

**Billions of Impoverished People Deserve to Be Better Served:
A Call to Action for the Service Research Community
A Vision for the Service Research Community - “A Dream with a Deadline”**

By 2020, to help improve the lives of the world’s impoverished people in an unrelenting, collaborative, and caring effort by applying our resources (intellectual, financial, and time), social networks (globally via the Internet and locally via physical presence), and professional infrastructures (universities, organizations, and conferences) and become a role model for how an academic research community can make a difference in the world.

Introduction

Poverty is truly a wicked problem with no easy solutions. Every country has large numbers of citizens trapped in poverty, which led the United Nations (2015) to boldly declare that ending poverty is their Number 1 Sustainable Development Goal. When so many people in so many countries live in multi-generational poverty, the service systems of human society are failing to deliver adequate basic services. Such basic service systems include health, education, public safety, transportation, energy, sanitation, and such life support services as food, water, and shelter. Poverty is difficult to reduce because the service systems of human society are complex and interrelated. Further, the poor are routinely the victims of crime and corruption, which makes their plight all the more tragic.

Our service research community has the ability to help reduce poverty. There is no longer any excuse for hesitation or inaction. The time has come for our service research community to broaden its research efforts to include the service needs of the majority of humanity who are still trapped in poverty. Not only is reducing poverty important but we should be expanding our service knowledge and research by actively learning from and with the poor. This would allow our service research community to explore new perspectives and test existing theories in new and different contexts. Indeed, service research will be much more robust when it applies to the entire human species.

Given that service researchers come from a vast number of disciplines and study service through numerous theoretical lenses and research methodologies, there is immense potential for us to work together to help reduce poverty. More service research is needed, as discussed later in our call for action, that addresses the many service problems of the almost five billion people worldwide who live in various degrees of poverty. Further, we think social innovations (such as social media activism) and technological innovations (such as mobile computing) can empower actionable research innovations that enable our service research community to begin chipping away at the poverty problem.

We begin this essay by describing the service problems and opportunities of the Base of the Pyramid (BoP). Second, we explore how service systems have perpetuated poverty from ancient to modern times and take a systems theory perspective to understand the different service system levels affecting the BoP while seeking service systems that can reduce poverty. Third, we discuss three research approaches - Transformative Service Research, service design research, and Community Action Research - as examples for better serving the needs of the neglected billions

of people in poverty. From this foundation, we issue our call to action for reducing and preventing the global service system deficiencies that perpetuate poverty.

The Base of the Pyramid: service problems and opportunities

Base of the Pyramid (BoP) has become the common description for the approximately two thirds of the world's population who live on the equivalent of less than 9 US Dollars per day (Arnold and Valentin, 2013). For these impoverished people, limited access to basic services and inadequate service systems leave them mired in poverty. These service problems include limited or no access to health care, education, transportation, and electricity; no sanitation; insufficient or poor quality food; no clean drinking water; and no adequate housing.

There are several essential lessons and opportunities from BoP research that should be emphasized as well. First, the BoP problem is embedded in all levels of human systems. Individuals, groups, families, communities, organizations, and institutions all dynamically interact and participate in complex social and economic environments, which all have a role in the failure of these service systems to serve the poor. Second, there are myths about the BoP that need to be discarded if we are to understand and learn from the BoP. People who are part of the BoP are not just passive aid recipients and consumers. Many of them are also proactive, entrepreneurial innovators who are constantly co-creating solutions to survive the struggles of their daily lives. The BoP population is a rich source of technological and business model innovations. There is much to be learned from BoP innovations. Third, an extensive BoP literature already exists, including contributions related to development economics, microfinance, subsistence marketplaces, socially inclusive business and social entrepreneurship (Kolk *et al.*, 2014). Fourth, there is a fundamental lack of BoP service research. Yet, existing BoP research and directions offered in the first and second Service Research Priorities (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010; Ostrom *et al.*, 2015) provide opportunities for more research. Gebauer and Reynoso's (2013) agenda for BoP service research includes leveraging value co-creation and resource integration in this context, service systems research in informal service activities, social inclusiveness for sustainable service business models, and integrating service innovation with entrepreneurship. Fifth, researchers and practitioners need to move from traditional, passive perspectives on the BoP to taking proactive actions. Practitioners should shift from just selling services to the BoP to involving low-income customers as active participants in the co-creation of new services to improve their well-being. Researchers should shift from survey research to greater engagement through action research, case studies, and participant observation. It is time for the global service research community to make a difference in better serving the needs of impoverished people. However, service researchers seeking to reduce poverty confront very complex service system problems, as we discuss in the next two sections.

