

SDG commentary: services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living for all humans

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this commentary is to present a critically constructive examination of the contribution of service research to the development of services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living for all humans.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw upon critical thinking and critical social theory to problematise the neoliberal agenda (e.g. marketisation and privatisation) that shapes the service ecosystems within which the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and service research relating to SDG11 – sustainable cities and communities – and SDG16 – peace, justice and strong institutions – are often based. The authors critically review extant literature aimed at these goals and present constructive pathways for transformative social change to foster fair and sustainable living for all.

Findings – The authors find that the United Nations institutions, the SDGs and the service ecosystems that shape the research and practice addressing SDG11 and SDG16 are often grounded in neoliberal capitalist ideology that may inhibit transformative change. While service research has made some relevant and important contributions to support the development of services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living, there is a need to consider alternative assumptions upon which service research and service design can be based to fully realise such transformative goals.

Originality/value – This commentary encourages service research scholars to engage with critically constructive perspectives that harness critique for transformative change.

Keywords United Nations sustainable development goals, Critical theory, Neoliberalism, Political economy, Ecosystem, Sustainability, Peace, Justice

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The orientation of our commentary is on services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living for all humans. This theme is an integration of SDG11 – sustainable cities and communities – and SDG16 – peace, justice and strong institutions. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) agreed on 17 sustainability development goals (SDGs) with great hopes of guiding public policies and governing sustainable development worldwide. Recent evidence aggregating over 3,000 scientific studies on the SDGs suggests that these goals have had some *discursive* impact and influenced actors' communication but limited transformative political impact in terms of legislative changes or resource allocation (Biermann *et al.*, 2022). The UN's own SDGs report noted that “cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave danger, along with humanity's very own survival” (United Nations, 2022). Critics have expressed

concern about the SDGs' close alignment with neoliberal capitalism, which focuses on marketisation, commodification, deregulation, privatisation, growth, austerity and removal of the welfare state as the solution, rather than acknowledging it as the cause of intergenerational inequity, global poverty and the rupture in ecological sustainability (Adelman, 2017; Hinkle, 2017; Horton, 2014). As such, the neoliberal agenda poses a fundamental risk to a commitment to fair and sustainable living for all humans.

In recent decades, transformative service research has emerged as a strong theme (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2013) and a priority area within the field of service research (Field *et al.*, 2021; Ostrom *et al.*, 2010, 2015). Many of the aspirations of this transformative agenda align strongly with the goals set out in the UN's SDGs. Given the emerging critique of the SDGs, our commentary adopts a constructive critical perspective to help inform transformative outcomes, as espoused by Tadjewski *et al.* (2014). To achieve this, we draw upon critical thinking and critical social theory to inform our problematisation (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) of the neoliberal assumptions upon which the SDGs and the service

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ecosystems, research and practice in this area are often based. Critical thinking involves actively, skilfully, carefully and meaningfully conceptualising, synthesising, analysing, applying or evaluating information to inform our thinking, beliefs, judgements and actions (Glaser, 1941; Alston, 2001). Engaging in critical thinking is important for service research as it provides clarity, accuracy, consistency, relevance, sound reason, good evidence, inclusivity and fairness in human decision-making (Alston, 2001). Thus, as service research aims to work towards upholding services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living for all humans, critical thinking can aid in analysing progress within this research field and thoughtfully propelling its transformative agenda.

To do so, we draw from critical social theories that challenge oppressive economic, social and political structures that cause harm. Aligned with Horkheimer (1972 [1992, p. 246]), we see potential in critical theory as a “liberating [...] influence” that can help “to create a world which satisfies the needs” of people, planet, flora and fauna. The benefit of a critical yet constructive perspective for service research is transformative, as it can help challenge biases, assumptions and existing power structures; stimulate reflexivity, inclusivity and polyvocality; foster empowerment; and promote social justice and social good (Bohman, 2021). Furthermore, acknowledging the neoliberal political economy as a macro-level factor shaping service problems and outcomes aligns with a service ecosystem approach (Field *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, from a systems thinking perspective, neoliberalism represents underlying structures and mental models that shape the service ecosystem (see Jackson, 2019). Without questioning the taken for granted structures, approaches to service design informed by service research risk simply reproducing the status quo and failing to realise their transformative aims (Vink and Koskela-Huotari, 2022).

