

A Rational Action Approach for Real Life – the Case of Service Work

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In 2003 we published an article in the Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie titled „Abstimmungsprobleme in Dienstleistungsbeziehungen. Ein handlungstheoretischer Zugang“ (KZfSS 55, 5, 757-781). For the English online version „A Rational Action Approach“ the article has been updated and a case study has been added: Drawing upon Diego Gambetta’s analysis of the mafia as “The Business of Private Protection” (Gambetta 1993) we interpret the opening sequence of Mario Puzo’s “The Godfather” in terms of interdependence problems between the Godfather and his customer.

Abstract

Rational action approaches have hitherto been applied primarily to situations which can be standardised and which are susceptible to quantifying techniques. This article presents the arguments for extending the application of such approaches to more complex empirical problems and is so doing to make use of interpretative social research techniques. One such problem is the question of how co-production in interactive service work can be achieved. The analysis of two case studies from the financial and protection service sectors shows that rational action approaches can also be usefully applied to complex everyday situations. At the same time this application questions assumptions of the rational action model.

Introduction

With our article we want to attempt to develop a theory-based sociological understanding of service work. Hence we shall focus our analysis on the actors involved in a service relationship and their interests. This allows a demonstration of typical interdependence problems between service providers and service receivers which are specifically not, as public discourse on service quality asserts, due to the unconventionality of the service provider but rather that of the service *relationship* for „it is not always human nature, conspiracy, or incompetence that are to be blamed for unpleasant social states, but sometimes certain properties to which actors are exposed“ (Tietzel 1990: 253). As we shall show, the specifics of service relationships also provide the preconditions which the actors involved can use to work out solutions to the problems. Both the subject of the service relationship and, as we shall show, the fact that this has to be agreed on, play an important role.

The article is constructed in the following way: in the first section there will be a review of the current state of academic research into service work, focusing on German industrial sociology of work. This first means indicating the fixation of sociology of labour and of economics on material commodities; secondly introducing attempts to determine constitutive characteristics of services; thirdly developing a model of the service relationship which is intended to comprehend service work as interaction. This model will be enhanced in the second section with decision theory; service provider and service receiver are conceived as rational actors who find they have typical interdependence problems. In the third section interactions in a call centre and in an enterprise from the protection service industry¹ will be examined with regard to underlying interdependence problems and their solutions. In conclusion in the fourth section we summarise the results of the article and make some suggestions for a broader understanding of rational action.

1. Service as Interaction

1.1 Service as non-productive work

Until very recently the sociology of labour in Germany has notwithstanding the increasing importance of service work been unable to overcome its theoretical and empirical emphasis on productive industry. The service sector has in the last twenty years been treated every so often by industrial sociology – but this has in the German-speaking world been primarily from the perspective of white collar worker sociology and the central question of processes of company rationalisation (see Baethge and Oberbeck 1986; Littek, Heisig & Gondek 1991, 1992); there have as well been attempts at demarcation from production work, while the latter nonetheless continued to be the contextual setting (see Berger and Offe 1984). What might be symptomatic for this is a negative determining of services to be found in Offe (1984, cited by Nerdinger 1994: 47): “The result of service work is non-material; it cannot be stored or

¹ The first example we shall cite stems from a project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Dunkel and Voß 2004; Rieder, Matuschek & Anderson 2002), the second is taken from the novel „The Godfather“ by Mario Puzo. We consider that novels are fitting empirical material for sociological analysis as social mechanisms apply in the world of fiction (see for example Weihrich and Voß 2004 on this). For the interpretation of the Mafia as a service industry we refer to Gambetta (1993).

transported; service work is not susceptible to technical and organisational rationalisation or at any rate less so than productive work; its productivity cannot be measured, thus maintenance of productivity norms cannot be checked; service work is....not productive.” It is only in the recent past that German industrial sociology has begun to free itself from its tradition and to gain an understanding of service work in its own right (Dunkel and Voß 2004; Voswinkel 2005).

Just as the term “work” in sociology is orientated to productive labour, so economic thinking underlying the discipline of economics concentrates traditionally on material goods – accordingly services are regarded as non-material goods. In the Seventies and Eighties the predominant approach in business as well as service sector management aimed at rationalising service work along the lines of the industrial model,² as the example of McDonald’s (Ritzer 2000) has shown in practice. But more recently various service management approaches (“New Service Management School”, “Total Quality Management”, “Business Process Re-Engineering”) have moved on from such technocratic concepts. The focus is now on customer satisfaction, on which the service organisation and its workers are to concentrate. While increased attention to the meaning of the customer and moving beyond a simple transfer of industrial concepts of rationalisation to service work can be seen as a step forward, these concepts do nonetheless show considerable weaknesses. One such deficit is the norm orientation of the “new service management school” criticised by Korczynski (2002), which assumes a win-win-win relationship between service organisation, provider and receiver. Increased customer satisfaction equals more satisfaction for the service provider in direct contact with the customer, which in turn equals more profit for the service organisation from the service interaction – although no empirical evidence can be given for this. Thus the relationships in the service triad (organisation – service giver – person served) are harmonised. This overlooks the fact that organisation, service giver and receiver each have their own agendas which do not necessarily accord with one another.

So contributions from the service management sector say more about how services *are supposed to* be provided and organised than how they in fact *are* provided and organised. They do not succeed in developing a fruitful empirical approach to service work. By way of contrast this is the case with a number of primarily qualitative anglo-american studies which provide detailed insight into the world of service work and service relationships (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993; MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Korczynski 2002; Korczynski and Ott 2004). The focal point of interest of such studies is on services in which there is direct contact between the service giver and the customer. For precisely the fact that the customer exerts considerable influence on the work process is regarded as a *differentia specifica* as compared with industrial production work (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 5). Awareness of this, however, does not lead to discussion of the active role and viewpoint of the customer regarding the service interaction to the same extent as is the case with the service provider, the “front line worker” (Frenkel et al. 1999) dealing with the requirements of both the customers and the service organisation.

² Cf. Levitt for a programmatic view (1972, 1976); examples of such an approach can be found in Czepiel, Solomon & Surprenant (1985).

