APPRAISING PUBLIC VALUE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURES

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Despite the increasing popularity of the concept of 'public value' within both academic and practice settings, there has to date been no formal review of the literature on its provenance, empirical basis, and application. This paper seeks to fill this gap. It provides a critical introduction to public value and its conceptual development before presenting the main elements of the published literature. Following this, a series of key areas of disagreement are discussed and implications for future research and practice put forward. The authors argue that if the espoused aspirations for the public value framework are to be realized, a concerted process of research, debate and application is required. Although some criticisms of public value are argued to be unwarranted, the authors acknowledge ongoing concerns over the apparent silence of public value on questions of power and heterogeneity, and the difficulties in empirically testing the framework's propositions.

INTRODUCTION

Public value has emerged as an increasingly ubiquitous term in the politics and public administration literature and has featured even more commonly in public sector improvement programmes. However, there remains some lack of clarity over what public value is, both as a theory and as a descriptor of specific public actions and programmes. Mark Moore (1995) initially formulated the public value framework to help imbue public sector managers with a greater appreciation of the constraints and responsibilities within which they work. This in turn was intended as a basis for a more proactive and entrepreneurial approach to value creation. Moore's central proposition was that public resources should be used to increase value in a way which is analogous to value creation within private enterprise. However, this public value would necessarily extend beyond narrow monetary outcomes to include that which benefits and is valued by the citizenry more generally. Following its origins in executive education programmes at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, the public value doctrine has been supplemented by newer interpretations and applications and, in the process, commentators (not least Moore himself) have reworked the themes and concepts involved. In particular, there have been a number of attempts to translate the public value framework into a blueprint for broader public sector improvement (for example, see Kelly *et al*. 2002; Alford and Hughes 2008; Benington 2009, 2011). However, despite public value's increasing popularity within academic and practice settings, there is to date no formal review available within the published literature (although unstructured literature reviews have been carried out, for example, by Kelly *et al*. 2002; Blaug *et al*. 2006; Alford and O'Flynn 2008). This paper seeks to fill this gap by identifying and appraising literature on the public value framework and its applications to public enterprise and action. It provides a critical introduction to public value and its conceptual development before presenting the main elements of the published literature (see table 1). Following this, a series of key areas of disagreement are discussed and implications for future research, policy and practice put forward.

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TABLE 1 *Literature included in the review*

Author and date	Document type	Literature type
Alford 2011	Book chapter	Theoretical development/debate
Alford 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Alford and Hughes 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Alford and O'Flynn 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Alford and O'Flynn 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Barber 2007	Non peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (generic)
Benington 2011	Book chapter	Theoretical development/debate
Benington and Moore 2011	Edited book	Theoretical development/debate
Benington 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Benington and Turbitt 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Bentley *et al.* 2004	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Blaug *et al.* 2006	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Blaug *et al.* 2006a	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Blaug *et al.* 2006b	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Bossert *et al.* 1998	Published report	PV as analytical frame
Bovaird 2008	Unpublished paper	Theoretical development/debate
Bozeman 2002	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Bozeman 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Bozeman 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Bryson 2004	Peer reviewed journal article	Other
Chapman 2003	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Chapman 2005	Non peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Charles *et al.* 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Coats and Passmore 2008	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Constable *et al.* 2008	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Cole and Parston 2006	Book	Normative applications (generic)
Cowling 2006	Published report	Theoretical development/debate
Crabtree 2004	Non peer reviewed journal article	Other
Currie and Guah 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Erridge 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Fauth 2006	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Fryer 2011	Book chapter	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Gains and Stoker 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Gallop 2010	Unpublished paper	Theoretical development/debate
Garnett and Ecclesfield 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Goodwin 2004	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Grigg and Mager 2005	Non-peer review paper	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Grimsley and Meehan 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Hills and Sullivan 2006	Published report	Theoretical development/debate

TABLE 1 *Continued*

Author and date	Document type	Literature type
Horner *et al.* 2006	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Horner *et al.* 2007	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Kelly *et al.* 2002	Published report	Normative applications (generic)
Levy 2008	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Lowndes *et al.* 2006	Peer reviewed journal article	Research
Mager 2007	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Mahdon 2006	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Meynhardt and Metelmann 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Research
Moore 1995	Book	Theoretical development/debate
Moore 2003	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Moore and Moore 2005	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Morrell 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Oakley *et al.* 2006	Published report	Other
O'Flynn 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
O'Toole *et al.* 2005	Peer reviewed journal article	Research
Paparozzi and Demichele 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Rhodes and Wanna 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Rhodes and Wanna 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Rogers and Kingsley 2004	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Samaratunge and Wijewardena 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Sherman *et al.* 2002	Conference proceeding	Theoretical development/debate
Skidmore 2006	Published report	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Smith *et al.* 2004	Peer reviewed journal article	Other (academic journal editorial)
Smith 2004	Peer reviewed journal article	Normative applications (generic)
Spano 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Stoker 2003	Online publication	Theoretical development/debate
Stoker 2006	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Stuart 2011	Book chapter	PV as analytical frame
Swilling 2011	Book chapter	Theoretical development/debate
Talbot 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Talbot 2006	Published report	Theoretical development/debate
Talbot and Wiggan 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Tritter 2011	Book chapter	PV as analytical frame
Try 2008	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Try and Radnor 2007	Peer reviewed journal article	PV as analytical frame
Wallis and Gregory 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate
Williams *et al.* 2007	Non-peer review paper	Normative applications (domain-specific)
Williams *et al.* 2011	Unpublished report	Research
Van der Wal and Van Hout 2009	Peer reviewed journal article	Theoretical development/debate

