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Knowledge Construction in Public Administration: Research Article

A Discourse Analysis of Public Value

Abstract: *Public administration is a relatively young field with a growing academic community. Against the background of enduring discussions about theory and increasing research output and diversification within the field, the authors apply the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse that combines discourse theories and a social constructionist tradition to the exemplary case of “public value” research. The authors scrutinize 50 articles from 12 journals over 18 years to trace the development of public value as a concept in public administration research. Drawing from this exemplary case, they develop propositions and propose a framework for knowledge construction that is uniquely characterized as public administration. From the anchor points of manageability, economization, and democratic accountability, the authors develop a framework for analyzing and investigating knowledge development in other concepts such as network governance, representative bureaucracy, and coproduction.*

Evidence for Practice

- Public administration knowledge construction is characterized by manageability, economization, and democratic accountability.
- The Three Pillars of Public Administration Knowledge Construction provide a framework to interpret knowledge developments in public administration.
- Manageability: Public administration research develops solutions for real-world problems.
- Economization: Public administration research defends collective values against the intrusion of an economic system.
- Democratic accountability: Public administration research and practice serve the public interest.

The social study of science is a meta-science that targets the analysis of science itself. The interest in and need to analyze how knowledge construction and progress take place in scientific communities has gained importance since Kuhn’s (1962) research on scientific revolutions. In public administration (PA), the scholarly debate on knowledge construction is reflected in the discussion of the nature, scope, and interdisciplinarity of PA (Raadschelders 2011). Scholars have examined this empirically, for example, by taking stock of the body of knowledge as published in specific academic journals (Raadschelders and Lee 2011) or by analyzing coauthorship networks (Hatmaker et al. 2017). Yet few studies have investigated knowledge construction in PA as socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckman 1966).

As the intellectual diversification of the scholarly field of PA is increasing (Nesbit et al. 2011), understanding the question of knowledge construction is critical for progress and theory building (Aimo 2002; Raadschelders 2011; Riccucci 2010). Developing

fields face the challenge of sorting among and connecting knowledge from different perspectives and almost “endless sources of knowledge” (Raadschelders 2005, 627). As researchers, scholars, teachers, and practitioners select among these endless sources of knowledge, the field becomes defined by these choices—by what is included and what is excluded. In the case of PA, scientific progress in the field has recently been shaped by powerful paradigms. Predicting the future of PA scholarship, “The likely answer is that it will look a lot like it looks now, but with a different set of buzzwords. In the 1990s, they were reinvention, New Public Management, and agency” (Barzelay and Thompson 2010, 295). While some scholars raise concerns about a loss of theoretical progress in favor of more and more empirical research (Meier 2015), it is increasingly important to consider how the field develops knowledge and advances theoretical work.

Critical to PA theory building is addressing how knowledge (what we know) comes into being. A starting point for the process of knowledge

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construction is to emphasize language use, as “it is through language that members of an academic field express their ideas, then it is also through language that the very essence, or implicit definition, of the field can be identified” (Nag, Hambrick, and Chen 2007, 938). Discourse analysis, rooted in a poststructuralist linguistic philosophy, allows for such inquiries. All discourse analysis approaches share the belief “that our access to reality is always through language” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 4). Poststructuralism centers on the relationship between individuals, the world, and the way meaning is constructed and reproduced (Belsey 2002). From this perspective, language is a representation of how we understand and give meaning to the world. Although language enables us to relate to the world around us, we must accept that language and its uses already contain meaning. The world we describe is inevitably socially constructed (Berger and Luckman 1966). Such a perspective mirrors the linguistic turn in the social sciences, which involves a greater interest in and focus on language (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000).

Our research objective is to understand how the academic community produces and institutionalizes knowledge in PA. We apply the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (Keller 2018) to analyze the peer-reviewed academic research area of *public value* as an exemplary case. As with other research objects in the field (see Peters and Pierre 1998 on governance), the academic debate on public value emerged from a practitioner’s application of the concept (Benington and Moore 2011). Drawing scholars from different areas of expertise, public value reflects the interdisciplinary nature of PA scholarship, making it an exemplary case for the analysis of knowledge construction and institutionalization. The discourse analysis addresses the following research questions: (1) How has the *public value* discourse evolved in the PA community? (2) What factors are related to the institutionalization of the public value research field? We draw from the results of the public value discourse analysis to offer propositions and a framework, the Three Pillars of Public Administration Knowledge Construction. These pillars present schemata that guide how PA scholars make sense of phenomena and engage in knowledge construction.

Our contributions are threefold: First, we provide insights into knowledge construction in PA (Raadschelders 2011; Zavattaro 2013). Second, we apply a research approach that is underutilized in PA research—the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (Keller 2018)—and thereby advance the application of interpretive research methods in PA (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018). Third, we analyze what the public value discourse might tell us about knowledge construction in PA, developing three propositions and a framework that can serve as starting point for future research. In summary, this research combines theoretical and critical perspectives on *public value* research to offer testable propositions about knowledge construction.

The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse Analysis

The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (SKAD) is a combination of discourse theories and the sociology of knowledge (Keller 2018). Building on the social constructionist tradition (Berger and Luckman 1966) and Foucault’s (1980) discourse theory, SKAD focuses on the social production,

circulation, and transformation of knowledge that occurs in social relations and politics of knowledge in knowledge societies (Keller 2011). SKAD builds on the understanding that discourses manifest themselves in data material (e.g., material practices of language in use). As such, discourses serve as ordering devices for the observation of reality and thereby constitute reality. Qualitative interpretive research approaches such as SKAD provide access to analyze discourses as a means to understand knowledge construction.

