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Acting on Emotions: Designing with the relational dramas in welfare systems

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CONTEXTS

SYSTEMIC DESIGN ASSOCIATION

Acting on Emotions: Designing with the relational dramas in welfare systems

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Abstract

As welfare systems worldwide face increasing pressures, there is a growing need for actionable approaches to transform them into more adaptable and sustainable forms. Service design is suggested to support such transformations. While early service design focussed on experiences, it has recently adopted systemic perspectives to address the complex interrelations among actors in service systems. However, this shift has neglected how these relations are experienced emotionally by the actors involved. Since emotions are integral to how actors understand, navigate and form agency, overlooking them can hinder service design's ability to support welfare systems transform into more adaptable forms.

This research aimed to integrate experiential and systemic perspectives in service design to support actors in transforming complex welfare systems. To explore this, a transdisciplinary research-by-design study was conducted. Drawing on recent service design research and relational sociology, the study was informed by the concept of emotional reflexivity and a service ecosystem design framework. Situated within the Norwegian child welfare system, this research involved over 100 system actors. Systems oriented design and theatre practices were used to facilitate emotional reflexivity among system actors about the complex, and sometimes difficult, relational dynamics they were embedded within. The four-month collaboration culminated in an interactive theatre event involving 800 participants, followed by facilitated conversations among system actors.

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By focussing on diverse emotional experiences within the child welfare system, three pairs of propositions for incorporating emotions into systemic approaches to service design were developed: 1) adopting a systemic view of emotions, 2) mirroring emotions to support reflexivity, and 3) facilitating conversations about emotional tensions. We discuss the implications of these propositions for practice and theory and how they can advance systemic approaches to service design within complex welfare systems.[1]

Keywords: service design, service ecosystem design, systems oriented design, welfare systems, reflexivity, emotions, theatre

Introduction

In many parts of the world, public welfare systems such as health care and family support have played a crucial role in achieving more equitable societies (Greve, 2022). However, welfare systems have traditionally been designed based on industrial logics, assuming individuals to be solitary, rational actors (Cottam, 2019; Guy et al., 2015). Amid the increasing pressures welfare systems currently face, there is widespread recognition that these assumptions inhibit welfare systems' adaptability (Storch & Hornstrup, 2020; Torfing et al., 2019). Consequently, there are growing calls to design welfare systems with more relational assumptions, emphasising human connections (Cottam, 2019; Donati, 2015a; Selloni, 2017; Von Heimburg & Ness, 2021). This transformation implies a shift from merely producing welfare to facilitating the co-creation of good lives lived well among the actors involved, based on what is meaningful for them (Cottam, 2011; Von Heimburg et al., 2021).

Service design is suggested to support such transformations in service systems (Sangiorgi, 2011). Transformation, in this context, refers to small or large changes in how actors, resources, and practices are configured within the system, as well as in the shared norms, assumptions, and beliefs that give these configurations meaning (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021). The promise is that service design's central emphasis on human needs and collaboration can foster constructive, bottom-up changemaking among multiple system actors (Anderson et al., 2018; Fisk et al., 2018; Sangiorgi, 2011). Simultaneously, the growing recognition of present-day service systems as highly entangled and complex has led to a systemic turn within service design (Koskela-Huotari & Vink, 2022; van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2022). For instance, service designers now facilitate multi-stakeholder interactions, systems mapping and policy development (Aguirre et al., 2017; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Patrício et al., 2018). While the incorporation of systems theory has equipped service design with concepts that recognise the complexity within welfare settings, typically involving a variety of interrelated actors (Colvin & Miller, 2020; Skålén, 2022), the systemic turn has also led to decreased emphasis on the emotional experiences of these actors (Hay & Vink, 2023).

[1] Editor's note: The authors presented this as a Paper Talk at the Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD13) symposium in October 2024. The final version is published here. https://rsdsymposium.org/relational-dramas-in-welfare-systems/

From a systemic perspective, emotions are not merely individual phenomena but are embodied and embedded within social systems (Campos et al., 2004; Gergen, 2009; Leach & Bou Zeineddine, 2021; Lively & Weed, 2016; van Kleef, 2016). This makes the emotional neglect in systemic approaches to service design problematic; emotions are integral to the interrelations between actors by infusing how these actors understand, navigate and form agency in their relations within service systems (Burkitt, 2012; Scarantino, 2016; van Kleef et al., 2016). For service design to support welfare transformation, the lack of integration between emotional and systemic perspectives can thus not only limit its transformative impact but also reinforce the rational-actor assumptions that currently underpin these systems.

The objective of this research was to explore how experiential and systemic perspectives can be integrated into service design by facilitating emotional reflexivity among actors in welfare systems. Emotional reflexivity here refers to actors' awareness of their relation to others, themselves and the world through embodied experiences (Burkitt, 2012). We drew on theoretical perspectives from service ecosystem design, which positions reflexivity as a core process in service system transformation (Vink et al., 2021), and relational sociology, which highlights how emotions are central to reflexivity, colouring the perceptions of our relations with ourselves, others and the world (Burkitt, 2012). The research was conducted as a transdisciplinary research-by-design study (Sevaldson, 2010) with the aim of fostering transformation within the Norwegian child welfare system by sparking reflexive conversations among system actors about their complex and sometimes difficult relations. By using systems-oriented design (Sevaldson, 2022) and theatre practices as a means to achieve this, we abductively developed propositions for the integration of experiential and systemic perspectives in service design.

We begin the article by connecting theoretical perspectives on emotions from relational sociology and service ecosystem design to our research aim. We then describe our explorative project, in which design and theatre practices were employed in collaboration with over 100 system actors with various roles in the child welfare system. These collaborations led to an interactive theatre event for 800 participants and a subsequent series of conversations among them. Based on what we learned, we suggest three pairs of propositions for how service design can better engage with relational and emotional dynamics in welfare systems. We conclude by discussing the implications of these propositions for service design theory and practice.