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

An initial scoping of the public value literature conducted by the authors identified little by way of formal research, indicating that a statistical review based on aggregation of evidence would add little insight into what is essentially an embryonic topic area. The relative absence of either qualitative or quantitative data – combined with the broad (international and cross-sectoral) scope of the review – therefore informed the decision to adopt a narrative approach. This facilitates inclusion of a broader range of literature types, and a summary, explanation and interpretation of this literature (Mays *et al*. 2005; Aveyard 2007). The benefits of this approach are that:

- Broad conclusions can be drawn as to the current state of knowledge on the topic;
- Specific areas of interest can be identified and explored in more detail;
- Due consideration can be given to research, practice, theory and normative literature contributions.

The intention was therefore to be comprehensive in coverage of the extant literature whilst remaining flexible over inclusion and analysis. Analysis involved narrative summary and synthesis followed by a critical commentary on the nature of the theory, evidence and applications of public value (Mays *et al*. 2005).

Data collection

Literature searches were undertaken on bibliographic databases in social science (ASSIA, Social Sciences Index, ISI Social Sciences Citation Index, MEDLINE); and business and management (ABI-INFORM, Info Trac, Proquest). These were searched using the terms 'public' and 'value' in conjunction. Included literature dated from 1995 (the date of publication of Moore's seminal text) onwards. Following initial database searches key journals were selected for further in-depth searching. These included: *American Review of Public Administration*, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, *International Journal of Public Administration*, *Policy and Politics* and *Public Administration*. Bibliographies and reference lists contained within items selected for inclusion were scanned for further potentially relevant material. Additional web searching was carried out with the specific aim of identifying grey, unpublished, policy and practice literature. Finally, a list of approximately 20 academics identified as experts in this area of study were contacted via email and asked to identify key texts on the topic of public value and to provide details of any unpublished studies where these might exist. This process had the benefit of accessing a range of grey literature, such as monographs, conference proceedings and unpublished reports that are likely to be overlooked through standard bibliographic searches.

Data inclusion and analysis

Inclusion criteria were kept deliberately broad in order that all literature with a specific bearing on public value was captured. Initial filtering was based on a review of abstracts with further sifting based on full copies of obtained literature, using data extraction proformas. Articles that, on further inspection, proved not to be related to the notion of public value (as explicated by Moore) were excluded at this stage, as were book reviews and newspaper articles. Also excluded were documents drawing on public value in non-public settings (for example, see Moore and Khagram 2004; Weinberg *et al*. 2005). The following document-types were included: empirical research, review and evaluation; grey literature such as reports published by government, public and
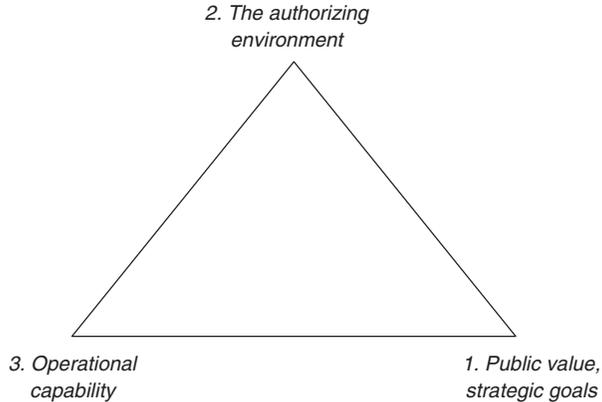
FIGURE 1 *The Strategic Triangle*
Source: visual presentation adapted from text in M. Moore. 1995. *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

private sector organizations, and other agencies; theory and conceptual contributions; and normative/exhortatory material.

Each literature item identified was reviewed by the authors and assessed in terms of both rigour and relevance. Ratings of rigour reflected robustness of empirical work and the extent to which non-empirical pieces presented an accurate rendering of the public value framework. Relevance was measured against factors such as the core themes of the review and consideration of date and context. This process enabled a number of observations and conclusions to be reached regarding the public value approach in terms of theory, evidence and application.