What we consider knowledge is an element of symbolic systems and societal orders, produced within and through discourse. Those discourses are “attempts to freeze meanings or, more generally speaking, to freeze more or less broad symbolic orders, that is, fix them in time and by so doing, institutionalize a binding context of meaning, values and actions/agency within social collectives” (Keller 2011, 51). The level of analysis for processes and practices of knowledge production, circulation, and transformation are institutional fields, for example, sciences or the public (Keller 2018).

To reconstruct and make sense of these actions and interactions, complementary heuristic concepts from the sociology of knowledge tradition are useful (Ullrich and Keller 2014). The structure of such institutionalized systems of meaning can be made visible in texts with an interpretive repertoire, story lines, and interpretive schemes or frames using texts. We apply the concept of interpretive schemes, which “depict fundamental meaning and action-generating schemata, which are circulated through discourses and make it possible to understand what a phenomenon is all about” (Keller 2011, 57). As discourses differ to the extent that specific interpretive schemes are combined, using interpretive schemes as the unit of analysis enables us to explore the discourses on public value and its changes over time (Ullrich and Keller 2014). Discourses are characterized by the emergence of new interpretive schemes and their positioning within existing schemes or displacement of existing schemes.

Knowledge construction in PA takes place through a wide range of practices, including practitioner experience, reports, and academic research. Articles published in academic peer-reviewed journals are “one bearer of the materiality” of scientific discourses (Keller 2011, 53). They mirror the multitude of central actors who constitute reality—researchers, authors, journal editors, and reviewers (Astley 1985; Hodgson and Rothman 1999; Laband and Piette 1994)—but do not necessarily capture practitioner perspectives. This research limits its focus to knowledge construction in academic journals.

Public Value as Exemplary Case

The terms *public value* and *public values* have been increasingly used among practitioners and scholars. Both concepts are integral to the New Public Administration movement (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014), and scholars have debated the distinctions and overlap between these concepts (Jørgensen and Rutgers 2015; Rutgers 2015; Shaw 2013; Van der Wal, Nabatchi, and de Graaf 2015). *Public values* refer broadly to discussions of a value base or values that characterize the public sector (Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007; Jørgensen and Rutgers 2015). *Public value*, in comparison, is defined as “producing what is either valued by the public, is good for the public, or both” (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014,

448). Public values and public value are often viewed as “two more or less independent schools or discourses” (Rutgers 2015, 30) and, in some cases, as distinct but related concepts (Van der Wal, Nabatchi, and de Graaf 2015). Although academic debate of these terms helps foster conceptual clarity, the question remains how and why the concept of *public value* emerged and developed as such in the research community and how that development might be exemplary for PA knowledge construction. Thus, we focus on the development of knowledge around the concept of public value (we exclude the public values concept and literature from the present analysis).

In the book *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (1995), Moore introduced the term *public value*. Moore aimed “to work out a conception of how public managers... could become more helpful to society in searching out and exploiting opportunities to create public value” (1995, 21). To conceptualize public value creation, Moore outlined the image of a strategic triangle with three parts: (1) public value—whether the purpose is publicly valuable; (2) the authorizing environment—whether it will be politically and legally supported; and (3) operational capability—whether it is administratively and operationally feasible (1995, 22). Moore used case studies and interactions with executive education participants at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government to illustrate how public managers can create public value. He continued to conceptually refine the philosophical base of his arguments (Moore 2014; Moore and Fung 2012) and the practical application of a public value accounting scheme (Moore 2013).

Public value emerged within the context of the New Public Management (NPM) implementation, characterized by a belief in the efficacy and efficiency of markets, citizens as customers, and privatization (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). At that time, Moore’s strategic management perspective on public managers and their ability to create value shifted the scope and discussion within PA research in a different, and for that time controversial, direction. What was initially a practitioner-oriented work became a reference point for scientific debate and policy research (Kelly, Mulgan, and Muers 2002; O’Flynn 2007; Rhodes and Wanna 2007, 2009; Stoker 2006). Alford and O’Flynn (2009) sketched out emerging meanings of public value as *pragmatism, rhetoric, narrative, and performance*. Williams and Shearer (2011) outlined categories and definitions within scholarly works as part of their literature review. Parallel with this development, there was scholarly debate and critique on public value (Dahl and Soss 2014; Morrell 2009).

Critique and debate triggered theory development in the field (Alford 2008; Colebatch 2010; Rhodes and Wanna 2007, 2009). The initial critique of the conceptualization of public value focused on the lack of political and administrative system characteristics as central features of government (Rhodes and Wanna 2007). Rhodes and Wanna further challenged the central role of the public manager as outlined by Moore, noting that manager roles are defined by the political and cultural environment. This view was in return criticized, for example, by Colebatch (2010), who defended public value as a practitioner approach. Morrell (2009) further noted the weak theoretical foundation of public value scholarship in his discussion of the relationship between control of power and

outcomes in the public sphere. Morrell concluded that issues of control of power and outcomes cannot be answered by taking a “how to” perspective (public value) but involve ethical and more fundamental questions. Dahl and Soss (2014) argued that public value falls short as an approach that fosters democratic theory beyond neoliberalism; rather, it reproduces what it criticizes.

Despite these challenges to the conceptual foundations of public value scholarship, a variety of scholars engaged defining public value through theoretical and conceptual research (Alford and O’Flynn 2009; Benington 2009; Meynhardt 2009), as the foundation of public value management (Stoker 2006), and in public value governance (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). Additionally, empirical research on public value grew (Alford et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2017), for example, in the area of performance management (Erridge 2007; Meynhardt and Metelmann 2009) and entrepreneurial behavior (Meynhardt and Diefenbach 2012).

Also, PA scholars have integrated a public value approach into teaching. Public value is present in executive and graduate education in business schools and schools of government, supported by a network of scholars and lecturers (Benington and Moore 2011). Workshops and seminars in Europe, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand have helped build a community of scholars advancing research and theory on public value. These efforts have resulted in formal sessions on public value at annual international PA conferences, including the International Research Society for Public Management, the American Society for Public Administration, and the Public Management Research Conference.

