

The Politics and Theatre of Service Design

Lara Penin, Cameron Tonkinwise

*School of Design Strategies, Parsons The New School for Design
New York, USA, peninl@newschool.edu, tonkinwc@newschool.edu*

Abstract: What differentiates service design from all other forms of design is that is primarily the design *of* people, rather than the design of things *for* people. This makes service design unavoidably political. Human-centered service designing claims to negotiate these politics by enabling improvisation in service roles, rather than scripting them non-negotiably. How best to not-over-design people in service relations? The paper will discuss these tensions within service design, particularly of jobs where there is an inherent asymmetry between the provider and the recipient that constrains the possibilities for co-creation. To design a service that provides value to clients, service designers also need to design systems that value those providers. Service designers need ways of getting in to the very improvised drama of service relations. This paper reviews theater methods that can be used by designers to gain a sufficient sense of the political complexities at work in service provision.

Key words: *service design, acting, politics, service design methods*

1. “How can I help you?”

(or “What are the expectations and limits of my role here? How can this organization help you? I am having such a bad day! I can only help you if you help me by telling me clearly what you really want. How much are they paying me to be nice to someone as awful as you?!”)

What differentiates service design from all other forms of design is that is primarily the design *of* people, rather than the design of things, environments or communications *for* people. This makes service design unavoidably political. Human-centered service designing claims to negotiate these politics by enabling improvisation in service roles, rather than scripting them non-negotiably. How best to not-over-design people in service relations?

The problem that has motivated this paper is captured by the following two blog posts, both of which had some notoriety amongst their respective communities on the occasion of their publication. The first is by Adam Greenfield. The post reviews a series of product service systems – the Nike and iPod Nike+, Puma’s Trainaway, and Amtrac’s Acela – in order to make some general comments about the danger of ‘total design’ that underlies the emergent field of ‘experience design.’ The crux of the argument is contained in the following:

“as things now stand, experience design’s Achilles heel is that contemporary American customer service standards are nowhere near the level of refinement routinely achieved by product and interactive designers.

A combination of low wages, disinvestment in training, habitual recourse to offshoring, and deeper cultural factors has left American businesses without a large pool of workers motivated to provide customer service at the level routinely specified by designers. The result is that experiences seamless on paper break down badly the moment a human being enters the loop; the necessary follow-through simply isn't there. The suggestion here is not that these crucial interactions be left to chance, to design by committee or to the exigencies of the moment. But there are real limits on what a design organization can reasonably expect to achieve. Designers may well be able to specify the degree to which a seat reclines, the font in which a sign is set, or the sleek lines of a uniform – but not the behavior of the person in that uniform, and ultimately, that's far more likely to determine the tenor of any experience.” [11]

The second post is Sam Ladner's about 'design thinking,' It sparked an interesting debate in the comments in which Sam tempered the post's polemic:

“Design is attractive to management because it is a de-politicized version of the well known socio-cultural critique of managerial practices. Design thinking is so popular because it raises only questions of “creativity” or “innovation” without ever questioning the legitimacy of managerial practice. Instead, design thinking aspires only to “better” management technique by investigating “contextual problems” or the truly innocuous “pain points.” The inconvenient truth is that the science of management fails because it treats people as either mere inputs into the production process or as faceless “consumers” who have no real stake in outcomes. Design thinking allows for these truths to remain unaddressed, thereby avoiding any discussion of power itself. Workers are cast as something to be organized or “incented.” Consumers are to have their “needs met.” And neither group is granted a meaningful stake in the creative process.” [15]

These posts point to a tension within service design concerning the extent to which interactions between people can be designed. They suggest that within the notion of service design lies the question of the limits of design, of what can and cannot be designed, but also of what perhaps should not be designed even if it could be. To what extent is service design really a sub-discipline of design, deploying the same design methods as a re used to determine the nature of products and their production? In which case, is service design treating humans like objects, something that ought not be done and in most cases cannot in the long term be done? Or to what extent is service design more a kind of design thinking, merely analogous to designing but in fact a sub-discipline of management? What sort of designing creates efficient services, and at what socio-political cost, and what sort of designing creates rewarding interactions for both parties involved in the service relation, and at what business cost?