KEY FEATURES OF PUBLIC VALUE

Public value has been described as '... a comprehensive approach to thinking about public management and about continuous improvement in public services' (Constable *et al*. 2008, p. 9). Moore himself defines it as:

> A framework that helps us connect what we believe is valuable ... and requires public resources, with improved ways of understanding what our 'publics' value and how we connect to them. (Moore 1995)

Clearly, the 'we' in this definition needs to be examined and Benington (2011, p. 49) interprets public value as combining (and reconciling) safeguarding and enrichment of the 'public sphere' with delivery of 'what the public values'. Beyond this distinction however, there is significant variation in usage of the term. For this reason it is important to ground any sustained discussion in Moore's original formulation which, itself, is informed by longstanding debates regarding the role of the public administrator in relation to government, markets and civil society (Roberts 1995). At the heart of Moore's formulation is the strategic triangle, within which public managers operate and which both constrains and facilitates the pursuit of public value (see figure 1).

The first point of the triangle is referred to by Moore (2003, p. 11) as the 'value circle'. This relates to the substantive aims of public programmes against which impact and performance should be measured. The second point of the triangle relates to the environment

within which individuals and organizations operate since the pursuit of public value aims requires the support of key external stakeholders including government, interest groups, and donors. Public sector decision makers must be accountable upwardly and outwardly to these groups and engage them in an ongoing dialogue over organizational means and ends. The third point of the triangle relates to resources, that is, 'how the enterprise will have to be organised and operated to achieve the declared objectives' (Moore 1995, p. 71).

These three dimensions are apparently granted equivalent status by Moore (Moore and Khagram 2004). Point one underlines the normative importance of pursuing aims that will bring measurable benefit to the public sphere and which address the expressed or revealed priorities of a given population. The second acknowledges that these aims can only be pursued with prior authorization from government and ongoing support from the publics that fund the enterprise. Managers must therefore use the strategies available to them to create this platform of legitimacy. Finally, point three is an acknowledgement that public value aims must be practically achievable in terms of operational capability. Resources – including finance, personnel, skills and technology – are limited if not fixed. Therefore, the strategic manager must lobby to increase, reallocate and/or better deploy the resources at his/her disposal in the pursuit of substantive public value aims. Furthermore they must be persuasive in making the case for mobilizing resources of partner agencies, and expert in regulating performance of contracted bodies.

The strategic triangle has been modified by the UK's Work Foundation who, building on Kelly *et al.* (2002), translate the strategic triangle into the three areas of: services (quality and efficiency); outcomes, and; trust (between citizens and government). This reformulation has been adopted by subsequent commentators (see, for example, Try and Radnor 2007) however, it should be noted that this version of the strategic triangle is more reductive than its precursor. Although 'outcomes' 'trust' and 'services' broadly correspond to Moore's 'value circle' 'authorizing environment' and 'operational capability' much of the original emphasis is lost in the process of re-articulation. Moore's focus is principally on the strategic decision maker who sits at the intersection between the three imperatives and is accountable upwards through institutional and political structures, downwards through management and operational lines, and outwards to the public. The range of roles and functions that fall within the remit of 'public sector management' is clearly vast and Moore's focus is primarily on those who, whether elected or appointed, have responsibility for resource allocation and are held accountable for performance (Moore 1995). In this way, the public value framework provides an affirmation of managerial ingenuity and expertise, albeit within a binding democratic order and a finite resource base. The manager's purpose is envisaged as going beyond policy implementation to the more proactive exercising of creativity and entrepreneurialism. This requires generation of the necessary authorization and 'a coalition of sufficient support' (Benington and Turbitt 2007, p. 383) to reengineer organizations not currently delivering public value outcomes. The ability to adapt to, and shape, the external environment is thus a core skill of the public value manager. Furthermore, public value cannot be delivered without ongoing public engagement and dialogue as the continuation of funds depends on this 'renewal of citizen consent' (Lowndes *et al.* 2006, p. 552). Allied to this, the public value manager must be skilled in the efficient and innovative deployment of available resources, and effective in persuading others to adopt similar purposes and approaches. However, Moore is non-prescriptive over how value objectives are to be pursued emphasizing flexibility and pragmatism in place of ideology (Sherman *et al.* 2002; Stoker 2006; Alford and Hughes 2008). The common requirement of all public enterprises is to foster and

exercise a brand of civic leadership – through 'search and interaction' (Smith 2004, p. 69) – that will create both consensus and momentum in the pursuit of public value. Finally, the public value manager must endeavour to record achievement against the public value aims set however challenging that may be in practice (Moore 2003). A number of commentators and analysts (including Moore) have turned their attention to the issue of public value outcomes and how these might be measured (Sherman *et al*. 2002; Moore 2003; Cowling 2006; Hills and Sullivan 2006; Mahdon 2006; Talbot 2006; Spano 2009; Benington 2011).

