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Journal of Service Theory and Practice

A4A relationships

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to investigate (1) the characteristics of actors that allow them to relate to others actors in the system through shared intentionality (orientation) and (2) the nature of the A4A relationship and the results that such interactions bring to the emergent system based on this shared purpose (finality).

Design/Methodology/approach – The topic is approached by theoretical analysis and conceptual development of three integrative frameworks: the sociological perspective, service-dominant (S-D) logic and a particular perspective of system thinking: the viable system approach (*VSA*).

Findings – The A4A relationships involve value co-creation based on actors integrating their resources and acting with intentionality to obtain value by providing benefits to other parties and by belonging to the emergent viable system; actor acts for other actors directly involved in the relationship generating positive effects for the whole system in which it is contextualized.

Originality – A4A is a relationship formed by actors that interact for the benefit of the whole system in which are involved. They find own benefit from the benefit created for the system in which they live and act. In A4A relationships the value of the single actor comes from the participation to the viability of the whole system.

Keywords: A4A relationship, value co-creation, actors' engagement, shared intentionality, systems emergence, systems viability.

A4A relationships

1. Actor's orientation and finality in A4A relationships

Historically, marketing has focused on various role of actors involved in exchanges. Initially, attention was on the role of -and the relationship between- firm and customer (business-to-customer, -B2C- and customer-to-business, -C2B-) as well as inter-organizational relationships (business-to-business, -B2B-). Later, focus has been on roles and relationships between customer communities (customer-to-customer -C2C-). Over the past decade, research has shifted from the predefined roles of firms and customers to a generic role of actors (Gummesson and Polese, 2009). However, Vargo and Lusch (2011) have recently argue for a generic description and suggest adopting the actor-to-actor (A2A) parlance. A2A does not emphasize a specific role for particular types of actors and indicates that these actors can play various roles when they interact with one another to co-create value. Moreover, several scholars have argued that it is essential to understand the relationships between actors in the value co-creation process (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Pels and Polese, 2010; Pels et al, 2012; Polese and Di Nauta, 2013; Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013; Jaakkola et al, 2015), particularly deepening our knowledge of actors' engagement in value co-creation processes (Payne et al., 2008; Wieland et al, 2012; Mustak et al, 2013; Quero Gervilla et al, 2015, Barthi et al.2015).

We suggest a particular type of interaction: the actor-*for*-actor (A4A) relationship. The A4A relationship involves actors integrating their resources and acting with the aim to obtain value by providing benefits to them and to other parties involved in their context. A4A highlights the iterative process that occurs during value co-creation among multiple actors, overcoming the directional aspect implicit in the meaning of the commonly adopted A2A term. We center our attention on actors that have a human nature (excluding actants, avatars, or electronic algorithm). From this perspective it is possible to argue that actor's engagement is a human's psychological state during experiential interaction with a value provider. This approach is aligned with the social construction approach (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Burr, 2003) which argues that individuals engaged in interaction and social practices created reality.

The aim of this article is to investigate (1) the characteristics of actors that allow them to relate to others actors in the system through shared intentionality (orientation) and (2) the nature of the A4A relationship and the results that such interactions bring to the emergent system based on this shared purpose (finality). Methodologically, to accomplish these aims we draw on three research streams: the sociological perspective, service-dominant (S-D) logic and a particular perspective of system thinking: the viable system approach (*VSA*).

- The sociological perspective is used to explain the meaning behind the aggregations of individual actors in common relationships. In particular, the social construction approach and the shared intentionality in social individualism emphasizing the combination of both the individual and the group are presented to explain how actors interact, expressing an orientation and a finality.

- The S-D logic framework is used to analyze the value co-creation that emerges through resource integration and to outline the behavior of the actors engaged in value co-creation relationships.

- The *VSA* concepts of consonant and resonant relationships are used to explain the relationships among actors in viable system characterized by multiple emerging interactions of actors that could have different goals but share the same finality/purpose: to survive in the same system.

The paper contributes to the domain of value co-creation research by introducing the concept of A4A relationships which helps to highlight that actors' interactions may both benefit the individual actors, by belonging to the system, and the viability of the emerging system. Additionally, this paper aids a greater understanding of the associated (yet distinct) concepts of actors' orientation (shared intentionality) and actors finality (shared purpose). Furthermore, A4A helps to visualize that the outcome of the co-creation process generates a new value proposition for actors in the same system (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), even if they were not involved in the initial co-creation process following a many-to-many relationship (Gummesson, 2006).

The article is organized as follows. First, the three streams of research are briefly discussed. Second, the paper outlines the approaches used to address the research question, and the contribution of each in defining our proposition. The article closes with conclusions and implications.

2. Theoretical background

We draw on the contributions of three research streams: the sociological perspective, S-D logic, and *VSA*. We borrow insights from these streams to derive the concepts at the core of the A4A relationship: the meanings and structures of the A4A relationship and the nature and roots of the characteristics of the actors who are able to establish these types of relationships.

2.1 Sociological perspective

Using the sociological perspective, we seek to explain why actors aggregate their resources to form groups interested to become part of something 'collective and supportive'. In short, we seek to contribute to explaining some of the concepts related to individualism and collectivism, particularly to gain a more in-depth understanding of two different perspectives: top-down and bottom-up.

Social construction is an approach to analyze phenomena of humans in particular contexts (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Burr, 2003); according to this approach, the people engaged in interactions and social practices to create social reality. Through this shared reality (Luckmann and Berger, 1991), people make sense of the social world (Giddens, 1984). In this article, we focus on the concept of social individualism (Triandis, 1995). Social individualism describes situations in which singular persons live in a society based on individualism in which they can derive the meaning of the group in governing bodies and/or lifestyles. The collective group may develop from a shared understanding that is capable of affirming the existence of individuals in the community, society, network or system. Furthermore, social individualism is useful in explaining the top-down and bottom-up approaches.

