

# Why Do Service Designers Struggle to Address Power Dynamics?<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

To support transformation in service systems, scholars argue for greater attention to power dynamics in service design (SD). While current literature stresses the need for individual service designers to be reflexive about power, it neglects the context within which these designers predominantly work. We argue that such an individual focus overlooks key contextual factors that hinder service designers from addressing power dynamics. This narrowed view of the challenge unintentionally positions service designers as scapegoats, while their inability to address power dynamics effectively persists. In response, we draw on ecological theories in psychology, which offer insights into how individuals' behaviors are interconnected with factors in their context. We introduce a framework for understanding these interconnections, detailing how we used it to identify and analyze domains of contextual factors that inhibit service designers to address power dynamics in practice. By proposing a systemic framework, identifying related contextual factors, and evaluating applicability with service designers, this study lays the groundwork for structural shifts to address power dynamics in service design more effectively.

**Keywords:** Power, Contextual factors, Ecological psychology, Reflexivity, Service design

## INTRODUCTION

Service design (SD) is increasingly seen as a promising means for transforming service systems (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021), often by fostering bottom-up change to enhance well-being and ensure equitable access to services (Anderson et al., 2018; Fisk et al., 2018; Sangiorgi, 2011). To fulfil these promises, it's pivotal for service design to address power dynamics. For instance, equity hinges on the liberation of marginalized actors, which necessitates a shift in power dynamics. Therefore, scholars stress the importance of addressing power dynamics and supporting a redistribution of power within service systems to achieve these transformative goals (Sangiorgi, 2011).

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Sangiorgi (ibid, p. 29) urges designers “to introduce reflexivity into their work to address power and control issues in each design encounter”. Similarly, a recent article on power literacy in service design by Goodwill and colleagues (2021, p. 54) states that, “the main challenge identified here is the designer's lack of awareness, sensitivity to, and understanding of how power dynamics and differentials affect stakeholders, the relations between them, and the social issues addressed in and through design”. Despite these calls, attempts to shift power through participatory approaches in service design reveal scant evidence of realizing such shifts (Donetto et al., 2015).

Penin and Tonkinwise (2009) emphasize the need for service designers to grasp the political complexities in service provision. In a discussion between Penin and Tonkinwise, Penin (2018, p. 138) poses the question, “Why is it important for designers to maintain an awareness of the issues of power, class, and gender when designing new service provision?”. While we share an interest in these questions, we wonder whether such phrasing might inadvertently hinder progress in service design’s ability to address power dynamics. A primary focus on the actions of an individual exhibits what is often described as the fundamental “attribution error”: overemphasizing individual reasons for behaviors or non-behaviors, rather than situational or contextual ones (Ross, 1977).

We argue that solely emphasizing the need for individual service designers to build reflexivity around power dynamics could inadvertently scapegoat them, while the issue at hand persists. To avoid this, we need a broader understanding of the systemic factors that are hindering the process of addressing power dynamics in practice. A systemic view can help identify mechanisms beyond individual reflexivity that get in the way of addressing power. This broader understanding can then inform the necessary structural changes that promote more equitable outcomes in service design. To support this understanding, this exploratory paper provides a framework that aids in contextualizing the challenge of addressing power dynamics in SD practice. The primary value of this research lies in challenging the current focus of the discourse around power in service design. The contextual focus that we adopt in this research aligns with the larger systemic turn that is currently taking place in service design (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2021; Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017; Vink et al., 2021) but has yet to become a part of the discourse on reflexivity about power.

We begin by introducing ecological theories from psychology, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between people and context. We then describe our exploratory research approach, inspired by mystery-focused research. Subsequently, we present the insights derived from analyzing SD literature and our own experiences through the lens of a framework informed by ecological psychology. We further report on reflections from a workshop where we tested the applicability and resonance of our framework with service design practitioners. Finally, we discuss how these learnings can lay the foundation for a more contextual understanding as well as structural actions aimed at thoughtfully addressing power dynamics in service design practice.

## 1. DRAWING FROM ECOLOGICAL THEORIES IN PSYCHOLOGY

To better understand why service designers might struggle to address power dynamics, we draw on ecological theories common in developmental and community psychology (Jason, 2016). These perspectives seek to understand people within their contextual environment

and foster changes in the context that impede the ability of its actors to take control and improve their lives (Trickett, 2009). Specifically, we adopt Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977, 1979, 1986) to guide our analysis. Originally developed as a framework to study human development throughout life, this theoretical framework embraces the reciprocal relationship between an individual and their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By not focusing solely on a person or their context but on their interactions and relationships (Trickett, 2009), this framework helps to connect individuals and context, allowing an examination through a unified lens that emphasizes their interconnection.

## 1.1. Ecological Systems Theory

Uri Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1986) compared the ecological environment individuals are embedded in to “a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (1979, p. 3), as visualized in Figure 1. The immediate environment, termed the microsystem, includes key actors and institutions an individual interacts with, such as family, friends, workplace, and neighborhood. Bronfenbrenner emphasizes that individuals have direct reciprocal interactions with these entities, with their subjective experiences shaping both their behavior, development, and surroundings.