Theoretical background

Multiple systemic service design frameworks have emerged over the recent decade (Hay & Vink, 2023; Sangiorgi et al., 2017). One of these service ecosystem designs (Vink, 2019; Vink et al., 2021) informed this research. Below, we outline this framework before drawing on relational sociology to discuss how the concept of emotional reflexivity can be incorporated into it.

Service ecosystem design

Rooted in systems thinking, service ecosystem design outlines how transformation occurs within service systems, and it has been applied to welfare contexts like health care and youth services (Farina et al., 2024; Romm et al., 2020).

Service ecosystem design posits that the design and redesign of service systems depend on system actors' intentional shaping of social structures within these systems (Vink et al., 2021). Social structures are the shared norms, values and beliefs that enable system actors to co-create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Typically, actors unintentionally reproduce these structures through ongoing physical enactments within the system, such as interactions, relationships and artefacts (Vink, 2019). Over time, this consolidates the structures, making them taken for granted among actors. However, when system actors intentionally design service systems, they engage in two activities. The first is reflexivity, in which they become aware of social structures, and the second is reformation—actions that create new, disrupt or maintain such structures (Vink et al., 2021).

Vink and Koskela-Huotari (2022) have identified three core processes by which service design can foster reflexivity among system actors. First, service design can reveal social structures that normally remain invisible, tacit or unperceived by making them visible. Second, service design can challenge 'taken for granted' social structures by supporting system actors to notice conflicts between multiple structures present within the system. Finally, service design can demonstrate the malleability of social structures by enabling system actors to view their interactions from a new perspective.

Reflexivity, relations and emotions

We believe fostering reflexivity is key for service design to support actors in transforming service systems; therefore, the facilitation of reflexivity has significant implications for how design practices should foster it among system actors. Reflexivity has been central to discussions across the social sciences about the interplay between individuals' agency and social structures. These debates focus on how individuals' actions shape social structures and how these structures, in turn, influence individuals' actions (Crossley, 2022; Walsh, 1998). In line with service ecosystem design, reflexivity is typically understood to enable individuals to enact social structures in ways not solely governed by habit or tradition (Giddens, 1990; Archer, 2007). However, two criticisms of the dominant discourse on reflexivity are relevant to our research. First, it often adopts a disembodied perspective, neglecting the role of emotions in human action and social structures (Shilling, 1999). Second, it tends to assume that people are solitary entities acting within structures that are external to them, overlooking how these actions are interdependent on and constituted by the relations we are embedded in (Burkitt, 2016; Crossley, 2022).

To address these criticisms, efforts have been made within relational sociology to develop a relational and embodied conceptualisation of reflexivity. This conceptualisation aligns with our study's focus on better integrating relational and emotional dynamics into systemic service design approaches. To challenge the division between reflexive individuals and the

social structures they act on from a position of emotional distance, we draw on the work of relational sociologist Ian Burkitt (2012; 2018b), who highlights the systemic, relational nature and role of emotions in reflexivity.

According to Burkitt (1997, 1999, 2014), emotions are embodied valuations that give meaning to the worlds, people and things with which individuals interact. This dynamic process of adaptation spans time and can be both inter- and intrapersonal: our embodied experiences, including emotional ones, are constituted within relations to others and ourselves in the present, our past, and our anticipated futures (Campos et al., 2004). Emotions, therefore, can be understood as complexes, emerging as embodied valuations of relations with both bodily and socio-cultural dimensions. They are embodied experiences people have while navigating the relations of the social systems into which they are embedded and, therefore, cannot be reduced to either social structure or the body.

From a relational sociology perspective, social systems like welfare systems are not external to individuals but are constituted by the patterns of relations among them (Burkitt, 2016; Donati, 2015b). Embedded within these relations, individuals do not reflect on them in a disengaged way (Burkitt, 2012). Rather, their embodied, emotional experiences are integral to these relations. Emotions, thus, reflect how people engage with others and themselves, making them a key part of reflexivity. Awareness of social systems and the agency and constraints we face within them intertwine with our emotional relatedness (Burkitt, 2018a).

The perspective on reflexivity outlined here suggests that emotions inform how actors experience, act, and shape service systems. According to this view, social structures are not external but felt in their bodies as they navigate relational dynamics in which they are embedded. Emotional reflexivity, therefore, can support challenging the current experience/system divide within service design. It emphasises the role of embodied, emotional experiences in how people navigate complexity, which is often under-appreciated in systemic design approaches (Vink, 2023), while also providing a more systemic view of emotions than the predominantly individual-focussed theories used in previous service design research (see, e.g., Cook et al., 2002; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

The integration of service ecosystem design and relational perspectives on emotions inspired our approach to service design within the child welfare system. By emphasising the experiences of interrelated system actors within this context, we aimed to foster emotional reflexivity and inspire reformative action among them.

Context and participants

The research was conducted within the Norwegian child welfare system, involving a wide range of actors, including children, youth, parents, extended and foster families, social workers, professionals from auxiliary services and other system actors. A large municipal child welfare organisation served as the main context of the study. This organisation, in which the first author was employed as an in-house design researcher, partly funded the research together with the National Research Council.