In the *top-down* approach, a governing body—or governmental organization—defines the group, establishing hierarchical relationships and choosing strategies and plans for future development. As Pettit (2002) argues, an integrated collectivity is rational when it is intentional; individual behaviors are not capable of defining the collective intentionality. As such, the 'super-agent'—the governing body—as a rational/logical unit, plays a relevant role in defining the collective intentionality; sometimes, the intentionality that the super-agent defines differs from the intentionality shared by the individuals in the system, but having the strategic input of the super-agent is relevant in a top-down organization.

The second approach, *bottom-up*, is based on the concept an aggregated lifestyle. Therefore, the individuals in the 'new community' have new responsibilities, and they have to develop individual self-awareness to recognize themselves within this new group. The connection between the elements (actors) in a society seem to have developed through self-awareness—a shared lifestyle, shared values, emerging necessities and emergencies. Bratman (1987, 2014)

created this vision where shared intentions do not necessarily imply a 'super-agent'; rather, shared intentions, as individual intentions, are in each agent who cooperates within the group. Taillar et al. (2015) highlight that to share intentions, goals need not be identical; they only need to be non-conflicting. Bratman (1987) defines intentions as elements of partial action plans that play fundamental roles in practical activities, supporting people and organizations. This indicates the existence of a collective activity based on a contingency where the actors must integrate their resources and promote the collective.

2.2 S-D logic concept of value co-creation

S-D logic highlights the role of actors as resource integrators, and value co-creation seems to be open to all actors who are able to integrate resources or collaborate to improve the process; From this perspective resources are used to provide service and are divided into operand resources (tangible assets such as products, goods, and materials) and operant resources (intangible assets such as knowledge, skills, information, relationships, and organizational and management culture).

The term 'actor' is used to indicate the agents of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2015). 'Value is always co-created by multiple actors, including the beneficiary' (Axiom 2—FP6). which implies that value creation is interactional and combinatorial (Vargo and Lusch, 2015) and that co-creation might be seen as a process that offers benefits to all involved actors. A common theme in the literature centers on the search for the nature of value creation (Payne et al, 2008). According to S-D logic, 'value creation can only be fully understood in terms of integrated resources applied for another actor's benefit (service) within a context' (Akaka et al, 2013; Chandler and Vargo 2011; Edvardsson et al, 2011), 'including the institutions and institutional arrangements' (Vargo and Lusch, 2015).

The latest advances offered by S-D logic point to *FP11* (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), signaling that value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements; consequently, value is influenced by the social context. Value comes from multiple actors, including those involved in dyadic exchanges and many others indirectly involved (Lusch and Webster, 2011). This idea is in line with those of Edvardsson et al (2011), who argue that service exchanges are dynamic and depend on value co-creation; value is shaped by social forces, is reproduced in social structures, and is potentially asymmetric for the actors involved (Tronvoll, 2007).

The path toward actor involvement is based on customer loyalty (Appelbaum, 2001), which again involves co-production and the relationship between engagement and new product development (Sawhney et al, 2005). In this sense, Brodie et al. (2011) present the experiential nature of engagement and connect with S-D logic, while Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) present the role of engagement in value co-creation from a system perspective.

2.3 System thinking view: the *VSA* paradigm

VSA proposes interpretation schemes based on systems thinking, which facilitate a better understanding of complex phenomena (Barile, 2009; Golinelli, 2010; Mele et al, 2010; Ng et al, 2012). The general interpretation schemes are useful when developing definitions in particular and contextualized schemes, and they are capable of ultimately solving problematic situations and uncertain conditions.

The *VSA* paradigm enables a better understanding of the emerging value co-creation among actors because it is based on the analysis of the dynamic of relationships between elements in specific environments (Badinelli et al, 2012).

According to *VSA*, every socio-economic entity (actor) can be viewed as a system that emerges from a structure through the definition of a perspective (the purpose of viability). The fundamental concept of *VSA* (FC1) affirms that these systems interact with other entities

(actors) to discover viable behaviors; all system dynamics seek out viable conditions and the relevance of the relationship emerges. System viability (Barile and Polese, 2010) relates to the capacity to survive in a particular context by establishing relationships with other actors/systems in the search for structural compatibility (consonance) and a common finality or shared purpose (resonance). Consonance refers to a possible structural relationship between two or more actors (structural compatibilities), whereas resonance refers to systemically effective interactions among actors, which moves them toward viability (purpose sharing).

Systems are hierarchically related to many other systems to facilitate the needed resource exchanges. Relevant resource owners are critical and can influence systems at lower hierarchical levels due to the resources that they can release and share (FC2 - Barile and Polese, 2010). For this reason, positive interactions are based on the (usually reciprocal) satisfaction that drives resource sharing among actors. Based on consonant and resonant interactions among actors, this process develops over time in stable and harmonious conditions, with actors pursuing resource integration to ensure the service exchange benefit. Hence, to better understand viable service exchanges, a more in-depth understanding of the concepts of consonance and resonance may be useful.

According to *VSA*, consonance represents a static evaluation of potential positive relationships among entities (actors) and refers to the structural and relational compatibility among the entities in the emerging system (FC7 - Barile and Polese, 2010). Because relationships are not fully operational, consonance refers to a static view that precedes the service exchange that can only envision what might occur.