Understanding the role of service systems in perpetuating poverty

Seeking to understand and reduce poverty is a difficult quest. To understand poverty requires examining the historical nature of the service systems where human life occurs. Systems theory is then explored to better understand the complex service system problems of the BoP.

Service systems and the inequality that leads to poverty

Service systems are complex living systems. James Grier Miller (1978) wrote the definitive story of living systems. He proposed eight hierarchical levels of living systems: cell, organ, organism, group, organization, community, society, and supranational. Since a service relationship requires at least two humans, human service systems emerged and grew from Miller's fourth systems level, the group. In Miller's hierarchy, subsequent human living systems are increasingly complex service systems levels such as the family, tribe, village, city, culture, and nation.

Service systems are the beginning of human civilization. "The family is the essential and original service organization in human history. The human relationships and interactions inherent in any family were the beginning of civilization and the service economy." (Fisk, 2009, p. 136). Division of labor between men and women as hunter-gatherers led to the pair bonding that we consider a family. After the family, tribes are almost certainly the second human service organization and emerged at nearly the same time.

Anthropologists believe that egalitarian lifestyles were the normal living system for hunter-gatherer societies for almost all of the approximately 200,000 years our primate species - *homo sapiens* – has existed. About 10,000 years ago, systems of inequality became prevalent and have persisted ever since (Pennisi, 2014). According to Powers and Lehmann (2014), the switch to agriculture from the hunter-gatherer era seems to have created the conditions for the evolution of leadership and especially of despotic forms of leadership based on coercive control of resources. They note that controlling surplus resources would have been a primary starting condition for despotism.

Since our human systems of writing are only about 5,000 years old, the written history of our species tells stories of persistent dominance and inequality. The absence of written records of egalitarianism undermines the ability of our species to understand that dominance and inequality are not inevitable in human service systems. Ironically, resource surpluses seem to have led us down the path of dominance and inequality, which means that our species is better at sharing resources when they are scarce than when they are abundant. Oxfam, an international confederation of 17 organizations working on poverty problems, recently publicized the historic news that the richest 85 people have the same wealth as the poorest half (3.5 billion) of the world's population (Jackson, 2014).

How does our species escape from this barbaric past (where even our English word for service, emerged from the Latin word for slave - *servus*) to a more egalitarian and fairer future? We suggest that rapidly changing perspectives on human rights offer great hope for changing the service systems of the future. Acceptance of social, political, and economic systems that subjugate women, children and minorities is rapidly eroding across the world. More and more human societies are recognizing that the most precious resource is human potential. Our service research community can help accelerate these trends to reduce the lost human potential of billions of our species being mired in poverty.

Systems theory for understanding and reducing poverty

Since all human societies are complex service systems, systems theory is an excellent theoretical lens with which to understand the BoP and to seek service systems that reduce poverty. Turner and Boyns (2006) explain processes in society by distinguishing between three system levels of social forces (macro, meso, and micro) with key internal forces working at these three levels of social reality:

The **macro level** concerns how large numbers of individuals are organized. The five macro level forces include population size and change, production of resources, reproduction of genes and culture, distribution of resources, and regulation of activities. Here the role of national governments and governmental alliances (like the European Union or the United Nations) are particularly important.

The **meso level** consists of the units from which social institutions (macro level) are built and the units within which face-to-face interactions (micro level) occur. Meso level forces include corporate units created by division of labor (e.g., complex organizations, town, large communities and groups); categorical units (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, and social class); and integration (forces that create relationships between corporate and categorical units).

The **micro level** consists of face-to-face interactions between individuals. Almost all interactions are embedded in categorical and corporate units at the meso level of reality. Micro level forces include emotions, needs, symbols, roles, and social status.

Turner and Boyns (2006) point out that these three levels of reality are intertwined in complex ways: The five macro level forces generate structures that are termed “social institutions.” These five macro level forces set parameters for the forces working at both the meso and micro level of reality. However, social institutions are also structured from and supported by the forces at both meso and micro level of reality. For example, interactions between doctors and patients (micro level), take place in surgeries or hospitals (meso level), which are influenced by national health policies (macro level).