Given its relatively recent emergence and substantial growth, *public value* is a useful case for observing how knowledge is socially constructed in PA. First, public value (singular) emerged as a distinct concept against the existence of a public values discourse (plural). Second, it is a relatively young phenomenon of knowledge construction, circulation, and transformation. Alford and O’Flynn, for example, concluded that Moore’s “original approach is being stretched, extended and reconstructed in the scholarly and practitioner worlds” (2009, 178). Third, it continues to gain importance in research and practice. For example, a symposium in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration (AJPA)* (2004) was followed by a special issue of the *International Journal of Public Administration (IJPA)* (2009).¹ Fourth, there is consensus (i.e., scholars describe different contours and summarize the literature) within the discourse on public value, but it is also controversial: there are struggles over present meaning and the distinction between public value and public values. Lastly, research on public value is most often circulated by those authors who themselves advance from the debate on public value. This resonates with the power of gatekeepers who shape a discourse and knowledge construction (Astley 1985).

Methods

SKAD is a research program (rather than a method) that “uses the rich tradition of qualitative data analysis to proceed in discourse research” (Keller 2011, 63). As shown in figure 1, we conducted the discourse analysis using a sequential, inductive coding process with four stages, applying a grounded theory approach to the data analysis (Charmaz 2006). We moved from the individual articles as

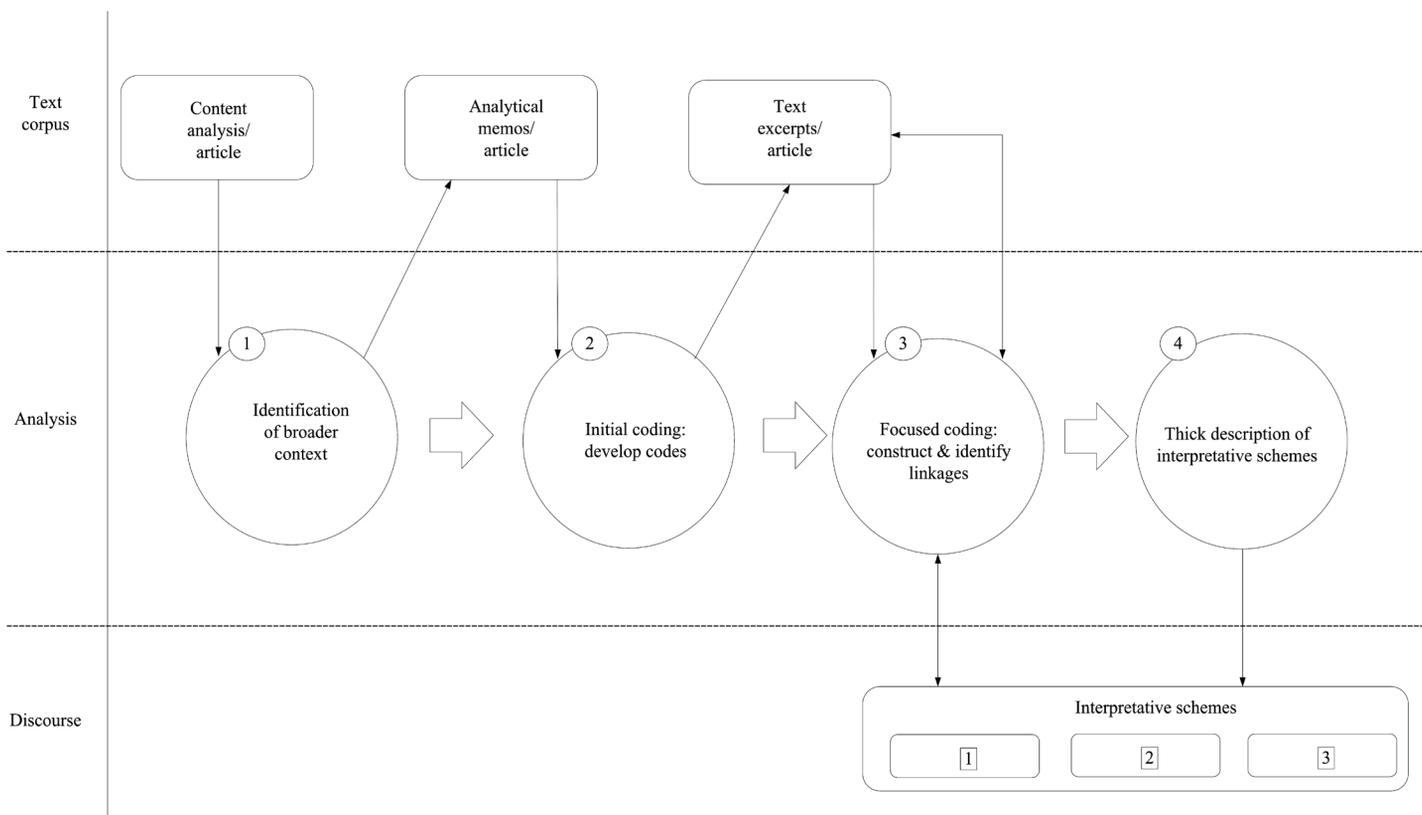


Figure 1 Description of the Analytical Approach

the unit of analysis (text corpus) to the discourse, captured by three final interpretative schemes.

To define the text corpus, we searched two databases, EBSCO and SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), for the term *public value* within the fields of PA and public management in English-language journals from 1994 to 2012. The searches resulted in 66 journal articles from SSCI and 53 from EBSCO, from 15 journals in total. After removing duplicates, three articles that were not relevant, and 42 articles concerned with public values, our search revealed 50 articles relevant to our analysis. The sample is not free of bias, and we cannot claim comprehensiveness to represent all articles written in that time period.