Turning to real-world examples, critical social work scholarship has helped inform the successful delivery of services that support fair and sustainable living for all humans, such as the Family Aid Centre in Israel, in which client respect; cultural, ethnic, gender and class awareness; non-hierarchical relations between clients and service workers; and democratic, critically conscious and reflexive organisational culture are key elements (Strier and Binyamin, 2014). Another example is the REAL MEN programme which adopted an intersectional perspective and supported young, low-income African American and Latino men returning from prison to avoid substance misuse, sexually transmitted diseases and rearrest (Freudenberg *et al.*, 2010). The programme encouraged participants to critically reflect on how race and gendered conceptions of risk, masculinity and power affected their well-being and consider alternative paths to manhood and ethnic pride that led to positive outcomes (Freudenberg *et al.*, 2010). These hopeful examples demonstrate the ways that critical theory not only offers a lens for interrogating the status quo but is constructive as it aids intervention to tackle deep structural issues and opens up alternative approaches to service design and delivery based on an alternative set of assumptions aligned with transformative aims (Tadajewski *et al.*, 2014).

The remainder of our article is structured as follows. We begin with an overview of SDG11 and SDG16 and their alignment with ServCollab research themes. We then interrogate the economic and socio-political context, and the

role of neoliberal influences, in relation to the UN and the SDGs. We consider if, how and why service research and practice have served to help or hinder efforts to support sustainable cities and communities (SDG11) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16). We unpack notable exemplars in both domains that illustrate some key achievements, issues and challenges, as well as unearth underlying assumptions in the ways that service scholarship typically works towards transformation. We then introduce a critically constructive research agenda to stimulate debate, facilitate productive critique and harness this for transformative outcomes.

Sustainable development goal overview and ServCollab's research themes

As illustrated in Figure 1, services from institutions that provide fair and sustainable living make up one element of the seven service research themes identified by ServCollab. Our specific focus here combines SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. That said, the UN acknowledges that action in one area across any of the 17 SDGs will often affect outcomes in another area.

About SDG11

The official mission of SDG11 is to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (United Nations, 2015a). The importance of making cities more sustainable is reinforced by the fact that 3.9 billion people, or approximately half of the world's population, currently live in cities. This is projected to increase to over 5 billion people by 2030 (Alvarez-Risco *et al.*, 2020). While occupying just 3% of the Earth's land, cities account for 60%–80% of total energy consumption and 75% of carbon emissions globally (Musango *et al.*, 2020). SDG11 is operationalised through 10 targets (7 outcome targets and 3 implementation targets) that are to be measured with 15 indicators. The seven outcome targets include safe and affordable housing; affordable and sustainable transport; inclusive and sustainable urbanisation; protecting cultural and natural heritage; reducing adverse impacts from natural disasters; reduction of environmental impacts of cities; and providing safe and inclusive access to public and green spaces. The implementation targets include strong national and regional development planning; implementing policies for inclusion; resource efficiency and disaster risk reduction; and supporting least-developed countries in sustainable and resilient building.

About SDG16

The mission of SDG16 is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015a). The challenge of meeting and upholding SDG16 is considerable given the ongoing global fight against inequality, exclusion, injustice, corruption and impunity (Smith-Simonsen, 2022). Indeed, the political landscape has become even more challenging since the SDGs were introduced in 2015, with war and conflict at their highest levels globally since 1946 (Palik *et al.*, 2022), inequality in

Figure 1 ServCollab's seven service research themes

Source: Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2024)

absolute terms increasing (World Inequality Lab, 2022), persistent discrimination and injustice against people who are Black, Asian, Indigenous and experience disability (Atrey, 2019) and corruption found in every region of the globe (Cockcroft, 2012; Goodman, 2022). SDG16 has ten outcome targets: reduce violence; protect children from abuse, exploitation, trafficking and violence; promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice; combat organised crime and illicit financial and arms flow; reduce corruption and bribery; develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions; ensure responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making; strengthen participation in global governance; provide universal legal identity and ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms. There are also two implementation targets for SG16, consisting of strengthening national institutions to prevent violence and combat crime and terrorism and promoting and enforcing non-discriminatory laws and policies.