Ecological systems theory's primary contribution is its integration of indirect factors influencing an individual's life, development, and actions. The mesosystem, as the model's second layer, embodies the relationships between the different entities of the microsystem, that are indirectly affecting the individual. For instance, a child might be affected by parental conflicts, and an inclusive setting for one person to live may emerge from positive relationships between other neighbors. In addition, the theory emphasizes the ongoing influence of societal factors that also are interconnected with individuals, represented by the exo- and macrosystems. The exo-system includes major societal institutions and infrastructure that “surround” and shape the micro- and mesosystems. Examples include mass media, government agencies, transportation systems, and informal social networks.

The model's outermost layer, the macrosystem, encompasses the institutionalized and often implicit cultural norms and social structures that pervade societal institutions and infrastructure. These include ideologies, religions, and economic systems, representing typically intangible factors that set the pattern for the structures and activities within the micro-, meso- and exo-systems. Finally, underpinning all the other layers is the chronosystem, representing time and history. This aspect of the theory also emphasizes that historical events and developments affect every layer within a given ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

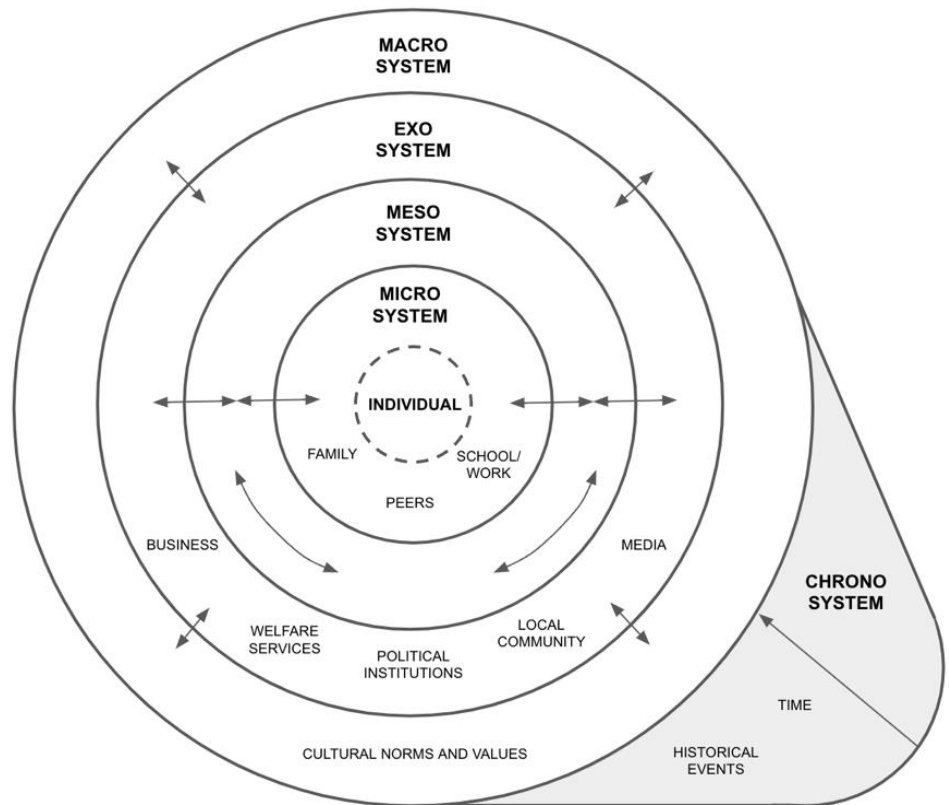


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model.

## 1.2. The Ecology of A Service Designer

In our exploration, we embrace Bronfenbrenner's notion that "the properties of the person and of the environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms" (1979, p. 41). To understand these interdependencies within a service design context, we adapted the model to the setting of a service designer, as depicted in Figure 2. The examples in this adaptation stem from the authors' perspectives, serving merely as illustrations, as the settings of individual practitioners may differ.

The service designer's microsystem includes their direct interactions, such as with their workplace, current project, and design team. The mesosystem encompasses processes and interactions within or between these entities, like the funding or team selection for specific projects. The exosystem, pertaining to the service designer, comprises a range of actors, organizations, and communities indirectly influencing the work of the service designer. Examples of these might include the general marketplace for service design, the service systems in which the practitioner designs, global and local professional service design communities, design schools and other non-design professionals in the same domain. This exo-system is embedded within a macrosystem, which comprises factors like ideology, culture, legislation, social structures, and the economic system of the given context.

