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Hearing Voices? User Involvement and Public Service Cultures

Richard Simmons, Johnston Birchall (University of Stirling)
Alan Prout (University of Warwick)

Abstract

Modern public services demand greater awareness of who they are trying to serve. Managing relationships in the service of the public therefore requires the ability to ‘tune in’ to who public service users are, and what they are trying to say. This article examines the nature of the relationships between service users and providers through various mechanisms of voice. It suggests that if the user voice is to be recognised and acknowledged, a range of channels should be provided that cater for the values, norms and attitudes of a differentiated user constituency. Beyond this, however, it suggests that the simple provision of a range of channels is insufficient. Resistance to hearing the user voice through one or other of these channels can result in counterproductive ‘culture clashes’ and/or withdrawal. The article argues that this should be avoided through a combination of appropriate institutional design and the commitment of institutional effort to ensure that service cultures fit better with users’ expectations.

Introduction

The involvement of citizens as users and consumers of public services is an important arena for engagement in the public sphere¹. The recent Power Inquiry² suggests an increasing sense of disconnection and disengagement in this public domain, reflecting such underlying factors as (i) the failure of politics and the political system to accept the new realities of ‘post-industrialisation’ and (ii) the replacement of ‘principle and ideas’ with ‘managerialism and public relations’. The realm of public services provides one area where many people still perceive themselves as possessing a legitimate voice³. Yet similar factors can also have an effect here in alienating service users - potentially leading them to disengage. Hence, where users express dissatisfaction, often it is over not only the nature of the services they are receiving but also their lack of control over them⁴. Some argue that this sense of a lack of control is exacerbated by factors associated with recent public sector reform:

- 1 The simultaneous decentralisation of service delivery to a plurality of service providers (adding to the complexity of the service environment) and centralisation of policy making (taking key decision-making mechanisms further away from individuals and communities)
- 2 The effects of ‘new public management’ (NPM) reforms in the public sector that place an increasing emphasis on such notions as managerial autonomy, agency performance, and a customer orientation (as opposed to ‘old’ public administration that emphasised standardisation, political co-ordination and professional control)

For some, the “bottom-up” perspective implied by customer-orientated systems of public administration appears highly democratic and participatory. Its customers do have a potential impact on the amount, type and quality of service they are to receive⁵. Yet others argue that

even if service arrangements related to NPM may increase consumers' choice and efficiency, they may also limit the scope of democracy, or the sphere in which the citizen is able to act politically⁶. Notions of control therefore remain controversial⁷.

These matters provide a backdrop to our study of the different channels by which service users communicate their views about public services. They underline the importance of how users see themselves when they use public services, and how they relate with both the services they use and with the people and organisations that provide them. It has been argued that processes of involvement and representation ('voice') are particularly important here if consumer interests are to be adequately taken into account. Yet there are several different, sometimes competing ways for consumers' views to be represented, and their interaction is not well understood.

We set about investigating these issues in a research study funded by the ESRC and AHRC as part of their 'Cultures of Consumption' research programme. We interviewed a large number of service users and providers in depth about their views and experiences, and followed this up with a survey of 543 service users in three services: day care, housing and leisure services⁸. One important factor is the nature of the context in which users seek to express their views. The ways in which users express their voice in different contexts therefore provides a major focus for this article.

Understanding Cultural Diversity in Public Service Contexts

We argue that different assumptions and expectations underlie the use of different channels for the expression of user voice. Using insights from grid-group cultural theory, we provide a framework for understanding different types of relationships between public service users and providers. Grid-group cultural theory has been developed as a tool for understanding cultural diversity⁹. It works by plotting two dimensions against each other to create a four-fold field space (see Figure 1). 'Grid' refers to the extent to which cultural environments are structured by rules and ascribed behaviour. 'Group' refers to the extent to which individuals are members of groups with well-defined boundaries.