Context

In 2023, approximately four per cent of children and youth in Norway were registered as recipients of child welfare services measures (Statistics Norway, 2024). Recently, an independent commission delivered a government-initiated public report, concluding that extensive system changes are needed within Norwegian child welfare to ensure children's legal rights (Official Norwegian Report [NOU] 2023: 7). This conclusion coincided with ongoing criticism of how Norway balances the rights of the child with those of the parents, leading to a series of case applications to the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds that parental rights had not been taken well enough into account (Melinder et al., 2021). These critiques highlight competing interests and logics that often make relations among system actors contradictory, conflicting, ambivalent and difficult (Bekaert et al., 2021; Kojan & Storhaug, 2021; Langsrud, 2017; Slettebø, 2008). Thus, the child welfare system represents an inherently complex and emotionally charged welfare service context (Colvin & Miller, 2020; Thrana & Fauske, 2014).

Participants

The first author led the research project in cooperation with a project group consisting of more than 35 design and theatre practitioners working together over a four-month period. This group included master's students in design, graduate students in acting and script writing, their teachers and researchers in systemic and service design. Throughout the project period, this group collaborated closely with over 100 individuals with diverse roles in the child welfare system. These included social workers from one of Norway's largest municipal child welfare services and members of user organisations, such as national associations for youth involved in child welfare, representatives from foster homes and biological parents. Additionally, other system actors like ADHD Norway, the County Governor of Oslo and Viken, and the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children and Youth were involved in various parts of the process. Everyone involved in the research provided informed consent to participate in the research project, which was found to be in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

The co-authors of this article represented various backgrounds and roles in the project, bringing different perspectives to the research. The first author is a design researcher with a background as a clinical psychologist with eight years of professional experience within the child welfare system. The other co-authors have varied backgrounds, from design research across various welfare settings to theatre practitioners and master 's-level design students. In the research process, some were actively involved in all explorations, while others observed the process from a more distanced perspective. Three of the co-authors have nationalities other than Norwegian. These varied perspectives provided both insider and outsider views in the research process, on the empirical materials and on the child welfare system throughout the research process and analysis.

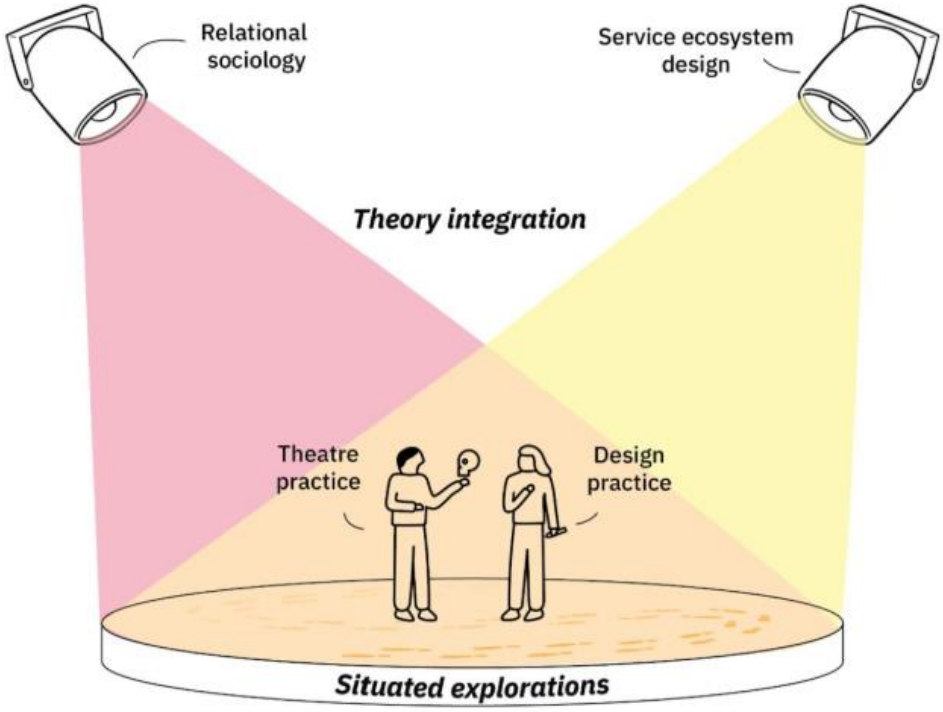


Figure 1. Metaphorical overview of the exploratory research methodology.

Method

Exploratory research approach

We used research by design (Binder & Brandt, 2017; Sevaldson, 2010) as our methodological approach. This generative form of research emphasises designing as a means of generating knowledge, and experimentation plays a crucial role in the research process (Bang & Eriksen, 2014). Through explorative design experiments, such research can challenge and transcend current theory and practice (Fallman, 2008). In this research, we collaboratively designed various representations of system relations to explore how to spark emotional reflexivity among actors in the child welfare. Krogh et al. (2015) describe this as an expansive research programme, where continuous experimentation seeks to broaden our understanding—in our case integrating experiential and systemic approaches to service design. Figure 1 provides a metaphorical representation of our research-by-design approach, depicting knowledge production as occurring on a stage set for exploration situated within the child welfare system. Here, the interplay between design and theatre practices moves through various explorations, illuminated by theoretical insights from relational sociology and service ecosystem design. These theoretical perspectives continuously informed the design explorations by shaping their aims as well as the interpretations we drew from them.

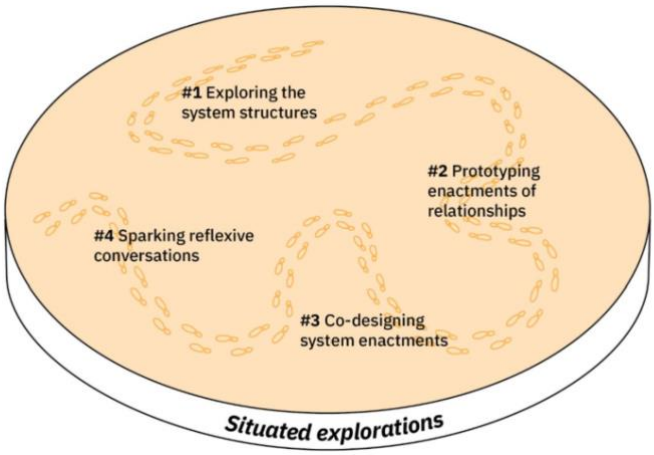


Figure 2. The project's process is depicted across a stage situated in child welfare.