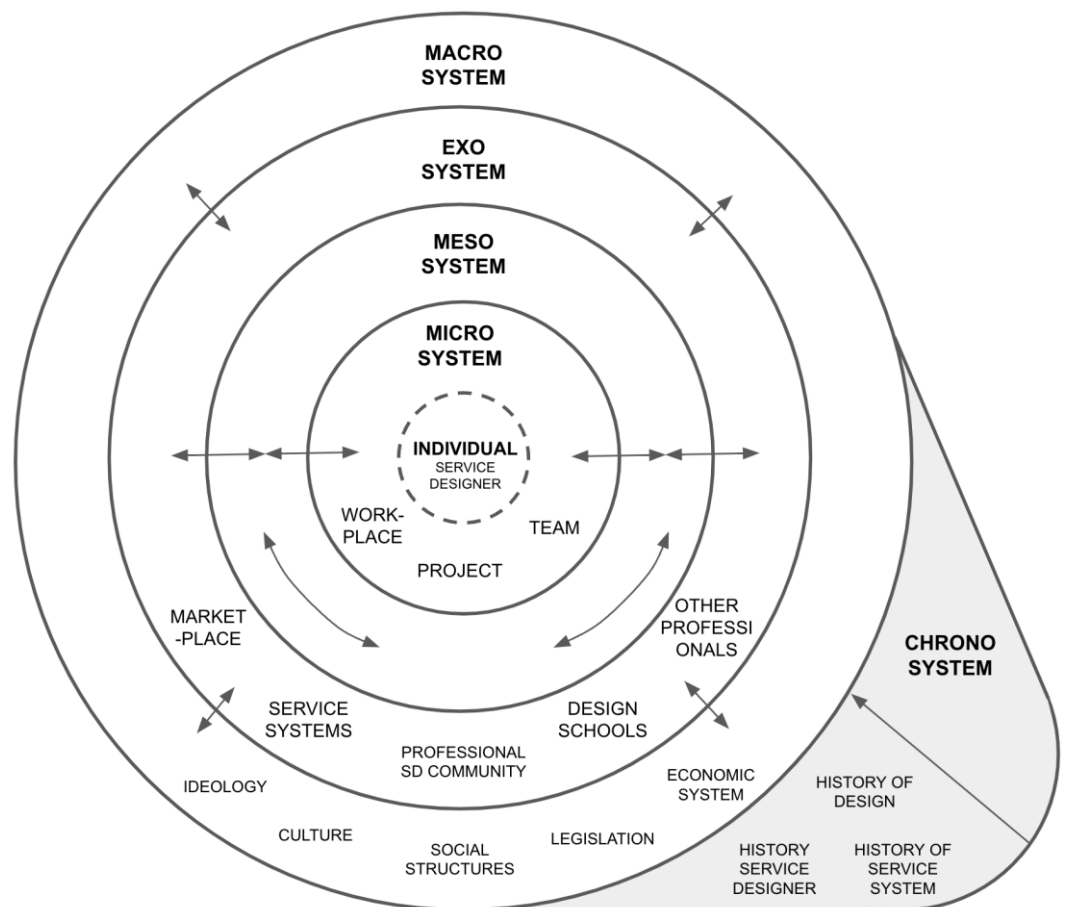


Figure 2: Ecological Systems Theory adapted to a service design context by the authors.

## 2. EXPLORATORY RESEARCH APPROACH

We undertook a preliminary conceptual analysis to examine how a contextual viewpoint could enhance our understanding of why service designers struggle to address power dynamics in practice. This observation was used to problematize current assumptions in the service design discourse (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). In our reflexive research inquiry, we drew inspiration from a mystery-focused research approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), which posits that theory development is stimulated by selectively examining phenomena that do not align with existing theory. The “mystery” in our research was the ongoing issue of inadequate attention to power dynamics in service designers’ practice, despite repeated emphasis on this subject within the discourse. To support this exploration, we integrated insights from ecological theories, service design literature and our personal experiences (Figure 3) through a recursive sensemaking process to understand how the failure to address power dynamics could “fit” within its situated context.

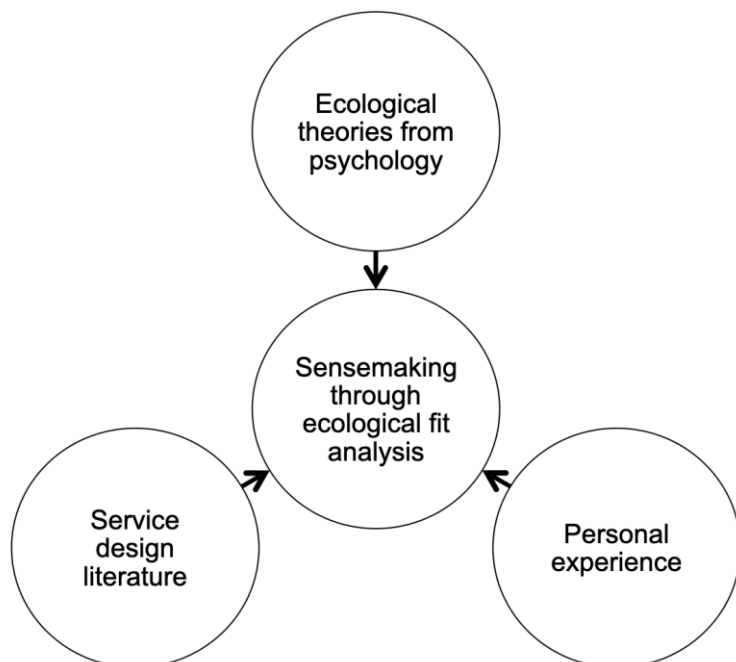


Figure 3: Integration of service design literature, ecological theories from psychology and our personal experience into an exploratory ecological fit analysis.

