

What is a service?

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When governments collect data relating to economic activity they commonly employ a distinction between goods and services. Both goods and services have economic value. Goods (cars, houses, bottles of milk) are, very roughly, independent continuants which can be alienated (sold, gifted, rented, and so forth). Services (hairdressing, gardening, teaching) are, again very roughly, occurrents. They are occurrents which are further often said to be marked by the fact that production and consumption coincide. Social services under both headings typically involve combinations of service provision. The patterns in question are primarily those of the family (where the patterns to be maintained or restored are, roughly, those characteristic of a healthy family life) and of the child (patterns characteristic of healthy development, provided by child protective services, who work to prevent child abuse).

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To apply this dichotomy also in areas outside traditional fields of economic goods and services production it is important to recognize that almost all goods production involves also a number of accompanying services – to buy a car, for instance, we typically need to rely on the services of a car salesperson.

Equally, many traditional services also give rise to products of a certain sort. These are continuants (they continue to exist after the service has been provided); not, however, as independent but rather as specifically dependent continuants – typically as patterns, as when the hairdresser creates a new pattern on your head; the gardener creates a new pattern in your garden; the teacher creates a new pattern in your brain.

Such patterns are clearly not alienable: you can sell your garden; but you cannot sell the pattern on your garden created by your landscape designer.

We can therefore distinguish the following types of services:

1. Those which support the provision of goods to customers (sales, marketing, brokerage services, end so on).
2. ‘Pure’ services – which means, services which do not give rise to any lasting products (tour guide, pop concert, and so on).
3. Those which produce enduring patterns (trainer in your gym, curator of your Instagram page, and so on).

Further families of services can now be distinguished:

4. Those which have the goal of maintaining a pattern or the bearer of a pattern (as realized by your dental hygienist or by your car maintenance engineer).

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5. Those which involve the restoration of a pattern (as realized by the art restorer, or by your doctor when she treats your athlete's foot).
6. Those which have the goal of prevention of impairments to a pattern (as realized by your bodyguard).

How, now, do these remarks apply to social services? The latter are commonly divided into public assistance on the one hand (involving economic support through money, food, child care subsidies) and social work services on the other (involving home visits to evaluate patterns of parent-child interaction; provide counseling; mobilize community resources, and so forth).

Social services under both headings typically involve combinations of service provision under types 4. to 6. The patterns in question are primarily those of the family (where the patterns to be maintained or restored are, roughly, those characteristic of a healthy family life) and of the child (patterns characteristic of healthy development, provided by child protective services, who work to prevent child abuse).