Further exploration of the role of the public value manager undertaken by O'Flynn (2007) and by Wallis and Gregory (2009) indicates that public value implies a rejection of the narrow conceptions of leadership associated with previous models of governance and requires those involved to move beyond delivery on performance targets to the pursuit of multiple objectives and accountabilities in the context of complex systems. This requires engagement with the authorizing environment and a pragmatic, 'what works' approach to delivery. Benington and Turbitt (2007) combine the public value framework with Heifetz's (1994) notion of adaptive leadership. From this perspective, a new concept of leadership is required when dealing with 'adaptive problems' (that is, those that are complex, contested and uncertain). The combined application of the public value and adaptive leadership models forms the central tenet of the UK Warwick Business School approach to executive leadership development (Benington and Turbitt 2007).

In normative terms, Moore's work can be distilled into a series of propositions, including the following:

- Publicly funded organizations (and individuals within them) should understand, articulate and continually review their public value aims;
- Strategic planning and management practices should be geared towards the generation (and demonstration) of public value;
- Public value aims are not reducible to narrow (that is, exclusively monetary) notions of benefit;
- Public value aims must be authorized by political overseers and the broader public in an ongoing process of dialogue and deliberation;
- Pursuit of public value aims must be subject to operational capability and the need to consider opportunity cost of resource deployment;
- The role of strategic managers and decision makers is to work within and endeavour to align the three points of the strategic triangle;
- Performance against these public value aims must be measured;
- Within these constraints a pragmatic, innovative, flexible and non-dogmatic approach to delivering public value should be adopted.

Recent attention has focused on adaptation of Porter's (1998) value chain analysis in an attempt to connect the public value aspiration to models of organizational structure and delivery (Bovaird 2008). Moore himself (2003, p. 13) uses the concept in identifying what 'specifies the relationship between desired outcomes on one hand, and the resources, processes, activities and outputs that are required to achieve the desired results'. From this perspective it is possible to assert the importance of each 'link' in the chain of public value creation as well as the ways in which co-producers and partner agencies feed into the delivery of public value outcomes (Benington 2011). Areas where public value is added, subtracted and stagnant can be identified for emphasis or re-work. The notion of

co-production of services is well established within debates over public sector delivery models (see, for example, Bovaird 2007) and has been linked to the public-value focus on generating high-trust relationship with service users, the public and other provider agencies (Alford 2011).

A number of commentators have identified the potential of the public value framework to embody a new approach to public governance which goes beyond command-and-control and market models (see, for example, Kelly *et al*. 2002; Stoker 2006; Alford and Hughes 2008; Benington 2009, 2011). In particular, public value is proposed as a framework for promotion of networked governance (Stoker 2006), a 'rediscovery of government' (Smith 2004, p. 71) and replacement of the new public management approach to public sector reform (Benington 2011). Bentley *et al*. (2004, p. 26) claim that public value challenges economics as the 'primary form of arbitration and evaluation' and Alford and Hughes (2008) advocate 'public value pragmatism' in response to the complex requirements for the organization of public life. Each of these perspectives reflects a perception that previous models of public sector organization have neglected civil society and positioned the public as either passive recipients of public goods or consumers in a quasi-market. Specifically, Moore's foregrounding of the citizen-state relationship resonates with those who are disillusioned with market-based models of public sector organization and delivery but reluctant to advocate a return to prior 'statist' models of administration.

REFLECTIONS ON THE LITERATURE

A full list of the literature items identified, categorized according to type, is included in table 1. The most striking feature is the relative absence of empirical investigation of either the normative propositions of public value or its efficacy as a framework for understanding public management. Therefore, neither advocates nor detractors are able to substantiate their claims with research. This absence may be due to the framework's origins in executive education (as opposed to research or theory) but may also reflect the difficulty of empirically investigating what has been seen as a 'vague' and 'slippery' idea, suggesting the need for further clarification, specification and consensus over concepts and terminology (Morrell 2009). Moore's use of non-empirical case studies and vignettes has set the tone for much of what has followed and advocates of a public value approach tend to illustrate arguments with briefly sketched examples rather than support them through specifically designed studies (Kelly *et al*. 2002; Sherman *et al*. 2002; Cole and Parston 2006; Horner *et al*. 2007). The potential advantage of this is that public value emerges as an approach that is rooted in everyday practice and retains a non-didactic flexibility of application. On the negative side, the risk is that public value fails to develop a secure empirical foundation and loses clarity and distinctiveness as an approach to practice. This is compounded by commonsense or unexplained use of the terminology (Hefetz and Warner 2004; Lowndes *et al*. 2006; Currie and Guah 2007), selective or partial presentation of the public value framework (see, for example, Stoker 2006; Rhodes and Wanna 2007), or simply misrepresentation (see, for example, Carmeli and Kemmet 2006). As well as this, use of the term 'public value' is not confined to those writing with reference to Moore's work (see, for example, Cresswell *et al*. 2006) which can increase confusion.