We actively incorporated our experiences into the analysis, in line with a mystery-focused research approach. This approach emphasizes the potential of researchers' subjectivity to challenge existing theories and develop better ones (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The first and third author, with a foundation in clinical, organizational and community psychology, have extensive experience applying ecological frameworks in family therapy, organizational settings and systems change efforts within the public sector. The second and fourth author have long experience working with service and systemic design in complex service systems, such as healthcare. Throughout the research, we used our interdisciplinary backgrounds dialogically to question and reframe assumptions and beliefs found in the service design literature, as well as each others' viewpoints.

To explore the persistent failure to address power dynamics, we engaged in sense-making using a fit analysis based on the ecological systems model, commonly used in systemic psychology interventions (e.g., Henggeler et al., 2009). Ecological fit analysis generates an understanding of how a specific phenomenon fits within its context, and, thus, how seemingly problematic actions or inactions may functionally serve an individual within their environment. Our aim was to investigate whether the failure to address power could *fit* within service designers' ecological contexts.





associated factors, and interconnections, supported us constructing a more contextual understanding of service designers' ability to address power dynamics.

To nuance our interpretations and reflect on the framework's applicability, we also organized a workshop that mirrored our use of the framework. Within this workshop, six service design practitioners received a brief introduction to the framework and its theoretical underpinnings. They were then asked to generate factors that influenced their ability to address power dynamics using the said framework. Finally, we engaged in a collaborative discussion about the framework's applicability and limitations. The participants were recruited from the authors' professional connections. These service designers had diverse cultural backgrounds and experience practicing service design across a variety of geographical contexts, but all work currently as service designers in Norway. In the next section, we present the insights gained from our research process and the workshop, which highlight the complexities and context-dependent nature of power in service design.

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1. The Ecological Fit of Inaction to Address Power

Our analysis led us to identify the domains and factors summarized in Table 1. We distinguished five distinct contextual domains, impacting service designers' inaction to address power: 1) the professional market, 2) the framing of design, 3) demographic representation, 4) social expectations and identity, and 5) organization of work. Within each of these domains, we identified proposed contextual drivers derived from both the literature and our own experiences. Some drivers were explicitly mentioned in the literature, such as how Akama & Prendiville (2013) note that the object-centered legacy in design schools drives a problem-solving focus in service design. In other sources, we indirectly interpreted factors from perspectives and assumptions in the literature, such as using statistics from Leitch and colleagues' (2021) to understand how demographic representation among service designers can be an indirect driver. Some factors overlapped across domains, particularly in the macro layer, where, for instance, being embedded in a capitalist logic was a driver in both the professional market and organization of work domains. Given the exploratory nature of our inquiry, the table should be viewed as our subjective interpretation of service designers' context.