According to Leidner (1996: 29) interactive service work poses the greatest challenge to the usual notions of what constitutes paid work. The sociology of labour has as yet failed to address this challenge adequately. This applies not only for the sociology of labour in the German-speaking world but, as McCammon and Griffin (2000) note, in Great Britain and the United States too. This is also particularly true as regards integration in general sociological theory. Thus recognition of the central importance of interaction as such does not give rise to efforts to embed undisputedly important interaction processes in an appropriate action theory context. So there is as yet a lack of conceptual understanding of service work which accords both with the subject of interactive service work *per se* and the requirements of sociological theory.

1.2 What are services in actual fact? An assortment of constitutive characteristics

It is part of the standard repertoire of academic treatments of services to try in various ways to find criteria to determine what services are. This is done primarily by distinguishing them from industrially-produced commodities.

a) *Distinctions from industrial production in business management theory.* Maleri (1998: 123) defines services as “immaterial economic commodities which have been produced using external production factors to meet the needs of a third party.” These commodities are, Maleri goes on, immaterial because their production does not entail use of raw materials. As distinct from what one makes for oneself they are produced to meet another’s needs. And it is the use of external production factors which fundamentally distinguishes their production from that of material goods. By external factors is meant the material commodities of the recipient (say the car which is to be repaired), immaterial commodities of the recipient (e.g. information or legally protected rights) as well as the “active cooperation and/or the passive involvement of the recipient”, which for Maleri is expressed in mental and physical energy and in time.

Kleinaltenkamp (1998) adds to this process-related definition of services a critical view of characteristics based on result (the immaterial quality of the product) and potential. By this he means that services are offered not as “finished products” but as *promises* to do something. While Kleinaltenkamp is able to show up the problem of clearly distinguishing this form from others (as elsewhere) he also draws attention to an aspect which plays a central part in interdependence problems in service relationships. The promise to do something takes the form of an *incomplete contract*: the service provider and the service receiver each have to contribute to performing the service; the nature and extent of the contribution can not be laid down completely beforehand; accordingly the quality of the service can only be ascertained after the fact.³

b) *Distinctions within sociology.* Within the sociology of labour there are similar differential criteria to those in business management. Korczynski (2002: 5f) names the following five characteristics of services which have proven their worth:

1. *intangibility* – the product of service work is not or only partly of a tangible nature.

³ Cf. Contract theory according to Schweizer (1999).

2. *perishability* – the product is “temporary” and thus cannot be stored.
3. *variability* – the product is not homogeneous, for it can vary according to the persons involved (for instance through the perception of the service on the part of the customer).
4. *simultaneous production and consumption* – the product is produced and consumed in one and the same situation (uno-actu principle).
5. *inseparability* – the product is produced by service provider and receiver together (co-production).

The last two criteria, the uno-actu principle and co-production, proved to be particularly interesting from a sociological perspective on service work as the problem arises for person-related services that producer and consumer have of necessity to cooperate in performing the service (Gross and Badura 1977; Gross 1983).

The sector of person-related services is in itself highly heterogeneous. It includes activities such as physical and emotional care work, guiding, catering, accommodation, transport, entertaining, teaching, selling, counselling, educating, giving therapy but also monitoring and administering punishment as well as providing protection. A further structuring of the field would include the distinction between direct services performed on the person of the service receiver (such as care or counselling) and indirect person-related services (selling or catering, Nerdinger 1994: 49). We also adopt Gutek’s distinction between service *encounters* and service *relationships* (Gutek 1995). *Encounters* are typically characterised by service giver and customer meeting just once and as a rule being unknown to one another (for instance on the railway or through a call centre). In contrast to this, with *relationships* both parties meet a number of times and thus get to know one another (this could, say, be in a residential home or in a hairdresser’s salon) or, as we shall see in our second empirical example, enter into a *mafiose* relationship.

1.3 A model of the service relationship

The subject of our model is the immediate relationship between the service provider (SP) and the service receiver (SR). This is characterised by the exchange of a job done for money and that there is a “malfunctioning object” (Goffman 1961: 329) owned by the SR on which the SP is to perform the job. Furthermore at this point we introduce the hypothesis that the relationship between SP and SR cannot adequately be described solely as one of exchange. The cooperation necessary to produce the service co-productively does not come about *per se*, as will be shown, when supply meets demand and a job is done in exchange for cash. Gross (1983: 51) grasped the simultaneity of exchange and cooperation in the following way: “The person-related service occupies.... an odd place somewhere between an economically-rational exchange relationship and a helping relationship on the basis of cooperative solidarity. On the one hand there is an exchange (e.g. a haircut for the money charged; advice for a fee), on the other the job/service being “sold” for the price or the fee has obviously to be produced in face-to-face cooperation between giver and taker.” Gross resolves this problematic

relationship by way of an either-or and takes up the question of “which way the service relationship, so to speak, swings: toward the *exchange relationship* side or the *social relationship* side” (emphasis in original).

We by contrast will show a systematic context for exchange and cooperation. Thus we conceive of SP and SR as rational actors who, while they are interested in an exchange relationship, nonetheless pursue individual concerns which can counteract this in practice.

Accordingly we assume the following parameters for our initial model:

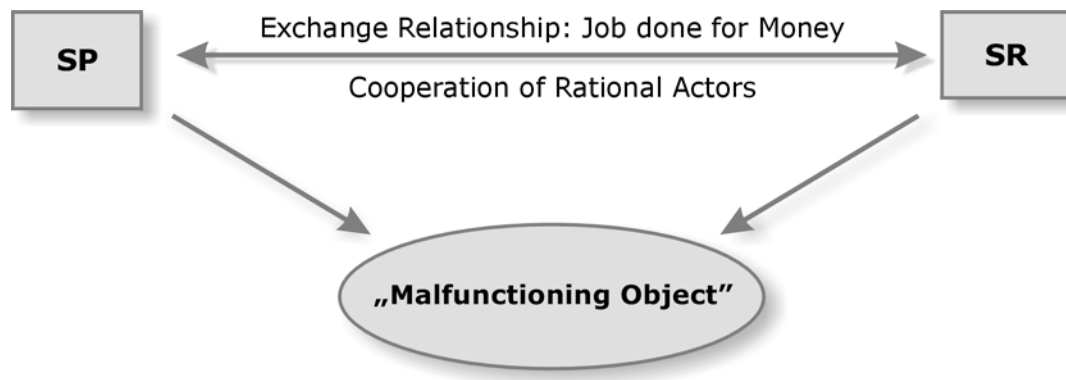


Figure I: A Model of the Service Relationship

The connecting line between the SR and the “malfunctioning object” symbolises the connection of the two: this becomes particularly evident if for instance physical or mental illness of a patient or the hair of a hairdresser’s customer are the “malfunctioning objects” concerned. At the same time the problem to be solved in the service interaction has to be analytically separated from the person and made into the object so that both can relate to and work on it. So both those involved, SP and SR, have to know what the “matter” at hand is, whereby the “matter” is often actually non-material.⁴