Much of the literature on public value is normative and/or exhortatory in tone (see, for example, Moore 1995; Smith 2004; Blaug *et al*. 2006; Barber 2007). Again, this might be seen as both a strength and a weakness. On the positive side, public value's appeal resides

largely in its communitarian commitment to the pursuit of agreed value-propositions and its attempt to support improvements in public management practice. However, there is a risk of conflating what 'ought to be' and what 'is', and there is as yet little evidence to demonstrate that the public value concept and its key tenets and frameworks have explanatory power, especially across contexts. Recent contributions reflect a growing recognition of these challenges and limitations and the resulting need to develop the theoretical and empirical foundations of public value. Most notably, this is the aim of two recent publications. The first is an edition of the International Journal of Public Administration dedicated to the topic of Public Value (Talbot 2009). The second is an edited volume which draws together a number of strands of debate and looks at public value applications in a range of contexts (Benington and Moore 2011). These interventions capture and build on the work of a series of commentators who have sought to critique, clarify and develop Moore's original propositions (see, for example, O'Flynn 2007; Rhodes and Wanna 2007; Alford and Hughes 2008; Alford and O'Flynn 2008; Bovaird 2008; Benington 2011; Swilling 2011).

Public value research

The review uncovered three examples of prospective research relating to the public value framework. The first study, by O'Toole *et al.* (2005) investigates – via routine data and a survey of managers operating in the education sector in the US state of Texas – the impact of management on the achievement of public programme objectives. The authors use the strategic triangle to categorize the web of activities undertaken by managers and to inform design of the survey tool. Although not the primary aim of the research, study findings are relevant to this review in that they appear to offer some validation of Moore's map of the strategic managers role as illustrated in statements such as: 'the top managers do report, as Moore's analysis anticipated, interactions upward, downward and outward' (p. 62) and that each of these are constitutive of their roles.

The second study is a multi-method, UK investigation by Lowndes *et al.* (2006) into public participation and engagement rates and their relationship with both institutional forms and social capital. The authors conclude that social capital 'fails to provide a strong explanation of patterns of political engagement' (p. 549) and that, in contrast, institutional forms and practices (or 'rules-in-use') are influential in the generation or obstruction of public participation. With specific reference to public value, the authors conclude that:

> In general terms it is clear that participation was more likely in those local authorities where institutional arrangements were informed by the precepts of public value management. (p. 552)

In other words, the presence of a public value orientation within institutions is linked to increased levels of engagement and civic participation. However, these findings must be treated with some caution as it is not entirely clear how public value is defined within the study and therefore its status as a variable of analysis.

The third piece of published research, by Meynhardt and Metelmann (2009) is an empirical case study exploration of how middle managers operating in a German public sector context, perceive public value creation and the determinants of this in their work. As well as reporting findings in relation to the primary study aims, the authors conclude that: 'we have found evidence that Moore's concept is applicable in the completely different cultural context and history of German administration' (p. 305).

Two further research initiatives are underway at the time of writing but have yet to formally report findings. The first is being undertaken by the University of Manchester (UK) and involves organizational case studies to determine the relationship between performance regimes and public value (http://www.mbs.ac.uk/research/performanceregimes/index.aspx) and the second is a collaboration between the Warwick University (UK) and the NHS Institution for Innovation and Improvement focusing on public value as an aid to priority setting in health care (Williams *et al*. 2011).

Public value as analytical frame

A number of literature items employ the public value framework (or elements thereof) as a means of analysing research data (Try and Radnor 2007; Try 2008). For example, Try and Radnor (2007, p. 656) pose the question: 'does public value theory assist in understanding the limited progress in implementing results-based management within the public sector?' Public value is thus employed as an analytic lens through which to interpret data derived from interviews with Canadian public sector executives. The authors conclude that barriers to the achievement of 'results based management' – including inflexible operational environments, information shortages or weaknesses, and lack of political leadership – can be understood in terms of the Kelly *et al*. (2002) framework of services, outcomes and trust. However, they argue that some barriers – such as 'political, information use, and motivation' (p. 667) – cannot be encapsulated within this framework. Finally, a qualified advocacy of public value as a means of structuring future approaches to the delivery of results-based management is offered. Overall, this is an interesting attempt to use the public value framework to understand problems faced by public sector executives albeit one which is constrained by a partial (and sometimes unclear) application of the public value framework. In a similar vein, Grimsley and Meehan (2007) develop a framework for evaluating e-Government projects with a particular focus on the concept of public value – taken to include dimensions of outcomes, services, satisfaction and trust (after Kelly *et al*. 2002).

More commonly, the public value framework has been employed as a means of analysing reforms and modes of public sector practice (Bossert *et al*. 1998; Bozeman 2002; Talbot and Wiggan 2009). For example, Bossert *et al*. (1998, p. 67) use the strategic triangle in a retrospective analysis of the 'substance, legitimacy and practicality' of health reforms in Columbia. Erridge's (2007) study of employment procurement in Northern Ireland uses the public value framework (although without reference to the strategic triangle) to analyse current practice and also as a 'guide to public preferences in relation to services and projects delivered' (p. 1041). Finally, Rogers and Kingsley (2004) trace the denial of the public sector (and therefore 'public value') in accounts of the development of the internet in the US. Although an interesting discussion, the undefined nature of the term 'public value' within this piece lessens its relevance to this review.