Table 1: Identified domains and factors with literature informing interpretation

Domain	Description	Proposed contextual factors	Literature stimulating interpretation
<b>Professional market</b>	Service design (SD) practice is entrenched in a professional marketplace that forms and limits the extent and contents of its practice.	<p><u>Macro:</u> SD practice is embedded in a capitalist market The free market holds the assumption that competition leads to progress</p> <p><u>Exo:</u> SD is gaining credibility as a professional practice Other professionals also engage in service development SD is framed as unique, and values-based</p> <p><u>Meso:</u> SD projects are initiated by stakeholders holding power Stakeholders are pleased with SD providing frictionless outcomes</p> <p><u>Micro:</u> SD teams risk losing support (financial and legitimacy) if they challenge power dynamics.</p>	(Fayard et al., 2017; Mager, 2016; Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009; Seravalli & Witmer, 2021; Zomerdijs & Voss, 2010)
<b>The framing of design</b>	The framing of SD inherently carries and guides expectations regarding what service design can and cannot achieve.	<p><u>Macro:</u> Scientific and positivistic reductionism is the primarily valued knowledge Innovation is culturally appreciated</p> <p><u>Exo:</u> SD holds a narrative of being of help by creating frictionless experiences SD is framed to create solutions to specific problems SD is taught in design schools with an object-centered legacy</p> <p><u>Meso:</u> SD projects are most often initiated by single organizations aiming to improve specific problems Success in SD projects is defined by concrete solutions being made</p> <p><u>Micro:</u> Power dynamics are intangible and not a part of the design brief Projects tend to aim for concrete outputs/innovations</p>	(Akama & Prendiville, 2013; Ansari, 2018; Blomkvist et al., 2016; Clatworthy, 2011; Duan et al., 2021; Joly et al., 2019; Secomandi & Snelders, 2011)
<b>Demographic representation</b>	The demographic representation within the SD community introduces biases and blind spots that affect SD practice.	<p><u>Macro:</u> An array of systemic sociopolitical practices and beliefs uphold differences in privileges based on gender, class, race and more</p> <p><u>Exo:</u> Disproportionally many men are leading SD agencies Lack of diversity in the SD community Actors with privilege are predominantly initiating SD projects/initiatives Power and oppression are not part of the curriculum in all SD schools</p> <p><u>Meso:</u> Low affective associations with power inequities in SD teams/agencies Bias in SD community around awareness and importance of power inequities</p> <p><u>Micro:</u> Low sensitivity to power inequities</p>	(Fonteyjn, 2023; Goodwill et al., 2021; Leitch et al., 2021; ZIPPA, 2022)
<b>Organization of work</b>	The setup of SD practice, typically carried out in projects by external or internal design teams, establishes a position and frame that further defines its scope and process.	<p><u>Macro:</u> SD is embedded in a capitalist marketplace Innovation is associated with rapid changes</p> <p><u>Exo:</u> Design processes are most often disembedded from other activities in the organization Design professionals most often work as consultants (internal or external) to the organization</p> <p><u>Meso:</u> Projects do not directly target the organization's current design legacy Projects have a limited timeframe Projects have a limited scope</p> <p><u>Micro:</u> SD team is not a part of strategic decision-making in organizations No position or need to address or expose power-hierarchies</p>	(Junginger, 2015; Karpen et al., 2017; Leitch et al., 2021; Seravalli & Witmer, 2021; Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018)
<b>Social expectations and identity</b>	The internal culture and narrative of the SD community carries certain social expectations.	<p><u>Macro:</u> Cultural belief that democracy is fair Underlying assumption that participation equals empowerment</p> <p><u>Exo:</u> SD community has an identity of altruism (design for a better world) SD holds the promise of being user-centric by including users in the design process Internal (and external) discourse around SD being powerful</p> <p><u>Meso:</u> An underlying assumption in projects is that power inequities are dealt with when people are invited to the process SD projects/agencies hold promise to be inclusive</p> <p><u>Micro:</u> Addressing their own power (as SD practitioners) is uncomfortable as it opposes the SD narrative</p>	(Fayard et al., 2017; Goodwill et al., 2021; Kimbell, 2011; Sangiorgi, 2011; Wetter-Edman, 2014)

Using principles from systemic interventions in psychology (Henggeler et al., 2009), we refined the factors in each domain to be as concrete and descriptive as possible. Finally, we established relationships between interdependent factors, proposing how they might affect one another.

By labeling, sorting, revising, and connecting the drivers, we identified potential feedback loops of systemic adaptation. These feedback loops represent a mechanism in which an individual's behavior adjusts to interdependent systemic factors across multiple levels of their ecological environment, while the individual's behavior, simultaneously reinforces the factors in the same ecology (Kelly, 1968). We intentionally refrained from punctuating a starting point in the feedback loops and figures, since all the factors continuously interact. Establishing a starting point might falsely imply a sequential causal relationship among them. In the following section, we will illustrate two such feedback loops related to "the professional market" and "the framing of design." By outlining examples of the identified feedback loops, we want to show how the framework helped us grasp the relationship between individual actions and contextual factors in SD practice.