The objective of the first stage of analysis is to gain an overview of the text corpus and identify the broader context of the discourse under examination. To index and sort the text corpus (Spencer et al. 2014), we deductively applied codes common in a systematic literature review including coding articles according to actors, journals, authors' institutional country of origin, applied method, and research objectives. In addition, we coded the role of the issue "public value" based on the following characteristics (building on Meyer and Höllerer 2010): importance (approximation of how public value is used in each article), terminology (definition of public value), position (public value mentioned in the title, heading or subheading, abstract, and/or plain text), and references made to other academic actors or practice and policy-based actors.

In stage two, we created short analytical memos for each article within the corpus (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014; Saldaña

2013) that summarize the researcher's thoughts pertaining to questions such as: What is the central theme of this article? What are its assumptions about public value? According to Saldaña (2013), analytical memos can generate codes and categories in grounded theory approaches. The coding built on these memos and resulted in an initial set of codes.

In stage three, we did focused coding involving constructing and identifying linkages and accounting for patterns within the text corpus (Spencer et al. 2014). Frequent or significant codes in the text corpus indicate "the most salient categories" (Charmaz 2006, 46). Researchers take the discovered themes from the initial coding and develop a set of codes to identify excerpts for textual analysis (Charmaz 2006). With the support of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software (MAXQDA, 1989–2015), we moved back and forth between the text corpus and codes, selecting from among the initial codes the ones that offered the greatest analytical sense and relevance (Charmaz 2006; Saldaña 2013). Identifying dichotomous categories in use served as an additional analytical tool during the coding process. The QDA software organizes the analytical journey so that the analytical and interpretative conclusions can be drawn from the constant confrontation with the empirical text corpus. This iterative process ended with three final sets of codes and text excerpts.

In stage four, we analyzed the text excerpts within each of the three final sets of codes by means of three analytical categories to reconstruct the interpretative schemes (similar to an approach by Herzig and Moon 2013). The first analytical category, *background and assumptions*, highlights the broader context within which the concept is embedded. Second, *actors, roles, and activities* point

Table 1 Example of Coding Stage 4: Text Excerpts from Spano (2009)

| Stage | Findings | Analytical Category | Analysis |
|--|---|--|--|
| Stage 4: Interpretative schemes | Manageability and progress | | |
| Stage 3: Focused coding: Identification of linkages across codes | Managing for outcomes Public manager/private manager Citizens/customers | | |
| Text excerpt of the code "Managing for outcomes" | "As pointed out in the previous section, three elements are important in understanding how public value can be created, namely the <i>choice</i> of the needs to be satisfied, the <i>choice</i> of the strategies to satisfy the selected needs and the <u>production processes</u> to create and deliver public services. The first and the second ones are a typical political choice: politicians are delegated <u>by citizens</u> to choose the needs that will be satisfied first and the strategies to satisfy them. The third element depends on the way in which <u>productive factors</u> are combined together in <u>production processes</u> in order to deliver services <u>to citizens</u> ." | (1) Background and assumptions: Who is responsible? (2) Actors, roles, and activities: Solutions and involved actors? (3) Rhetorical devices/categories in use: norms, values, and goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Choices</i> by managers based on rational thinking • Actors: citizens, politicians, productive factors • Politicians are delegated by citizens, not citizens delegate to politicians • Strategic management as solution • public service delivery as <u>production process</u> • <u>By citizens, to citizens</u> (not subject) |

to action-generating, practical consequences of the concept. Third, *motives and rhetorical devices* refer to the linguistic sphere of knowledge construction and show how interpretative schemes become embedded in norms, values, and goals. We analyzed each text excerpt of the final code set based on these three analytical categories (see table 1 for an example).

To ensure quality and rigor in the data analysis process, the analysis built on techniques proposed to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative inquiries, such as process and terminal member checking with internal members (public value scholars) and external members (PA scholars skilled in qualitative inquiry) (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To ensure transferability, the text corpus and a thick description to the analysis is presented in a supplementary appendix in the online version of this article. The following presentation of findings takes the interpretative schemes across articles to account for the multiple perspectives and rhetorical devices evident in the public value discourse (Thomas 2006). The Results section starts with a description of the evolution of the public value academic discourse and its institutionalization. These results arise from our data, in particular the first stage of the coding process. This description sets the context for understanding the nature of the discourse as described in the section on interpretative schemes.

Results

Evolution and Institutionalization of Public Value as an Academic Discourse

Investigating institutionalization requires assessing how specific articles have been turning points in the debate or summarized the debate in a way that has been broadly accepted (freezing) and whether struggles over meaning persist. Such an assessment might yield insights into the degree of discourses being accepted as knowledge or taken-for-granted meanings of reality (Tolbert and Zucker 2006). The production of public value, in the form of peer-reviewed journal publications, has been increasing since Moore's first article in 1994, to 1 in 1998 and 48 from 2004 to 2012, to a peak of 11 articles in 2009 with an *IJPA* special issue on public value (see table 2 for a summary of the content analysis).

The public value text corpus emerges with Moore's initial attempt to freeze the meaning of public value. Moore's research established

