity, emergence, human-centred design

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