2. Designing vs Engineering, Collaborations vs Labor

From the point of view of service management, service design is corrective of service engineering, with its focus on the industrialization of service delivery. The hope that management has for design is that its creative problem-solving can improve demand-side quality without reductions in, and perhaps even with enhancements to, supply-side efficiency. The ‘creative leap’ of design experts [8], it is hoped, can do what managers have not yet been able to do, and elegantly resolve the conflict between customer service and profiting.

Design is of course not one static thing. It is a multiple and changing set of practices. Contemporary 'user-centered' design claims to work from and/or with people's existing habits and desires [27]. Given the human-centeredness of services, the designing of service design presumably draws on, and emerged out of, these less instrumental and less prescriptive forms of designing. This is why service design tends to employ the rhetoric of participation, co-creation and enablement.

However, service is also not one static thing. Service design is relevant to a wide range of situations, stretching from non-market community cooperation (C2C) to exchanges of creative class expertise (B2B). In between are the large majority of service jobs (B2C). These can be characterized by two conditions:

A) **Skill Parity > Luxury** – What the service provider does for recipients is something that the recipients more or less have the skills to do, but choose not to because they can afford to pay another to do it;

B) **Recompense Non-Parity > Work** – The individual service provider is employed by a company to provide that service and does not receive in recompense the equivalent of what the recipient pays for the service (the cost of the service = hourly wage + infrastructure + profit margin)

In these service jobs, where there is an inherent asymmetry between the provider and the recipient, where there is no getting around that there is a difference between the service provider and the receiver of the service, a servant and a master, the possibilities for participation, co-creation and enablement are very different from those of community cooperation or expertise exchange. More commercially-oriented non-design-based service research does indeed focus on these sorts of cases, precisely because the problem there is how to get employees to care about those they service. What mechanisms can be used to force or persuade or help waged service providers to be of service to clients in ways that uphold the brand promises and business models of the service company?

Regular management approaches to such issues must negotiate the double bind of:

- a) training front-line service-providing staff at the risk of demotivating them with strictures on how they perform their roles, or
- b) giving these staff members the autonomy to improvise in service provision but at the risk of customizing beyond the demands of the business model. Michael Chaffin for example argues passionately in relation to the latter paradox in his "Vanished: Where has the Service Gone?" manifesto published at ChangeThis.com:

"Most organizations don't promote improv[ization] in the workplace because they're afraid to fail, afraid the customer and the employee together will take them someplace they don't want to be and afraid of the unknown. To them, the unknown is a dangerous place that is too risky and full of pitfalls. Conventional wisdom tells us to avoid danger at all costs and take the safer route. So, instead of embracing the possibility of creating customer evangelists and tripping a few times along the way, they hire robots, program them to play according to the script, train them to ask for help when they get stuck and hope no one complains. The problem is people don't like dealing with robots and rules. They certainly don't like to wait while someone tracks down their boss. In fact, all they want is a reaction, some attention and to

believe someone cares.... The key to mitigating fear of the unknown and to keeping your staff honest when dealing with customers is to stop piling on rules and guidelines. Frankly, that's the easy way out. As with most easy things, the rewards are nothing to write home about. Rather, the right thing to do is much more challenging (of course); the right thing to do is to make an investment and spend whatever time and money it takes to hire the most talented and trustworthy people. Train them on the basics and where to find answers and get out of their way!" [5] (pp 6-7)

Presumably service *design* might be able to offer a middle-way between (c)ons)training and hiring those who need no (c)ons)training. Service designs *afford* particular sets of service relations that are satisfying for both the customer *and the provider*. To put it another way, the best services relations are clearly co-creative, with the service provider and recipient collaborating to accomplish something valuable. To allow this to happen, let alone to ensure that it happens, service designs must guide the recipient in how to make appropriate demands of the service; but they must also guide the provider in how to meet those varied demands in flexible ways. To be done rigorously, service design must enable the particularities of the experience of not only the service recipient, but also the service provider. What methods then should service design use to enable those particular experiences? Are they, for instance, the same methods that service design has extrapolated from interaction design, such as activity-based participatory designing? To what extent are service provision employees as important as customers when researching and designing a service interaction?

