New development: Expanding public service value to include dis/value

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Abstract

In this new developments paper we introduce two new terms to the public value lexicon 'public service ethos' and 'dis/value'. Both terms serve to progress the conceptualization of public value. We use 'public service ethos' to refer to the prevailing assumption that the inclusion of service user voices in the delivery and improvement of public services creates individual and societal benefits (public value). We further argue that this ethos is predicated on discourses of rational action and human relationships that do not reflect the complex reality of public services. We use 'dis/value' to refer to the public value relationships that fall outside of the public service ethos and suggest three service assemblages to exemplify this. Based on this we suggest a theory/practice disjuncture whereby the 'public service ethos' is not practicable based on its anthropomorphic focus and the consequent failure to recognize complexity. To overcome this, we draw on new materialist theory to reposition public value as a relational assemblage that can accommodate value in all combinations.

Impact statement

Public value is now a common buzzword in public service management and its creation or production processes represent common approaches to service delivery. It is increasingly argued that public value is overly optimistic and premised on overly positive ideals of universal benefit. Here we propose two new terms that both critique current approaches to public value and also expand the concept to reflect the complex reality of public service practice: dis/value and public service ethos. Public service ethos represents the idealism associated with the public value and dis/value accounts for public value relationships and experiences that fall outside of this.

Key words: public value, dis/value, public value ethos, assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari

Introduction

In this paper we introduce a new term to the public value vocabulary – dis/value. This is a necessary term to critically assess the widespread perception that public service value is accessible and beneficial to all. Here we explain our understanding of dis/value, first situating it contextually and then unpacking three position statements that ground our conceptualization. We draw on new materialist theory, primarily Deleuze and Guattari's logic of assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), to challenge previous assumptions by positioning public value in terms of a fluid relationship in which positive and negative co-exist. Seen in terms of a logic of assemblage, public value necessarily includes dis/value, rendering all value experiences apparent. It is important to note that our approach is not intended to present a binary alternative to value, rather we argue that dis/value is a fundamental and inherent component of public service value that must not be

ignored.

Moving away from anthropocentric logics that have previously been used to conceptualise public value, we ground public value in a logic of assemblage, offering three position statements to allow for a richer understanding of the complexities of public service delivery.

1.   Public value is a heterogeneous and changeable assemblage.

2.   Public service value is not the same value for all.

3.   Dis/value expands the understanding of the experience of public service value.

We expand and discuss each statement as the paper progresses. First, we make clear the need for a revised approach to public value and propose two issues – the predominance of 'public value ethos' and a theory/practice disjuncture. We then discuss dis/value as part of public value. We conclude by emphasizing the idealistic nature of 'public service ethos' and call for further consideration of public value as an assemblage of fluid and heterogeneous elements.

The public value ethos

Public service value co-creation and co-production represent popular approaches to the design, delivery and management of public services. Each concept is grounded in its own theoretical framework and numerous definitions have been suggested (Cluley and Radnor 2019). Despite this both terms are frequently used simultaneously to refer to the same action – the explicit inclusion of service users in public service work (Voorberg et al 2015).

Typically, although not exclusively, definitions of "co" work position the service user and the service provider in a structured, two-way exchange relationship. Depending on the theoretical approach taken, emphasis is then placed on either the service provider (Ostrom 1972) the service user (Gronroos 2011) or the relationship between them (Osborne et al 2016). The logic is that including service users in public service design and delivery will result in better services (Osborne 2018. In promoting inclusion and personalization in a context where efficiencies are required, it is apparent why such approaches have 'intuitive appeal' (Dudau et al 2019). Such approaches are rooted in what we call a 'public value ethos'- a commitment to the inclusion of service users to provide services that benefit the common good and which are valued citizens (Ersoy 2017). Predicated on this ethos, utilising public service co-production/co-creation is frequently heralded as a gold standard approach to public service delivery and often seen as a value in themselves (Voorberg et al 2015).

Indeed, the 'public value ethos' narrative has become so ingrained that it is has been difficult critique (Dudau et al 2019). Who would dispute the inclusion of user voices? Recently, however, the implicit benefit of co-production and co-creation to achieve public value has been questioned. Dudau et al (2019) propose a "constructive disenchantment" question what they refer to as magical co-paradigms. Other commentators argue that there is a dark and evil side to co-creation/production that diminishes state responsibility, reduces accountability, and involve service users in a tokenistic manner (Steen et al 2018). Cluley and Radnor (2019) question co-creation and co-production in practice by emphasising the anthropocentric focus of previous conceptualisations dose not adequately reflect the complexity of public services. Their example of a service user with learning disabilities highlights the theory-practice disjuncture inherent within the 'public value ethos', in that this ethos encounters limits and challenges when faced

with the diverse and complex reality of public services. This theory-practice disjuncture is predicated on the anthropocentric focus of previous conceptualisations of public value; whereby, service users are typically positioned as rational actors at the centre of public value creation. Consequently, the experiences of 'non typical service users' and other factors in the public value experience, such as lived experience, socio-economic status, and environmental factors are largely ignored. In this way, the inclusivity of public value creation processes are often exclusive in practice. We expand on this in position statement two.

In conjunction with growing skepticism, different terms have been used to describe the opposite of public value creation, including subtracted and destroyed (Benington 2011, 48), lost and displaced (Hartley et al, 2019, 11-12) contaminated (Williams et al 2016) and as disvalue (Esposito and Ricci 2015). It is unclear if these words are used inter-changeably or mean different things. Alford (2016) identifies obligatees as those who are forced to engage in co-production, rather than co-creation as a complicit and mutually beneficial partnership with the state. Examples of obligatees include prisoners, police enforcement, mental health sectioning and the safeguarding of vulnerable people. We propose the term dis/value as an umbrella term to capture the range of public value experiences that may not fit with the general perception that public value co-creation is a positive process for all. In order to ground this position philosophically and conceptually we next expand our three position statements.