Service researchers can conduct studies on all three service system levels or focus on only one level. However, it is important to remember that every human is embedded in the social forces of these three system levels. For example, if researchers focus only on the micro level of reality they should still bear in mind that face-to-face interactions are not only influenced by micro-level forces but are also embedded in corporate and categorical units of the meso level, which are influenced by meso level forces. Further, the units at the meso level are influenced by the five macro level forces that generate social institutions at the macro level.

Service system deficiencies that affect the BoP occur at the macro level of ecosystems and society, the meso level of organizations and community, and the micro system level of the individual. Overcoming poverty is hampered by a lack of supportive societal and organizational infrastructures. The people in the BoP are resourceful in many ways, but new service system perspectives and new service systems are needed to help the poor unleash their value co-creation potential. The next section explains three research approaches that can help achieve that goal.

Research approaches for understanding and reducing poverty

To expand beyond the significant streams of BoP research, we offer three service research approaches that are well suited to complex service system problems like the BoP. Transformative service research, service design research, and community action research were chosen based on our own expertise. There are numerous other service approaches that are relevant to the BoP problem that are not articulated here because of the space limitations of this short article. For example, service ecosystems in the BoP (Ben Letaifa and Reynoso, 2015) and service co-creation in low-income markets via socially inclusive service innovation (Reynoso *et al.*, 2015) are useful approaches to combine existing BoP research with service research priorities.

We start with the newest approach of Transformative Service Research, which provides a perspective for studying the relationship between service systems and well-being. Second, we examine service design research because redesigning services or designing new services can change each of the three system levels. Finally, we spotlight Community Action Research, given the great need to embrace methods that facilitate collaboration between service researchers and BoP citizens and because of our belief that our service research community must move beyond studying poverty to taking specific actions against poverty.

Transformative Service Research

Transformative Service Research (TSR) has been defined as service research that seeks to improve well-being by uplifting individuals, collectives and ecosystems (Anderson, 2010; Anderson *et al.*, 2013). TSR draws from service-focused well-being research and emanates from numerous disciplines and sub-disciplines including transformative consumer research (Mick, 2006) and social marketing that focuses on creating well-being oriented behavioral change (Andreasen, 2002). The fundamental assumption of TSR is that humanity is surrounded by and embedded in service systems that have great impact on how people live their lives. Thus, services have considerable influence on people's well-being. Underpinning TSR is the belief that service systems should be held accountable for this impact. In the case of poverty, issues abound such as access to services, marginalization during service experiences, lack of service literacy, and discrimination embedded in service designs. Services can improve well-being, but they may also worsen it. Service consumers are often vulnerable because of the disproportionate information and control possessed by service providers. This imbalance is exacerbated in impoverished communities where choices, resources and capacities are limited. TSR seeks to shine a light on these service problems. Research on medication adherence by Spanjol *et al.* (2015) provides an illuminating example of such research in their study of those in poverty who must cope with extended and complex health care service experiences well beyond the immediate exchange with service providers. More importantly, opportunities and resources in impoverished communities are often unrecognized. Research by Blocker and Fajardo (2015), for example, illustrates how faith services developed out of a homeless community's strengths and impacted not only the well-being of this homeless community but also the larger city community and their perceptions of poverty and homelessness. TSR not only seeks to understand the problems but also strives to identify community strengths in order to develop service strategies, innovations and designs that build better futures.

Service design research

Service design research can significantly improve well-being in the BoP because it focuses on devising courses of action for changing existing situations into preferred futures (Simon, 1996). Service design can therefore help the service research community go beyond studying the BoP to devising new services that overcome its system deficiencies and improve the lives of the underserved population. An excellent example of an innovative service for the BoP is the mobile banking service M-Pesa. This service has taken advantage of the widespread usage of mobile phones in Kenya to enable millions of customers to have a bank account, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them (Mbogo, 2010). Service design can make important contributions through two research directions: service design for social innovation and designing service platforms for service ecosystems in the BoP.

Service design has recently significantly expanded to become a human-centered, creative, iterative approach to the creation of new services (Blomkvist *et al.*, 2010). Service design generates and brings service ideas to life by understanding customer experiences, envisioning new service offerings and prototyping them (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). Service design approaches can seek to improve societal well-being in what is called design for social innovation. Social innovation involves “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations” (Murray *et al.*, 2010, p. 3). Design for social innovation creates innovations that improve life in society and introduce more sustainable solutions and business models (Cipolla and Moura, 2011). One example is the DESIS (for Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) Network (<http://www.desis-network.org>), which has applied its design for social innovation approach to BoP contexts.