3. “We are all Un(der)-Paid Customers Now”

This is the unavoidable politics of service design. By bringing design to services, designers hope to create more agile businesses, economies and societies. The posts of Greenfield and Lander, and Chaffin, make clear the negative point that service design must *not* be a kind of total design; not the controlling sort that forbids the humans providing the service from being in a bad mood every now and then; but rather the enabling sort that puts those humans more often than not in good moods – though in the end this might mean also redesigning the economic relations governing those service providers, improving their working conditions. To design a service that provides value to clients, service designers also need to design systems that value those providers.

This has been long recognized in the service management literature. See for instance the conceptual model used by Lee et al.’s “What Factors Influence Customer-Oriented Prosocial Behavior?” in the *Journal of Services Marketing* [17]:

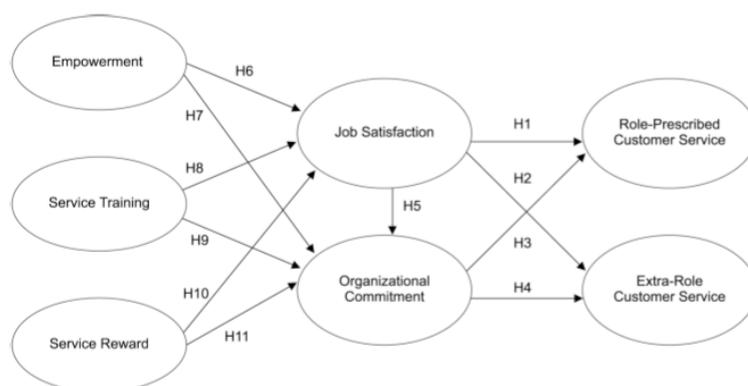


Figure 1: Conceptual model used by Lee et al.’s “What Factors Influence Customer-Oriented Prosocial Behavior?” in the *Journal of Services Marketing*.

The not very original conclusion

of the paper is that “service organizations should regard their employees as internal customers while they view customers as external employees. This means that employee management should be shifted from a transactional to a relationship-building orientation.” (p261)

The politics of design entering this otherwise service management discourse is therefore to develop ways of affording good service relations without resorting to managerially contractual incentives and disincentives. How can design facilitate someone (a service provider) caring for a stranger (a service recipient – and vice versa)? For the remainder of this paper, we would like to explore the way in which considerations of theater might be instructive for design in its quest to ‘afford agile service provision’.

4. Staging Service Designs

We have chosen the term ‘theater’ as a way of encompassing all the ways in which acting methods and stage performances overlap with service designing, research and provision. Theatrical techniques are increasingly being incorporated into product and interaction design. This is occurring at several levels of a design, almost organically, as designers innovate better ways of understanding and servicing the people they anticipate buying and using their designs. For instance, theater is being used in design in at least 3 ways:

A) Theater for design testing

The use of theater in designing is most common in relation to prototype testing. All designers concerned about the quality of their designs will test their designs in some kind of staged setting, whether in the studio, a laboratory or in the world. The prototype, whatever their level of ‘fidelity’ (depending on what is being tested [18], will be a prop in the enactment of a likely scenario of use. By engaging the prototype in this kind of physical setting, the designer is able to evaluate the awkwardness or ease of the use of the design in an appropriate setting [9]. Discussions of prototyping have begun to recognize that a prototyping experiment is only as good as the acting skills of the prototypers, that is, their capacity to put themselves into the scene realistically, and in the character of the target persona (at which point prototyping overlaps with user testing) [22].

B) Theater for design ideation

Human-centered design mostly involves the use of methods appropriated from ethnography in order to better understand those for whom designers are designing. The essence of ethnography is empathy, the capacity to ‘go native.’ This acting method capacity to ‘get into someone else’s shoes’ is essential at all stages of research: gathering data by sympathetic qualitative long interviews or sensitively situated observations; and then analyzing transcripts or observations using grounded theory methodology for example, in which one attempts to analyze the motivations behind what is being said or done, and synthesize the categories being deployed by the characters one has interviewed or observed. An acting method capacity is also crucial for moving beyond ethnographic research toward designing [32]. To extrapolate from ethnographic data toward an unarticulated but present need requires not just empathy with a target group, but a capacity to embody the situations and activities of that target group in order to improvise beyond what was said or observed [16]. The outcome of such improvisations tend to be scenarios. The rigor of a scenario lies in its being a type of creative non-fiction; an imagined future, but one that remains plausible in relation to its researched existing characters.