	Low Group	High Group
High Grid	'Fatalism': 'uncertainty/apathy'	'Hierarchy': 'bureaucracy'
Low Grid	'Individualism': 'market-based'	'Egalitarianism': 'mutuality'

Figure 1: The Grid-Group Matrix

The four positions in the grid-group framework represent different ideal-types, or 'cultural biases'. *Hierarchy* sums up a traditional, hierarchical relationship in which service users are dependent on experts to define their needs, and administrators to make sure the service is delivered according to strict rules of eligibility. The service is overseen and regulated by local or central government politicians, through which individuals can seek redress. The expression of voice through any other channel would be regarded as undue influence, since the aim is to meet professionally-assessed needs through rule-bound allocation procedures that treat everyone the same. *Individualism* is represented by market-based relationships, in which service users are constructed as rational, utility-maximising individuals, negotiating the role of consumer in the ways that best support their private needs and wants. The provider role is to match supply to this demand, and to respond directly to feedback from individuals. *Egalitarianism* is represented by 'mutualistic' forms of relationship, whereby users relate to the service through a sense of membership/ownership that confers rights (but also

responsibilities) to express their views through collective processes. The final position is *fatalism*. Fatalists see social relations as imposed by external structures, and the pressures on them to conform with any social group are weak. They consider the expression of voice as pointless – ‘its never going to change anything,’ they reason, ‘so why bother?’. However, fatalism can have important effects on user-provider relationships within the service system. As one eminent professor has observed, a fatalist approach to public management will arise in conditions where co-operation is rejected, distrust widespread, and apathy reigns – ‘a state of affairs which will be far from unfamiliar to many readers’¹⁰.

Grid-group theory is a useful means of framing the public service context¹¹. The theory’s ‘requisite variety’ condition means that we would expect elements of all four cultural biases to be present within the service system at any time (however attenuated any of them might be). Recognising the simultaneous presence of all four biases has advantages. As the authors of the theory put it, ‘regimes that exclude a cultural bias lose the wisdom attached to that bias’¹². If user voice is seen as a ‘transfer of wisdom’, then each of the different strategies for its expression (with their accompanying assumptions and expectations) must be seen as important.

Managing Relationships with the Public: The Expression of Voice

Most users and providers agree that voice is important. It provides a way of tapping into a range of valuable inputs for public services: knowledges, ideas and individual/collective sentiment. Users are generally able to choose how they express their views about public services from a range of options, which reflect different categories within the grid-group framework:

- 1 Hierarchical oversight mechanisms (e.g. elected representatives, senior officials, ombudsmen) (*hierarchy*)
- 2 Individualised mechanisms direct to service providers (e.g. suggestion schemes, complaints procedures, personal communications) (*individualism*)
- 3 Group-based mechanisms (e.g. user groups, consultative committees, user forums) (*egalitarianism*)

We generally found awareness of the different available mechanisms to be high amongst service users, although some are clearly better informed than others. Users are also quite discerning about what strategy is appropriate in what circumstances.

I always try to pitch my enquiry or suggestion at the appropriate level. So I took it that the ‘Ideas and Implementation Group’, by the very name of the group, was the group that I should be targeting to achieve the desired effect....If I went even higher up and went to my member of Parliament, I’ve no doubt that they would try and help me but then you have to address the enquiry at the appropriate level.

(*Day Centre User, M, 50s*)

This ‘logic of appropriateness’ may be the result of institutionalisation, i.e. people internalising the way they have been told to behave in a certain context. However, it was clear that none of the service organisations we looked at had devoted a great deal of institutional effort to such matters. Reform processes have also often left public service institutions in flux, and users reliant on previously-learned ‘habits of the heart’¹³. User ‘choice about voice’ is therefore just as often linked to a more personal set of dispositions. In this way, service users often tend to be ‘biased’ towards one form of ‘voice’ rather than another. Hence, users are

frustrated if opportunities to express their views through their preferred channel are not perceived to be viable.

‘What I object to is that only the people who attend on a Tuesday are the people who are really consulted about how the centre runs. I spoke to the chair of the group about it and basically the manager is inflexible, he’s not prepared to meet on any other day. And as someone who only comes on a Monday and a Wednesday, I think I am being disenfranchised. Of course, I am a bit more articulate than some of the clients that come to the centre, and I’m able to put pen to paper. But that’s not good enough, it’s just not good enough’.