Resonance occurs when these positive potential relations actually happen, when interactions take place, confirming the positive outcomes of the exchange through harmonization processes (Barile et al, 2012c). Resonance thus refers to a dynamic view of the service exchange—a systemic harmony among entities (actors). When resonance occurs, actors positively integrate their resources and exhibit intense connections among themselves, which are based on the shared purpose of the whole system; this condition implies that the existence of non-conflicting goals among the actors engaged in the service exchange seems a fundamental component in realizing its viability, which indeed benefits from purpose sharing and alignment among actors. The described harmonizing process is an appropriate and iterative part of the service exchange, as systems (actors) dynamically adapt, change and reconfigure themselves in an effort to maintain stable conditions (FC9/FC6 - Barile and Polese, 2010), which relates to the viable and harmonic interactions among systems.

System viability is linked to the adaptability of elements and/or actors related to the subjectivism of environment perceptions. The subjectivism of the observer (in a constructivist logic) can be mitigated because the observer can view the relationships in the larger environment and thereby perceive a relative context in which the system is in action. In observing the relationships and dynamic interactions of the structure, the observer is able to perceive the emerging system (through subjectively interpreted).

This is in line with the orientation and finality of the actors' resource integration and relationships.

3. Foundations of A4A relationships
In order to sustain the new locus 'A4A' inner meaning, we adopt an aggregate viewpoint, drawing on three perspectives: Sociological, S -D logic and *VSA*, Using a interdisciplinary view allows a robust scientific background for building new reflections on the role of actors.

3.1 – Insights from selected research streams

The A4A relationships are a specific interaction that occurs between actors with a human governing body and who interact in a specific context. Table 1 helps explain the integration of the 3 previous presented perspectives.

Table 1: Perspectives and frameworks: integrating the contributions from the literature

Perspectives	Specific frameworks	Contributions in terms of
Sociological View	• Social construction approach • Social individualism • Bottom-up approach	• Intentionality
S-D logic	• Resource integration • Value co-creation • Institutional arrangement (logics)	• Engagement
Viable System Approach	• Consonance and resonance • Dynamic relationship • Viability	• Emergence

Specifically, the sociological view overcomes the "old" concept of individualism (based on achieving a personal goal) and introduces new reflections on the new sharing action. As Bratman (1987) argues, intentions could be defined as elements of partial action plans that support people and organizations. The shared intentionality required to form groups and to facilitate cooperation arguably represents the specific orientation of actors underlying the finality behind the desire to belong to specific communities, networks or systems.

The sociological perspective contributes to define the nature of the interaction between humans in this period characterized by complex interactions and societies. Of particular relevance is the concept of *shared intentionality* (i.e., orientation) in the process of a systems' emergence (Taillar et al, 2015). Actors' shared intentionality to engage in the co-creation process is associated with (yet distinct from) the actors' *shared purpose* (i.e., finality) in achieving the system's viability (i.e., capability to survive).

This affects our A4A proposition because it helps shift the focus to communities and groups rather than single individuals, emphasizing the advantages to provide a different overview of the phenomena. Those acting for mutual benefit are positively influenced to cooperate, which will favor new forms of aggregations and stress the effective intentions of involved actors to 'be part of'. Firms, organizations, individuals are all potentially connected and may co-exist, and thus, they are able to obtain personal and specific benefit through cooperation.

Further, in S-D logic insights we can find lots of ideas for interpreting A4A relationships. Many scholars addressed the concept of engagement linked to S-D logic that is so helpful in understanding nowadays dynamics in the exchange, because it concerns several components of a customer's active participation in its experience and underlines the term's reciprocity in the relationship between customer and provider in service. Payne et al. (2008) used the terms of involvement and 'motional engagement' to analyze the role of the customer as a co-creator of value, placing him/her at the same level of importance as the provider; Kumar et al. (2010) proposed several components of a customer's engagement value and underline the term's reciprocity in the relationship between customer and service provider. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) use the term 'engagement' to analyze the holistic nature of the customer's role in the customer experience, and Sweeney et al. (2015) do the same in defining the customer's effort in value co-creating activities (EVCA). Recently, the term 'engagement' has been often adopted to define the active, equal and reciprocal participation of the customer and the provider in the co-generation of value. In this sense, Shaw et al. (2011) analyze the role of the

customer by applying S-D logic in the context of tourism management. Customer engagement is also described as a customer's psychological state during experiential interactions with a company or brand (Brodie et al, 2011), actor engagement can be argued to generally follow the same rules; thus actor engagement is a multidimensional concept, i.e. behavioral, cognitive and emotional.

These factors all help A4A by highlighting the subject's sense of responsibility, thus constituting a model in which the intensity of the customer's participation is greater than in normal engagement, particularly in terms of the aspect of dynamism, which determines the development of positive and harmonious interactions with the service provider. Similarly, the possibility of sharing resources (of any type) synthesizes the results of the collaboration in terms of aggregation and integration, which is helpful with regard to co-existence and co-evolution. Indeed, when actors are motivated to collaborate in a new and higher-performing action, they focus on the possibility of creating the right appeal and fostering spontaneous participation; engagement and self-engagement aid in achieving the required mood and avoiding opportunistic behaviors by the actors involved, which useful for a strong and positive cooperation.

Finally, by highlighting differences in terms of system/structure, static/dynamic and consonance/resonance, *VSA* scholars have noted the relevance of 'emergence' in organizational behavior as organizations are involved in a defined context while playing a key role in the survival of the system as a whole (Barile et al, 2012a). Many dynamics occur between and within systems over time, which creates turbulence and uncertainty; emergence concerns the boundaries of any organization or actors (viewed and intended as a system) while they acts and interact with other surrounding systems (Barile et al, 2013). Emergence is in the mode in action of organizations themselves in reacting and adapting to external changes or contingences and affects the ability of each top government to make decisions and propose new solutions for daily problem-solving (Carrubbo et al, 2017).