This model (cf. Dunkel and Rieder 2003) is intended to serve as the point of departure for identifying the action problems inherent in the service relationship for the actors involved. Models of service work presented hitherto have in this regard shown themselves to be not sophisticated enough: thus while the existence of a problem to be solved in the course of the service and the immediate interaction between SP and SR is stated, not enough account has been taken of the fact that the exchange and cooperation relationships as well as the definition of the “malfunctioning object” and its “repair plan” are not simply givens, but are to be produced interactively by the actors. The interests of the actors involved are central to this: “Mixed motives” can be at play, which lead to interdependence problems.

To summarise we can say that service relationships imply the following problems:

1. *The problem of the definition of the “malfunctioning object”.* Before the service can be carried out, those involved have to define what the “malfunctioning object” is and

⁴ Cf. for the role of materiality in sociology Heinlein (2003), who discusses the application of actor network theory approaches particularly to service work.

how it is to be treated. Hairdresser and customer have to agree what kind of cut they are aiming for, doctor and patient will try in the course of a diagnostic talk to determine what is “wrong” with the patient. How the following problems described can be solved depends on the type of service concerned.

2. *The problem of creating a cooperative relationship.* SP and SR have to find a way to coordinate their actions such that the subject of the service relationship (the “malfunctioning object”) can be worked on (“repaired”) successfully. It is not enough for the SP to deal with the task concerned competently – the SR always has to play along in the right way, thus the hairdresser’s customer has to sit still while her hair is being worked on or the patient has to take the medicine the doctor prescribes if the therapy is to be successful as desired.
3. *The problem of the incomplete contract.* Neither the “malfunctioning object” nor the procedure leading to its “repair” nor the result of the “damage arrangement” can be fixed beforehand; it follows from this that the contributions of service provider and service receiver cannot be precisely determined beforehand either. In cases where after the concluding of the contract a new incentive structure develops in the phase of the co-production in which one of the actors can withhold his contribution, and the other urgently requires this, there is a danger that the service will not be performed (a lack of “compliance” on the part of patients is one such problem).
4. *The problem of the relation between exchange and cooperative relationships.* Service relationships are not only characterised by the fact that cooperation is necessary for their success but also that money changes hands for the job done. A contract between service provider and service receiver setting down how the damage is to be repaired will only come about if the service provider agrees to the sum he is to get for his performance and vice versa. Because of the specifics of service relationships both contract partners have, once the contract has been agreed, both the opportunity and the incentive to withhold their part of the deal: the service provider would be happy to work less hard for the sum of money received while the service receiver would want to get more value for money. Both contract partners must reckon with the cooperation necessary for the service not coming about. “We can expect, then, that the framework of rights and duties on each side of the relationship can form a kind of matrix of anxiety and doubt, even when each party to the relationship is behaving properly” (Goffman 1961: 336).

2. Service Work from the Perspective of a Theory of Strategic Acting

In the usual social scientific treatments of service work there is no mention of problems of interdependency, thus they are implicitly considered as already solved. Services are viewed as forms of supply for which there is customer demand. The assumption is that exchange relationships in markets regulate the coordination of supply and demand. This implies that customers will not have to take up supply if the quality is not satisfactory or the price acceptable. Alternatively if an exchange takes place this means that both partners were able to

improve their position, for otherwise they would not have entered into a voluntary exchange relationship. According to Albert O. Hirschman (1970) demand always has an exit option on the market. This is taken up if a better offer comes along. Trust is not required.⁵

But why for instance, as will be shown in Section 3, does a financial service not get performed although both partners plainly have an interest in it? Why is a Mafia man not satisfied with a customer's one-off cash payment, although the customer is prepared to pay a high price? To all intents and purposes the ideal-typical market solution for person-related services does not apply: at the root of service relationships there are interdependence problems which cannot be solved by market exchange alone.

In the following we shall try to explain such "peculiar" interactions by interpreting them as solutions of particular interdependence problems. These types of problems can be recognised by applying a theory of strategic interaction. Service provider and service receiver are conceived for these purposes as "rational egotists" (Esser 2000: 16), making their actions dependent on their expectations of what other actors will do. Here we fall back on the instrument "game-related sociology" (Swedberg 2001)⁶ and will follow Michael Hechter's appeal (1987: 254) to find solution strategies for these problems through "observation of people's actual behaviour in the field." Thus we are using a "theory of strategic interaction" as an analytical tool to resolve an empirical puzzle (cf. Swedberg 2001: 323). We shall present this instrument in the next section.

2.1 Social dilemmas

The theory of individual acting upon which our argument is based⁷ assumes that an actor pursues goals or interests which he seeks to arrange in order of preference; that he has reserves of knowledge as well as expectations which may be assumed to be fallible or incomplete; that he has got an idea of the acting situation in which he finds himself; that he ultimately makes his decision to act by setting the urgency of the specific desired result against the probability of it coming about and thus decides for the action of the highest expected subjective utility.

Inasmuch as our model actor depends on what other actors do to realise his goal, typical problematic situations are to be expected. For specifically *because of* their rational calculation actors get caught up in social dilemmas which – at the worst – are distinguished by "a sharp conflict between individual rationality and collective rationality" (Swedberg 2001: 316). There is no invisible hand showing the way out of such dilemmas: the stable "solution" is, rather, not the best – as long as the actors are incapable of finding better ones. This is precisely the "annoying fact of society" (Dahrendorf) and the original problem relating to the question of social order which all social theories have addressed and will continue to address.

⁵ Cf. for homo oeconomicus acting on the market Weise (1989) and Granovetter (1985).

⁶ For the use of game-related theoretical models within the framework of a sociology based on acting theory see e.g. Ullmann-Margalit (1977) and Schmid (1998, 2003).