Research process

The research process included four design explorations aimed at fostering emotional reflexivity among interrelated child welfare system actors. Throughout the project, this was explored in different ways. The research process is illustrated in Figure 2 across a situated 'stage', outlining the inquiry in four main explorations. Table 1 details the aims and activities of each exploration, the participating partners beyond the project group and the empirical materials collected in each of the explorations. Given the collaborative nature of the research, we saw our learning process as a cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2006). Aligned with this form of inquiry, we used a methodological blend to collect empirical material, valuing personal reflections, artefacts, images, theoretical inferences and practical learning that emerged through the experiments (Heron & Reason, 2013).

The aim of the first exploration was to understand the structures underpinning relations among system actors within Norwegian child welfare. In this process, we employed two central tools from systems-oriented design: gigamapping (Sevaldson, 2011) and rich design spaces (Sevaldson, 2008). Participants included youth, biological parents, foster parents, social workers and other system actors such as lawyers, bureaucrats and politicians. The participants were grouped based on their roles within the system and matched with a team of exploring researchers to engage in co-design sessions where they reflected on child welfare using visualisations. In total, approximately 70 system actors participated in 36 sessions over two weeks. Empirical material collected from this exploration consisted of 77 individual half-page reflection notes written after the dialogue sessions to highlight specific actor group perspectives. Additionally, eight 45-minute collective debrief sessions were held with the entire project group to explore similarities, differences and tensions across different child welfare actors by discussing and comparing the maps developed collectively during the process.

Table 1. Overview of the aims and activities, partners and empirical materials collected in the research exploration.

EXPLORATION AIMS	EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES	COLLABORATING PARTICIPANTS	EMPIRICAL MATERIAL
#1 - Exploring system structures: Explore system structures and the relations between system actors.	Collaborative mapping and conversations between system actors and design students.	70 system actors within child welfare, including youth, parents, foster parents, social workers, managers, supervisors, bureaucrats, police, lawyers, and teachers.	77 individual reflection notes from students written after the co-design sessions. Eight 45-minute collective debrief discussions among the design students and researchers involved. Maps developed in the experiments.
#2 - Prototyping enactments of system relations: Learning how emotional experiences within different system relations could be authentically enacted.	Six collaborative two-hour workshops that engaged various system actors in prototyping enactments of system relations.	31 system actors within child welfare, including youth, parents, foster parents, and social workers.	Participant observation by the co-authors. Survey feedback from collaborating social workers.
#3 - Co-designing system enactments: Enacting the emotional experiences of multiple system actors in relation to each other.	Design of an interactive theatre event, including script, interactive engagement of participants, event flow, scenography, costumes, props, and so on.	Eight collaborating social workers.	Participant observation by the co-authors. Materials, including script, props, visual artefacts, notes, and sketches from the design process. Video recording of the full interactive theatre event
#4 - Sparking reflexive conversations: Sparking new conversations about child welfare among system actors through facilitating emotional reflexivity.	Facilitating conversations through interactive provocations of the event and follow-up with the collaborating child welfare service.	800 participants from the public, including people with lived experience, politicians, bureaucrats, and others related to the child welfare system. 130 social workers in an extended event, including post-event conversations.	75 individual half-page reflection notes from social workers Two transcribed 60-minute group conversations among 8-18 social workers. Participant observation reports from eight social workers 39 reflective survey notes from the public. Three-page reflection notes from students written after the event. A 200-page collective project report from the students involved.

In the second part of the project, we explored how various system actors experienced their relationships with child welfare. To do this, we created simple, everyday scenes representing interactions between system actors that could be experienced within the system. Drawing inspiration from forum theatre practices (Boal, 2008; van Amstel, 2023), these scenes were used for prototyping how relations among system actors could play out. In six collaborative two-hour workshops with various system actors, the scenes were enacted multiple times by theatre actors, each with variations. The participants drove the iterations by suggesting, co-directing and discussing modifications in the scenes. The improvised enactments provided an opportunity to explore the emotional and relational dynamics within various situations. To reflect on what happened, the emotions that were elicited and how this affected the reflections among participants during the workshops, the co-authors wrote participant observation notes on them. Further, participating social workers wrote reflection notes as supplementary empirical material from this exploration.

In the third exploration, we designed an interactive theatre event based on the lessons learned in previous explorations. The aim was to foster emotional reflexivity by designing the interactive theatre as a system map that represented the emotional experiences in the manifold relations among system actors. Building on the prototyped enactments, we began creating a gallery of fictional characters and their interrelations. Through cycles of ideating, rehearsing and critical iteration, we developed an event that aimed to portray the emotional experiences within child welfare relations realistically.

At multiple times during this process, social workers from the collaborating child welfare service were involved in discussing the development of the enactments and gave feedback on how genuine they perceived them to be. The event consisted of a main narrative and sections in which various characters delivered monologues, making their experiences explicit. Additionally, during pivotal moments in the main narrative, all characters would pause and, amidst a shift in lighting and sound, they began to articulate the intentions and feelings behind their spoken words to each other. Empirical material that was collected from this exploration consisted of scene scripts, conversational props, visual artefacts, process notes and sketches from the design process. Furthermore, participant observations from the project team were shared and collected in the form of notes in a debriefing session after the exploration.