Emergence concerns and supports the A4A concept because emergent strategies and operations reveal several adaptive strategies adopted by organizations to become more competitive. To better fit a customer's needs by developing new value propositions, attention must be paid to evolving trends and managing every situation that could occur (Barile and Polese, 2010), which shows effective resonance (empathy) and real interest in pleasing others. In the context of operation, as it is subjectively perceived, conditions change and emerge, and thus organizations must also be emergent and improve their change management to ensure long-term survival. This consciousness in adaptation (*VSA* includes many types of adaptive solutions, such as adjustment, transformation, and reconstruction; Barile, 2008) stimulates consonance between the actors in the exchange and ultimately allows a cognitive and profitable alignment (Pels et al, 2014).

Table 2: A2A and A4A theoretical contructs comparison

Issues	A2A	A4A
Great attention on mutual benefit	X	X
Strong reciprocity	X	X
Multi-part contribution in value co-creation	X	X
Not opportunistic behaviors		X
Shared intentionality		X
Cognitive alignment		X
Consciousness in adaptation		X
Actor engagement		X
Effective resonance (empathy)		X
Emergence in action for system viability		X

Comparing A2A relationships to A4A (just as in the above tab.2), we can point out a number of differences. The table above show how A4A may fit much better with the interpretation of relations among actors involved in any exchange today. A4A bridges and overcomes some interpretative gaps in terms of shared intentionality, actors' engagement, emergence in action; A4A deeply highlights motivations, mode in actions, empathy and consciousness; A4A seems to be a greater and successful integration of some of main research streams focusing on actors' relationships; A4A allows to a more completed overview of actors' relationships, by enriching the lens used in such a way.

3.2 – Discussion: integrating the three research streams
From this it is possible to consider the flow of perspectives–*sociological view, S-D logic and VSA*–and select relevant frameworks to develop a definition of the framework that highlights relationships that go beyond the individualism–which is characterized by the pursuit of individual goals rather than co-creating value per se with the directly involved parties–to searching for belonging in a much wider and systemic entity and a more inclusive experience. In that case, directly and indirectly, a single actor could eventually find many more opportunities to survive in complex contexts.
Strong links are present between the sociological perspective and S-D logic. The role of institutions and institutional arrangements is particularly relevant because the sociological view has strong roots in the contextualization of single individuals living in societies based on individualism in which they derive shared intentionality from institutional governing bodies and/or lifestyles (Triandis, 1995). Similarly, in S-D logic, the value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements (axiom 5 – FP11) (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In addition, the role of institutions and institutional arrangements is related to the generation of a social context that could be analyzed in the dynamic of relationships through *VSA*. The dynamic nature of relationships between actors in a system is caused by the properties of systems (in general) and by the characteristics of the subjects that allow them to adapt to survive in contexts managing complexity and integrating resources. Resource integration in systems is favored by consonance between actors and facilitated by institutions.
The interactions between actors, the role of each actor and the categories that define value are stated by the shared norms and rules (institutions) that emerge from the context/society. The aggregation of the actors drives the aim to integrate resources to co-create value (S-D logic perspective), stimulate the eventual emergence of a society with a bottom-up approach (sociological perspective), and stimulate the emergence of a viable system (*VSA* perspective).
In any case, the common goal is to go beyond the individualism of actors stimulating the aggregations to increase the opportunities to survive in the complexity.
Starting with the scenario in which a subject is acting alone (individualism) and is trying to survive in a complex context by integrating resources and co-creating value, relationships evolve when the actor (characterized by a human governing body) recognizes that he is part of a system/context that is composed of other actors that recognize the same system/context and present the will to survive themselves in the recognized system. In this case, the actors could act 'for' system survival, co-creating value for the whole system and not directly for themselves. The intentionality to reduce individualism toward a much wider interest (system survival) emerges.
This tendency to achieve a much wider finality characterized by the viability of the system in which each actor integrates resources is probably the expression of a mutual value creation that has the goal not of satisfying a single actor only but generating benefits for different actors involved directly and indirectly. The actors must manage and regulate themselves in

relationships searching for mutual value creation and act to integrate resources beyond the individualism facilitated by institutions and institutional arrangements. These types of relationships between actors going beyond their own satisfaction could characterize the service ecosystem. In S-D logic, a service ecosystem is a '*relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource[s] – integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange'* (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p.10-11).

The relationship that goes beyond individualism to search for system viability is considerable a mutual value creation relationship contextualized in a service eco-system in which the actors are adaptive and searching for relationships within that context, integrating resources and co-creating value while respecting the different actors in the system. The actors believe that they have a much greater opportunity to satisfy their needs by acting for the system instead of acting alone in complexity.

4. Defining the A4A relationships

The A4A relationship involves value co-creation based on actors integrating their resources and acting with intentionality to obtain value by providing benefits to other parties and by belonging to the emergent viable system. Actor are the foundation resource in the service ecosystem (Tronvoll 2017) and acts upon other actors involved in the relationship generating positive effects for the whole system in which it is contextualized. The system contains different actors with different goals who share the same need: to survive in the system during the time they are part of the system because the system can emerge only by their interaction.

The actors go beyond simple utilitarian relations and perceive that survival in this context is possible, looking ahead to results in the medium and long run. The actors must recognize that resource integration through their interactions facilitates the creation of a viable system in which the value of the whole system is *greater than* the *sum* of the values of its parts (Bogdanov, 1922). System viability depends on this recognition among actors. As noted in the theoretical background, the A4A relationship is a relationship that, in a social context, goes beyond individualism and contributes to the system's viability. For this reason, the A4A relationship is arguably characterized by *sociological roots, resource integration and value co-creation, systems thinking and viability.*

Sociological roots: Naturally, individual actors can find their own contacts and connections that stimulate a shared intentionality (Taillard et al, 2016); a governing body (Bratman, 1987, 2014) is not required to make these connections because the relationship represents a bottom-up aggregation.