It is crucial to note that, in terms of theater, these two points form a positive feedback loop. A more detailed scenario for a future situation will make that scenario more compelling, allowing the designer to more easily enter into the scenario and experience its possibilities and so design appropriately for such an experience. Similarly, a more emotionally compelling scenario – one for instance, based upon credible characters and a motivating narrative – is easier for a designer to detail consistently, in others, to design this or that component product or interface within the scenario.

One of the most controversial examples is the use of personas [31], originally conceived by Alan Cooper [7] and now elaborated by John Pruitt. Importantly, Pruitt and others now insist that what Personas lack in empirical rigor they should gain in design authenticity, precisely by being richly personified, through acting techniques such as Stanislavski's method [31]. Another example is the now-famous IDEO method of experience prototyping and body storming. If non-designer stakeholders are to participate in the designing, it is increasingly recognized that they need the theater inherent to designing to be made explicit (mostly commonly in the form of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre [4, 20, 25], but also Focus Troupes [29] and Drama Workshops [19]).

C) Theater for design maintenance

The convergence of designing and branding, in the form of the experience economy, has introduced theatrical strategies to the ongoing delivery of a design. Marketing, packaging, retailing and post-sales service can all now be conceived as sets, props, characters and narratives that surround what is designed and maintain its designed qualities. These are often referred to as 'scapes', as in landscapes and servicescapes, referring to all the touchpoints, human or non-human that the buyer/user has with a design, particularly at the point-of-sale. However, this contraction of the term landscape is misleading, as it does not capture the combined affect that the design of such touchpoints usually aim for. Their purpose is much more theatrical.

Let us then look at each of these emergent uses of theater in relation to the design of services

a) Stage Testing the (Ethics of) Service Design

Clearly, any service design, like any other form of design needs testing. However, the politics of service design, of designing people rather than things, as spelled out earlier, makes this essential. Not only must the service work from the recipients' point of view, but the service must also be workable from the providers' point of view. Participatory design with the service providers would be advisable, but before then the designer would want to be confident that the service script and blueprint of activities is enactable. In this case, the service designers would need to have already 'rehearsed' the service, performing the role of the service designers.

There are two primary and related qualities of enactability that need to be tested directly through stagings of the service design proposal by designer:

~ *Plausibility* of the service interactions

Service interactions, as opposed to interpersonal relations (families, lovers, friends), involve role-play; a service provider playing the role of someone who cares about and so wishes to help (in the place of an interpersonal relation) a service recipient. This is why businesses take the metaphor of the corporation

literally, and adopt a personality via a brand. That organizational style is the character that service providers need to adopt to give the service interaction quality. Such roles need to be delivered credibly; that is, they need to be able to be well-acted by frontline employees. This is a gap that has emerged between the *Experience Economy* and *Authenticity* (Pine and Gilmore's next-to-last and latest books); customers apparently want 'real' relations with companies (Zuboff's *Support Economy*). It is therefore crucial that service designers know, with defensible rigor, how plausibly their service scripts and blueprints can be performed. Since what is at issue is exactly getting someone not in the business (a prospective employee) to adopt the role of a service-provider (customer care), role-play of the service by the designers is a highly appropriate testing method; 'if I, a designer, can play credibly the role of service provider in this or that non-design industry, then others should be able.'

~ *Ethicality* of the service interactions

Related to whether a service design can be enacted authentically is the appropriateness of asking a service provider to perform in that way. Presumably, assuming the role of servicing another should be able to be designed in such a way that it is not demeaning; it is hopefully also fulfilling. Only through a direct experience of performing the service role that they have designed can the designer be assess how 'humane' his/her service design is; in other words, 'if I, the designer, feel awkward doing this, then it is probably inappropriate that I propose that others do this.'

B1) Improving the Service Design Proposition

Designerly ethnography normally proceeds through the development of scenarios, rich pictures of people and situations undertaken a series of activities. These inform the requirements for the design. This means that while important to the design, these scenarios are in the end disposable. For services, they are themselves the design. The 'disciplined imagination' that allows the development of innovative and yet realizable scenarios is therefore particularly important for service design. The capacities that theatrical techniques have brought to design-oriented ethnographies are exactly what allow service *design* to accomplish what service engineering and business management have not been able to.