Service design research has evolved from focusing on the customer experience at the micro level of the service encounter to a multilevel view that also encompasses organizational service systems and value constellation levels (Patrício *et al.*, 2011). Following this multilevel approach, the starting point is understanding the overall activity the customer is trying to perform and then designing the service by taking into consideration the constellation of service offerings and resources that the customer may integrate to perform that activity and co-create value. Only after taking this broad view does the design drill down to the organizational service system and to specific service encounter levels. Starting with a broad systems perspective is important to go beyond incrementally improving existing services for customers to exploring possible value constellation solutions for customers that do not yet exist. This approach can help design innovative services for the BoP, since some of the traditional services and structures may not exist but other services and resources may be available in the customer value constellation. The M-Pesa example shows that, by understanding the potential of the resources available to low income Kenyans through mobile phones, Safaricom was able to build a large and profitable business, while improving the lives of millions of people (Mbogo, 2010).

To tackle BoP problems and improve well-being at the societal level, higher macro level issues need to be addressed by taking into account the overall ecosystem with different actors, interactions and institutions. A service ecosystem approach (Vargo and Akaka, 2012) can enable better understanding of the many BoP problems, and can support designing service platforms that have a structural impact on improving well-being. A service ecosystem perspective fosters social embeddedness, with the involvement of local communities, actors, and users, to enhance

the service co-creation process adapted to the local context (Ben Letaifa and Reynoso, 2015). For example, designing new service platforms to support the emergence of small businesses at the BoP can foster a structural transformation of the BoP ecosystem towards a better future.

Service design for the BoP can have a strong impact, not only in service research, but also in improving well-being at the societal level. By adopting a social innovation approach and addressing the BoP problems from an ecosystem perspective, service design can make key contributions towards a better future for the BoP by moving from understanding the problems to designing actionable solutions.

Community Action Research

The requirements for Community Action Research (CAR) go beyond traditional research in two critical aspects (Ozanne and Anderson, 2010). This makes CAR especially appropriate to address wicked service problems at the micro, meso and macro levels and to develop theory related to the poor living in neglected and impoverished communities. First, consistent with the underpinnings of TSR, CAR is premised on advancing the well-being of a community. This goal focuses on action that improves the well-being of the community through resultant services and service design. Second, the community has a voice and hand in developing the well-being goals, conducting the research and taking the resultant actions. This collaborative approach is built on respect for people who are often viewed as less capable than “experts” in research, health, education, economics, etc. Through this collaborative approach, CAR acknowledges the incredible creativity and community expertise of people living in subsistence communities. Traditional well-being research focuses on the community weaknesses, disparities, low literacies and noncompliances. In CAR, community strengths, assets and capabilities are emphasized and celebrated. This boosts the likelihood that the results from CAR will increase empowerment and co-creation engagement within marginalized communities. Further, service designs and community actions that are compatible with the goals, socio-cultural context, values and strengths of the community are much more likely to be effective. CAR illustrates this strength-based priority when research (presented in Anderson *et al.*, 2015) focusing on diabetes led to a diabetes camp for adolescents supported by the local tribe and based upon many traditional healthy foods, stories, and values.

Call to action: service research engages with the Base of the Pyramid

Developing and conducting service research that seeks to transform conditions at the base of the pyramid is overdue. We believe the service research community is ready for a call to action based on four pillars: the development of knowledge exchange activities for sharing ideas, experiences and practices among researchers and practitioners from developed and developing countries; the design of joint research projects; the enhancement of established service theories and empirical generalizations; and the global promotion and diffusion of these research results.

First, implementing knowledge exchange initiatives supports including different cultural backgrounds, redefining service research priorities, and providing fresh perspectives on service research phenomena. These initiatives could include exchange/visiting programs for researchers coming from emerging countries; organizing existing conferences in emerging country locations

including special tracks and sessions at service research conferences; inviting colleagues from emerging countries to be part of conference committees; providing scholarships for attendees from emerging countries (faculty and PhD students); teaching PhD service research seminars on relevant topics to the BoP in traditional doctoral consortia; and supporting students' participation from emerging countries. One example of such initiatives is the International Research Symposium on Service Management (IRSSM) established by Jay Kandampully, which nurtures the next generation of researchers and teachers in emerging economies: <http://www.seri-initiative.org/irssm.html>.