The principles of public value have also been applied to the design of other activities – for example stakeholder analysis (Bryson 2004) and the UK Work Foundation has supplemented its sector-specific publications with two further papers which discuss cross-sector challenges facing public services. The first of these adopts a public value framework to the promotion of civic renewal and community cohesion (Blaug *et al*. 2006a) and the second looks at how public value might help to alleviate the public sector delivery paradox (Blaug *et al*. 2006b).

Normative domain applications

The most common usage of the public value concept and framework is in prescriptions for change and improvement in specific public sector domains ranging from culture, criminal justice, learning and skills, to employment, higher education and health. These supplement more generalized discussions of public value as a potential blueprint for public sector improvement (see, for example, Kelly *et al.* 2002; Smith 2004; Blaug *et al.* 2006). The most high-profile of these applications is that of the British Broadcasting Corporation whose manifesto for charter renewal was constructed around the public value credo. However, Oakley and colleagues present a fairly damning assessment of the BBC's commitment to public value:

> Given the inconsistency with which it is deployed, it seems clear that the BBC's use of public value is primarily opportunistic. (Oakley *et al.* 2007, p. 6)

Further examples of attempts to frame improvement in public value terms include schooling (Bentley *et al.* 2004) and further/higher education (Garnett and Ecclesfield 2008). Grigg and Mager (2005) contend that 'the concept of public value . . . resonates with the concerns of the learning and skills sector in a number of ways' (p. 14) including the focus on 'wider outcomes' and the need to clarify purposes and engage 'customers and stakeholders' (p. 2). Similarly, Fauth (2006) sets out to describe the learning and skills sector 'from a public value perspective' (p. 39) and in a more theoretical account, Fryer (2011) provides a qualified assertion of the potential benefits of a public value approach to understanding public provision in the area of learning. He acknowledges a weakness, however, in determining how conflicting perspectives should be reconciled and notes that 'the expectations of some individuals and groups seem to count for very much more than do those of others!' (p. 508).

In a criminal justice context, Paparozzi and Demichele (2008) call for US probation and parole services to pursue 'publicly valued' outcomes in response to 'political faddism' (p. 275). However, the concept of public value is not defined within this paper and appears to be considered synonymous with evidence-based and outcomes-oriented practice. Skidmore (2006, p. 12) uses Moore's strategic triangle to posit a number of potential improvements to the relationship between the police and the public in a UK context. Finally, the field of health care has also been the focus of normative public value discussions (Chapman 2005; Williams *et al.* 2007; Constable *et al.* 2008; Levy 2008). Williams *et al.* (2007) and Tritter (2011) focus on English primary care trust commissioners as the organization with primary responsibility for leading the local value mission and Mahdon (2006) uses the public value framework to address some of the key challenges facing the NHS in England.

Overall, these applications suggest that the public value framework has been well received by numerous public sector commentators. However, many of the examples detailed here lend support to those who criticize the public value framework for operating with terms and concepts that lack clarity and consistency. There is considerable variation in interpretation of the framework, and at times unexamined adoption of the 'public value' label. This is not to decry the intentions or outcomes of these applications or to suggest that Moore and his followers have a monopoly on usage of the term. However, for public value to be more than a catch-all label for a series of loosely connected prescriptions for improvement there needs to be greater specification of its central tenets and propositions and development of strategies for their empirical examination.

In summary then, the field of public value is marked by a shortage of empirical research, a surfeit of exhortation and domain-specific applications, and increasing debate at the level of theory. However, definitional inconsistency and imprecision remain prevalent. O'Flynn (2007, p. 358) notes in relation to public value that 'a clear definition remains elusive' and that it is a 'multi-dimensional construct'. Horner *et al*. (2006) identify numerous types of invocations of public value including: academic theory; appeals for public sector improvement; a mode of governance; and a performance evaluation framework. Within these, there appear to be two key sources of divergence in the ways in which the notion of public value is employed. The first is between the normative case for public sector reform on the one hand and the analytic case for understanding and measuring performance on the other. The second relates to the scope and scale of application – ranging from Moore's focus on individual management practice to those who consider public value as an embryonic paradigm for public governance in contemporary society (Stoker 2006; Benington 2009, 2011). The availability of these multiple interpretations has, for some, rendered the entire concept nebulous, ambiguous and therefore impossible to refute (Crabtree 2004; Morrell 2009). Others consider public value to be a valid theory, albeit one still in the early stages of maturation (Alford 2008; Benington 2011).

THREE KEY THEMES IN THE PUBLIC VALUE DEBATE

The goal of this review has been to identify the extant literature on public value and develop more rigorous appreciation of its tenets, applications and likely future contribution. Therefore, having provided a narrative summary and synthesis of the literature, this section turns to three important areas of critique and counter-response in the literature. The first relates to the notion of public value itself and the relationship between citizens and agents that it appears to endorse. The second (related) theme pertains to the rules of engagement between, and relative legitimacy of, public agents ranging from democratically elected representatives and executives, to locally appointed managers. Finally, the issue of applicability of the public value framework to non-US settings is explored.