We would like to draw particular attention to the use of Boal's Forum Theater in design research. In Forum Theater, short narratives are presented and then opened to the audience for critique and reformulation, the actors improvising alternative endings that show ways of negotiating oppression. The critical libertarian philosophy behind Boal's work has to date been translated to designing as a way maintaining more utopian or at least transformative design possibilities, particularly with lay participants in the design process. However, given the politics of service provision, there is a much more literal connection to Boal's dialectically resistant philosophy. Investigating service design scripts through Forum Theater is a way of ensuring that often otherwise hidden ethical dimensions of service relations get interrogated in open and useful ways.

C1) Maintaining the Service Design Performance

As indicated above, there is now a substantial literature on servicescapes [1, 10, 30, 33]. That literature suggests that designers, or at least managers, now have a clear sense how to design environments so that they facilitate the service journey through those environments in efficient yet rich and so memorable ways. That designing of

servicescapes incorporates the design of employee service providers, at least with respect to their uniforms, tools and scripted speech. However, very few focus on the impact of servicescapes on employees or ‘internal customers.’ [12] Those that do are concerned mostly about the functionality of the servicescape for service providers, and subsequently on employee job satisfaction and retention:

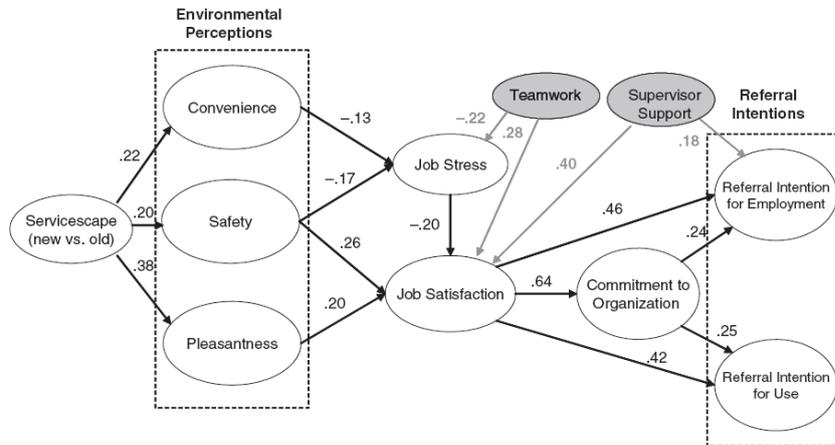


Figure 2: functionality of the servicescape for service providers

A theater perspective offers a very different way of approaching the relation between the servicescape and service provider. In theater, the set design, props and costumes exist to communicate to the audience the mise-en-scene that contextualizes what the actor is saying. However, from the actor’s point of view, all those theatrical elements also help them to stay in character, maintaining the illusion of the drama being presented and their role in it. Similarly, servicescapes do not just communicate processes and qualities of the service to the client, but also to the service provider. And in that capacity, servicescapes need not only cue service providers functionally, reminding them what to say, but servicescapes can also cue service providers affectively, reminding them how to say what needs to be said.

This point can be taken further. If servicescapes act as theatrical devices, orienting employees toward the kind of service provision that characterizes the business, and helping them maintain consistency in their role, then the business should feel more confident about being less prescriptive of the service providers, granting them greater freedom in the performance of their role. In terms of Chaffin’s “Where has the Service Gone?” manifesto, the business can get out of the way of its employees and allow them to improvise, knowing that they will remain within the overall framework of the service offering because the servicescape is acting as a background guide; or to change the metaphor of improvisation, the servicescape is acting as a consistent rhythm, or chord progression.

As Grove, Fisk and Laforge argue, since “According to Lovelock [1994: 96], a superior service actor, like a skilled stage performer, possesses the characteristics of ‘flexibility, empathy, a penchant for improvisation, and the ability to recover gracefully when the performance doesn’t go as smoothly as expected... theatrical training guidelines can be created as a means to develop the abilities of the service actor.” [13] Their recommendation is to model service employee training on the Stanislavskian Acting Method, since this a holistic approach to acting, where all elements of stagecraft are combined to maintain the integrity of the performer’s role. Theater techniques therefore can, and should, be deployed in service design research, ideation, testing, and implementation. Theatrical techniques move empathy, whether researched or intuited, into active and detailed dimensions appropriate to designing. They reveal the unavoidable politics of service and so make those dynamics available for negotiation.