The actors' shared intentionality spontaneously pushes them to form a collective to make sense of their social world (Giddens, 1984). Shared value emerges, and the actors integrate their resources to create a value co-creation community that can include actors with different goals.

The process emerges as a definitive system when the oriented actors (with a shared intentionality) are motivated to be together, and such motivation can emerge from their engagement in a cooperative search for viability in order to belong to an emerging viable system.

Resource integration and value co-creation: The A4A relationship concept is supported by the S-D logic FP11 (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), which argues that value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements; consequently, value is influenced by the social context. Edvardsson et al. (2011) maintain that service exchanges are dynamic and depend on value co-creation; value is shaped by social

forces, is reproduced in social structures, and is asymmetric for the actors involved. This idea potentially supports the hypothesis regarding A4A relationship, which strictly focuses on sociological and institutional contexts. It also supports the shared intentionality of the actors in social context, who are searching for a group with a shared purpose to survive as part of a viable system.

A4A is viewed as a value co-creation relationship because the shared intentionality causes the actors to cooperate and integrate their resources. The *VSA* paradigm supports the shared intentionality of viability as a precondition to pursue and maintain effective resource integration and value co-creation; this shared intentionality is thus one of the fundamental determinants of actors' engagement. Consequently, engagement is related to the psychological involvement of actors and is identified based on a shared intentionality toward viability. This intentionality also depends on the structural compatibility among actors, which can be characterized by coherent values, similar beliefs and the reciprocity of relevant resources. Given these considerations, actors' interactions and value co-creation can only be subjectively evaluated.

Systems thinking and viability: The systems thinking approach relates to the actors' awareness of belonging to the whole system. The actor accepts an eventual reduction in individual benefits in an effort to realize the viability of the whole system because the benefits of being part of the whole increase because the value of the system is far greater than the sum of its parts (individual actors). We assume that the emergence of the system occurs after these relations are activated—and only under specific conditions; when the actors embrace the search for a common way of acting and relating (shared intentionality), i.e., find a reason to harmonize their activities and their finalities (shared purpose), resonance emerges, and a new and different system appears, traceable to the value co-creation practices among engaged actors.

Actors engage in an A4A relationship to achieve system viability. Each actor can contribute to many systems and take on various roles (e.g., as a supplier, a customer, and a partner), and these actors can have different goals. However, their reason for resource integration needs to fulfill the same purpose: to attain a viable system to benefit the engaged actors. The contextualization of actors in service ecosystems specifies their relative role in value co-creation, enabling positive and harmonic interactions resulting from effective resource integration if certain conditions are met. We assume that the system emerges as part of the relationship during specific conditions. In that moment, when the elements seek to adopt a common way of acting, relating and coordinating their activities as well as their finalities, resonance emerges, and a new and different system appears, traceable to the value co-creation practices among engaged actors. Not every consonant actor will be resonant when action occurs. Some actors will be able to exchange resources in the short run, but viable service exchanges only occur when actors are engaged in resonant interactions after they develop shared goals and perspectives. The shift from compatible (consonant) actors (potentially able to contribute to value co-creation processes) and engaged (resonant) actors (able to generate stable conditions of value co-creation over time) is indeed crucial and drives effective and viable service exchanges. When an actor foresees that his or her expectations will be fulfilled and perceives a shared purpose and alignment with other actors, this actor will be able to abandon an individualistic standpoint and enjoy the perspective of the emergent system.

According to A4A relationships, the perception of value co-creation opportunities that emerge from the system is greater than the sum of the value co-creation opportunities that emerge from individual actors. In that sense, the value co-creation directly benefits the

emergent system (in which all engaged actors recognize themselves in resonant conditions) from the service exchange and indirectly benefits each engaged actor and the ecosystem.

5. Characteristics of A4A actors

Relevant characteristics can be highlighted when identifying the actors involved in the A4A relationship, but an understanding of the entire A4A relationship, rather than its individual elements, is essential. In the analysis below, a list of characteristics —*knowledge management, subjective awareness of the context, adaptability,* and *willingness to engage*—is presented.

Knowledge management: The aim of a viable system is to survive in a context populated by other systems that are present in the environment. Knowledge management (and knowledge empowerment) is at the base of A4A relationships because resource sharing for the benefit of the system—and not only with utilitarian drivers—results from an awareness that the emergent systems have richer capacities than those obtainable by actors' individual efforts. In other words, knowledge supports each actor's perception of the overall benefits that ultimately affect and support the actor's behavior. The actor is oriented toward considering every type of knowledge that permits resource integration and the sharing of best practices and collaborative models. The knowledge orientation results in an openness not only to new cultures and a new perspective but also to sustainable relationships.

Subjective awareness of the context: In a subjective approach, the actor in the A4A relationship presents a particular perspective that needs to arise from some type of awareness. Viability causes the actor to recognize the role of the environment, and the decision making of the actor generates an awareness of his (or her) need to have a goal and a specific way of affirming himself (or herself) in the path toward engagement in this role. The actor needs to share the intentionality to be part of an emerging system going through the survival (Polese et al, 2016). This awareness comes from a subjective perspective. In fact, reality can no longer be considered stable and objective; rather, reality should be understood as unstable with multiple perceptions of different actors.