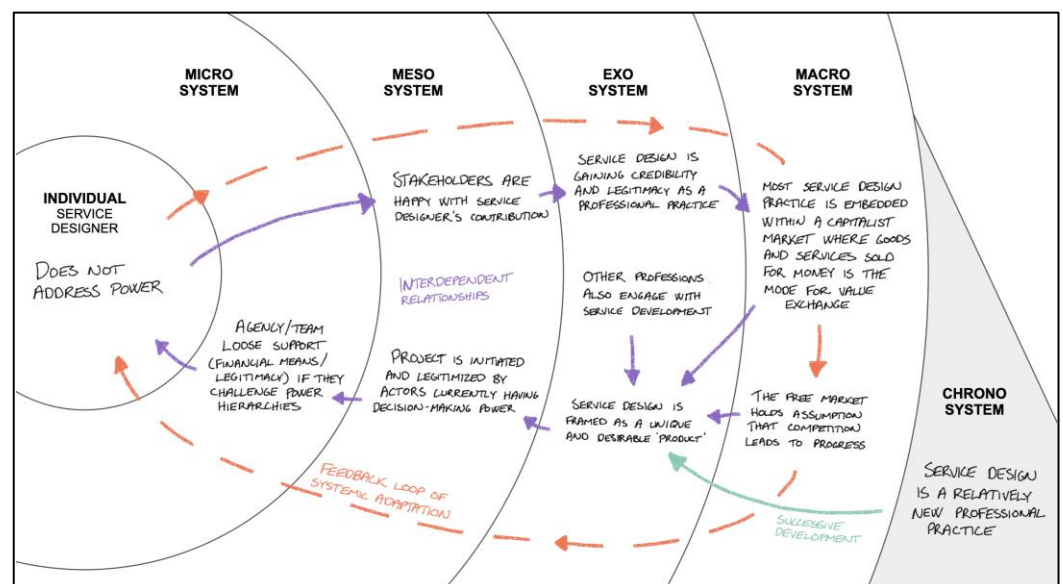


Figure 5: Successive development, interdependent relationships, and feedback loop of systemic adaptation regarding the inaction to address power in the professional market domain.

Figure 5 shows a proposed feedback loop related to the professional market in which SD practice resides. Since SD is a relatively new professional practice (chrono) embedded within a capitalist market (macro) that presumes that competition fosters progress (macro), it must be portrayed as a unique and desirable product to stakeholders (exo). This portrayal is further reinforced by marketplace competition from other non-design professionals involved in service development (exo). Also, stakeholders with decision-making power must support and legitimize SD for initiatives or projects to occur (meso). If the SD agency or team challenges these stakeholders' decision-making power, they might jeopardize their financial resources or legitimacy (micro). As a result, the adaptive behavior is to not address power dynamics, which in turn reinforces the stakeholders' satisfaction with SD work (meso). More broadly, this affirms SD as a credible and legitimate professional practice (exo) in the capitalist market (macro).

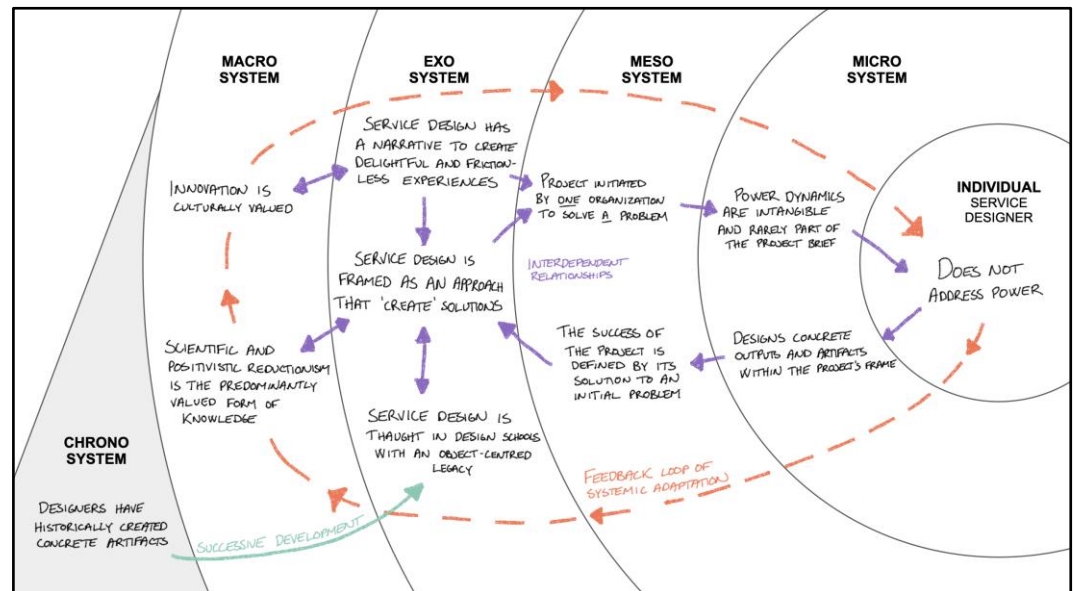


Figure 6: Successive development, interdependent relationships, and feedback loop of systemic adaptation regarding the inaction to address power in the *design framing* domain.

Figure 6 visualizes another proposed feedback loop, related to the framing of SD. As SD is framed to create solutions for defined problems (exo), it aligns well with Western culture that holds scientific and positivistic reductionism as the predominantly valued mode of knowledge (macro). This solution-focused framing of SD is reinforced by design schools teaching SD, which often carry an object-centered legacy (exo). This legacy stems from most designers traditionally crafting artifacts of concrete materials (chrono). Also, we note that SD has a narrative to create new solutions that imply less friction (exo), which fits in a culture that equates innovation with progress (macro). The framing and narrative of SD then lead to projects being initiated by single organizations to tackle specific problems (meso). These specific problems are the foci of the project briefs (micro). Since the brief rarely encompasses power dynamics, which are inherently intangible, service designers find few incentives to address them. Instead, they focus on tangible outputs and service artifacts within the frame of the project (micro). As stakeholders assess SD projects on these tangible solutions (meso), the created solutions become symbols of success, reinforcing SD's framing as a viable way of creating solutions (exo). Ultimately, this reinforcement further validates the cultural values of innovation and reductionism (macro).