Is public value popularist or manipulative?

It has been argued that Moore's conception of value – the equivalent in public enterprise of private value in the commercial field – is not well specified (for example, see van der Wal and van Hout 2009). In response, subcategories have been posited by a number of commentators (Bentley *et al*. 2004; Bovaird 2008; Benington 2011). For example, Bovaird (2008, p. 12) argues:

> if the concept is to be operational, it needs to be unpacked to highlight the different elements of public value which are created by public interventions – value-added for users, value-added for wider groups, social value-added, political value-added and environmental value-added.

In a similar vein, Benington (2009, 2011) identifies value-added to the public realm to include: 'economic' 'social and cultural' 'political' and 'ecological' elements. Further specification is offered by Mahdon (2006, p. 8) who emphasizes the distinction between what the public values and the public's values: 'one is a moral concept; the other empirical findings about what position people take on those moral concepts'.

Comparing public value to more established notions of public benefit, interest and good helps to highlight its distinguishing features (Alford and O'Flynn 2009). Although

extensive discussion of the provenance and attributes of these prior concepts is beyond the scope of this paper, comparison suggests that the distinctive elements of public value relate to the emphasis on co-creation and citizen authorization. Hence, the greater focus on the responsibility of the public themselves to identify what is considered 'valuable' so that citizens are not just recipients and beneficiaries of public interventions but also designers of public enterprise and constitutive of the institutions of public service delivery. However, this 'bottom-up' approach to governance and delivery strays too far, for some, towards the temptations of populism (Morrell 2009; Gallop 2010).

Benington's incorporation of the 'public sphere' within the broader category of public value is an attempt to ward against this threat of populism. But who are the proper arbiters of the public sphere and what is the source of their legitimacy as a counter-weight to the priorities of the public? In a public value approach much hinges on deliberation and engagement so that unacceptable perspectives are subjected to the counterweights of evidence, expertise, and persuasion. However, the refining of preferences must be balanced against the imperative of being responsive to the public's values. And once we weaken the possibility of public value posing a serious challenge to received wisdom and practices, much of its radical potential is neutered. Public value has, for example, been portrayed as a rationalization for the exercise of bureaucratic power and a disguising of manipulation as discussion (Roberts 1995) and as being insensitive to power more generally (Morrell 2009).

While it may be unrealistic to expect a defence against simultaneous charges of populism and manipulation, how the public value 'school' responds to these challenges in the long run will be telling. Certainly there is no obvious inherent safeguard against either populism or manipulation, apart from Benington's public value-public sphere distinction. The risk of falling foul of either therefore appears considerable, and the flexibility of the public value approach therefore threatens to undermine its integrity when applied in practice.

Who should create public value?

The second issue relates to the question of who should be responsible for public value creation. In other words, who has the legitimate authority to engage in value seeking behaviour in democratic societies? We have seen that Moore's focus has been largely on the practices of managers accountable for the allocation of public resources. Although he does not exclude elected representatives from this group, their relative absence from his case study examples is taken by Rhodes and Wanna (2007) as an illustration of his distrust of government and his advocacy of 'managerialism'. They argue that Moore depicts politics as inherently risk averse and inhibiting of managerial ingenuity: it is the 'business schools view of politics getting in the way of effective management' (p. 12). This accusation is subject to detailed refutation by Alford (2008) who points out the absence of any reference in the Rhodes and Wanna critique to the authorizing environment (or indeed the strategic triangle). Alford recounts Moore's numerous assertions of the primacy of elected representatives and party politics over the management function. Subsequent rejoinders to this debate (Rhodes and Wanna 2008; Alford and O'Flynn 2009) suggest that the dispute is essentially over the degree of authority which Moore grants to political overseers rather than over the underlying axioms of the framework, as first appears to be the case. While this debate remains important, therefore, it is not one which appears to threaten the broader validity of the public value framework.

However, it remains the case that Moore's lens is primarily focused on the unelected public sector manager, and this latter is invariably depicted in a highly contextualized US setting. Work needs to be done therefore to clarify to whom, and in what settings, responsibility for public value creation is conferred and the implications of this for other statutory roles and functions. Some, such as Smith (2004, p. 79), argue that it is not just managers that need to address the public value challenge and that 'the task of exploration needs to be shared around', notably with elected representatives at the macro level. With reference to the UK, Gains and Stoker (2009) take a different perspective, arguing that a public value approach to governance fits well with the history and culture of *local* government. Similarly, Coats and Passmore (2008) associate the public value approach with support for devolvement and decentralization. Although, as we have seen, Rhodes and Wanna's (2007, p. 418) view is that managers should refrain from 'doing politics' they also identify low risk strategies for value creation that managers can legitimately pursue.