Therefore, value co-creating actors observe reality (experiencing the service exchange in which they are involved), making efforts to observe other actors' behaviors and attempting to align their purposes with those of other actors. Hence, this theoretical frame supports our understanding of actors' behaviors in co-creation exchanges, as they continuously (often unconsciously) detect their value perceptions. Furthermore, the experience derived from value co-creation is simultaneously the base for judging other actors' contributions to value exchanges. In A4A relationships, value co-creation within the service exchange is thus determined by the context and perceived through the sensitivity of the actors involved.

Given the knowledge of the observer, different scenarios can emerge from the same structure, and several contexts can arise from the same environment (Barile et al, 2012a). Decision makers can see other entities with which they can establish relationships and interact in a non-conventional manner. The possibility of involving these entities in a systemic process depends on the existence of consonance, which facilitates the recognition of a shared purpose (survival), in which actors' interests and needs are aligned—or at least are not conflicting.

Adaptability: The adaptability property is studied from different perspectives. According to Begun et al. (2003), among others, adaptability represents the ability of actors to analyze the environment and adapt to survive. Adaptability resides in the intelligence and knowledge of the actors; adapting their behaviors and tolerating certain changes, the actors are able to achieve their goals and survive in the face of any difficulty. The stimulus to act 'for' another

actor—or a system—is a kind of value proposition that is directly connected to the nature of the actor; for this reason, with self-stimulation, adaptability is not only a characteristic of a reaction—after contact with the environment—but also a direct and proactive action that influences the environment and the stakeholders involved in the A4A relationship. This proactive condition supports viable value co-creation because emergent and contextual processes describe iterative exchanges that imply a continuous adjustment of actors who try to improve the value co-creation process. This concept implies self-reconfiguration, self-regulation and adaptable traits that are favored by proactive features.

Every actor is engaged in numerous value co-creation exchanges. In each of these settings, actors should realize the effective contextual conditions for directing their efforts toward shared benefits derived from a shared purpose. We assume that actors' abilities and sensitivity when analyzing and interpreting other actors' behaviors are crucial in creating a positive and relaxed attitude toward a specific service setting. In the sociological approach presented, we posed that actors interact in the environment; in addition, in the bottom-up approach, they share an intentionality to come together and create a 'new community' because the new aggregation—formed through self-awareness, shared lifestyles, and shared values, emerging necessities and emergencies—becomes relevant. This contextual awareness affects the actor's willingness to agree to the shared purpose of the emergent system, enabling viable service exchanges.

Willingness to engage: In A4A relationships, the engaged actors are active and integrate their resources for the shared purpose of system viability—not for a utilitarian benefit. The actors benefit when the system to which they belong benefits and thus the outcomes affect actors, the system and the surrounding context. The condition of engagement encourages actors to reduce any collaborative difficulties or relationship issues because they are engaged in a purpose greater than that of the individual. The actor is thus able to reduce any differences, misunderstandings, and difficulties in his or her interactions with other actors for the benefit of the system survival. In the process of value creation, the actors are initially consonant and then resonant at the moment of value co-creation, which ensures a win-win situation where the actors' ultimate goal is to reach even higher level of collaboration to enhance the service exchange, thereby increase the value co-creation for the whole system. Value co-creation is argued to be based on collective intentionality rather than individualistic intentionality. This attitude implies that successful value co-creation is performed by actors who are capable of completing their own intentionality and a collective intentionality, which is possible because of the shared purpose of all actors engaged in the service exchange. The basic components of co-creation is not a 'precious golden capacity'; integrated dynamic capabilities are far more precious. The willingness to engage among actors (as systems) is a basic element of viable co-creation, a condition that links all actors (directly and indirectly) to a respect for the same institutional arrangements.

A4A relationships are capable of successful value co-creation when actors engage in harmoniously integrate their resources. To realize service exchange benefits and to increase system viability, actors should possess the described traits, all of which support their positive contribution to the exchange in different ways. The 'for' in the acronym 'A4A' represents all these traits in a condensed form; for this reason, we believe that we can refer to A4A relationships when we refer to positive and successful value co-creation exchanges. In other words, A4A may represent the conditions to be pursued by each actor in ideal situations in which viable service exchanges are reached and maintained over time.

6. Managerial implications

This paper suggests that managers to relinquish their individualistic intentionality (and interests) in favor of a more rewarding and long-lasting collective intentionality—a win-win logic that supports value co-creation. Extending the reflection to organizations as actors, the A4A relationship represents a collection of actors involved in an investment in a place.

Actors invest in the territory because they believe that can become part of an evolving territorial system and that their investments will be much more useful to them in terms of how well these investments are able to create benefits for the territory's stakeholders and the territory as a whole (viable system). In this case, the A4A relationship emerges because the investor is oriented toward integrating resources with other actors in the territory and sharing the purpose of making the territory a better place and contributing to its transformation into a viable system. That situation represents the intentionality of the actor to 'act for' the context/viable system. Such engagement moves beyond individual returns on the investment and stimulates new equilibriums in interactions. Considering the relevant four characteristics of A4A actors – *knowledge management, subjective awareness of the context, adaptability, willingness to engage* -, the actor will be:

- Supportive of knowledge needs because knowledge supports the actor behavior – knowledge management – and the benefit perception.
- Tolerant of interactive problems within the territory and with other agents because the actor goes beyond the individualism, perceiving – *with subjective awareness of the context* – best performances by the interpretation of the territory as system
- Ready to act (and invest) to fill gaps in the system in terms of providing services in the territory that may encourage investment and resource integration because the actor is available to adapt itself – adaptability – and its strategy to the change
- Capable to perceive how the interactions between actors are useful to achieve its goals in relation to the A4A approach and acting for the territory that feels as part of its own opportunities to survive - *willingness to engage* -. In that way the actor will be able to influence the strategy definition in the territory thereby having effects that go beyond the activity of the government in the territory and proposing 'nudges' to optimize rules and constraints eventually attracting stakeholders (investors, tourists) and other A4A actors.

