

Public Values: Core or Confusion? Introduction to the Centrality and Puzzlement of Public Values Research

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Torben Beck Jørgensen¹ and Mark R. Rutgers²

Abstract

This article provides the introduction to a symposium on contemporary public values research. It is argued that the contribution to this symposium represent a Public Values Perspective, distinct from other specific lines of research that also use public value as a core concept. Public administration is approached in terms of processes guided or restricted by public values and as public value creating: public management and public policy-making are both concerned with establishing, following and realizing public values. To study public values a broad perspective is needed. The article suggest a research agenda for this encompassing kind of public values research. Finally the contributions to the symposium are introduced.

Keywords

public values, private values, public values research

There is an increased interest in public values in the study of public administration the early 21st century. Interest in public values is, however, hardly new; in fact, it is probably one of the oldest issues in political thought as well as administrative practice. The contemporary increased or renewed interest in public values constitutes a “counter movement” to developments in public administration theory and practice in the late 20th century: a Public Values Perspective (PVP). Roughly stated, the interest in public values counters an instrumental, managerial focus on public administration (Beck Jørgensen & Andersen, 2011) and a dominating neoclassical political economy (Bozeman, 2007).

This symposium presents a concise selection of the wealth of approaches in contemporary public value research in the study of public administration. More specifically, the aim is to highlight the variety of approaches and escape the limited perspective of “creating public value” as introduced by Mark Moore (1995). Although this approach is also an attempt to counter the “technocratic” intent of recent administrative trends (i.e., New Public Management), it is restricted to a managerial perspective on public values. Recent research on public values is more promising and rich in nature as will become clear.

¹University of Copenhagen, Denmark

²University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Torben Beck Jørgensen, Professor Emeritus, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, P.O. Box 2099, DK-1014 Copenhagen K, Denmark.
Email: tbj@ifs.ku.dk

Naturally, one question may be raised: Does the development in recent research on public values indeed allow talking about a PVP? If so, do we need such a perspective? To start with the latter, we believe there is a need for a PVP. This does not imply a claim for a “paradigmatic revolution” or a major restructuring of the field, yet a PVP implies rethinking and refocusing of some of our cherished assumptions. The study of public administration too quickly tends to instrumentality, marginalizing or cloaking that public administration (or governance for that matter) is essentially about values: about what we need, want to preserve or change, and how we want things to be done.

What is more, the interest of study in our field is often limited to specific organizations and management issues or particular policy areas. Although important, it tends to obscure or marginalize the public context in which the phenomenon at hand exists in the first place. Often, we take the underlying values for granted and/or dismiss them as being self-evident: efficiency, democracy, legality, and so on. Of course, such values are discussed in the context of management and organization theory and figure prominently in policy- and decision-making theory as problems to deal with. But we should consider these topics and issues as *inherently* normative, that is, as *processes guided or restricted by public values* and as *public value creating (or annihilating) processes*: public management and public policy making are about establishing, following, and realizing public values, so we should take them as a starting point rather than as a marginal consideration.

In the study of public administration, there are roughly three lines of research that explicitly examine public values as their core concern: First, there is administrative ethics where the focus is on issues concerning public integrity and corruption. In more recent years, this discourse has broadened from more “classic” philosophical and ethical reflection to include empirical research on moral values in public administration. This is a fairly well defined field of study. Second, there is public value management. The inspiration for this line of research is the idea of public managers as creators of public value: “Public managers create public value. The problem is that they cannot know for sure what that is” (Moore, 1995, p. 57). It can be appreciated as a correction to the dominant focus on businesslike values in (the by now old) New Public Management. Sometimes, this approach is presented as a new paradigm (Stoker, 2006). However, it hardly seems to be a “Next Phase of Public Management” (Alford & Hughes, 2008), but rather appears in more recent studies as a new approach to already-established management techniques (see, for instance, Cole & Parston, 2006), ignoring other issues such as the inherent tension between the value creating public manager and democratic politics (Overeem & Rutgers, 2014).