3. Example of the need for theater in service designing: Demedicalization

A prominent hospital has been working with Parsons on a satellite chemotherapy clinic. This facility has a number of innovations that converge as service design opportunities and constraints. Being away from the hospital's central location, the clinic is more convenient for many patients, but there are then the logistics of transporting the chemotherapy drugs from where they are prepared at the central location to the satellite clinic. This is exacerbated by the perishability of the drugs and the uniqueness of each dosage to individual patients and at different stages of each individual's treatment. The clinic will have no doctors on site, though each patient's doctor will be available via live audio-visual link when necessary. The design principle for the clinic has been to move chemotherapy from the medical genre more toward the health and well-being genre. The clinic's interior design and the emerging patient experience pick up elements of spas. Nevertheless, chemotherapy is a precise medical science with little margin for error.

At the forefront of many of these conflicting requirements are the nurses; part customer relations managers, part medical care expert. A key aspect to this service design project is therefore managing the role stress that nurses at this clinic are going to experience. Nurses must meet patients at the door and take them to their private rooms to settle them in with the entertainments and luxuries that are available; but then nurses must put on protective clothing to access and administer the chemotherapy drugs; and yet, nurses cannot be assigned to patients throughout the chemotherapy, in which case the nurse administering the chemotherapy is a substitutable service provider and clearly not 'my' expert doctor. So nurses must move between the roles of concierge, health care worker, and medical expert, without becoming stuck in the first or the last. This movement in roles is not a fixed sequence determined by where every patient is in the chemotherapy administration process, but it is also needs to be merely flexibly negotiated in response to different patients' expectations.

To help the hospital begin to design this service, Parsons held an initial one-day workshop with a large and wide range of stakeholders in the service. The workshop began with a review of the hospital's planned service blueprint to determine the best experiential journey for the patient and verify the interaction line along it as well as the corresponding touch points. We then conducted a 'reverse' persona building activity. Rather than synthesize personas out of research, the participants chose images of strangers and developed an appropriate character for them, drawing on their experience of patients and nurses.

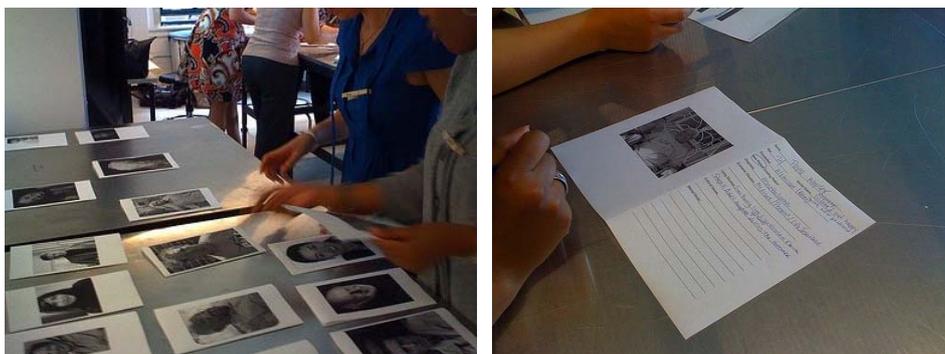


Figure 3: Developing fictitious personas that will understand and simulate interactions

The fictitiousness of the personas was not an issue at this point because the personas were merely triggers to thinking through role stress at various moments in the service. The participants “navigated” their personas into the service blueprint, focusing on three parts of the journey where the most intensive interactions between patients and staff are more likely to occur. To give depth to these moments, participants developed *mental models* for their personas at those points in the service, answering the questions, “What am I thinking”, “What am I feeling”, “What am I doing.” (This technique is part of Steve Dean’s G51 consultancy repertoire - <http://www.g51studio.com/services.html> - and was developed with Indi Young [35]). With this ‘backstory,’ as it is called in Stanislavskian method acting, those moments in the service design become rich and clear, with the tension between the expectations of the nurse from the patient and from the service system palpable.