In the last exploration, various interactive provocations during the interactive theatre event served as open-ended prompts for conversations about the social structures within the child welfare system. Our interest was in how participants, through emotional reflexivity, would engage in new conversations about the child welfare system. The event attracted 800 participants across seven performances, including 130 social workers from the collaborating child welfare service who participated in an extended five-and-a-half-hour version. Figure 3 shows a collage of pictures from the event.

During the event, participants were invited to engage in conversations through multiple interactive provocations. For instance, they participated in a "political fair" where fictive politicians from various parties advocated for policies based on different views of what constitutes a good family. During the fair, participants were involved in a political debate and voted for their preferred party. Other interactive elements included collective "professional" meetings to discuss dilemmas faced by the characters, an auction to "purchase" different forms of care highlighting societal values on cost and caregiving, and a hypothetical community meeting set in 2050, after the dissolution of the child welfare service, prompting them to consider their responsibilities for children's well-being. Following the interactive theatre event, collaborating social workers participated in both individual and group reflections, some of which were facilitated by the first author.

Several sources provided empirical material from the last exploration. First, seven facilitated fishbowl dialogues were conducted with child welfare workers to collect feedback and reflections after the interactive theatre event. Transcriptions of these dialogues and observation notes from six participating social workers were collected. Second, during a staff meeting, 75 child welfare workers who took part in the event were asked to spend 15 minutes reflecting on their experiences of it and the conversations that had emerged from it. These reflections were collected in an open-ended survey with questions about the social workers' feelings, concerns, conversations with peers, personal takeaways and their future wishes related to child welfare. A similar survey was sent to participants in the interactive theatre event from the public, resulting in 39 responses. In addition, the participating students wrote individual reflection notes and a collective project report about what they had learned and experienced in the project.

Abductive analysis

Our analysis employed abductive cooperative inquiry, a form of action research where co-researchers collaboratively cycle through stages of action and reflection (Heron & Reason, 2006). The aim of the analysis was to develop propositions for integrating experiential and systemic perspectives in service design. The methodological blend used to collect empirical material provided a diverse array of research data that we actively triangulated (Flick, 2018) by combining and comparing, as well as using them to question each other through the analysis. The initial phase of the analysis involved dialogue with co-authors, students and partners from the child welfare system, reflecting on learning from experiments while integrating theoretical perspectives from relational sociology and service ecosystem design. These discussions laid the groundwork for our analysis and were subsequently consolidated into five dedicated analysis sessions.

The goal of the consolidating analysis was to develop propositions for integrating experiential and systemic perspectives in service design. To prepare for the analysis sessions, we compiled all empirical materials into a comprehensive data portfolio encompassing materials produced and collected during the four explorations. This portfolio was revisited in five two-hour analysis sessions where the co-authors engaged in collaborative analysis (Cornish et al., 2013). An interactive digital board facilitated flexible data management and visualisation.

In the first three sessions, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify patterns within the transcribed conversations and reflection notes from an interactive theatre event. Our primary interest here was whether and how the event facilitated reflexivity among participants. We coded statements under four themes: feedback on the event, emotions evoked, reflections sparked and initiatives for action. These themes were revised, iteratively labelled, and described in increasing detail through a dialogical process during the second and third sessions.

In the fourth and fifth analysis sessions, we connected these themes with reflections and various empirical materials from the entire research process. We discussed how themes identified in the initial sessions could be understood in connection to learning from the research process and explained by the concept of emotional reflexivity (Burkitt, 2012) within the framework of service ecosystem design (Vink et al., 2021). Prior to the final analysis session, the first author prepared suggested propositions. In the final session, we iterated on these propositions, grounding them in themes from previous analysis steps and illustrative examples from the research process. The final propositions were considered the core findings from our abductive analysis.



Figure 3. Example images from the interactive theatre event (Photos: Kristiania/Jonatan Quintero).

Findings

In this section, we present the findings of our abductive analysis in the form of three pairs of connected propositions. The propositions suggest how to integrate experiential and systemic perspectives in service design to more effectively support system actors in transforming complex welfare systems. An overview of the three pairs of propositions is presented in Table 2. The propositions were developed based on a broad range of empirical materials during the analysis and are here presented through vignettes from the research process.

Table 2. Propositions for integrating experiential and systemic perspectives in service design

Adopt systemic views on emotions	Proposition 1.1: Emotions are integral to relations among actors and are therefore not merely challenges to be "dealt with" but fundamental occurrences through which the dynamics of welfare systems can be understood.	Proposition 1.2: Because social structures are enacted in the relations among system actors, the emotional experiences within these relations are essential ways in which the actors encounter these structures.
Mirror emotions to support reflexivity	Proposition 2.1: As relations in welfare systems are guided by social structures, mirroring how these relations are experienced can enhance awareness of social structures through system actors' emotional reflexivity.	Proposition 2.2: As system actors occupy varied relational positions within welfare systems, mirroring the manifold emotional experiences among them can facilitate emotional reflexivity about broader system dynamics.
Facilitate conversations about emotional tensions	Proposition 3.1: As conflicting social structures manifest emotionally in various relationships among welfare system actors, fostering reflexivity on emotional tensions can help actors negotiate system reformation in emergent ways.	Proposition 3.2: Due to the emergent properties of social systems, increasing emotional reflexivity among system actors can facilitate reformation, yet also lead to unintended outcomes such as conflicts, hopelessness or withdrawal.

Adopt systemic views on emotions

The findings from our material align with the theoretical views of emotions as embodied and embedded as integral parts of social system relations (Burkitt, 2018b; Campos et al., 2004; Gergen, 2009; Lively & Weed, 2016; van Kleef, 2016). Accordingly, our first proposition is as follows:

Proposition 1.1: Emotions are integral to relations among actors and are, therefore, not merely challenges to be "dealt with" but fundamental occurrences through which the dynamics of welfare systems can be understood.