Together, these targets make up the ServCollab theme of services from institutions that provide fair and sustainable living. While many of these targets seem widely aspirational, it is important that they are interrogated in relation to the assumptions and politics that they promote so that service researchers can more intentionally and strategically consider if these goals align with and fully support the types of transformative outcomes they are seeking.

Service ecosystem context surrounding the United Nations and the sustainable development goals

Before considering constructive proposals for how service research is addressing SDG11 and SDG16, it is important to understand the economic and socio-political landscape surrounding the UN and the SDGs that shapes these service ecosystems. The stated purposes of the UN are to “maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights” (United Nations, 2015b). In evaluating the success of the UN in achieving these goals, major

advancements in health and longevity, reductions in absolute poverty and numerous successful peacekeeping efforts can be acknowledged (Fomerand, 2009).

However, with a recent status report highlighting many failures to coherently advance the sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2022) – now more than ever critical discourse about the United Nations and the SDGs is emerging. Too often, SDG targets have been missed (Biermann *et al.*, 2022), they prioritise economic growth over sustainable resource use in practice (Eisenmenger *et al.*, 2020), and businesses engage in what is known as SDG-washing by focusing on either environmental or social goals while ignoring the other (Vilchez *et al.*, 2022). The SDGs have been identified as weak on agency, with limited obligations on governments and little to none on businesses or consumers, as well as a lack of attention to oppositional forces (Spangenberg, 2017). Furthermore, criticism has emerged from the Global South that the SDGs are paternalistic, neo-colonialist and fail to address power imbalances to recalibrate the global order away from the dominance of the West (Oloruntoba, 2020). This leads us to question the political economy of neoliberalism, which is often closely associated with UN institutions (Kumi *et al.*, 2014), and the idea of development ever being sustainable (Redclift, 2005).

Neoliberalism first emerged in the 1930s, before taking hold in the late 1970s, and can be understood as the priority of the market, free enterprise and competition. Proponents including Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand argued that the competition of neoliberalism would establish an elite structure of successful individuals who would assume power in society, with these elites replacing the existing representative democracy acting on behalf of the majority. The economic shocks of the 1970s and the entry into political power of President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s saw neoliberal policies take hold and spread rapidly around the globe – bringing marketisation, privatisation, deregulation and individualisation. This was concomitant with a reduction of the state, lower taxation, increasing profits for the rich, erosion of the welfare state, low wages, job precarity and unaffordable housing (Picketty, 2019).

The effect was described by Pierre Bourdieu (1998a, p. 5) to enshrine neoliberalism as “a programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic”. As Zwick (2018, p. 913) articulates, “capitalist violence is intensifying and with it processes of exploitation, class bifurcation, downward mobility and environmental, political and social degradation”. All of which seemingly flies directly in the face of SDGs 11 and 16. Picketty (2019) identifies that this social order is propped up by a cynical tendency for dominant ideology, discourses and rules that bolster inequality and reify neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, researchers have identified how neoliberalisation and privatisation have developed a strong influencing role in the UN system, which does not seem to align with its supposedly universalist and justice orientation (Lee *et al.*, 1997). While the UN has acknowledged the problems caused by “neoliberal” outsourcing of public services to the private sector (United Nations, 2018) – clear action has been lacking. In this way, the neoliberal underpinning of the SDGs and the political landscape within which they are applied influence both how these goals are constructed and their ability to realise truly transformative outcomes (Tadajewski *et al.*, 2014).

Service research, itself, is not immune, playing a role in the neoliberalisation, marketisation and privatisation of public good – often working on the assumption that the private delivery of services is more profitable, efficient, desirable and beneficial (Myers and Wijnholds, 1990; Cervera *et al.*, 2001; Radić, 2021). Critics argue that this has merely served to transfer wealth into private commercial hands and away from the public good (Cordelli, 2022). They also articulate that privatisation in the Global South has reshaped political economies and reformed countries as sites of extraction (Vikas *et al.*, 2015; Varman, 2018). Furthermore, the privatisation of public services relevant to SDG11 and SDG16, including energy, water, transportation, sanitation and elements of the legal and criminal justice system, has often resulted in pressure on wages, decreasing employment numbers, increasing workloads and poorer service quality (Hermann and Flecker, 2012). Globally, we are now witnessing the market failure of formerly public services that have been privatised in areas such as energy, health, transportation and social services (Cohen and Mikaelian, 2022; Cordelli, 2022). Yet, service research literature has been strangely silent, with little debate regarding the future of key service provision and whether these should be public or private. We argue that such a foundational question in relation to service should not simply be outsourced to discussions in public administration but should be, in fact, a core exploration within our inter-disciplinary domain. However, service research has paid little attention to the neoliberal political economy that has arguably contributed to the failure to achieve sustainable cities and communities as well as peace, justice and strong institutions.