⁷ See for example Schmid (1998a: 146ff or 1998b: 266ff.)

Let us introduce other actors to the game and thus some dynamic into our acting model: James S. Coleman (1995) in his social theory assumes actors who are interested in specific resources while at the same time controlling specific resources. The state of paradise can easily be identified: it exists if I control the resources in which I am interested. The relevant sociological problems occur if the resources in which I am interested are controlled by someone else.⁸ Here the interests or goals of the two model actors – Ego and Alter – can relate to each other in different ways: in one case Ego can only attain his goal if the same applies for Alter; at the same time this is also the situation which both actors choose in preference to all the other options. In another case there is a shared goal which can be attained if both actors make their contribution; but at the same time there is a preferred alternative: Ego would do even better if only Alter made his contribution. Lastly in a third case Alter and Ego pursue a goal which both can only reach at the expense of the other.

The related goals described allow three types of interdependence problems⁹ to be distinguished:

1. *Coordination problems*: Even though they are trying, the actors may fail to attain shared or complementary goals, if Ego does not know where, when and in which way his co-player might make his contribution. This may result in them not being able to coordinate their activities. If a coordinated solution is found however, they will stick by it: it is stable (see e.g. Sugden 1986; Tietzel 1990) and matches the interests of both actors as neither of the protagonists sees divergent profits in defecting.
2. *Cooperation problems*: This is not the case with cooperation problems. Here each actor discovers an alternative for himself which he would prefer to making his own contribution. Ego would prefer to let Alter make his contribution but not offer his own. A cooperation problem of this type which has the structure of the prisoner's dilemma¹⁰ also ends with a stable solution. However this takes the form of the cooperation not coming about, if Alter anticipates Ego's behaviour or assumes it – then he will refrain from making his contribution in his turn. He will thus be able to avoid the worst pay-off for him, the “sucker” position in which he pays the full price while his partner (or opponent) is the beneficiary. Thus they fail to reach the zone of mutual profit and both partners end up – in contrast to the coordination problem – in the less-than-best position.
3. *Inequality problems*: Finally, for incompatible goals a problem of distribution or inequality can be identified. If the commodity in view cannot be split up or if the division once made appears unjust to either party¹¹, this results in a solution which is

⁸ According to Coleman this person has power over me.

⁹ For the suggested typology see Ullmann-Margalit (1977), Hardin (1990), Schmid (1998c, 1998a: 152ff, 1998b: 269ff, 2003)

¹⁰ According to Ziegler (1998: 138) the prisoner's dilemma is a „game theoretical Drosophila“; the literature on this is extensive accordingly. See e.g. Sugden (1986), Axelrod (1988), Homann (2002) and on the history Poundstone (1993).

¹¹ If there is a shared goal but one of the partners has to be satisfied with less payment, then this is a so-called „battle of the sexes“ (Hargreaves, Heap et al. 1999: 109).

not stable. There is no chance of an optimum balance or of one below the optimum level. On the contrary, distributive processes of this type contain a lot of conflict potential, the prospect of the protagonists fighting for a bigger share can never be ruled out. One should bear in mind, too, that dividing up means any kind of sharing is possible, thus in case of a decision made there is always the chance that the rules applied for the division may be questioned (see e.g. Moore 1987: 19ff).

The “games” described are thus subject to varying degrees of conflict; while for coordination problems there is a stable area of mutual profit there is at least an unstable one for cooperation games; but with conflict games there is no mutual profit from the point of view of those involved. In the extreme case the utility for me is totally at the expense of my fellow player so that we are in the middle of a zero sum game, i.e. a pure conflict. „If one groups these games along a *continuum* with increasing degree of conflict or, conversely, increasing degree of cooperative incentives among the players, one will find no-conflict or *pure coordination games* with one ... equilibrium at one end and *pure conflict (zero-sum) games* at the other” (Tietzel 1990: 252; our emphasis).

We have now shown various aim constellations with their respective consequent problems into which rational actors drift respectively. For their part will they be able to solve these problems?

There are indeed solutions available which have nothing to do with those of the rule-based approach of “homo sociologicus”,¹² but are nonetheless bound to involve a lot of preconditions: rational actors can find points of balance for their coordination problems – but if they cannot communicate they have to attain the appropriate information in another way (Schelling 1960; Sugden 1986); they can solve prisoner’s dilemmas in that they play iterative super-games in which a tit-for-tat strategy¹³ is applied – but a defection has to be apparent for this (Keck and Wagner 1990), and there ought to be no indication of the game being at an end (Kliemt 1986; Axelrod 1988); they can solve conflict games like the “battle of the sexes” by being alternately content with the worse position; but this only makes sense if they can change alternately.

Apart from this sociology is able to discern more sophisticated problem solving mechanisms: the market, authority, trust and norms are such instances (see Coleman 1995; for similar systems see Lichbach 1996; Schmid 2003; 1998b: 173 ff; Wiesenthal 2003); if one makes the acting model more complex one also succeeds in conceiving moral acting as rational acting (Frank 1992; Kliemt 1993; Baurmann 2000; Weihrich 2002).¹⁴ Ultimately institutions are one way of solving such problems by providing incentives to choose or refrain from certain actions. This approach is nonetheless not particularly promising bearing in mind that the same dilemmas will underlie the creation of institutions they are intended to solve.

¹² Homo sociologicus has so to speak ready-made solutions.

¹³ The feature of this strategy is that one actor matches the other with both cooperation and defection; should this strategy be successful one is not allowed to bear a grudge, but has to begin offering cooperation once again after failure (cf. Axelrod 1988).

¹⁴ Violence as a form of solution merits attention, power can be arbitrary power and even morality assumes control (see Weede 1992; Schmid 2003).

According to Coleman the point of departure for such solutions is the exchange of *rights* to act or their transfer, as actions themselves can neither be exchanged nor transferred. But one certainly can do this with control rights over these actions. If I exchange control rights with each other, then we are simply dealing with an exchange relationship. If I transfer control rights one-sidedly to another person a power relationship comes about. Relationships of trust may be understood as the transfer of such control rights under risk, and norms will only be maintained if control rights are distributed in such a way as that all members of the group have them mutually available.