In the initial exploration, the central role of emotional experiences among system actors became clear during our collaborative mapping of the child welfare system. While these visualisations provided a certain understanding of child welfare dynamics, they also tended to flatten and abstract the experiences of the system actors, thus distancing our conversations from them. This issue became a frequent discussion theme during our workshop debriefings. Capturing these discussions, one of the co-authoring students wrote in a reflection note: "While looking at these maps, I felt they were unable to convey the full extent of our research. Somehow, the urgency I felt disappeared when translated to words, arrows, shapes, or colours." The visualisations supported us in adopting a meta-perspective and thus fostered cognitive reflexivity among system actors (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022). However, they had limited value in representing the embodied and situated experiences of the interactions taking place within the system. In other words, we struggled to capture the emotional experiences and urgency that the system actors were communicating. A connected proposition that surfaced during our analysis highlights why this poses a limitation for design within welfare systems.

Proposition 1.2: Because social structures are enacted in the relations among system actors, the emotional experiences within these relations are essential ways in which the actors encounter these structures.

This interconnectedness was evident in various parts of the project. One example comes from the series of workshops in our second exploration. In these workshops, system actors co-directed everyday scenes in which theatre actors enacted relational encounters in the child welfare system. Figure 4 captures a moment from one of these workshops, where a youth argues with their foster parent, accusing them of caring only because they are paid and not being "true" parents.

In the workshop, foster parents modified the scene to explore how various social structures influenced the relational and emotional dynamics of the situation. Playing with certain social structures in the scene emphasised the entanglement between these structures and the emotional experiences of those involved. For instance, an improvised version portrayed the youth as a customer whom the foster parents tried to please at all costs. This exaggeration prompted reflections on the dual role of foster parents as both caregivers and professionals and the emotional impact of this role on their relationship with foster children.



Figure 4. Co-design workshop exploring emotional experiences through improvised enactments.

Mirror emotions to support reflexivity

The first pair of propositions suggest that an emphasis on the emotional fabric of relations is key to understanding the dynamics of welfare systems. Previous research has noted that bringing to light emotional dynamics among system actors can foster reflexivity about social structures within service systems (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022). Our analysis supports this, as specified in the following proposition:

Proposition 2.1: As relations in welfare systems are guided by social structures, mirroring how these relations are experienced can enhance awareness of social structures through system actors' emotional reflexivity.

Mirroring, in this context, means portraying emotions as they are felt and experienced in situated relations and situations instead of abstracting them to descriptions, visualisations or materials. An example of this occurred during the development of the interactive theatre event, where social workers provided feedback on a late version of the script. Initially, they expressed concerns about whether their experiences were authentically represented. One social worker remarked, "I don't know if I'm disappointed … But if the goal here is to capture the complexity in our work … I maybe feel like it's not … it is a bit simplifying". However, their views changed after seeing the script played out by the actors. In a follow-up conversation, they enthusiastically expressed that the actors authentically conveyed the complexity of their roles when these were enacted. From this shift in perception, along with other similar examples, we inferred that embodied enactments better portrayed how the relations within child welfare were experienced than other representations did. Furthermore, the emotional engagement provoked by these enactments led system actors to question what

they had already taken for granted. We interpreted this as a form of emotional reflexivity through which participants became aware of the social structures in the system. This was highlighted in survey responses from the participants in statements such as, "During the performance, I became emotional. I cried and realised that my perspective on the child's role might be limited." For social workers, emotional engagement raised reflections on their professional roles and practices. One of them noted,

"To see how vulnerable everyone was. How afraid they were … I was deeply touched. I found myself thinking about many old cases. Cases that somehow passed in review. I thought, what did we do? … Why did we do it that way? Why didn't we do it differently?"

As highlighted in the previous quote, many social workers emphasised the impact of being exposed to the experiences of multiple system actors simultaneously. This observation is reflected in the following connected proposition from our findings:

Proposition 2.2: As system actors occupy varied relational positions within welfare systems, mirroring the manifold emotional experiences among them can facilitate emotional reflexivity about broader system dynamics.

Throughout the project, the system actors communicated a range of dilemmas, challenges and struggles that they encountered within the child welfare context. Through discussions of ethics for designing in such a sensitive context, it became important for us not to take sides but to reflect on these conflicts as they occurred within the system. Therefore, we chose not to try resolving conflicts but rather mirrored them in ways that would empower system actors to address them within their contexts. We found that the theatre approach helped us to portray emotional experiences in relation to each other, thus showing how they depended on the positions the various characters had within the system.

Exposure to the manifold emotional experiences within the system was highlighted as valuable for understanding the system dynamics among the participants. For example, in a conversation, one social worker expressed the following:

"I was moved by something. But then suddenly I become aware of the foster parents' experience of the situation. It's a bit… I became very caught up in the importance of bringing out others' experience of a situation. Rather than what I think the other thinks."

From this and many similar reflections, we inferred that presenting the multiplicity of emotional experiences within the system as interrelated was effective in fostering reflexivity. While emotions, as subjectively experienced "truths", were often overlooked when visualising the system, the enactments served to highlight their importance. The responses after the event reflected this complexity: many participants noted that while all the characters had different perceptions and standpoints, they were all legitimised. Illustratively, one participant remarked, "Everyone had a valid point about what is best for the child. There are so many truths."