### 3.2. Reflecting on the Framework with Practitioners

In our workshop, practitioners echoed many of the barriers that we found, such as the business model, dependence on decision-makers, and colleagues' awareness of power dynamics. As they acknowledged and described these barriers and the need to better navigate power dynamics, they demonstrated reflexivity on issues of power. This highlighted that mere reflexivity about power dynamics is insufficient; the context and the service designer's positioning within these dynamics are also crucial aspects for effectively addressing them. Another relevant reflection from the workshop was the experience of emotional drain when attempting to navigate these barriers, portraying the dilemma of practitioners: facing heightened expectations about addressing power without the appropriate positioning and support to do so.

The feedback from service designers illuminated several challenges in applying the framework. Firstly, the framework was perceived as being abstracted from their day-to-day experiences. We observed that these abstractions led to generalized discussions, without necessarily revealing actionable insights for the practitioners themselves. Secondly, the defined focus on “the universal service designer” seemed contrived and overlooked how a designer’s personal history, privileges and surroundings shape their professional role. Based on this, we discussed if the framework’s application might be more fitting for specific situations rather than the broad generalization presented in this paper.

In essence, this feedback suggest that a context-specific understanding may be more supportive for practitioners than the generalizations offered in this article. To make the framework relevant for practitioners, there is a need to pinpoint specific factors affecting individual service designers in unique situations and contexts. The framework might, thus, have its best application by narrowing the scope down to an analysis of one or several service designers in a specific and current situation and context. In this way, the framework can help practitioners and other actors shift from mere reflexivity on power dynamics to actively identifying and leveraging opportunities for action within their specific contexts.

Lastly, some features of the ecosystems model came under scrutiny. Workshop participants commented that its linear representation of history oversimplified the relationship to time, neglecting, for example, how future projections influence the present. Furthermore, the anthropocentric nature of the framework overlooks how elements like technology or nature impact individuals. This echoes other criticisms of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, pointing out that it is anthropocentric, sidelining human connections with nature and other species (Darling, 2007; Elliott & Davis, 2018). The theory has also been questioned on how it distinguishes daily cultural practices of individuals from the broader concept of culture (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017).

## 4. DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

This explorative research enriches the discourse around power in SD research and practice in three main ways. First, the framework adapted from ecological theories in psychology initiates a systemic shift in reflexivity around power, acknowledging the numerous factors influencing practitioners’ ability to address power dynamics. Second, it suggests a redistribution of the responsibility for addressing power dynamics in SD from the individual practitioner to the entire SD community. Finally, the research highlights multiple possible strategic and structural changes related to power dynamics in SD. We discuss each of these three contributions and future directions for a more contextual discourse around power dynamics in service design below.

### 4.1. A Multiplicity of Contextual Factors

While existing literature stresses the need for individual SD practitioners to be reflexive about power (Goodwill, et al., 2021; Sangiorgi, 2011), this paper presents a more contextual understanding of the challenges service designers face when addressing power dynamics in practice. By identifying such contextual factors, the SD discourse can shift from focusing on a single underlying reason (individual reflexivity) to insights into multiple contributing and interdependent factors. This shift acknowledges that merely raising awareness among

individual SD practitioners is inadequate. Our research suggests that reflexivity is situated and necessitates supportive contexts. Furthermore, it highlights that multiple interventions within the broader service design community are needed for service designers to be able to address power dynamics in practice. For example, it is not enough to simply take action on addressing issues of representation among service designers, there is also a need to address the cultural expectations that are being placed on these service designers and their work.

## 4.2. From Individual to Collective Responsibility

While discussions to date typically reinforce the responsibility of individual service designers to address power dynamics, our research conveys the importance of a collective approach, spreading responsibility among various actors in and connected to the service design community. To counter the effects of the fundamental attribution error of individual behaviors, ecological theories from psychology provide valuable perspectives for understanding of how people interact with and within their contexts. These theories encourage a balanced consideration of people, process, and context in focus, rather than prioritizing one over the others. Viewing an individual's inability to address power dynamics as an adaptive, context-driven response, helps reduce blame and guilt on individual service designers, while recognizing the need for collective and context-aware action to challenge unequitable power dynamics. Even though individual service design practitioners share this responsibility, addressing these contextual factors necessitates not only individual but also collective reflexivity, as well as recognition of power dynamics at play within the service design community. Consequently, we propose that practitioners, scholars, leaders, authors, design organizations, and others must share responsibility for examining their roles in maintaining the problem and taking appropriate action to address it.