Second, joint research projects are needed that integrate mainstream service theory and existing research to investigate and transform service innovation, service systems and value co-creation at the base of the pyramid. This can result in inviting colleagues from emerging countries to participate in global research project initiatives, locating service research activities in emerging countries and partnering with them, providing financial support for service research projects at the lower-end of the economy, and supporting specific initiatives such as the *BoP Service Research Network* recently launched by Javier Reynoso at Monterrey Institute of Technology. Such joint research projects should also be interdisciplinary teams of people with complementary skills who learn from each other and help each other succeed as a team.

Third, a main purpose of this call to action is to encourage revisiting established service theories and empirical generalizations. Adopting a new, socially inclusive lens for doing service research overcomes the limitations of data gathered only in medium and high-income segments of society. Service theories and empirical generalizations that apply to serving all of humanity, not just the affluent, will be truly robust scientific work.

Finally, we suggest promoting and diffusing these research results around the world by promoting and facilitating publication of articles on serving the needs of the impoverished (whether inspired by BoP, TSR or some other source); editing special issues in service journals and other relevant publications; seeking contributions from colleagues in emerging countries when working on new journal articles; writing new books or editing new editions; and including such service research in service textbooks. While publishing this research is important, disseminating the results and taking action based on this research is more important because it can have a transformative impact on the lives at the BoP.

Creating a movement for and with impoverished people

Join our team! The service problems of the impoverished people on our planet are urgent. Help us change the future for billions of impoverished people! Change is always a difficult process for our species. Our service research community is capable of accelerating the pace of change by teaming together to develop both improved service systems and new service systems for impoverished people. Together we can help build a better future for the world!

From a systems perspective, we can make a difference at the micro level (helping individuals escape poverty) and meso level (helping communities and organizations reduce poverty) of reality. At the micro and meso level, such changes could include encouraging business and society to denounce the morality of any service system that undermines and neglects the needs of

the impoverished majority of our species. Such changes would hopefully help lead to changes at the macro level (e.g., national and international policies, laws, etc.). Further, we could lobby for changes at the macro level (asking our elected representatives to speak out for reducing poverty and even propose legislation that could reduce poverty by nurturing human potential).

Since poverty is a problem in every country and every community, we should seek experimental opportunities to help the poorest people in our local communities improve their lives. However, the larger goal is forming a movement to co-create service for and with the poorest people at the base of the pyramid. For this, we should draw inspiration from Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), which seeks to serve all of humanity:

“MSF was created on the belief that all people have the right to medical care regardless of gender, race, religion, creed or political affiliation, and that the needs of these people outweigh respect for national boundaries.”
www.doctorswithoutborders.org.

Ask yourself, “How can our service research community help reduce the poverty problems that afflict billions of people?” When you finish reading this essay, take the simple step of joining the BoP Service Research Network - <http://tinyurl.com/BoPServiceResearchNetwork>. The second step we ask you to take is to encourage members of your social networks to join, too. This might include anyone interested in aspects of the BoP, such as other scholars in service, international development, political science, economics, and international studies. For the third and most important step as members of our new movement, we ask you all to be creative, collaborative, caring and unrelenting in developing actionable research with and for the BoP that makes a difference in their lives.

Our new movement should adopt a pro bono logic in planning future service research projects. If researchers pursued just 10% of their many research projects on behalf of the poor, we would quickly broaden the relevance of our service research to all of our species, not just the affluent. Further, seeking research funding for large scale BoP projects instigated by the members of our movement would be one of the next steps in moving forward.

Conclusion

Our service research community has a long history of generosity towards one another that has helped us grow and prosper as a field. The prehistory of our species shows that we are hardwired for such egalitarian generosity. Now we need to extend that generosity of spirit to those less fortunate by developing research projects that help impoverished people escape the poor service systems that undermines their futures and the futures of their children. Flawed service systems prevent our species from living in more just and equitable social, political, and economic systems. With better service design and social innovation, poverty can be significantly reduced.

Where should we start on such a large initiative? To gain experience and confidence, we can start with BoP projects within our local communities and our own countries. We can scale up our BoP efforts by collaborating with our service research community within borders and across borders. More importantly, we can collaborate with the poor to find the best tools that help them reduce

their own poverty. We can find inspiration and purpose in helping the poor improve their lives. Will you join us in our quest to ensure that the billions of impoverished people on our planet are better served?

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