The balance and distribution of responsibility for value-creation is also discussed by Alford and Hughes (2008) who share the concern of Gains and Stoker (2009) to explore how public value creation can be enacted in contexts marked by complexity, in terms of both politics and delivery systems. They posit a series of 'design rules' that should guide the allocation of responsibilities between actors in public bureaucracies.

It seems clear that resolving these questions and concerns will require empirical enquiry as well as debate. Much of the distinctiveness of the public value approach lies in its concern to place the requirement for legitimacy at the heart of the routine activities of public enterprise. Clearly legitimacy deficits are not confined to the public management function in contemporary developed societies and therefore an argument can be made for the broader relevance of public value for governments and others responsible for the public sphere. However, this seems harder to argue for when there is, as yet, little concrete evidence to suggest that public value can be operationalized at the level at which it was initially intended – that of the local decision maker and manager. Our recommendation would therefore be that research into, and evaluation of, the applicability of public value to the local strategic management level would be the most logical starting point.

The benevolent bureaucrat and the benign state

The third theme (and the second strand of the Rhodes and Wanna (2007, 2008) critique) relates to the alleged naivety of Moore and his advocates in their vision of government. For example, they claim that it is unreasonable (not to say dangerous) to advocate creativity and entrepreneurialism in public management when the penalties for mistakes are likely to be severe. Governments, it is claimed, can no more be expected to behave in a benign fashion than can managers, as history suggests that they are likely to deal ruthlessly with subordinates engaging in risky, 'value-seeking' behaviour. This argument relates to a more fundamental claim of Rhodes and Wanna that the public value mission, within Westminster systems at least, is something of a pipedream and that 'parliamentary systems with stronger hierarchies of control' (2007, p. 13) do not afford the freedoms that Moore urges managers to exploit. They therefore dispute the validity of applying what is a US-derived model to systems characterized by greater central command and control. In short, they add to their rejection of the normative claims of public value a flat denial of its possible realization in practice.

Although potentially more damaging than the charge of 'managerialism', Alford (2011) doesn't pick up on this accusation in his rebuttal. However, Rhodes and Wanna's position appears to be weakened by their blanket assertion that Westminster systems are

'hierarchical, not pluralist' (2007, p. 414) thereby characterizing these as binary opposites rather than ends of a spectrum. Westminster systems are invariably more centralized than those in the US but due recognition is required of the differences between such systems and between policy subsystems within each. And with this goes multiplicity of institutional form. We have seen, for example, that Lowndes *et al*. (2006) identify significant geographical variation across local government in the UK and 'public value orientation' as one such source of divergence. The extent to which ideas and practices can be transferred across contexts is of course an important point for consideration and certainly the role of the state is very different in a US context than elsewhere. However, a more nuanced appreciation of the relative power and responsibility afforded to elected and non-elected public sector functions (as well as interest groups and wider stakeholders) is required to resolve these discussions than is provided by Rhodes and Wanna. The tentative findings of studies reported earlier suggest that the public value strategic triangle may help us to understand and analyse the experiences of managers operating in a variety of settings, and recent work has begun to extend this analysis to developing countries (Samaratunge and Wijewardena 2009). Commentary by Wallis and Gregory (2009) acknowledges a strain of recent political rhetoric which seeks to empower the public manager in ways analogous to public value leadership, but warns that such rhetoric can at times prove to be chimeric. Clearly this issue is related to the one discussed previously in its concern with identifying the appropriate agents of public value creation. Once again, without a more substantial body of evidence on public value in practice it is difficult to see how such questions will be satisfactorily answered.

SUMMARY

The public value framework does not derive from a particular research tradition and there is, as yet, little by way of empirical research to support the claims made for it. However, filling this gap presents a challenge given the varying definitions and usages of the terminology, which lead to an absence of 'identifiable propositions or suggestions for empirical development' (Morrell 2009, p. 11). The task for future researchers must therefore be to define the central concepts and arguments that make up public value and subject these to empirical investigation and testing. It is also clear that if the grander aspirations for the public value framework are to be realized then a concerted process of research, debate and application is required (Alford and Hughes 2008; Benington 2011). In particular, links should be made to discussions relating to the nature of organizations, institutions and the policy process in order that artificially polarized stances can be avoided (Spano 2009; Wallis and Gregory 2009). This paper seeks to support this endeavour through a comprehensive review of literature and through a discussion of three of the most telling debates over public value and its application. We argue that although Rhodes and Wanna's rejection seems hasty and open to reasonable challenge, there remain concerns, notably over the apparent silence of public value on questions of power and heterogeneity, as well as the relative lack of empirically testable propositions. Without resolution of these, public value is likely to remain as a useful pedagogic tool for public administration but fall short of offering a broader theory of public enterprise and organization. As we have seen, both theoretical development and empirical research and evaluation are currently underway and it is perhaps worth waiting to see how these develop and how public value emerges as a result.

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