## 4.3. Strategic Interventions in Context

An important step toward effecting change in how power dynamics in service design practice are addressed, involves understanding the systemic context. By examining and suggesting related domains—such as the professional market, design framing, demographic representation, social expectations and identity, and organization of work—along with their associated contextual factors, our research identifies potential strategic interventions. Such interventions may foster more supportive contexts for action concerning power dynamics in service design practice. To transform service systems toward more equitable and sustainable outcomes, redistributing power to marginalized groups or future generations, is essential (Fisk et al., 2018). The factors within service designers' context can serve as leverage points to be targeted for achieving transformative change by shifting power dynamics within service systems. Specifically, it gives possible directions to the needed structural changes within the broader service design community, including for example alterations in the business models service design relies on or the selection criteria for service design educational programs. Such leverage points within the service design context can steer towards a more strategic course of action.

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#### 4.4. Enriching the Discourse Through Multiple Lenses

While Bronfenbrenner's model offers an intuitive organizing framework, it inevitably frames the system with a particular perspective. In broadening and nuancing the discourse, alternative ecological frameworks, like Kelly's Ecological Theory (1968) or Moos's Social Climate Theory (2003), offer additional representations on individual-context interactions. Increased reflectivity on such a complex and multifaceted issue as power would benefit from looking beyond frameworks from only ecological psychology, to include those from, for example, political science, organizational theory, and economy. Multiple lenses on the issue of addressing power will aid actors in grasping interconnected contextual factors within the service designer's context and open other opportunities for intervention. Furthermore, a variety of perspectives may help in relating to actors with a multiplicity of backgrounds and positions that need to be involved in shifting the context around addressing power.

#### 4.5. Building on Existing Momentum

While working with this framework, our primary focus was on the contextual factors that might impede service designers from addressing power dynamics. However, early steps toward addressing these dynamics in service design are already underway. These efforts can serve as groundwork for more contextual interventions. Notably, the ServDes 2020 conference sought to explicitly unsettle dominant power dynamics in the field (Akama et al., 2022). Moreover, we can look to other design dialogues for inspiration. For instance, the discussion on power and politics in the closely related field of participatory design (Halskov & Hansen, 2015) and the broader conversations on decolonizing design (see e.g., Schultz et al., 2018; Tlostanova, 2017) offer valuable perspectives and learnings for the service design community. Both research-driven (e.g., Goodwill et al., 2021) and practice-oriented descriptions of how to work amid and with power can also aid actors in developing appropriate strategies. For instance, the System Innovation Initiative provides a framework that delves into power dynamics, contrasting concepts like the "powerless" versus the "powerful", having power "over" versus power "with", the power to "resist" versus to "initiate", and "hard" versus "soft" power (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2021). Such distinctions can clarify and deepen conversations on power. Engaging with these ongoing discourses the service design community can enrich, refine, and challenge some of the interpretations outlined in our research.

#### 4.6. Future Research

As this study is an exploratory and preliminary investigation, further research is needed to build a more robust, systemic understanding of addressing power dynamics in service design practice. Contextual factors are inherently circumstance dependent and, thus, need to be understood in their situated setting. Our aim in this paper has been to explore how an ecological framework might enhance our awareness of the contextual factors in addressing power in service design, not being comprehensive or identifying universally valid factors. Hence, further investigation can both validate, refine, or challenge the factors and relationships proposed in this study. Our research is rooted in a Western Anglo-European perspective and context. As such, situated inquiries in other contexts are needed to understand differences and nuances.



Moreover, our analysis interpreted general factors based on selected literature and our personal experiences. As discussed above, such broad categorizations often abstract from the nuances of everyday practice. Empirically grounded inquiries, for instance through case or field studies within varied service design communities would offer richer and more situated understandings into the domains and factors influencing a service designers' ability to address power dynamics and appropriate interventions within diverse contexts.

Despite these limitations, this research offers a starting point and a new direction for continued research on addressing power dynamics in service design practice. The preliminary domains identified can open into more concrete questions for further research and discourse, such as: How does SD's positioning within the professional marketplace inhibit actors in addressing power within the practice? How does the fundamental framing of design influence how power dynamics are worked with within the service design community? How do the current demographics of service design practitioners how power dynamics are addressed? Additionally, this research opens new questions about what actions are needed to address barriers and build supportive contexts for reflexivity and action around power across these and other domains. Rather than letting service designers completely "off the hook," we need further research on how they might work with others within their situated contexts to address contextual factors. Furthermore, additional research is needed to nuance discussions about ethics that take specific contextual settings into consideration.

## 5. A CALL TO ACTION

Several scholars have argued that reflexivity among service designers is vital for addressing power dynamics. However, a myriad of contextual factors influences service designers' inability to address power dynamics in their practice. To realize service design's potential for transformational change and strive for equitable outcomes, a more systemic approach to addressing the contextual factors within which service design operates is needed. Developing contexts for both reflexivity and action around power requires joint efforts among actors within and related to the service design community. Structural and fundamental changes in domains such as work organization, market positioning, and design framing, are necessary to achieve the practice's aspirations. Based on this preliminary study, we call for a discourse shift in the literature and strategic action in the service design community that challenges the focus on blaming practitioners and moves toward collaboratively creating contexts for deliberate and systemic confrontation of power imbalances in service design.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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