Positioning dis/value

While we support the principle behind 'public value ethos', here we question its practicality. Indeed, we propose an inherent theory-practice disjuncture, predicated on the intrinsic complexity of public services and their users. We argue that current conceptualisations of public value and

its creation do not reflect reality, and that 'public value ethos' does not necessarily mean value for all.

1. *Public services and public service users are heterogeneous and changeable assemblages of relational human, environmental, social, cultural, material, existential, contingent, animal and economic factors.*

This is not a novel statement, however, the complexity of public services is largely missing from previous anthropocentric conceptualizations of public value and its creation processes. Complexity must be factored into any conceptualization of public value (Dudau et al 2019). Indeed, public services are riven with complexity with a broad range of organizations delivering a variety of complex services to a diverse population. Public services have statutory duties, a commitment to serve the common good, and are available to the public as a whole. Consequently, their service user population is heterogeneous (Cluley and Radnor 2019). This means public service experience is a unique phenomenon that needs to be considered when conceptualising value and its emergence.

While such complexity is recognized in network theory (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000) and often in particular public service accounts (Greenhalgh and Papoutsi 2018), it is largely missing from understandings of the public value process (see Bryson et al 2017 and Cluley and Radnor 2019 for exceptions to the norm). Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) logic of assemblage provides a useful approach to making sense of complexity, with essence rejected in favour of fluidity. In this way, human interaction is not prioritised, rather, public value can be seen to include a range of changeable factors including objects, animals, humans, environments, feelings, socioeconomic

factors, cultural beliefs and more. This logic is predicated on a fluid ontology whereby beginning and end is not considered, rather the focus is on change and becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). If viewed as an assemblage, public value is highlighted as the heterogeneous and changeable experience that it truly is.

2. *Public service value is not value for all.*

Numerous attempts have been made to conceptualize public value (Moore 1995; Benington, 2011; Meynhardt ?) Applying an anthropocentric focus previous definitions of public value implicitly position those involved as rational actors. This is problematic due to the diversity of public service users and the impact of other non-human factors in the public service relationship. Public value discourse, moreover, largely ignores service user experiences of exclusion, negotiation, and rejection (but see Hartley et al 2019). In this way, public value is rendered an exclusive and limited experience. We propose three assemblages where public value co-creation is often unaccounted for.

a) "Navigating the state" - This assemblage highlights the relationships involved in negotiated access to public services and includes factors such as cognitive capacity, skills, social capital, structural accessibility, socio-economic status, transport, and health and wellbeing. To experience public value the service users in this assemblage may be socially expected/coerced to refer themselves to the state by navigating and interpreting what the state offers. The state may not be clear about what can be provided or accessible (physically and cognitively), and navigators will frequently be vulnerable people. Examples include frail older people and their carers, people with cognitive disabilities, and vulnerable families.

b) "Rejected by the state" – this assemblage reveals the elements involved in the public value experience of those who can be considered to be rejected by the state. Examples include asylum seekers, young offenders, and people whose application for welfare benefits has been rejected. Rejection will take different forms including denial of citizenship, denial of financial resources, and the removal of liberty. In these assemblages, factors such as official forms, language, physical and cognitive ability, buildings, temporal restrictions and laws will feature.

c) "Rejection of the state" – This assemblage addresses the relational factors involved in the public value experience of those who reject the state. Examples include Gypsies and Travelers, sexual offenders, and those living anarchist lifestyles. Factors in this assemblage can include ethnicity, political orientation, cultural norms, mental ill health, and environmental factors,

3. *Dis/value expands the understanding of the experience of public service value.*

If public service value is not value for all (as we state in our second assemblage above), dis/value, must be accounted for. Meynardt (2009) refers to 'public value inside', focusing on how an individual's experience of public value is influenced by their interaction with that state. We extend this conceptualization to include objects, environments, animals and structures such as material objects, living conditions and institutions as equal and acting agents (Cluley and Radnor 2019). In this way we see public value as a fluid and relational experience that will be different depending on

circumstance. By virtue of this, public value cannot always be positive, rather its various assemblages create and affect that will be heterogeneous and changeable (Fox and Aldred 2019).

In the assemblages we have outlined, it is highly likely that the public value experience will not be positive, but could be limiting, struggled for, frustrating, and constraining. These are experiences of dis/value. They represent experience that fall outside of the remit of the 'public value ethos' inherent within previous conceptualisations of public value and its creation processes. Despite this, they are experiences that are inextricably linked to public value in that they represent the limits of 'public value ethos'. Dis/value, moreover, is more than a constitutive outside, it is part of public value.

Conclusion

We have argued that current definitions of public value are problematic as they can assume the creation of public value is beneficial and positive for all, and tend to rely on an anthropomorphic discourse that positions humans as rational actors. We summaries this combination as 'the public service ethos', whereby the inclusion of service user (positioned implicitly as rational actors) voices is thought to result in individual and societal benefits. We do not dispute the idealism and morality inherent within this ethos. Predicated as it is, however, on discourses of rational action and human relationships, we argue that public value as previously conceptualized and practiced is limiting and exclusive. Based on the complexity of public services and their users we have suggested a theory/practice disjuncture whereby the 'public service ethos' is not practicable if complexity is not accounted for and anthropomorphism is not removed. By repositioning public value as assemblage this can include experiences of dis/value in public service delivery and challenge normative assumptions. In this way all experiences of value, including dis/value, are

included.

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