It would appear fitting to regard the exchange of rights as the common solution for producing commercial services. The service provider gets the right to my money and gives me the right to make use of his specific abilities. We would seem to have a coordination problem with a relatively simple market exchange solution on the table, of which the last difficulties can be resolved by the service provider doing precisely what the customer wants. But is this the case?

2.2 Interdependence Problems in Service Relationships

There are prisoner's dilemmas even in simple market relationships,¹⁵ in which both partners would in fact do better if they agreed to an exchange, but have to bear in mind that the other would not be able to keep to the implicit contract. If they think along these lines and see no further incentive for cooperation, then both will refrain from making a contribution and there will be no cooperation. If an on-the-spot transaction of goods can be made, the quality of which is easily ascertained, then the cooperation problem may be solved relatively simply; but if we consider the exchange of goods on which the partners cannot get adequate information as regards quality, we will have a problem (see e.g. Opp 1987).

It is precisely such conditions of exchange which we find in person-related services, if we regard these as a *specific type of interaction*: as a strategic interaction between rational actors who are exchanging a job for payment, but who focus their activity on an object (the "malfunctioning object") which requires co-production for it to be agreed and worked upon. The fact that the definition of the job to be performed first has to be arrived at co-productively can give rise to a *coordination problem*, should the agreed goal be a priority but one dependent on prior definition of the service and its attendant procedure. But: if the service has first to be defined, then it is not as yet clear what exactly it is. This means that part of the definition of the situation for the actors can be *not* knowing whether as SR they will get the service desired or (from the point of view of the SP) whether the service is in demand or to be remunerated. The SR must ask himself whether the protection on offer really works or if the investment agreement really gives the projected interest. The SP will not know for his part whether he is to receive the appropriate payment, the more so because considerable value is attached to the currencies of "gratitude" and "customer satisfaction". There can be even

¹⁵ Kliemt (1986: 288) points out „that practically every exchange situation contains a type of prisoner's dilemma, even if this may not seem evident on account of mutually-advantageous agreements arrived at without problems.“

greater *cooperation problems* than this: Goffman's psychiatric services provide the paradigm for the "best" in the view of the SP actually being the "worst" for the SR who does not feel at all sick – thus creating an *inequality problem*.

We have to presume that very serious interdependence problems occur in service interactions. In the next section we shall show with two examples of service interactions from different areas that their features can be traced back to the respective interdependence problems underlying them. At the same time these case studies will make clear that the specifics of service interactions also present the chance to solve these problems. Being forced into co-production – via definition of the "malfunctioning object" and agreement on how to "repair" it – provides the actors involved with the opportunity to give each other information on their respective readiness to cooperate. In the service interaction itself, in which the actors have to relate their actions to one another, service receiver and provider can get information on whether they should invest trust or break off the interaction. Thus the fact that coordination problems have to be solved "uno actu" can become the precondition for solving cooperation problems.

3. Application of the Theory of Strategic Acting to Social Reality: Two Case Studies

In the following we shall analyse a service interaction collated in the course of an empirical research project (see Fn 1) and a case study from the world of fiction. In so doing we shall try while analysing the empirical material to block out the institutional solutions of interdependence problems prior to the service interaction¹⁶ in order to be able to make clear the interactive contribution to solving such problems. In selecting a call centre and a Mafia business we have settings where service interactions are not particularly institutionalised and thus suitable for our purposes. Apart from this they allow a comparison of possible solutions under *encounter* (call centre) and *relationship* (Mafia enterprise) conditions. And in one case a service agreement is successfully concluded, in the other it is not.

3.1 Bank customer and Call Centre Agent

The call centre is a relatively new form of organisation which expanded rapidly in the Nineties (Bittner et al. 2000) and has been the subject of numerous work research studies (Holtgrewe 2003). In the empirical research project on service interaction the call centre of a bank was studied (cf. Dunkel and Voß 2004; Rieder, Matuschek and Anderson 2002; Rieder and Matuschek 2003). The basic assumptions connected with the market mechanism, that the customer himself decides which services he asks for, can choose between various services on offer and generally has exit options available apply, broadly speaking, for the relationship between call centre agent and bank customer. However this does not mean that the market-driven exchange of money for performance is *alone* sufficient to solve interdependence

¹⁶ The institutional solution aspect of interdependence problems will be taken up once again in the next Section.

problems which may occur. In the following example, an excerpt from an interview with a female call centre agent, it becomes apparent that further conditions have to be fulfilled:

SP: He was a really nasty man, he phoned up and basically just never let me finish my sentences..., yes, didn't answer any questions, he definitely thought the only one to put questions or to have a say was him. He is a large-scale investor, that is he wanted to invest 20.000/30.000 Deutschmarks and that's not a large investor for us – while he is important, he doesn't have to play Mr. Big. He was very, very unfriendly, really bad-tempered,...yes, he reacted to everything, like, really badly and he wanted written material, but not the usual things. He wanted everything to be specially written up for him and when I stated that this, well, isn't possible, that he would have to be satisfied with the normal material he became even more aggressive, and he was a, yes, a really evil person, talking down, his motto being: if someone puts a question, then only him and I was to keep my mouth shut thank you very much and to do as he says and so on. And then I said: "well, don't get me wrong, but not like that. You phone me up here and you want something from me, well I decide, too, now if you get something or not and you're not getting any written material." And then he was even more angry and he shouted: "Why?" And then I said: "Now I've had to take being shouted and grumbled at by you for the last seven minutes solid, you talk to me as a complete stranger in this way, I don't have to take this. You want something from me, this is a service company, but you only get it with the appropriate tone." Then slowly I brought the talk to an end. And nothing has been heard from him since then, either. Because we can do without those sorts of customers as well...He should look for a bank that goes along with that sort of thing, but not like that.

This interview extract presents a situation in which the service does not get performed. But the reason for this failure is not that the customer took stock of the offer and was not satisfied with it. It did not get anything like as far as this. Right from the phase of working out the "malfunctioning object" those involved were unable to cooperate; an exchange or a transfer of acting rights did not take place. Why did this not happen?

We may assume that the object of the service was supposed to be the conclusion of an investment contract. This goal was not attained, and this was not on account of unacceptable conditions. The customer did not even get as far as to find out anything about them. For the questions relating to conditions only get answered by the SP if the potential investor reveals information about himself. Getting this information is in the bank's interest. *The way in which* customers react to this request gives the SP in the service action *information on their readiness to cooperate*. In the case described here the SP could not come to feel with any confidence that there would be a preparedness to cooperate: "if someone puts a question, then only him" is not an acceptable offer of cooperation for the SP.