Initiatives such as transformative services research have outlined ambitious goals to “integrate consumer and service research that centers on creating uplifting changes and improvements in the well-being of consumer entities: individuals, communities and the ecosystem” (Anderson *et al.*, 2013, p. 1204). Still, in practice, there is a paucity of evidence on the ground that service research is having a revolutionary and transformative impact and limited critical reflection about possible unintended consequences (see Blocker *et al.*, 2022).

There is a need for service research to move beyond outlining appealing values and aspirations towards a critically constructive, reflexive, contextual, diverse and inclusive debate and practice on the ground. Only by understanding the structural foundations that are needed can service research move beyond performative change towards transformative outcomes. It is within this overall context that we now turn to considering the influence of service research as it relates to SDG11 and SDG16.

Service research and SDG11

Within the domain of service research, there is some literature connected with the topics of the outcome targets of SDG11. Related to a focus on safe and affordable housing, a recent study highlights the need for addressing challenges in housing integration and the assistance needed to support refugees in navigating the housing market (Subramanian *et al.*, 2022). In connection with the target aimed at affordable and sustainable transportation in communities, there has, for example, been work done in service research connected with measuring users’ satisfaction of their experience on public transport (Olsson *et al.*, 2012). Regarding reducing adverse impacts from natural disasters, there have been investigations into shopping behaviour in times of a natural disaster (Larson and Shin, 2018), consumption and stockpiling behaviours during crises (Hall *et al.*, 2021) and digital support for the crisis preparedness of service employees (Leo, Laud and Chou, 2023). Scholars have also outlined a framework for equilibrating resources and challenges for well-being across levels of the service ecosystem, including pre-, during and post-incidents (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020).

There has been further research done on reducing the environmental impact of cities, such as through working with manufacturing companies to shift towards a more service-intensive way of doing business (van der Zwan and Bhamra, 2003). It has been highlighted as a priority within service research to explore ways of designing and delivering services that reduce the negative impact of services on the environment (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015). In response, recent research focusing on food waste, a significant environmental problem in many cities, built a conceptual understanding of sustainability as “the dynamic ability of a focal system. . . to sustain the system(s) that contains it (Koskela-Huotari *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Aligning with the orientation of this commentary, this research directly calls out how a profit maximisation mindset connected with the neoliberal capitalistic ideology strongly permeates the running of organisations and inhibits service system sustainability. Such work demonstrates how service scholars can engage with critical thinking and theory as part of their research.

While there are some exceptions, much of the service research literature connected with the themes of sustainable communities and cities tends to reproduce neoliberal assumptions of privatisation and commodification. For example, service research does engage regularly with discussions about community development, but this is almost exclusively done within the framework of brand communities for businesses. Service scholars examine the connection between fostering a sense of community and brand loyalty (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2005), brand engagement (Calder, 2022; Kumar and Kumar, 2020) and the consequences on

purchasing behaviour (Mahrous and Abdelmaaboud, 2017). However, such an orientation frames community as a commodity for the benefit of capitalism rather than supporting the resilience of communities for their own sake. When community is appropriated for neoliberal ambitions, its development serves to benefit companies, such as luxury brands (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017), driving the wealth accumulation of a few rather than supporting broader goals of financial equity. Furthermore, brand communities often benefit from sameness in community membership (Hook *et al.*, 2020), with minority groups framed as opportunities for market share growth (Goldman and Hino, 2005). This way of framing communities supports the extraction of relationships for capital gain and the development of a competitive market.