The A4A actors are not interested in immediate results; they are concerned about systemic dynamics in the medium and long run. The A4A actor is interested in diffusing the languages (and/or institutions) that are useful in explaining the value of systemic interactions with other actors interested in participating and obtaining benefits from the interactions between A4A actors. In a territory, for instance, A4A interactions will have many more effects in the middle and long run than the strategic thoughts of the territory's government. Sometimes the governing body of a territory can be a simple actor involved in the process.

Considering the line proposed by Edvardsson et al (2011), service exchanges are dynamic and depend on value co-creation; value is shaped by social forces, is reproduced in social structures and is potentially asymmetric for the actors involved. This consideration helps describe the A4A relationship. This relationship reduces the entropy in the dynamic service exchange because it encourages actors to interact based on a shared purpose; it creates the conditions for managing social structures because the actors involved in A4A relationships are interested in context development because their surrounding environment contributes to the materialization of that relationship; this approach helps shape social forces, accepting the resource integration of the actors engaged in A4A relationships. In essence, the A4A relationship helps reduce the asymmetry in the interactions between involved actors. This function is particularly true in relationships within territories in which the immateriality of resources, the fascination, the creativity, and the presence of many different actors united by

the need to share ideas, thoughts, and lifestyles stimulate the emergence of a creative territorial system that is innovative and challenging for many sectors of activity and for innovation and quality-of-life benefits in general.

7. Limitations and future research perspectives

This manuscript proposes theoretical implications, but is lack of empirical evidences. Future researches may support the theoretical propositions offered by this manuscript by confirming the inner traits of A4A relationships and their correlation with successful and viable service exchanges. In the future, practitioners and scholars may benefit from the presented view of relationships within successful co-creation exchanges due to inferences of the meaning of A4A locus onto managerial practices and service design perspectives.

It is possible to imagine future research integrating the contributions and advancements of the three disciplines presented – sociological view, S-D Logic and VSA – identifying models and schemes to select capabilities and competences able to stimulate (or highlight) A4A behaviors in actors (organizations, subjects) and for this reasons in communities. It is possible to apply the integration of the three perspectives to different research that in A4A relationship it is possible to develop.

Future research could be focused on the role of A4A relationship in service ecosystems; A4A relationship could represent the perspective and the 'approach' that actors could use in ecosystems belonging because the mutual value creation needs to be characterized by the availability of the actors to interact for themselves and for the system (ecosystem) that they are contributing to stimulate in emersion. To identify the role of A4A in ecosystems could be a challenge and, in particular, could represent the alternative to manage or predict the randomness in interaction. Sometime the interactions and the institutional arrangements could be caused by randomness; A4A brings intentionality (causality) to be part of the ecosystem acting for the 'whole' and not only for the individualism. Because technology represents a relevant element of the society and considering the relevance of the interaction in society, it is important to consider that A4A relationships could be studied as approach to apply to the technology, simplifying the interaction between humans and technology.

The A4A relationship could encourage the research toward the sustainability of service systems (Spohrer, et al. 2010) and toward the multiple interconnections in context and environment establishing sustainable relationships (Pels et al. 2014). Could be interesting to study the role of A4A as 'code' to develop institutions based on sustainability.

Another contribution could come from research applying the A4A relationships to the management of complexity. A4A could create the conditions to manage complexity in systems simplifying rules and constraints because stimulates adaptability and availability to cooperate; could be interesting to study the managerial perspective of A4A in relationships between companies and employees, toward the flexibility of working day or the respect of the tasks and goals going beyond the monetary benefits but the involvement of employees to this kind of relationships could bring persons to work with the finality to co-create value 'for' company.

Looking for a sociological perspective could be interesting to study if A4A relationships are able to stimulate the diffusion of this kind of behavior between persons and what kind of social aggregation/organization could be much more in line with A4A and why. It is possible to argue that future perspectives in research could be based even in the study of the contributions coming from A4A in generating favorable contexts in sustainable interactions and on the role of this kind of relations in the entangled community.

Any case, A4A relationships seems to represent the reorientation and reframing of the think about the actors interaction synthesizing the approach of the actors toward a community (or toward the world) going beyond the single utilitarianism and perceiving (and realizing the

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value) not by the direct interaction with the other party but by the benefit generated in the sustainable context in which the actors are interacting.

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Manuscript titled "A4A relationships"	
Reviewer comment	**Answers and modification**
The author(s) aim to "investigate (1) the characteristics of actors that allow them to relate to others through shared intentionality (orientation) and (2) the nature of the A4A relationship and the results that such interactions bring to the emergent system based on this shared purpose (finality). To accomplish these aims we draw on three research streams: the sociological perspective, service-dominant (S-D) logic and the viable systems approach (*vSa*). Although there is some merit in the paper, it requires greater clarification and consideration in its current form. There are two basic issues with the paper: 1) it lacks a relevant argument that is based on a clear rationale that is clear and 2) the three research streams identified are weak, lack clarity and purpose. Finally, the contribution of the paper is questionable.	We tried to give a contribution in actors relationships providing *a* particular type of interaction: the actor-for-actor (A4A) relationship. The A4A relationships involve value co-creation based on actors integrating their resources and acting with intentionality to obtain value by providing benefits to them and to other parties indirectly involved in their context. In particular, to better explain this concept, we have written the follow sentence in the paper "….*providing benefits to them and to other parties indirectly involved in their context*"
First, a basic but dominant concept in the paper lacks clear credibility. The author(s) concentrate on the notion of actor-for-actor (A4A) relationship based on the "rationale that value co-creation results from a process of multiple and dynamic interactions, among generic actors, such as individuals, companies, and organizations (Vargo and Lusch 2016)". The author(s) further suggest that A4A helps visualize that the outcome of the co-creation process generates a new value proposition for actors who recognize the potential of the new value proposition (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), even if they were not involved in the initial co-creation process (Gummesson, 2006)". Whilst the authors have a point here that is of relevance, I cannot see how it advance the basic claim by Vargo and Lusch and Grönroos and Grönroos and Voima (none of whom you have not cited) who claim that 'others' have always had a role to play in value creation. These 'others' can relate to anyone who is directly or indirectly involved in the value creation process.	We tried to define and explain a relationship that in S-D logic is able to generate the so called *mutual value creation*. The mutual value creation is present in the included definition of eco-system. We think that it is possible to have it in viable systems.
Second, does this mean that the word 'actor' is just another term for 'other' and if so, how does this contribute to the literature?	We believe that the "actor" in this paper is an entity that "acts" using a own agency with human brain. We considered only human actors or organization that present