Table 2 Key Findings of Content Analysis

| Code | Key Findings |
|--|--|
| Year | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1994 to 2012 |
| Journals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 PA journals, ranging from country- and continent-specific journals (e.g., <i>AJPA</i>) to international journals of public administration and policy-oriented journals (e.g., <i>Policy Studies</i>) • <i>AJPA</i> has published the largest number of articles on public value (14), followed by <i>Public Administration</i> (8) |
| Research design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argumentative and conceptual articles (54%) • Essays or introductions to issues (12%) • Qualitative empirical (24%) • Mixed methods (6%) • Quantitative empirical (4%) |
| Authors' institutional country of origin | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European institutions (37%) • Australian institutions (33%) • North American institutions (20%) • Asian institutions (10%) • African or South American institutions did not publish on the topic • Out of the 60 authors, 13 contributed more than once to the text corpus (eight with Australian affiliations) |
| Importance of issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high importance (36%) • High importance (26%) • Only 28% of the articles embed their research in the broader context |
| Position of issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public value in the title (56%) • Public value in the abstract (82%) • Public value in the body of the article (62%) |
| Terminology for issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 80% give a definition to public value • 16% use the term without reference or specifying a definition |
| Reference to text corpus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half of the articles (25) refer to Stoker (2006) • 19 cite the critique of Rhodes and Wanna (2007) • 14 reference Smith's (2004) introduction to the <i>AJPA</i> symposium • 13 cite O'Flynn's (2007) overview article |
| Reference to actors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42 articles refer to Moore's book (1995) • Half (24) refer to the U.K.-based policy research by Kelly and colleagues (2002) for the Cabinet's Office Strategy Unit • Another influential actor is the U.K.-based Work Foundation, which accounts for 11 out of 17 references to practice-based reports |

public managers as central actors who are assigned particular roles and responsibilities in the public value discourse. This instrumental practitioner perspective has been especially shaped and reaffirmed by Australian journals and academic institutions (e.g., *AJPA* symposium, 2004) and reproduced over time across the majority of the text corpus. There is a consistent frame of reference to Moore's research, and it is—despite a few exceptions—unchallenged.

While Moore's initial research did not position public value as a counterpart to public sector reform, the PA academic community positioned public value as such from 2002 onward. Both the article by Stoker (2006) and the policy work by Kelly, Mulgan, and Muers (2002) were influential in establishing public value as a post-NPM response. This corresponds with the influence of a practice discourse in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. The U.K.-based Work Foundation shared the discourse in terms of practitioner perspectives on public sector reform. Against the institutionalization of public value as a management framework, public value scholarship takes on a relational perspective on the government-citizen interface; citizens are central to public value, and public managers have a responsibility to engage in legitimation.

Stoker (2006) and Smith (2004) were influential in freezing public value as an academic PA theme. This academic growth becomes visible when looking at practices of the scientific community, in which authors refer to workshops, conferences, and presentations as reproduction of the academic discourse. Interestingly, a close reference to and reproduction of practitioner discourse decreases as the academic community reproduces the academic constituency of public value. Few articles continue to refer to the practitioner perspective, while most articles build on the shared meaning as represented in the research by Smith (2004), Stoker (2006), and O'Flynn (2007). The public value academic discourse then widens in scope (institutional affiliations of actors expand, influenced by the 2009 *IJPA* special issue), depth (conceptual research is complemented with empirical research), and critique (debate emerges within the academic community).

Parallel with this, the academic community raises concern about the discourse's positive connotation and its symbolic power. Critics (Davis and West 2009; Morrell 2009) of this understanding worry that public value falls short of providing a holistic understanding because it only functions in opposition to other frameworks and has a managerial, reductionist connotation. Besides these concerns, there are also attempts to produce a new meaning of public value. For example, value creation is challenged by a democratic perspective rooted in the idea of a public sphere (Benington 2009) and a psychological perspective focusing on the individual rather than the institutional level (Meynhardt 2009). These attempts do not alter the discourse but build on the set of present schemes, thereby reproducing and fostering the institutionalization of public value in PA.

Interpretative Schemes of Public Value

The discourse analysis indicates that the academic public value field is shaped by an evolution of three interpretative schemes. This evolution of schemes is a differentiation of the discourse over time and an enhancement of Moore's original work. The scheme "manageability and progress" directly connects to Moore's work, while the schemes "superseding economization" and "democratic accountability" evolve from 2000 onward and expand the action-generating schemata that make up the public value discourse. The three interpretative schemes do not represent competing views; there is no "powerful" internal debate to establish a different meaning or understanding. Ruptures in the discourse particularly evolve with the evolution of the superseding economization scheme. Table 3 gives an overview of the three interpretative schemes.

Table 3 Summary of Public Value Interpretative Schemes

| Categories of text excerpt analysis | Interpretative schemes | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | Manageability and Progress | Superseding Economization | Democratic Accountability |
| Background and assumptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refinement of Moore's notion Public value management as solution for progress in public administration Characteristics: post-competitive, relationship-oriented, innovative (cf. former management frameworks) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shortcomings in market-based reforms of the public sector Public value as theme and paradigm for reforming the public sector, beyond economization Synthesis of different (reform) characteristics: bridge not only an antipode to existing themes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of integration of the public into policy making, service delivery, and management frameworks Clash with understandings of government in a democracy Public value contributes to democracy Relational quality of public value |
| Actors, roles, and activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizens define what is valuable, who values, and who benefits from value creation Public managers as central actors to apply public value management Value creation translates into management functions Activities include engaging with stakeholders and performance management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government should be built on public value thinking Management, policy making, and politics must apply public value management Citizens are designers and recipients of public services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizens must play a more active role in policy making and service delivery Relationship building by government, public organizations, and managers Public value as means and ends to public policy making and service delivery |
| Motives and rhetorical devices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compatibility of a public value approach with current practices Resemblance to democratic principles Outcome and impact orientation Metaphors: Management as helping hand; Language of change and newness Categories in use: old/new; past/future; traditional/progressive or modern; input/impact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characteristics of public value: collective preferences, democratic, legitimate, deliberate, serves community building Overcoming ideologies Rediscovery of government Holistic perspective on government Metaphors: Emergence of public value as part of a natural cycle of paradigms; vision for government Categories in use: public/private; efficiency/democracy; competition/cooperation; NPM/PVM; old/new; past/future; customer/citizen; market/stakeholder or civil society | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relational quality of government-citizen exchange: trust, quality, voice, equity Fundamental premises: participation and deliberation in representative democracy Responsibility of government Personification Collective citizenry (pleonasm) Categories in use: partnership/hierarchy; public/private or individual; effectiveness or efficiency/legitimacy; politics/administration |

Manageability and Progress.