(Day Centre User, M, 50s)

Overall, we found that users want ‘choice about voice’¹⁴: they strongly support having a full range of voice mechanisms, even if they currently have little intention of using them (see Figure 2).

	Housing			Leisure			Day Care		
	Ind*	Grp	Hier	Ind*	Grp	Hier	Ind*	Grp	Hier
Have ever used	56.9	6.4	23.9	23.3	3.5	2.1	36.2	19.8	11.2
Would consider using	82.2	50.5	70.4	79.5	46.1	37.4	72.3	55.9	35.8
Support having	93.6	85.4	86.1	83.1	72.4	89.3	91.1	78.4	79.2

*NB: * These figures do not include expressing views to frontline staff, which would raise them still further*

Figure 2: Support for different voice mechanisms

Yet the perceived viability of opportunities for voice (or lack of it) goes beyond the simple provision of a full range of channels. It relates to the prospects of users’ views being recognised and accepted. Hence, users also need to feel that public service organisations are receptive to their views. Our study therefore examined the role of structural and cultural factors in the service environment.

The Role of Context: Facilitation or Constraint?

Ideas of facilitation and constraint help show why the simple provision of a full range of channels is insufficient for perceptions of viability. Hence, we found that even where public service organisations have ostensibly elaborate involvement processes, users often report them to remain remarkably impervious to the input from these processes. Users’ ability to express their views therefore appears to be mediated by the receptiveness of the context in which they are expressing them.

I would write to the council - to the Leisure and something services. And they would send me a letter back. And it would always say that I was the only one who had complained, or, you know, that that was just a one off thing.....It was always a very patronising answer back... I felt they were covering up whenever I wrote to them. I didn't feel that they were saying 'Oh, we are really sorry about this Mrs. [X]. We will try and see if we can sort it out', or... you know? Or some discussion with me, so I felt it was a bit patronising and it was a bit of a cover up – ‘we must keep these people safe’. I felt they were on the side of the Leisure Centre, and that they just wanted it quiet - you know – ‘just keep quiet and it will be all be alright’.

(Leisure Services User, F, 60s)

There have been occasions when they've been putting on a show, but the thing is you can tell. They're backing away from you all the time. They're not going to stand there and tell you what's going on... I'll wait for the day when all my problems are over. But now I'm just waiting for the day when I next sit and put pen to paper again, go over the same old ground, the same old requests and the same old non-acknowledgement.

That must make you feel a little bit....

Despondent to say the least.

(Tenant, M, 50s)

Were you disappointed with the response that you received?

Yes. Although it was polite and prompt, I thought if they had said 'we are looking into it again', then I would have been disarmed, you know, I would have to shut up. It was the fact that they didn't even say they were going to consider it. So I thought this was authoritarian - rigidity and all that - and it is not accomplishing anything.

And in terms of come back, what did you feel your options were there?

Nothing, I didn't think I had... there was no other option to me.

There was no point in writing another letter to say, 'Actually I am not quite sure about your answer to this, could you explain that a bit more'. Did you consider that?

No I didn't. Mainly because the tone of the letter was very strong. You know, it didn't leave any doors open.

(Leisure Services User, F, 50s)

Cultural factors help to define the contextual conditions. Cultural values direct people's attention to what is more and less important, while cultural norms define what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The extent to which the values and norms institutionalised in public service contexts overlap with those internalised in service users provides the basis for either 'cultural congruence' or 'culture clashes'. As individuals draw their values and norms from a range of institutions, it cannot be assumed that they will conform to those prevailing in the public service context. Hence, while the service context is clearly important, users' values and attitudes are conditioned rather than determined by it. Users therefore retain a degree of flexibility in how they negotiate their relationships with the service. This can potentially affect:

- the 'reflexive' way in which they 'frame' service issues
- the mechanism chosen to express their voice
- the language/rhetoric produced when they do
- their expectations of subsequent action¹⁵