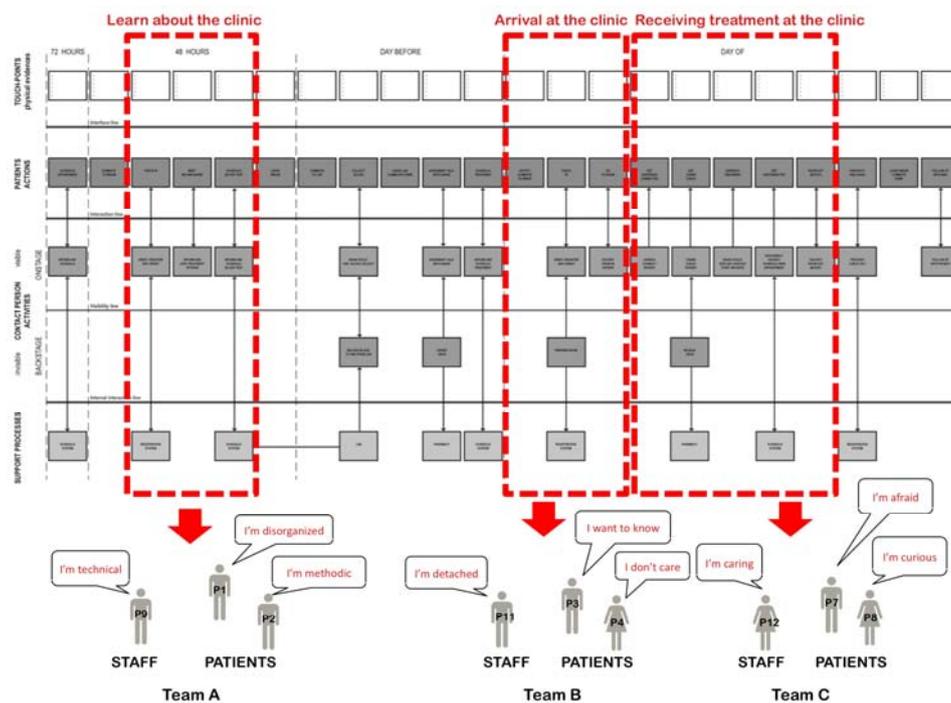


Figure 4: “Navigating” personas (patients and staff) through the service blueprint

The drama of those service role tension moments were then analyzed by being exaggerated into opposites that could be located on polarity maps. These provide a deductive approach for building alternative scenarios that might better negotiate those opposing forces. The final activity consisted of selecting the most promising tentative idea that emerged from the polarity maps exercise and developing it into a more detailed scenario. Specific guidelines were provided for the scenarios' textual description and these focused on defining “rounded” [21] (pp103) characters (as opposed to flat ones), by explaining who they are and why they do/think/feel the way they do. Starting from the characters, the service “scene” should be described, using the theater metaphor proposed by Pacenti [23] to approach services: set (space), props (objects/products/tools), people (who they are), script (what people are saying and how).

This was only a very early stage workshop, but what was evident was the speed at which the participants could move into design work, as a result of experiencing the tensions in the service design through small theatrical exercises, such as fleshing out the mental models. We mean this to merely demonstrate what we have been arguing rather than a validation. What emerged from the workshop are proposals for how the physical design of

the clinic and the service journey can temper patient expectations of nurses on the one hand, and cue nurses in relation to their changing roles through the service journey on the other.

4. Conclusions

The medical situation, for which this workshop ran, is politically complex. The intention is to create a new type of chemotherapy center, one with a much less institutionally medicalized experience. It is one thing to plan such a center and its operations from the point of view of its customers – the patients. It is another to implement that plan with medical staff at various hierarchical levels with extensive experience and a strong commitment to health care, but not necessarily to a non-medicalized ‘customer experience’. The success of this center will depend on the ability of service designers to guide the relation between patient and center staff, without impinging on the different sorts of autonomy that either demand. In this context, service design must engage theatrical techniques so that:

- a) the designers have a rich enough sense of the political complexities at work in this initiative;
- b) the service providers can have input into the design of this initiative so that their autonomy and expertise is part of all aspects of this project.

Service design, as the design of relations of servility, no matter how co-creative, between employees and their customers, is in every case and in every way political. To do justice to those politics, and to ensure that services are designed that deliver valuable outcomes whilst valuing the receivers and providers of those services, service designers need ways of getting into the very improvised drama of service relations. This is why service designers must not only start to adopt the theatrical research methods already well-established in interaction design, but must advance this work with more careful and creative dramaturgical processes.

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