Overview. The interpretative scheme of manageability and progress signals a belief that the public value framework enables public managers, policy makers, and public organizations to achieve particular outcomes for society. It emphasizes the need for a managerial perspective to improve public service delivery and policy making. Several authors connect managerial need with the idea of public value creation as a new paradigm for governments. For example, O’Flynn notes that “a new ‘post-competitive’ paradigm. .. could signal a shift away from the primary focus on results and efficiency toward the achievement of the broader governmental goal of public value creation” (2007, 358).

Background and assumptions. Reflecting the NPM movement and the increasingly complex environment that public organizations face, this scheme finds a solution in a more managerially oriented perspective. The concept of public value (Moore 1995) gets refined in both scope and weight, such that Moore’s articulated need for concrete methods and instruments to understand what public managers do gets transformed, under the umbrella of public value, to a movement and theme for managing public organizations. As depicted in the following example, this scheme portrays the need for a theme that creates a barrier to former ones, such as NPM, as a reform theme or traditional bureaucracy.

The argument here is that the next movement in public management should be what can be referred to as “public value pragmatism.” This is an approach that is principled about ends but pragmatic about means. (Alford and Hughes 2008, 131)

Actors, roles, and activities. In addition to serving as an abstract theme, public value representing manageability and progress translates into concrete actions. This scheme explicitly refers to planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, and controlling, as management functions to approach value creation and performance management. Public managers have central roles in these management processes, designing structures and leading value creation in coordination with the public. The role of managers cannot be uncoupled from stakeholder definitions of what is valuable and who benefits from public value creation.

The consequence of the approach presented is not about “reinventing government” but developing innovative methods for identifying, assessing, prioritizing, communicating, and controlling the public value, facing the difficulties of subjective accounts. (Meynhardt 2009, 215)

Motives and rhetorical devices. This scheme reflects the belief that manageability is compatible with shifting environments (e.g., network arrangements) and demands for more collaborative approaches. Inherent in public value are principles such as deliberative democracy and participatory governance. In this interpretative scheme, public value is portrayed by metaphors and a language of improvement and change (constructive and innovative) in contrast with other themes (destructive or obsolete wording). Public value is applied in diverse ways, appearing as noun, adverb, and adjective. This stretches its conceptual power but also raises challenges to aligning meaning.

Superseding Economization.

Overview. Our analysis indicates that the scientific discourse on public value is shaped by the interpretative scheme of superseding economization as a reoccurring theme. Economization refers to the intrusion of an economic system, preference for technical efficiency, and market-based administrative reform. Economization is a result of NPM and the marketization of the public sector. This interpretative scheme establishes public value as a framework that enables a diverse set of actors to articulate a vision as well as concrete measures for improvement, with economization as a threat that must be overcome. Broader developments, such as New Public Service, network governance, and coproduction, are part of this new way of thinking and the sense-making for public value. For example, Stoker argues that

...new public management rests on a trade-off that places efficiency... as the overwhelming objective. Management is king, and politics is sidelined. The public value management paradigm as part of a wider networked governance argues that legitimate democracy and effective management are partners. (2006, 56)

Background and assumptions. In the literature, public value is emerging as a solution and new paradigm, due to the ongoing shortcomings and debate about NPM and traditional forms of bureaucracy. A focus on market-based reforms has led to an insufficient integration of citizen values and concerns into reform, policy making, and service delivery. There is the need for a new paradigm that moves beyond existing dichotomies and ideologies. For example, O’Flynn notes,

More recently, however, cracks have appeared and the search for a new way of thinking about, and enacting public management practice has begun, in part to address the supposed weaknesses of NPM. This is unlikely to underpin a return to the bureaucratic model, but rather spark a paradigmatic change which attempts to redefine how we think about the state, its purpose and thus, ways of functioning, operating and managing. (2007, 353)

This scheme portrays public value as the new theme of reform for managers, policy makers, and politicians. Public value is a replacement for earlier models of policy making and service delivery, bridging NPM and traditional approaches. Although in this interpretative scheme, public value has meaning predominantly through boundaries and as an antithesis to other frameworks, its boundary-spanning role is outlined. By blending features of obsolete approaches, a public value framing can alter the way different actors think about government.

Actors, roles, and activities. Government and citizens are the central actors in this economization scheme. Government (authority, institution, organization) should be built on public value management (PVM); citizens build the foundation for thinking in a public value manner. Thus, stakeholders must be actively engaged as designers and coproducers rather than just recipients. Other governmental and government-affiliated actors should base their behavior and decision-making on public value instead of solely economic or bureaucratic thinking. Thus, public value supersedes economic value as outlined in the following anchor example:

The notion of PV [public value] promises to include collective preferences in a much broader (Waldonian) sense. It empowers holistic and systems thinking and seeks to overcome simplistic state versus market ideologies. (Meynhardt and Bartholomes 2011, 286)

Motives and rhetorical devices. This interpretative scheme strengthens particular characteristics of public value, building on collective preferences and rooted in the central elements of democratic principles, legitimacy, and deliberation. The motives present within the scheme of superseding economization reflect the goals of both scholars and practitioners to provide a framework that overcomes ideology and is built on holistic rather than reductionist thinking about government and policy making. It portrays a rediscovery of government, from multiple perspectives: government itself, policy making, and civil society. This particular vision for government uses a language of metaphors. The emergence of public value is portrayed as part of a natural cycle of paradigms, a vision for change, an alternative.

Democratic Accountability.

Overview. The democratic accountability interpretative scheme regards public value as resembling a positive perspective on the quality, responsibility, and legitimation of government, enabling greater public involvement. It acknowledges the need to integrate democratic institutions and political processes more prominently into questions of policy making and service delivery.