Our discussions with service users elicited a number of issues concerning service-related values. As well as user involvement, key themes emerged around courtesy and respect; whose knowledge should be considered credible/reliable; notions of fairness/equity in access to and use of services; and power/control in the way services were regulated. These themes were used to produce attitude statements for the survey, so as to establish users' perspectives of the cultural context. Using Likert-type scales, users were asked to respond against two dimensions: first, how the service *actually is*, then, repeating the exact same criteria, how the service *should be*. Their scores against each value were plotted on a concentric graph to enable us to visualise the tension-bound nature of the cultural context (see Figure 3). While these scores can only be used in relative, (not absolute) terms, they provide a useful method of triangulation with our other primary data. Users' responses to the 'is' statements fit well with

our case study evidence. Our day care case provides the most ‘rounded’ levels of support, with a mix of ‘benign hierarchy’ from professional staff, a strong sense of ‘groupness’ amongst centre users (from both group activities and group representation), yet with personalised support from individually-allocated ‘keyworkers’. In our leisure case the provider organisation was alert to the hierarchical requirements of its contractual relationship with the council and was relatively strong in responding to the demands of individuals, but seemed particularly hostile towards any form of ‘collective user’. Meanwhile, in our housing case we were regaled with stories of broken promises, lack of access to senior staff and opaque decision-making. Combined with other indicators of marginalisation amongst residents of the estate, the sense of fatalism was tangible.

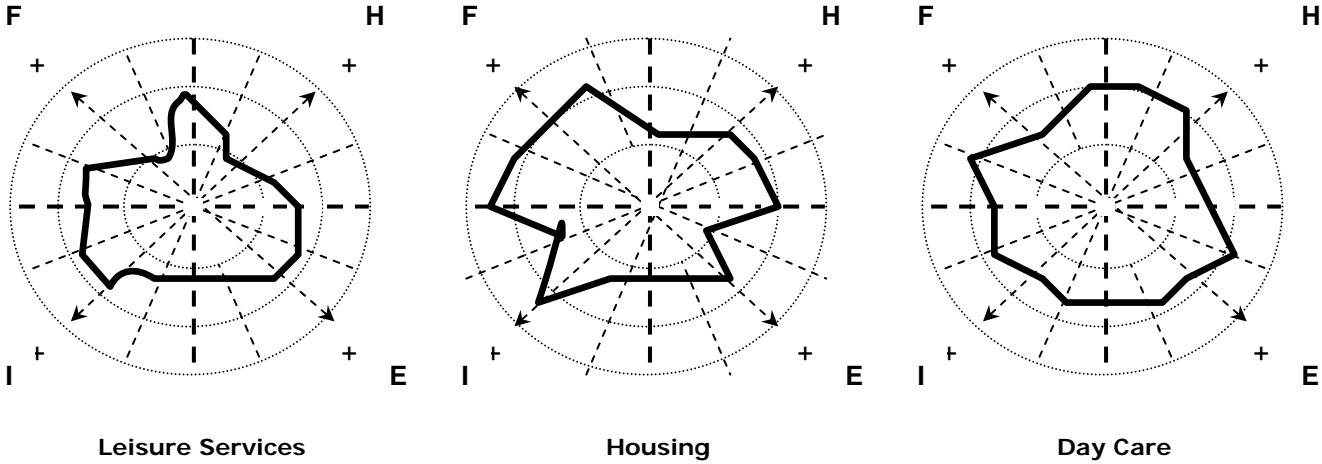


Figure 3: User Perceptions of How the Service ‘Is’

When we looked at the way users felt the service *should be*, we found a good degree of agreement across our three cases (see Figure 4). In general, the differences in users’ perceptions represent a desire for a movement ‘down grid’. Users felt that their relationships with the service should be no more hierarchical, less fatalistic and more individualistic and egalitarian.