In this example the customer interested in investing money does not take into account that bringing about cooperation can be a complicated process in the course of which he has plausibly to convey that he is reliable. He denies the SP the right to put questions, does not

understand this to be a chance to signal his readiness to cooperate. Rather he feels deprived of his right to be able to put questions and get answers. As a result he becomes aggressive, to which the SP reacts by refusing to cooperate. “And then he was even more angry.” He became angry, we may conclude, because the bank for its part did not signal any readiness to cooperate. And he could have been angry because it was a very important matter for him: the investment of – from his point of view a very large – sum of money. The game is being played as it were – at least from the point of view of the customer – for high stakes.

So we can see that the cooperation problem exists from the beginning of the service relationship: each has to decide whether the other is ready to cooperate at all. The solution of the cooperation problem would consist of the SP beginning with a cooperative move – as was usually the case with calls between call centre agents and bank customers – , to which the SR answers with a cooperative move and so on: were the customer to answer the SP’s question and to be friendly, then her next step might be to go beyond the “normal” and put together the written material not usually provided. The contact conversation serves not only to define the “malfunctioning object” but also provides the chance to test preparedness to cooperate via a *tit for tat strategy*. As we can see from the passage, expression of feelings plays an important role here. The customer is described as unfriendly, bad-tempered and aggressive; these expressions of feeling are interpreted as a credible sign of a lack of willingness to cooperate – and they are recognisable even on the telephone. If signalling of a readiness to cooperate does not succeed at this level, that is, should there be reasonable grounds (because of outbursts of feeling) to assume the opposite, it is not possible to cooperate at the next level. Both are now playing a *conflict game* in which the customer tries to push through his idea of a service relationship “with a ramrod” – a strategy of all or nothing which proves to be unsuccessful. The call centre agent sees the only alternatives as being to accept this idea and thus to recognise the domination of the client or not to do this and to break off the interaction. She decides for the latter as she does not want a customer unwilling to cooperate. So in this case the result is the second best “solution” for both actors which also accords with the theory in the sense of the prisoner’s dilemma: cooperation does not come about as in this case the customer would reap the profits of cooperation while the SP remained in the worst position: giving information without receiving it and being shouted at for it instead of thanked.¹⁷

Put positively the points of criticism made by the agent add up to a list of requirements a bank customer has to fulfil in order to get the desired services and to enable the zone of mutual profit to be reached:

- The customer has to be prepared to reveal information about his/her own person.
- The customer should make an effort to speak in a friendly tone.
- The customer should submit to a certain degree of standardisation of service and regard the fulfilment of special requirements as a concession.

¹⁷ The decision for defection was easier for her as this customer was not one regarded as a large-scale investor (even if he thought differently and plainly overestimated his power). Other rules apply for so-called VIP customers, i.e. the economic worth of the customers diminishes the social skills the bank feels able to require of them.

- The customer should recognise the agent as a partner on the same level as himself (not “looking down on” this person but “eye-to-eye”).

3.2 The Customer and his Godfather

Our second case study is taken from the novel “The Godfather” by Mario Puzo. It is the description of a service interaction between a customer and a mafioso. The customer is the funeral director Bonasera, the mafioso is Don Corleone, who heads the family business in the New York of the Forties. Our view of this business as a service enterprise is based on Diego Gambetta. He conceived of the Mafia as “a specific economic enterprise, an industry which produces, promotes, and sells private protection” (Gambetta 1993: 1). According to this view the “Mafia” is not a mysterious secret society, but – quite prosaically – the special trademark of a specific protection industry. Its services are required, according to Gambetta, because there is no trust - for all transactions, because nobody trusts anybody else.

Generally the state eases this problem and provides for a minimum of protection in that it makes security available as a *public good* for *its citizens*. Should the state not be capable of providing security (or should it not want to protect particular transactions, or if it – the state – does not exist at all), then private entrepreneurs in the business of security appear and offer protection as a *private good* for *their customers* – perforce to the detriment of those who are not their customers. As there is a demand for protection – and especially under these circumstances – and as it is paid for voluntarily, the providing of it is a genuine service.¹⁸ The oft-avowed stability of the Mafia can be explained by the fact that those known not to be under protection can be cheated. Even if Mafia protection is miserable and unreliable and gives rise to unpleasant consequences, for the individual any protection is still better than none at all.

Here, too, we shall observe a concrete service interaction. What kind of interdependence problems arise for those involved in this case? Do they succeed in solving them? And if so, in what way?

Bonasera followed Hagen into the corner room of the house and found Don Corleone sitting behind a huge desk ... The undertaker closed his eyes for a moment and then began to speak ... “I raised my daughter in the American fashion. I believe in America. America has made my fortune. I gave my daughter her freedom and yet taught her never to dishonour her family. She found a ‘boy friend’, not an Italian ... two months ago he took her for a drive. He had a masculine friend with him. They made her drink whiskey and then they tried to take advantage of her. She resisted. She kept her honour. They beat her. Like an animal. When I went to the hospital she had two black eyes. Her nose was broken. Her jaw was shattered ... I went to the police like a good American. The two boys ... were brought to trial ... The judge sentenced them to three years in prison and suspended the sentence. They went free that very day. I

¹⁸ Gambetta is interested in removing the mystique from the Mafia with the help of his rational analysis and thus in improving the chances of developing rational strategies to fight it.