Public value management as a form of governance provides the frame on which a more extended exchange between governors and governed can be built. (Stoker 2006, 54)

Background and assumptions. Government as a boundary setter ensures that public services are delivered according to democratic principles. Similar to the other two interpretative schemes, democratic accountability gets compared to an economic understanding of the relationship of government and the public. This scheme also entails a relational perspective, with a personified description of the exchanges among government and stakeholders. Talbot notes that public value establishes

The idea that in a democratic polity it is not just individual benefits from services or outcomes, or public interest benefits, but also the procedures by which they are shaped and decided upon which determine the utility of public services performance. (2011, 30)

The scheme emphasizes the belief that public value contributes to the democratic quality of a society. As greater involvement of community stakeholders is central to the post-NPM zeitgeist in the scientific community, this scheme directly connects to other research areas in PA (e.g., collaboration, partnerships, network governance, and participation).

Actors, roles, and activities. This scheme acknowledges that public value is an expression of democracy and political processes, whereby community members must play active roles. Rather than emphasizing manageability and the theme of public value, this interpretative scheme addresses public value as means and ends that contribute to democracy and legitimacy as related to government action. Public value shapes

exchanges between government and stakeholders, providing legitimation through trust, equity, voice, quality, and participation. As an end, it provides a criterion for evaluating government performance, the achievement of internal and external stakeholder preferences.

In the case of public value, it is the needs and wants of the collective citizenry that count. But different citizens have different and often conflicting preferences about different issues, and moreover, these preferences change over time, sometimes quickly. So defining what is valuable to the collective citizenry is an inherent challenge for public managers. (Alford and Hughes 2008, 133)

The translation of public value into practice and meeting democratic accountability is a constant challenge for public managers. By redefining the relationship between the public and governments, a more fundamental question arises: "What is the appropriate framework for judging the relationship between public officials and the citizens in whose name they serve?" (Morgan 1988, 67).

Motives and rhetorical devices. By connecting public value and democracy, this scheme acknowledges legitimacy as an operational but also constitutive resource of organizations (Suchman 1995). It reflects the assumption that fundamental challenges to an organization's legitimacy can be differentiated between performance challenges (i.e., performance of service delivery/goods is questioned because the organization fails to execute the tasks for which it is responsible) and value challenges (e.g., its mission is questioned, regardless of service delivery). This scheme reflects the belief that public value enables governments to overcome both performance and value challenges. This scheme builds on a belief in the relational quality of a government-citizen exchange, reflecting principles of deliberation in representative democracies.

Discussion

The discourse analysis shows that the evolution of the academic discourse on public value is deeply interwoven with practitioner and policy discourses. Furthermore, few seminal public value works are able to produce a discourse by referring to other discourses (e.g., NPM, financial crisis). The discourse on public value historically emerges out of the actions and interactions of a wide range of social actors. Institutionalization is enabled through discursive practices within the academic community. The structure and practices of the academic system allow for a reproduction of the discourse (Astley 1985). Through these practices, the public value discourse partially loses its contextual connection and national focus. According to the data, public value discourse moves from a practice to an academic focus as a universal disciplinary agreement emerges when particular discursive events are shared. Public value serves as a symbol for change in the public sector, with goals never to be reached, functioning as normative assumptions that guide reforms, research, and organizational behavior. This symbolic power enables institutionalization and strengthens robustness to counterdiscourses, building an identity among scholars, policy makers, and practitioners.

Drawing from this case, we find that in PA identity centers around the following views: PA scholars collectively share the ideal of a new theme (*economization*) that bridges the divide of government and citizens (*democratic accountability*) in order to develop practice (*manageability and progress*). Each of these schemata, which guide how PA scholars

make sense of phenomena, employ the rediscovery of government and its responsibilities as part of the identity of PA scholarship. What do the findings on the public value discourse might tell us about knowledge construction in public administration? In this article, we offer three propositions for future investigations on knowledge construction in PA, thereby linking the findings on public value discourse to the broader question of knowledge construction in PA.

The interpretative scheme of manageability and progress points to the reciprocal relation of PA theory and practice, with practice being key to knowledge creation. PA research evolves from and influences practitioner discourses as solutions for real-world problems. Manageability makes PA distinct from one of its parent disciplines—political science—and more akin to another of its founding disciplines—business and management. We therefore propose that manageability and progress are required for knowledge construction in PA research:

Proposition 1: Knowledge construction in PA is contingent on achieving manageability and progress by means of practical knowledge.

The interpretative scheme of superseding economization points to the motive of PA scholars to limit or bound economization in PA theory and practice. While PA research inherently builds on themes of public sector reform and fundamental principles of bureaucracy and economics, PA scholars concurrently reflect the influence and direction of such reoccurring themes. We therefore propose that PA knowledge construction requires balancing, and often limiting, a focus on economization:

Proposition 2: Knowledge construction in PA centers on the tension of achieving collective values that supersede strict economization.

The interpretative scheme of democratic accountability points to the belief that PA research and practice serves the public interest. The translation and protection of values such as equality, accountability, and solidarity guides PA scholarship and practice. Thus, the challenge of determining whose values and interests government is accountable to serve is foundational to PA as a field. We therefore propose that addressing democratic accountability is critical for knowledge construction in PA research:

Proposition 3: Knowledge construction in PA requires balancing the demands of individuals, society, and government to achieve democratic accountability.

The propositions indicate the need for future research on knowledge construction in PA. In particular, from a holistic perspective, the propositions illustrate how the evolution of public value might mirror current issues within PA. In that vein, we propose that how PA scholars make sense of phenomena and engage in knowledge construction might take place within three pillars, as figure 2 illustrates: manageability and progress, superseding economization, and democratic accountability. As part of the process of a concept's institutionalization, each of the three anchor points might be more or less substantial over time. Knowledge as such is a snapshot of acceptance of actors at a particular point in time.