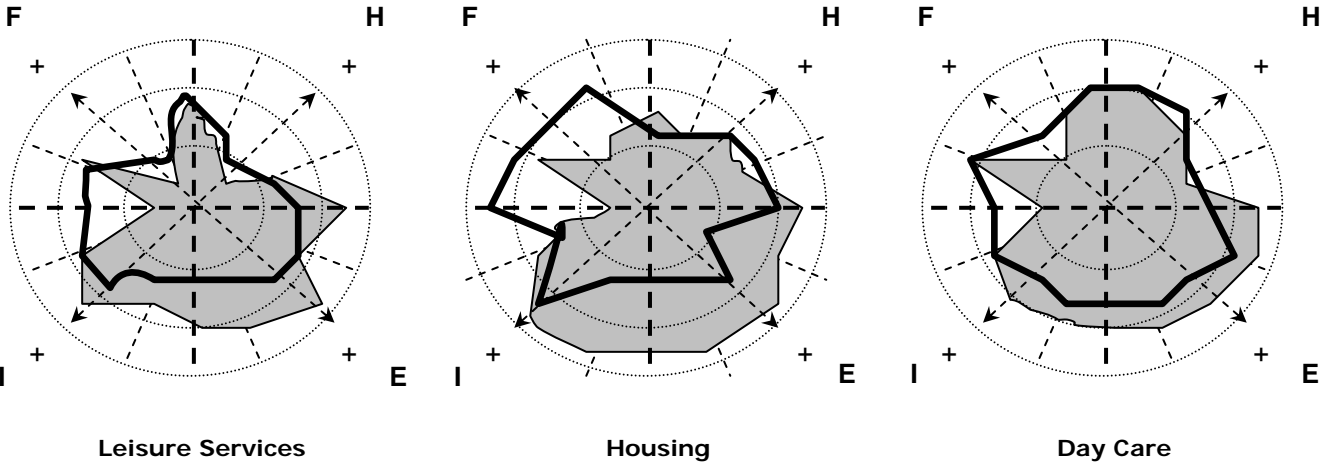


Figure 4: User Perceptions of How the Service ‘Is’ vs. How It ‘Should Be’

These ‘gaps’ in users’ perceptions suggest cultural blindspots, which leave the provider organisation susceptible to ‘culture clashes’ or ‘cultural surprises’¹⁶. Gaps are least evident in our day care case, where the shapes formed by the ‘is’ and the ‘should be’ statements are relatively similar. In our leisure case there appears to be a particular blindspot in relation to egalitarianism. Meanwhile, our housing case has work to do to close the gap on at least three dimensions. Importantly, user assessments of user-provider relationships and service performance are considerably more positive in cases where these ratings are more congruent (see Figure 5).

	Day Care		Leisure		Housing	
	<i>Relationship (%)</i>	<i>Performance (%)</i>	<i>Relationship (%)</i>	<i>Performance (%)</i>	<i>Relationship (%)</i>	<i>Performance (%)</i>
Very good	59.5	63.5	13.0	17.4	8.3	7.3
Quite good	29.7	22.6	47.2	51.1	23.9	14.7
Neither good nor poor	7.2	10.4	34.5	29.0	45.0	47.7
Quite poor	0.9	2.6	4.7	2.2	16.5	22.0
Very poor	2.7	0.9	0.6	0.3	6.4	8.3

Figure 5: User Evaluations of User-Provider Relationships and Overall Service Performance

Factors relating to the culture of public service organisations are important for the ‘possibility spaces’ or ‘opportunity structures’ they are felt to either open up or close off. Our survey asked users whether they felt good opportunities were available to express their views. Those who said ‘no’ were significantly more likely to see their relationship with the service as fatalistic than those who said ‘yes’ (see Figure 6).