Facilitate conversations about emotional tensions

Service ecosystem design suggests that fostering reflexivity among actors can facilitate their engagement in reforming social structures within service systems (Vink et al., 2021). With multiple social structures present within welfare systems, conflicts often arise (Nilsson et al., 2022). Throughout the project, the system actors shared the difficult dilemmas, challenges and struggles they faced within the child welfare context. These issues were often linked to conflicting social structures, like divergent views on expertise or differing norms related to parenting. This is illuminated in the third set of propositions:

Proposition 3.1: As conflicting social structures manifest emotionally in various relationships among welfare system actors, fostering reflexivity on emotional tensions can help actors negotiate system reformation in emergent ways.

After the event, a pattern emerged from the empirical material: participants expressed a desire for more genuine and open conversations about the complex dilemmas, struggles and challenges within child welfare. We interpreted this as an inspiration for reformation, as participants sought ways of relating that could better accommodate these tensions. When observing conversations among colleagues after the event, some of our collaborating social workers noted a shift. For example, one observed:

"… it was more intimate now than it was earlier… Many were concerned about what we do, the doubt, the uncertainty. There were also discussions about how we view our job. I felt that it was a very open conversation that was about "I". There was a "me" and a "we" in the tone throughout the conversation… this conversation gave me hope."

In general, participants suggested that change should be collective, focussing on reforming the system's conversational culture rather than solely on individual changes. We interpreted these calls as initial emerging reflexive conversations in which system actors sought new ways of relating. Increased engagement with the uncertainties and complexities of their roles could foster an appreciation of social structures as malleable within the system. While this shift in conversations was generally viewed positively, others also noted that it would require them to "… tolerate a little discomfort to find agency [to change]". These views led us to a complementary proposition:

Proposition 3.2: Due to the emergent properties of social systems, increasing emotional reflexivity among system actors can facilitate reformation yet also lead to unintended outcomes such as conflicts, hopelessness or withdrawal.

This proposition reflects the range of emotions communicated in reflection notes and conversations among system actors after participating in the interactive theatre event. These emotions ranged from hopelessness to hope and from grief and anger to pride and affection, with these emotions varying not only between individuals but also manifesting as mixed emotions for them individually. Notably, two of the six main emotional themes that surfaced during the analysis were negative and mixed feelings that were evoked by the interactive theatre event. These were intense for some of the participants; for instance, one member of the public reported feeling "… the urge to cry and to be alone". In sensitive welfare contexts,

like child welfare, this raises considerable ethical questions about mirroring peoples' experiences. Furthermore, while the elicited emotions inspired change for some, others were left with feelings of hopelessness and apathy. For example, one social worker shared the following in a conversation:

"And then I became… It feels like our job is impossible. How can we do this in a good way? It's maybe a bit unfortunate that for me, there was a bit of a reinforcement of the "what are we doing?" thoughts."

From this, we argue that focusing on emotional tensions within sensitive welfare systems is a double-edged sword. While it holds the potential to facilitate reflexivity and constructive reformation within these systems, it can also have the opposite effect, causing negative reactions among system actors and unintentionally leaving them without a sense of agency.

Discussion of Implications

The lack of integration between experiential and systemic perspectives limits service design's ability to support transformation in welfare systems (Hay & Vink, 2023). Additionally, it risks reinforcing the rational-actor assumptions that contribute to the current inadaptability of these systems (Cottam, 2019; Storch & Hornstrup, 2020; Torfing et al., 2019). To address the lack of integration, this research explored how experiential and systemic perspectives could be integrated into service design by facilitating emotional reflexivity among actors in welfare systems. By focussing on the diverse emotional experiences within the child welfare system in various explorations, we have articulated three pairs of propositions that suggest how service design can achieve this integration by adopting systemic views on emotions, mirroring emotions to support reflexivity and facilitating conversations about emotional tensions. As the nature of this study was explorative, its limitations prompt questions and open up potential future research trajectories. Next, we discuss these questions and potentials, as well as what the propositions imply for service design practice and theory.

Adopting systemic views of emotions

Propositions 1.1 and 1.2 integrate experiential and systemic perspectives in service design by framing emotions as systemic phenomena and welfare systems as intrinsically emotional. This leads to two key implications for service design: first, it suggests that service design should recognise how the emotional dynamics are integral to welfare systems rather than perceiving emotional experiences merely as outcomes of what happens within them. This aligns with calls to shift service design from focusing solely on individual users' experiences of service interaction and provision (Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009; Sevaldson, 2018) towards considering and addressing the broader emotional entanglements within service systems. In this expanded perspective, the choices made regarding the inclusion of participants, relations and experiences within a given service system are critically important. To mitigate the risk of service design unintentionally marginalising certain system actors or experiences, it is necessary to address this issue reflexively in both research and practice. A systemic perspective on emotions also suggests that professional service designers engaging with service systems cannot do so in entirely "objective" or "rational" ways. In our project, the

emotional experiences we had while engaging with the child welfare system actors, even as "outsiders," were crucial for how we understood the system.

This leads to a second implication: a systemic approach to service design should not only focus on understanding welfare systems from a meta-perspective. Instead, we posit that it also requires zooming in on the embodied ways these systems are experienced within relations among actors, including the professional designers involved. This aligns with calls for more situated and embodied approaches to service design, remaining entangled within system actors' lived contexts (Akama & Prendiville, 2013; Vink, 2023). We argue that relational perspectives on emotions can support this by providing a lens through which one views the emotional experiences of actors as intertwined in the social structures within welfare systems. Following this, our research aligns with recent calls for service design, as well as design more generally, to develop theories and practices grounded in relational ontologies (Escobar et al., 2024; Nielsen & Bjerck, 2022).