Community studies scholars John McKnight and Block (2011) take this neoliberal critique even further, highlighting that the process of the commodification of communities simply involves seeing a human condition as a problem that can be fixed and selling the solution. When the solution becomes any form of professionalised service, the communities they aim to serve are destroyed by a commercialised dependency and authentic, informal care between people is eroded by counterfeits (Knight, 1995). They argue that formal service systems cannot produce care, and there is a need to be wary of sustainable community development when everything is turned into a service offering that must be bought and sold in the market. For example, in calls within service research to attend to the “base of the pyramid” and meet the needs of those with the lowest income globally (e.g. Fisk *et al.*, 2016), there is a need for more careful use of language and attention to ensure that efforts framing and addressing this “problem” do not reproduce neoliberal patterns of driving corporate profits through service development rather than nurturing the sustainability of cities and communities. This critique opens up critical questions about the way that service research relates to community development and calls for more careful attention to supporting care in communities that does not default to private, professionalised services or brand communities.

Service research and SDG16

A critical focus of SDG16 is on strong institutions and providing justice for all. Service scholarship relating to SDG16 mainly clusters in three areas: legal and justice, refugees and displaced persons and human trafficking. One body of scholarship in this area has focused on aspects relating to the provision of legal and justice services. In their longitudinal qualitative study investigating the culture of the British Police, Kiely and Peek (2002) identified misalignments between the views of police officers regarding quality of service and those in directives and mission statements. In their study on how stress and anxiety impact consumer responses to police services, Singh and Duque (2012) identified that helping people manage stress is critical and that improving public service provision is an important and under-researched focus area. Yet they also acknowledge that public services are increasingly expected to behave like privatised services to enhance quality – inferring that private is superior.

Reynolds (2006) tracks the advertisement of legal services and some of the potential benefits to consumers through

increased competition. Service scholars took part in a World Bank initiative in Bangladesh to help develop legal capacity building and socio-economic development through empirical research and recommendations for reform framed through service-dominant (S-D) logic (Pecotich *et al.*, 2010). They argued for service-focused reforms of the Bangladeshi judiciary to deliver value through, for example, a high-quality judicial process and resolution with appropriate redress, punishment and explanations. Such work seems oriented towards advancing SDG16, although both the World Bank and S-D logic have been criticised as neoliberal apparatuses (Hietanen *et al.*, 2018).

Another nascent body of service research literature has focused on displaced persons, specifically refugees. In a research note, Finsterwalder (2017) implored scholars to engage in research regarding health, social and translation service provision to refugees, especially given the global scale of the challenges in handling the displacement of people. Taking on this challenge, Shneikat and Ryan (2018) conducted empirical research with Syrian refugees, highlighting how they used strong social networks and demonstrated considerable resilience to restart their lives. Building on this agenda, a systematic literature review by Farmaki and Christou (2019) identified key priorities to build capacity and ensure the quality of health and social care for refugees in host countries. They also called for a macro-oriented research agenda in which service industries and service systems are considered holistically to help better tackle the global refugee crisis.

Shultz *et al.* (2020) adopted a macromarketing perspective to examine the service pathways of Syrian refugees and called for a humanitarian marketing system. They cite geolocation services for safe route planning, such as *Trace the Face* – a family reunification service using face-recognition technology, and Migreat – an online platform clarifying migration rules across different countries, as examples of how services can contribute towards a more humanitarian marketing system. Boenigk *et al.* (2021) then developed a transformative refugee service experience framework to help researchers, service actors and public policymakers understand and negotiate the myriad challenges faced throughout a refugee’s service experience.

A small body of service research on human trafficking has also emerged in recent years. In a conceptual paper, Loomba (2017) proposed a tripartite transformative services model for human trafficking involving survivors, rescue services and the community to help foster resilience, re-establish ties and facilitate reintegration. Building upon this, in an empirical study with “rescued” survivors, Badejo *et al.* (2021) problematised the victim blaming, stigmatising and retraumatising impact of human trafficking rescue services in Nigeria and called for a context-specific intersectionality and trauma-informed approach to the design and delivery of transformative services. Finally, and at a broader scale, scholars have encouraged a shift beyond individualistic orientations to also acknowledge macro influences on service delivery and outcomes (Field *et al.*, 2021). This work has identified a focus on “large-scale and complex service ecosystems for transformative impact” as a key priority to help build “resilient infrastructure and society”, support sustainable consumption and establish “efficient and effective public/government services” (Field *et al.*, 2021, p. 465).