Q: <i>Are there are good opportunities available to express your views about the service?</i>	Day Care		Leisure		Housing	
	<i>Fatalism Ave. Score</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Fatalism Ave. Score</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Fatalism Ave. Score</i>	<i>N</i>
Yes	3.01	82	3.33	69	2.76	35
No	2.55	21	3.11	115	2.29	48
Don’t know	2.82	7	3.25	129	2.38	26

NB. Lower scores represent a stronger sense of fatalism

Figure 6: User Evaluations of Opportunities to Express Views vs. Fatalism

Fatalism, characterised by a perceived lack of agency, futility and isolation, can lead service users to ‘withdraw’. Withdrawal occurs where users remain within the service system and still feel they have something to say, but feel ‘blocked’ from saying it. In sociological terms, people who withdraw become ‘holdouts’ (alienated from the service system) or ‘escapees’ (people who currently find exit from the system unfeasible, but who would take the first feasible opportunity to leave)¹⁷. This lowering of commitment and concomitant withdrawal of trust and support can have serious implications for policymaking and service delivery. First, there are implications for day-to-day system control, whereby it is harder to gain service users’ consent. Second, it may result in ‘leakage’ from the service system in one of two ways:

- ‘reluctant exit’ (whereby users cross a tolerance threshold, leading to the abandonment

of public sector for private sector services)

- ‘exit without alternatives’ (whereby people prefer ‘no service’ to a ‘poor service’).

In general, we found that service users do tend to trust providers to take the lead in running public services. However, this trust is limited and conditional, not absolute. Users often feel a need to keep their eye on the ball, and to make sure that important matters do not go unchallenged. This has implications for the nature of ‘stewardship’ in public services¹⁸. It reflects a desire for both ‘leadership’ and ‘listening’.

Conclusions

A lack of connection with service users’ hopes, fears, dilemmas, and so on can serve to create perceptions of a lack of institutional responsiveness. Elsewhere we consider the role of institutional design in addressing these issues¹⁹. We argue that organisations need to think harder about their flexibility and responsiveness to user voice. Yet, as we have pointed out, many public service organisations still appear to remain remarkably impervious to user input. There is considerable scope for confusion when the language users are speaking seems to differ from that of the providers. For some, the solution to such ‘culture clashes’ must be found at the level of institutional design by making agreements between the parties involved about rules and roles, which must subsequently be applied in practice²⁰.

Here, however, the relative power of service providers in establishing such ‘rules and roles’ comes to the fore. For example, some commentators highlight the power of public officials to constitute the public in particular ways that tend to privilege notions of a general public interest and that marginalize the voices of ‘counter-publics’ in the process²¹. This brings into focus the emerging ‘competition’ between different actors to represent the interests of the consumer²². Legitimacy in ‘speaking for’ public service users is a key factor. While traditionally the hierarchical ‘politics-administration nexus’ would have been considered the legitimate conduit for service users, this legitimacy has been challenged both by market-based reforms and ‘consumerism’ on the one hand, and the rise of more egalitarian, identity-based representation on the other. These factors have created a more highly differentiated service user constituency, holding various normative values, commitments and expectations. In such conditions, the representation of consumer interests has arguably become increasingly problematic. If we are to better understand the dynamics of how these issues are addressed in today’s public services, we need to understand not only the choices service users make about how they express their voice, but also what happens when they do.

Reform has undoubtedly had an impact on public service cultures, and there is a danger in the movement towards a customer orientation we pointed to in our introduction of replacing one standardised approach with another - such changes suit some service users better than others. Understanding this needs a more flexible and responsive approach and, crucially, one that is closer to the ‘differentiated consumer’. Indeed, if public service leaders wish to retain users’ support, they can little afford to allow themselves to become disconnected. This means not only considering how to ensure the institutional design is conducive to the expression of user voice, but that institutional effort is invested in ensuring that the message gets through. A full range of channels for users to express their views needs to be kept open, but reception of user voice through these channels also needs to be clear. This means service providers should ensure that they ‘tune in’ to the correct frequency to be able to listen. Resistance to hearing the user voice through one mechanism or another should be controlled if negative culture clashes are to be avoided. This includes the rise of fatalism and withdrawal. As one prominent cultural theorist observes, each of the four cultures has its contribution to make - three of

them are fragile, but the culture of fatalism is resilient and takes over when one of the other cultural viewpoints is repressed²³. The causes and consequences of fatalism and withdrawal therefore need to be considered and addressed. Our argument is that this requires a combination of (i) appropriate institutional design and (ii) the investment of institutional effort to ensure a more balanced and culturally congruent approach.

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