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It Never Ends: Vulnerable Consumers' Experiences of Persistent Liminality and Resource (Mis)Integration

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Synopsis

This research explores how vulnerable consumers experience liminality and resource (mis)integration in service systems. Set within a family caring context, the vulnerable consumers in this study are parents in families of children with life-long conditions (e.g., autism spectrum disorder/ASD and Down syndrome) who are highly dependent on health, education, and other public services. Our research reveals a new form of liminality that is persistent and relational, which is collectively experienced by interdependent, vulnerable consumers. Our study also identifies the dynamics of persistent liminality as Precipitating, Subsisting, and Resisting. In line with Transformative Service Research (TSR), we shed light on the resource constraints that decrease the well-being of vulnerable consumers.

Introduction and Background

Recent discourses related to systemic value cocreation (e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2016) and resource integration (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012) are founded on several normative assumptions: the unlimited agency of consumers and other actors, the capacity of resource integration to create value, and the self-adjusting and resource re-plenishing capabilities of service systems (Ng, Sweeney, and Plewa 2019; Karpen and Kleinaltenkamp 2019; Lusch and Vargo 2014). However, other scholars have begun to critique this overly optimistic view (e.g., Echeverri and Skålén 2021). Resource integration, for example, becomes particularly contested in situations

where actors may not have equal agency or skills to engage in it (Kelleher et al. 2020). Furthermore, TSR highlights the need to study vulnerable consumers (Anderson et al. 2013), emphasizing the importance of resources for consumer well-being. In tandem, service researchers are calling for further research on resource constraints to improve service system flexibility to meet consumers' changing needs (Ostrom et al. 2021).

Liminality refers to "a state or process which is betwixt-and-between" and often occurs as part of social transition processes such as growing up, moving house, divorcing, or losing loved ones (Turner 1979, p. 465). Some people however are compelled to live with permanent liminality i.e., long-term transitions that lack an anticipated end (Appau et al. 2020). In the case of children who have ongoing and complex additional needs, with reduced opportunity to transition into independent adulthood, liminality may severely impact parents and families. This important dialectic between liminality and resource integration remains under-researched.

Issues and Questions Considered

In opposition to traditional perspectives, recent research on value co-destruction and resource misintegration (e.g., Echeverri and Skålén 2021) suggests that actors face several challenges in identifying, accessing, securing, or integrating the resources that they need. Further, Dauphin et al. (2020) propose that resource misintegration may be attributable to a mismatch between

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resource demand and supply or when actor needs are intense, uncertain, and/or stressful. Despite these advancements, empirical research is scant and resource integration discourses have been criticised for their inability to uncover “what really matters to actors” (Echeverri 2021, p. 104).

Although research on permanent liminality has advanced the understanding of an enduring liminal state, little is known regarding the dynamics of liminality in terms of its temporal and processual aspects and how it evolves and is experienced over extended time-periods. Moreover, in complex service systems, involving multiple actors, interactions, and actor interdependencies (Pinho et al. 2014), exiting a liminal state may be particularly difficult. Hence, actors must often navigate complex resource integration challenges to cocreate value on behalf of dependent others (Kelleher et al. 2020). While available resources are likely to influence consumers’ experiences of liminality and vulnerability, research on the topic is limited.

Our study responds to these critical perspectives. Set within the context of family caring and complex service systems including healthcare, education and other interconnected services, the research aims to explore vulnerable actors embedded in family systems (i.e., parents of children with ASD or Down syndrome), specifically investigating parents’ and families’ experiences of persistent liminality and resource (mis)integration.

Methodology

Our empirical research was conducted in Ireland and Finland and adopted a participatory qualitative approach involving close collaboration with representative organizations in both countries. While differences exist between the Finnish and Irish health systems, families face similar challenges in accessing and securing resources, often due to the complexity of the children’s conditions and also the service systems involving multiple actors and interdependent bodies/agencies. The qualitative study comprised 18 interviews with parents of children (including adolescents and young adults) with ASD and Down syndrome. We followed a hermeneutic approach (e.g., Thompson et al., 1994), involving analysis and interpretation of data and theory

(Spiggle 1994) leading to the development of higher-order themes relating to liminality and resource integration.

Outcomes and Findings

Our findings reveal a new form of liminality, which is enduring and evolving, which we term *Persistent Liminality* (see Figure 1). The on-going and problematic interplay between families’ complex resource needs (reflected by *Resource (Mis)integration*) and their children’s ongoing conditions (captured by *Family Caregiving Realities*) creates and sustains the three dynamics of persistent liminality: *Precipitating*, *Subsisting* and *Resisting*. *Precipitating* reflects how persistent liminality is initially triggered and develops while *Subsisting* represents families’ efforts to survive and endure its effects, and, finally, *Resisting* represents families’ efforts to resist and escape their entrapment.

Our work contributes theoretically and practically to service research in three important ways. Firstly, through identifying persistent liminality, we shed light on vulnerable consumers’ experiences of resource acquisition when needs are complex and shifting. Secondly, the three dynamics of persistent liminality illuminate the interrelationship between persistent liminality and resource integration in service systems. Third, in line with TSR, we highlight how systems’ failure to adequately supply and replenish necessary resources accentuates and perpetuates resource misintegration and persistent liminality, thus decreasing the well-being of vulnerable consumers.

Our study identifies key recommendations for service organizations and policymakers to better support vulnerable consumers with ongoing complex needs. These include the provision of an integrated and holistic service that is flexibly accessible along with appropriate family-focused and child-specific care and developmental plans and supports. We also highlight the need for specialized education, training and skills for service professionals. Regarding public policy implications, we recommend that government bodies, state-run service institutions and private service providers engage in strategic planning and co-ordination to assist families plan for the longer-term welfare of their children.

The underlying paper was published in the *Journal of Service Research*, and a full copy can be obtained at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/10946705231184610>

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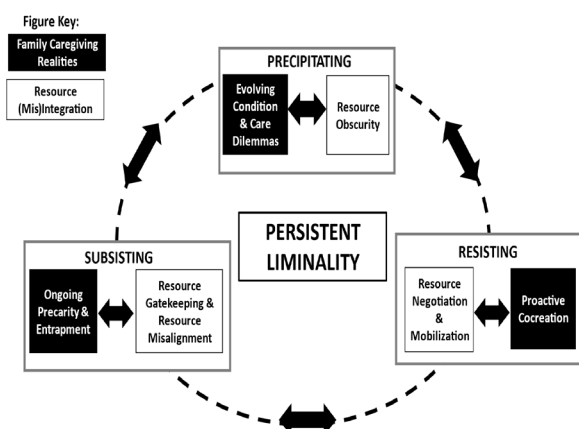


Figure 1. Vulnerable consumers’ experiences of persistent liminality and resource (mis)integration.