As illustrated, service scholarship has been working in several areas relevant to addressing SDG16. Much of this work can be commended for offering practical suggestions on how service ecosystems, technologies and practices can support peace, justice and strong institutions. However, what is notable is the paucity of work that critiques the capitalist neo-colonialist political, economic and social systems that underpin many of the wicked problems associated with SDG16. This is important, as prior work has demonstrated how critical perspectives are constructive as they can help challenge unbalanced power structures and foster inclusivity to help deliver services that bring peace, justice and strong institutions (Freudenberg *et al.*, 2010; Strier and Binyamin, 2014).

There is a need for a more critical discourse in service research to make visible some of the underlying assumptions that service scholarship can perpetuate in relation to SDGs 11 and 16, to reduce some of the possible unintended consequences this research may cause and to inform service design that enables truly transformative outcomes in practice.

Towards a critically constructive service research agenda for SDGs 11 and 16 and beyond

We close our commentary by introducing a critically constructive research agenda for how service research can better support sustainable cities and communities, as well as peace, justice and strong institutions. We argue that it is time for service scholarship to reflect and rethink its values, aspirations and practices, considering the neoliberal critique. We call for a critically constructive agenda that focuses on three key areas:

- 1 engaging with critical social theories;
- 2 embracing plural and polyvocal approaches; and
- 3 rethinking the service research academy.

These three key research areas highlight directions regarding input theories and approaches for careful integration for service research scholars and ways that the academy itself is implicated in this overall pursuit. The future research questions that we highlight in each key area speak both directly to the specific goals of SDG11 and SDG16 and also to more foundational aspects that need to be considered in working towards transformative change (Tadajewski *et al.*, 2014).

Engaging with critical social theories

Our first area of focus for a critically constructive service research agenda for SDGs 11 and 16 calls for increased engagement with critical social theories. Critical social theories, including critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism (see Marx, 1867/2011); Nkrumah, 1965; Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Habermas, 1988; Lorde, 1984; Bourdieu, 1998b; Klein, 1999), could help us interrogate how service ecosystems, research and practices reify neoliberal ideals. They can also facilitate an analysis of why neoliberal framings of service scholarship and practice are the norm and point us to alternatives. We might also consider what has shaped the privatisation of public services and how these could be reclaimed for the public and common good. Thinkers such as Arendt (1958/1998), Foucault (1980) and Ahmed (2004), who have written about issues including power, politics and gender, can help us consider how services can reinforce existing power

relations, might be used as political tools or could alternatively be harnessed to democratise society and everyday life to support sustainability, peace and justice.

Ideas from feminism, intersectionality and critical race theory (see de Beauvoir, 1949/1997; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1996; Oy wumi, 1997; Salami, 2020; Ahmed, 2021) can encourage us to examine how services privilege some people over others, what social and personal factors intersect to create such outcomes, how race in service ecosystems shapes practices, experiences and outcomes and why service institutions sometimes fail to uphold notions of sustainability, peace, justice and fairness. While there are many different questions that critical social theories could help answer, some relevant ones we offer include:

- What perspectives other than neoliberal capitalism can inform service theory and practice?
- How is power held, distributed and used in service ecosystems and how can services help address power imbalances?
- How does political ideology shape service ecosystems and the design and delivery of services?
- How do factors including gender, race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability intersect to create privilege, oppression and exclusion in service contexts relating to peace, justice and sustainability?
- Can service scholarship advance the renationalisation of public services that support peace, justice and sustainability for collective benefit?

Embracing plural and polyvocal approaches

A critical orientation highlights the need to continue to open up service research to support the co-existence of many ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2021). The goals of working towards a sustainable community (SDG11) and just institutions (SDG16) rely on diverse, meaningful participation in decision-making and governance. Traditionally within service research, a positivistic paradigm, which uses formal propositions, quantifiable measures and hypothesis testing, has been dominant within the most prominent and celebrated research articles (Tronvoll *et al.*, 2011). However, the dominance of one way of knowing over others perpetuates ontological occupation when one reality erases other local realities (Escobar, 2016). With inspiration from the Zapatista concept of the pluriverse, a world where many worlds fit, we argue that service research should aspire towards becoming an “uncommon” that supports an ongoing negotiation between divergent knowledges and ways of beings without aspiring towards conformity (De la Cadena and Blaser, 2018).