stood in the courtroom like a fool and those bastards smiled at me. And then I said to my wife: 'We must go to Don Corleone for justice' ... Tell me what you wish. But do what I beg you to do." ... Don Corleone said gravely, "And what is that?" Bonasera glanced at Hagen ... then bent down and put his lips so close to the Don's hairy ear that they touched ... Finally the Don spoke. "That I cannot do. You are being carried away." „Bonasera said loudly, clearly: „I will pay you anything you ask“ ... Don Corleone rose from behind the desk. His face was still impassive but his voice rang like cold death. 'We have known each other many years, you and I ... but until this day you never came to me for counsel or help. I can't remember the last time you invited me to your house ... Let us be frank. You spurned my friendship. You feared to be in my debt.' Bonasera murmured, "I didn't want to get into trouble." The Don held up his hand. "No. Don't speak. You found America a paradise. You had a good trade, you made a good living ... the police guarded you, there were courts of law, you and yours could come to no harm. You did not need Don Corleone ... Now you come to me and say, 'Don Corleone, give me justice'. And you do not ask with respect. You do not offer me your friendship. You come into my home ... and you ask me to do murder and you say ... ,I will pay you anything'. ...what have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?" Bonasera cried out in his anguish and his fear, "America has been good to me. I wanted to be a good citizen. I wanted my child to be American". The Don clapped his hands together with decisive approval. "Well spoken. Very fine. Then you have nothing to complain about ... Forgive. Forget. Life is full of misfortunes". The cruel ... irony reduced the poor undertaker to a quivering jelly but he spoke up bravely again. "I ask you for justice". The Don asked, "What is our justice?" "An eye for an eye", Bonasera said. "You asked for more", the Don said. "Your daughter is alive." Bonasera said reluctantly, "Let them suffer as she suffers". Bonasera screwed up the last of his courage and said, "How much shall I pay you?" ... Don Corleone turned his back ... "If you had come to me for justice those scum who ruined your daughter would be weeping bitter tears this day. If by some misfortune an honest man like yourself made enemies they would become my enemies" – the Don raised his arm, finger pointing at Bonasera - "and then, believe me, they would fear you." Bonasera bowed his head and murmured in a strangled voice, "Be my friend. I accept." Don Corleone put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Good", he said, "you shall have your justice. Some day, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do me a service in return. Until that day, consider this justice a gift from my wife, your daughter's godmother". When the door closed behind the grateful undertaker, Don Corleone turned to Hagen and said: "Give this affair to Clemenza and tell him to be sure to use reliable people. People who will not be carried away by the smell of blood. After all, we're not murderers, no matter what that corpse valet dreams up in his foolish head" (Puzo 1978: 29-33).

Bonasera is in the process of changing the provider of protection and from a citizen is becoming a customer, for the American state, of which he thought a great deal, does not share his idea of justice. First contact with the state's competitor is easy. Bonasera knows that Corleone runs a protection service, he also knows where to find him and as they both are related through women in the family Corleone receives him in his office, thus solving the *spatial coordination* problem quickly. *Coordination of the subject matter*, that is definition of

the subject of the service and determining the “repair” of the “malfunctioning object” turn out, however, to be more difficult. After Bonasera has put the subject of the service he is expecting into words, the service provider refuses: “That I cannot do.” Whereupon Bonasera replies he will pay whatever Don Corleone wants.

So alongside the problem of a shared definition of the “malfunctioning object” – what is justice? – a further problem emerges. Just as we saw in the previous case study that the market-driven exchange of a job for cash *alone* is insufficient to produce a cooperation relationship, so we now see that here the offer of a monetary market transaction is nothing short of an affront. Thus not only has the shared definition of the object failed, but there are also very different views of the valid terms of trade. While the customer believes he can commission a murder for a one-off payment, the provider of protection expects the customer to commit himself to a long-term relationship: becoming a sort of regular customer as an SR owing a debt to the SP in a form which is termed friendship. These differing expectations are nevertheless not only the result of a misunderstanding, but also the product of divergent interests of SR and SP as well as of the peculiarity of the type of service itself.

It is true of the service on offer here, too, that it is a promise to perform a service: it cannot be tested beforehand. SP and SR have to solve this problem of an incomplete contract under particularly difficult conditions in order to do business with one another, for they each have every reason to be mistrustful of one another. Ultimately the fact that there is no basis for trust is why our service enterprise exists. If the service is not provided as expected or rewarded as expected, neither of those involved will be able to turn to the law.¹⁹ From the point of view of our customer the Mafia is a brand name and Don Corleone enjoys a good reputation so that he would accept the second-best option – he would prefer to be able to make use of protection as a public good – of paying a one-off price for justice and with that commissioning a murder. But how does the matter appear from the point of view of the mafioso? Bonasera does not – like the customer in our first example – ask himself this question and shows himself to be an incompetent customer, who does not know the rules of this business or does not want to stick to them. In the course of the talk about the service Corleone perceives gets the impression that his customer doesn’t actually know what the service on offer consists of, i.e. doesn’t know what the “matter” in hand is. As Corleone plainly does genuinely want to do business, he subjects his potential customer to a bit of further training.²⁰ Bonasera has to acknowledge that he is discredited as a customer by having gone to the competition – in that he went to the police. He should have come straight to Don Corleone. Above all he should have offered him respect and friendship – then Corleone would have made Bonasera’s enemies his own. They would be afraid of Bonasera. It is precisely this protection that Don Corleone would most like to offer. But for this the customer would have had to become his client as early as possible

¹⁹ On the contrary they are in fierce competition: as Mafia service providers have to be in a position to use violence to be able to give their guarantee of protection, the Mafia undermines the state’s monopoly of power. And the more powerful the state is, the less protection by Mafia is demanded.

²⁰ Puzo presents the service interaction between Corleone and Bonasera at the beginning of his story and thus makes the reader aware as soon as possible of how the business works in which the protagonists are active. In Coppola’s film this interaction is the first scene. The first shot in the film is of our customer’s face while he is putting his request. Fiction thus exactly matches Gambetta’s postulate of the Mafia as a protection service branch whose services are actively in demand.

instead of remaining an “American citizen”. Then it would have been a well-known fact that he was protected by the Godfather and nobody would have attacked him or members of his family.

A service of considerable quality such as this is not to be had for a one-off payment, and this is on account of the peculiarity of the object “protection”. In the interest of the customer potential “damagers” should know which customers are under protection, while it is necessarily in the Mafia’s interest to exclude free riders from protection. The principle of regular customers would clear up both these uncertainties. As our customer cannot reverse his past conduct it is now necessary to give a credible signal of readiness to cooperate in the future, and there is an offer for this: making a gesture of submission wrapped up as an expression of friendship. With Coleman a power contract has to be agreed to under which certain control rights over one’s own actions are handed over to the service provider – who is thus transformed into the ruler, for Bonasera, who ultimately makes this submissive gesture²¹, now owes him without being allowed to buy himself out – one can take the view that he has thus been integrated into the company. Corleone accepts the submission and commissions the service. Herewith the customer has also accepted the final result of the negotiation on the subject of the service relationship, Goffman’s malfunctioning object: “justice” will be done by giving the perpetrators of violence (who have been given probation by the competition) a brutal beating, but not murdering them.