	human government body
Third, given the above two comments, I therefore fail to see how customers and others differ (yes one is often more directly involved in the interaction than another), and in many consumption experiences customers and others both directly and indirectly can contribute to the vale creation process. Therefore, the author(s) claim that: "Because customer engagement is described as a customer's psychological state during experiential interactions with a company or brand (Brodie et al. 2011), actor engagement can be argued to generally follow the same rules; thus actor engagement is a multidimensional concept —behavioral, cognitive and emotional" is weak and lacks differentiation.	We assume that in this context actors have a human nature and for this reason it is possible to argue that, actor's engagement is a human's psychological state during experiential interaction with a value provider. This approach fits with the social construction that sustains (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Burr, 2003) that people engaged in interaction and social practices create reality. We believe that could be useful to better explain our perspective of "actor (with human nature) engagement"
Fourth, the paper further differentiates itself in terms of intentionality and purpose. They claim "that actor's share intentionality to engage in the co-creation process is associated (yet distinct) to actor's *shared purpose* (i.e., finality) of achieving the system's viability (i.e., capability to survive). In short, A4A has no directional dimension and highlights that the co-created value that is greater than the sum of the value propositions of its parts (the actors) (Bogdanov, 1922). However, A4A is a special case of A2A relationships". I'm afraid you will need to unpack this for your reader because as it currently stands, it is impenetrable.	We deleted this part and we explained better in paragraph n.4 and n.5 that A4A has not direction. The unique direction is the tendency toward the viability of the actors involved in the viable system

Fifth, the author(s) use three research streams to ground their proposition of A4A based on the sociological perspective, SD logic, and the *vSa*. To start with, each stream is very broadly brushed but without teasing out its meaning in the context of the paper. What I mean here is that, it appears you have cherry-picked ideas from each of the research perspectives but not really considered or depth in terms of the nuances of each and their specific meanings. For instance, the authors representation of the sociological perspective is based on social individualism and collectivism but you have not considered the wealth of works that is positioned in this domain that comes under the umbrella term "Consumer Culture Theory". Here both top-down and bottom-up relationships are researched in great depth and may lend itself to you as a fruitful area.	The bottom-up perspective has been adopted and well explained with the integration of the three research stream. In particular, we have dedicated a complete paragraph (paragraph n.3) to explain this integration and to go through the literature.
Sixth, the authors talk about resource integration and value co-creation, however, they do not seem to get the sequence of events in order. For instance, they claim: "S-D logic is thus useful in explaining the integration between value co-creation and resource integration", however, value co-creation takes place due to resource integration as actors/customer integrate/deploy their resources for value creation purpose.	We have re-organized the table and the discussion about the sequence of events in order (table n.1 and n.2 in paragraph n.3)
Seventh, what does the following statement mean "…signaling that value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements; consequently, value is something influenced by the social context"?	We better explained in sociological perspective in different points in the article. In particular in paragraph n.3 and at the beginning of the paragraph n.4
Eight, the rationale or basis of all three research perspectives lack 1) clarity and 2) a convincing argument. For instance, the author(s) claim: "The *vSa* paradigm enables a better understanding of the emerging value co-creation among actors because it is based on the analysis of relationships between elements in specific environments (Badinelli et al., 2012), and the fundamental concepts of this paradigm help explain and analyze the dynamic of relationships between elements.", but what do you mean by this? Reading these sections is hard work for the reader as they are not explained very well and this should not be the case.	We clarified and explained how the three research streams contribute to our proposal and what is really new in the research field, by including in the manuscript a new dedicated paragraph (cfr. paragraph n.3). Here, we assume actors have a human nature and argue that A4A relationships are influenced by several issues characterizing observed phenomena in service exchange, just like: social construction approach, social individualism, bottom-up approach, resource integration, value co-creation, institutional logics, consonance and resonance, dynamic relationship, viability.

Finally, a major issue with the paper is based on its overall theoretical contribution. To what literature is this paper contributing to and how?	We expanded the resuming table (cfr. table n.1) by highlighting the main scientific contribution to A4A definition coming from each research stream, in terms of: i) shared intentionality (from Sociological View); ii) engagement (from S-D logic); iii) emergence (from VSA). In the same section we made a comparison between A2A and A4A features (cfr. table n.2), distinguishing more clearly and deeply among them.
Minor points: In text citation needs to be carefully edited throughout the paper e.g. "According to S-D logic, "value creation can only be fully understood in terms of integrated resources applied for another actor's benefit (service) within a context" (Akaka et al. 2013, Chandler and Vargo 2011, Edvardsson et al. 2011), "including the institutions and institutional arrangements" (Vargo and Lusch 2015)". Who is the author of the first citation and where are the page numbers in support of these references?	We updated the sentences appropriately.