One promising approach for cultivating uncommons is that of two-eyed seeing, which brings together Indigenous knowledge and mainstream knowledge into a side-by-side dialogue (Bartlett *et al.*, 2012). This could be particularly relevant for supporting sustainable communities (SDG11) by bringing mainstream service research into dialogue with Indigenous knowledge systems while being vigilant in relation to co-option (Yunkaporta, 2019). Furthermore, scholars highlight that knowledge offered by epistemologies of the Global South can offer a deeper, contextualised understanding of social transformation than that traditionally generated from the academy (Escobar, 2016). The integration of such knowledge

requires support for other research methods and means of knowledge sharing, such as African-centred methodologies such as Egyptology, which involve going back to the source and learning from the past and present cultures and identities (Bangura, 2011; Chilisa, 2012). Questions that this ambition brings forward to a critically oriented research agenda include:

- How can service research better acknowledge, engage with, respect and be informed by Global South cosmological, ontological, epistemological and perspectives to cultivate sustainable, pluriversal communities?
- How might different ontologies and epistemologies be brought into dialogue with each other without using dominant ontologies and epistemologies to interpret all others?
- What different forms of knowledge sharing could aid service research in creating space for divergent traditional knowledge and emerging ways of sensemaking?

Rethinking the service research academy

Adopting a critical orientation in service research is not only about the content of research papers. A critical, comprehensive approach to cultivating services from institutions that offer fair and sustainable living for all humans also demands a full interrogation of the very institutions that make up the service research academy. This includes a critical look at the commitment of academic institutions to the SDGs and accountability for moving beyond discursive alignment (Biermann *et al.*, 2022) to create significant improvements in outcomes. Service scholarship would benefit from shifting beyond disciplinary boundaries and working across different bodies of knowledge and practice to create transdisciplinary and transformative outcomes. It also requires careful examination of the reproduction of domination and oppression in society through academic institutions, including in the recruitment and experience of students and teachers, course content and teaching methods, administration, funding and so on. Recognising the links between neoliberalism, colonialism (the domination of one culture over others) and racism (Preston, 2013), a critically constructive agenda must also examine ways that such interlocking systemic oppression is being reproduced within academic institutions. This requires going further than a symbolic commitment to diversity that fails to bring about the intended outcomes but instead perpetuates institutional whiteness and reinforces existing power dynamics (Ahmed, 2021). Decolonising academia requires nothing less than material change in the order of the world (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Rodríguez, 2022). To “walk the talk”, service scholars have an important role to play in critically examining and shaping the institutions that they work with and within (SDG11) and the ways that these institutions help or harm the communities that they are related to (SDG16). Questions to support this process include:

- In what ways are academic institutions perpetuating capitalist ideologies and how can alternative ideologies inform institutional work?
- How can service educators incorporate critical and transdisciplinary perspectives into their teaching, reading lists, case studies, class activities and assessment tasks?
- How can service scholars engage in critical reflection and meaningful, material change within their own institutions through action-oriented research methodologies?

Conclusion

The points and questions outlined above offer a glimpse into what it might mean to move towards a critically constructive service research agenda, yet they are by no means a comprehensive overview of such an ambition. Certainly, service research does not need to and should not do this work in isolation but can learn from critical research happening in cognate areas. For example, work done by Black Feminist thinkers offers important insight into the examination of gendered and racialised roles in service work (Hill Collins, 2000/2009) and brings forward the important concept of intersectionality, which recognises that experiences of oppression are not subsumed within either/or boundaries of identity (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, critical disability studies have developed ideas on “care webs”, where a community mobilises to support and service someone’s practical needs, not as a chore or charity but for mutual benefit (Lakshmi Piepznia-Samarasinha, 2018). We align with Parsons *et al.* (2021) call to adopt an ethics of care in service research, which includes emphasis on the maintenance and repair of ourselves and our environment within the complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto, 1993). Recognising the legacy of neoliberalism and the role of service research in reifying it, a critical lens of care can offer alternative assumptions to support the fair and sustainable living of all humans and more-than-humans. It is our hope that, over time, the development of a vibrant critical service research discourse can aid scholars and practitioners in supporting and enabling positive transformation with significant material and revolutionary changes.

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