4. Summary of the Results and Desiderata

The case studies show that considerable interdependence problems arise between the actors involved in service relationships, which are not to be solved by market exchange (alone). On account of the specific attributes of the commodity to be produced SP and SR require – as distinct from the model of the pure market – trust in their mutual willingness to cooperate. In the process the service interaction itself serves as a medium within which the interaction partners can indicate and develop their preparedness to cooperate step by step. They do this with the help of a tit-for-tat strategy which they apply within a service interaction and which – depending on the result – can either end in it being broken off or completed successfully; and via repeated interactions this can lead to trust within the framework of a *relationship*. This is how systematic problems within the service relationship from the definition of the “malfunctioning object” to that of the incomplete contract can be dealt with successfully. As we have seen, the services expected in the course of the tit-for-tat strategy will vary according to the type of overall service. In the Mafia example it becomes particularly apparent how important it is for the SP to be able to rely on his customer “playing the game” and sticking to the terms of the contract as agreed. Otherwise he will not be able to keep his promise to deliver the service and will lose his good name. Therefore he sets up a device which obliges

²¹ The fact that he has not done this before now does not mean that he did not know the terms of trade, but that he was not interested in fulfilling them. Taking on a risky commitment („Having trouble“, as he puts it) and having to be satisfied with a milder form of revenge were third in his order of preference – but still better than remaining without protection. In contrast to the direct bank Bonasera will not find any other offers on the market.

the customer to stick by his cooperation. For the bank this is easier. Contracts which it concludes with its customers after a successful interaction are secured elsewhere. Because of this security it is then possible for the customer and the call-centre agent to allow space for an “eye-to-eye” market relationship – in the case of the protection service by contrast the submission of the customer *within* the service interaction is necessary.

It was important to us to show that the solution of these problems is worked out *between rational actors interactively*, and is not based on keeping to pre-set rules. If accordingly we conceive of service interactions as deeds of rational actors behaving strategically, one recognises that certain problems occurring empirically are attributable to the specific structure of the service relationship. For the analysis of the basic interdependence problems we had to be able to block out the role of previous experience, institutions and organisations – for the solutions conceal the problem – and we have chosen our case studies accordingly. The social reality of service relationships is however often highly pre-structured.

We would imagine a theoretical integration of biographical, institutional and organisational framework conditions within our model as follows: one can presume that previous experiences on the part of SP and SR with service relationships influence the interaction. They can be integrated in our model by conceiving them as accumulated knowledge in the course of a “service biography” or convictions of the actors involved. Within a *relationship* this can mean previous experiences had by SP and SR in shared interactions. As regards *encounters* the customer’s previous experiences with the service organisation as well as those of the SP with other customers can be conditions helping or hindering the solution of interdependence problems.²²

Institutional solutions, as looked at in various forms as standardisation of services (McDonaldisation – see Section 1.1) or as normative regulation of professional services, can be treated within the framework of our model, by viewing them as expectations of behaviour, rules of the game (Zintl 1999: 183 ff) or “rules with validity” (Esser 2003: 47) which can replace interactive production of confidence-building measures. One can investigate by which means (how), under what circumstances, to what extent and at what expense this can succeed.

We have restricted ourselves in our study to one service provider and one service receiver respectively; often service relationships reveal a greater complexity however. Social services are an example of this, in which alongside SP and SR further customers, public funders, the public realm or relatives of the service receiver play a part. Our model allows one to test the influence of principal-agent problems occurring in this context (between SP and his organisation), public good problems or threshold dynamics²³ on service interactions.

²² The Mafia can fall back on customers whose social conditioning has been largely determined by the paternalistic family structure. An example of rail travellers’ experiences and their detrimental influence on interaction with conductors is discussed in Dunkel (2003). One may consider the example of gender as a social attribution which can pre-structure service interactions.

²³ See as an example the mobilisation of protest among travellers in a train compartment: „It’s like if one shouts, shouts loudly, the others hear it too, you know, it’s a bit like a chain reaction...” (Quote from an interview with a train conductor: Rieder, Poppitz and Dunkel 2002: 507).

Apart from extension of some content of our model of the service relationship the obvious thing is to give thought to play-theoretical model options concerning the problems depicted and their solutions. We do not want to rule out a model conception of the comparatively complex problems and their solutions as being possible as well as sensible.²⁴ For this article the game theoretical approach initially had the sole function of pinning down the basic interdependence problems in order to be able to show that the theory of strategic acting of rational actors is in a position “to simplify and crystallize out what is essential in a situation” (Swedberg 2001: 322).

Thus we wish to conclude by pleading for the application of a rational decision theory with actors behaving strategically for analysis of complex everyday situations. We hope that we have succeeded in showing how its application within a sociology of service work gives rise to a new view of the decision situations of the actors. But we also think that this view should not be “clearer” than the problem with which the actors are in fact confronted. Thus the explanatory power of the theory of rational acting can – vice versa – be strengthened by employing empirical case studies and with them the situational constructions of actors acting in reality. Incentives missed by analytical models based on “oversimplified” assumptions can be concealed in these, with which the appropriate dilemmas may be solved or may not even arise. For actors cooperate more often than theory allows.

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²⁴ To be able to work out dominant strategies and balanced solutions in empirical cases, game theory is restricting itself in that the situations examined are freed of the incentives which might make another decision possible. Goffman himself remarked that it is „a custom in game theory” to “employ miniature scenarios of a very farfetched kind” (1971: 89). Naturally, purified models of this type have the advantage that one can change the parameters and control their effects. But it is precisely this controlled (and successive) change of the conditions of the situation which imposes limits on the complexity of the design, a fact which is recognised in the Rational Choice camp: „Our models may grow heavier“, Gambetta thus demands (1998: 121). For „Rational-choice analysis, powerful as it is, often ends up modelling obvious aspects of phenomena or enslaving the choice of the phenomena to be explained to the limits of the theory. Its neatness comes at the cost of being of less interest to humans other than rational-choice theorists” (ebd.). This ought to be amenable to change.

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