These pillars might also represent the concepts, often interdisciplinary, that tie PA to and make it distinct from other disciplines. PA focuses on knowledge for practitioners (proposition 1), making it distinct from political science. By superseding economization (proposition 2), knowledge creation in PA centers on public organizations and public values, making it distinct from business management. And by balancing the demands of individuals and society through the state (proposition 3), PA knowledge is fundamentally about government, not just individuals and groups.

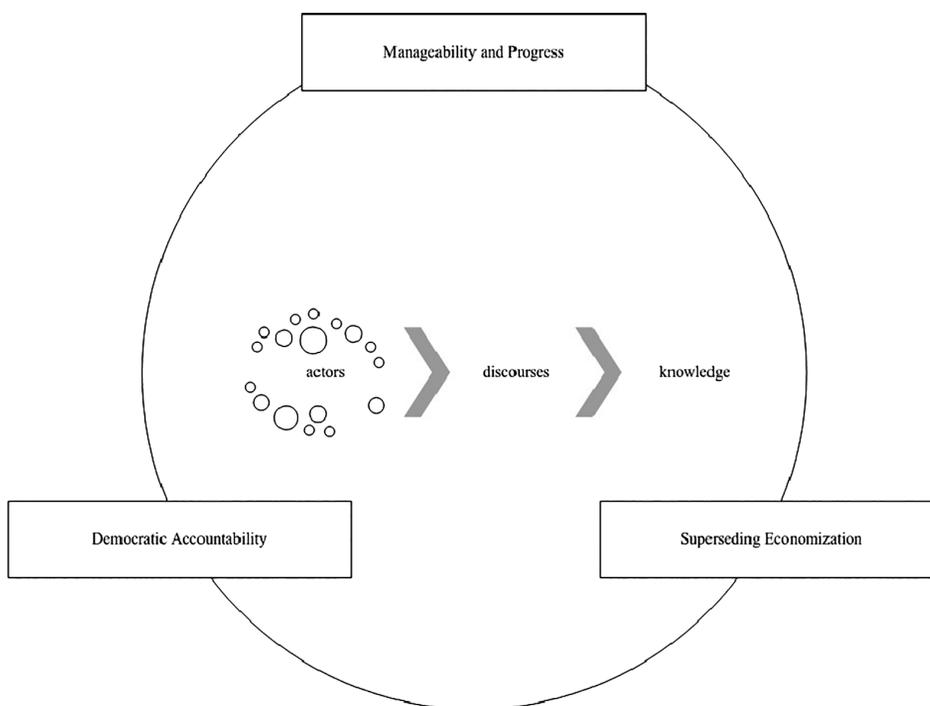


Figure 2 The Three Pillars of Public Administration Knowledge Construction

Conclusions

This research advances our understanding of knowledge construction in PA (Aimo 2002; Raadschelders 2011) by using a particular lens that can “bring some phenomenon into sharper focus while also reducing blind spots” (Nesbit et al. 2011, 117). Our lens contributes to the better understanding of the development of an important construct in the field: the public value case shows that the reciprocal relationship of practitioner and scientific discourses is transformed as part of the process of institutionalization. Moreover, the symbolic power of the research field, as collectively shared among actors, reinforces its institutionalization and stabilizes the acceptance of discourses over time. We argue that the analysis of the evolution of public value mirrors current issues within PA such as governance, network arrangements, and coproduction. All of these issues highlight the changing environment and resulting challenges for policy making and service delivery. From the case of public value, we offer propositions and a framework for understanding knowledge construction in PA in future research.

The limitations of this research must be mentioned. First, our sample selection focused on academic articles, excluding other manifestations of the public value discourse such as books (Alford 2009), edited volumes (Benington and Moore 2011), conference papers, and practitioner reports. Yet we partially address knowledge construction and thus contribute to the understanding of emergence of a research field that is tied to practice. Second, our lens does not enable us to evaluate symbolic power across other research fields, which limits possibilities for connecting knowledge. Third, our interpretive approach follows the ontological position of constructivism/subjectivism (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 14). We were involved in constructing reality during the analysis, which translates into particular choices during the analysis (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018), thus limiting replication and generalizability.

Our framework, the Three Pillars of Public Administration Knowledge Construction, offers possible areas to explore PA knowledge construction in future research. Scholars can apply these three schemes to other areas of knowledge creation (e.g., network governance, contracting, public service motivation, coproduction), testing our propositions that expect that modern PA knowledge creation is embedded in a discourse of public sector reform (e.g., contracting, bureaucratic discretion, and performance management) and that PA requires an emphasis on citizens as central to research and knowledge construction (e.g., administrative burden, coproduction, and technology use for citizen engagement). Testing manageability as a key schemata to PA research can determine the veracity of our proposition that practitioner perspectives anchor theoretical concepts and allow for theory development in the field. Finally, not examined here, but emergent in our analysis is a pattern that academic knowledge production on public value coincided with movement away from practice. This points to a potential threat in knowledge creation in PA. As academic research grows does it become more removed from practice? Do academics co-opt practice? Or are they using jargon and theoretical and methodological approaches that make their research less accessible and relevant to practice? These questions require further research and application to other areas of PA knowledge. Further research into questions of PA knowledge construction should address the role and power of other institutional actors, especially practitioners and the public.

Note

1. Public value continued to be a central topic in academic journals from 2012 onward; see the *Public Administration Review* symposium in 2014 (vol. 74, no. 4) and the special issue of *Public Management Review* in 2017 (vol. 19, no 5). Furthermore, public values were central to special issues of *Administration & Society* in 2015 (vol. 47, no. 9), *American Review of Public Administration* in 2015 (vol. 45, no. 1), and *IJPA* in 2016 (vol. 39, no. 1).

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Supporting Information

Supplementary appendices may be found in the online version of this article at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/puar.13005/full>.