However, two limitations of our study also highlight potential areas for further strengthening this bridge. First, our study was conducted within a child welfare service – a context characterised by a high degree of emotionality. This raises the question of how our principles and propositions might apply to other service systems, for example, those that are more technology driven. Second, the perspective from relational sociology informing this research represents just one of several possible theories that could inform a more systemic understanding of emotions within service systems. For example, normative theories within sociology (Hochschild, 1979; Thoits, 2004) or feminist theory (Ahmed, 2014) could contribute to a more robust basis for how emotional dynamics within systems may marginalise certain actors. Additionally, ecological theory (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020) may inform how emotions are entangled with ecological contexts, another dimension for further exploration.

Mirroring emotions to support reflexivity

Propositions 2.1 and 2.2 provide actionable insights for maintaining an emotional focus within a systemic approach to service design. They suggest that mirroring the diverse emotional experiences among actors in welfare systems can enhance their system awareness. Since a core aspect of design is making things tangible, this offers a promising path for supporting service system transformation efforts. However, we argue that mirroring emotions – portraying them as they are truly felt and experienced – requires moving beyond merely abstracting these experiences through descriptions, visualisation and materialisation. While we do not suggest abandoning such practices, we argue that design has the potential to broaden current approaches to representing systems. In our research, we facilitated different forms of reflexivity among actors by representing the child welfare system through different means. For instance, approaching the system through collaborative gigamapping (Sevaldsson, 2011) facilitated conversations characterised by cognitive reflexivity, while enactments of the system facilitated more emotional and embodied forms of reflexivity. In service system transformation, it might be constructive to use such means in complementary ways to facilitate various forms of reflexivity among actors. Future research is needed to

understand how designers can intentionally vary such means to address different objectives within design processes.

This study demonstrates that current practices can be expanded through transdisciplinary collaborations, such as with the performing arts. We suggest that future theory and practice should explore more ways of achieving this. We employed interactive theatre approaches, as also used by others (e.g. Brandt & Grunnet, 2000; van Amstel, 2023), to foster emotional reflexivity. However, a wide range of approaches could be incorporated into service design to effectively mirror experiences in different ways. As representations of systems, including the ones presented in this study, inevitably provide certain limited perspectives, they risk silencing others (Bailey & Gamman, 2022). Therefore, we encourage service design practitioners to pursue diverse ways of mirroring people's experiences within systems.

Facilitating conversations about emotional tensions

Propositions 3.1 and 3.2 support the integration of systemic and experiential perspectives in service design by suggesting that system transformation can emerge when individuals become aware of how systemic tensions are experienced by themselves and others. This perspective implies that these tensions can be highlighted in service design to foster reflexivity, enabling system actors to enact changes within the systems in which they are embedded. In our study, agentic action – taking the form of new conversations – emerged among system actors after they were exposed to the relational tensions within the child welfare system. A focus on building agency among system actors aligns with meta-design, which in human-computer interaction design aims to empower all stakeholders "to be actively engaged in the continuous development of personally meaningful socio-technical systems" (Fischer et al., 2017). It also resonates with Banathy's (1996) assertion that system actors must be the ones designing the social systems that affect them.

However, focusing on tensions and conflicts can provoke negative reactions that raise questions in two main areas. The first area concerns ethics. Our study found that mirroring emotional experiences within a complex welfare system can lead to conflict, apathy and hopelessness. While increasing emotional reflexivity has the potential to initiate reformation, it can also elicit negative feelings, increase interpersonal conflict or leave system actors feeling powerless to effect change. Within our research, the first author, a trained clinical psychologist with extensive experience in the child welfare context, facilitated ongoing discussions about ethical dilemmas with the project group and collaborating partners. These discussions focussed on how to engage with people's experiences in sensitive ways and how to respectfully portray insights from these conversations. Exploring the nuances of such dilemmas is beyond the scope of this paper, but they warrant attention in the future development of practice and theory. If service design is to focus more directly on conflicts within sensitive contexts, we align with calls for developing practices and theories to ensure that such approaches are trauma-sensitive and do not cause harm (Dietkus, 2022).

A connected second area for future research concerns how system dynamics enhance or constrain actors' agency to act on their emotional reflexivity. A limitation of our study was its focus on building reflexivity among actors without examining the long-term effects of such

reflexivity. If focussing on tensions and conflicts is to support transformation within welfare systems over time, an equally important factor is the capability of actors to collectively address these issues. Negative feelings or conflict can be important drivers for initiating change, but only if system actors have the possibility to act on them in constructive ways (Thoits, 2004). The notion that system actors within our study called for collective efforts to reform their ways of interacting supports the need to understand the conditions that constrain or support such collective processes. Thus, questions such as "What conditions facilitate system actors' agency in addressing experienced conflicts?" and "How can service design support the creation of such conditions?" are important for developing future theory and practice. Such knowledge could help elucidate the mechanisms through which systemic approaches to service design can not only foster reflexivity but also empower actors to use it in transformative ways.

Conclusion

Through this exploratory research, we demonstrate how experiential and systemic perspectives can be integrated into service design by facilitating emotional reflexivity among service system actors. Based on our research within the Norwegian child welfare system, we suggest three pairs of propositions that contribute to both theory and practice in service design. First, the research underscores the role of emotions in welfare systems as integral to the relations among actors. Second, it suggests that service design can foster reflexive system awareness by mirroring the emotions actors experience within these relations. Third, by facilitating emotional reflexivity on the experienced tensions within the system, service design can help actors negotiate system reformation. Combined, these propositions outline an integrated approach to service design that bridges experiential and systemic perspectives through a relational lens. This calls for further development of a relational perspective in service design, raising ethical and practical questions that could be addressed in future work. In summary, the study charts a course for service design that emphasises people's embodied experiences and relations in a systemic way, thereby challenging the assumptions in welfare systems that portray people as rational, solitary actors.

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