Finally, there is what we would like to call a Public Value Perspective (PVP).¹ This concerns not a singular approach or conceptualization, but a diversity of approaches that are characterized by taking as their starting point the intrinsically normative nature of public administration and the attempt to bridge theoretical and empirical perspectives on this issue. In this symposium, the contributions can be regarded as being firmly within this third approach to public values. The authors are critical toward the dominant approach in the study of public administration. This is evidenced by critical remarks about the second approach, and the attempt to make the more classic ethical approach of the first approach open to empirical research.

Public values research is troubled by one major problem: The research area is constituted by a complex concept, public values, that brings with it all the associations and confusions of the two highly ambiguous and contested concepts it unites: Public and Value. Both concepts are notoriously tricky and have been widely discussed both from theoretical and empirical perspectives. First, what is public and what is private are questions asked in several disciplines such as law, philosophy, and political science. The title of Bozeman’s book from 1987—“All organizations are public”—and especially the part of title the publisher canceled—“and all organizations are private”—invites the reader to consider an interesting provocation: There are no pure public organizations and no pure private organizations. All organizations are marked by a degree of

publicness constituted as a balance between political and economic authority. Even a state department has characteristics shared with private organizations; conversely, even pure market organizations exhibit public characteristics (Bozeman, 1987). If we further add that private organizations may easily carry out or implement public policies or activities with implications for the public, then the distinction between public and private becomes increasingly fuzzy.

So, what are public values and what are private values? How can we find an answer to this question? One alternative seems straightforward. Values carried out by legally public organizations are public values and we simply need empirical investigations to identify these values. The problem is naturally that what is “public” is specific to a legal order. What is more, some of the thus identified values might be equally important in private organizations (Van der Wal, de Graaf, & Lasthuizen, 2008), and it is still possible that public or private organizations may be engaged in carrying out what are legally identified as public or private acts. The consequence is then that we must study private organizations in addition to public ones and may result—perhaps—with a group of pure public values, a group of pure private values, and a vast group of shared values.

The second alternative to the study of public values is even trickier. It can be argued that a public value is something that creates or destroys value for the public. For instance, pollution caused by private firms or corruption caused by governmental agencies concern negative public values (or disvalues). Conversely, corporate social responsibility and agency transparency can be considered as positive public values. From a theoretical perspective, this alternative is perhaps more satisfying, but what remains troublesome is the question of what constitutes the “public.” Is it a matter of majority preference, consensus, or does it not have an empirical grounding, but rather a philosophical one? And how do we find out whether or not certain actions have consequences for the public? Simply replacing “public” by “the public interest” or “the common welfare” emphasizes the ambiguity inherent in this approach. Nevertheless, we can at least conclude that “the public” is commonly accepted as a valuable concept, at the heart of most political theories, and actually defining for our broader object of research, “public administration.”

Second, what is a “value?” Like with the above discussion of the nebulous public/private distinction, it is highly unlikely that anybody will end up with a final answer. First, some seem to be satisfied by mentioning values alongside preferences, wishes, desires, and the like. In contrast, Kluckhohn (1962; see also Van Deth & Scarbrough, 1995) defines a value as “a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (p. 395).

The core in Kluckhohn’s definition is the word “desirable.” Likewise, the key word in Rokeach’s (1973) definition is the “personally or socially preferable.” A value is not merely something that an individual can “desire,” but rather something found personally or socially acceptable to wish for. Similarly, Nalbandian (1998) defines values as “deep seated beliefs about what is right and wrong” (p. 622), and according to Bozeman (2007), “(v)alues are difficult to change and a change can be brought about only after careful deliberation” (p. 117). Values are something more than longing for a glass of Mosel Riesling Kabinett on a hot summer day; they are used as arguments or reasons in rational argumentation (Rescher, 1982).

Next, psychologists and social psychologists naturally have been inclined to study values at the individual level, often related to the concept of motivation, and today, the flourishing discussion on public service motivation also concentrates on the individual level. In contrast, it is equally necessary to look at the collective level of public values (Andersen, Beck Jørgensen, Kjeldsen, Pedersen, & Vrangbæk, 2012). Public values are *not* to be taken as a simple conjunction of the values of individuals: Reductionism of public values should be rejected as oversimplifying matters. They are the outcome of collective processes. Public values cannot adequately be reduced to values held by individuals; they are to be taken as having an independent, autonomous status, and reductionism as inherent in methodological individualism is rejected or bracketed. This is not to deny that the ontological and epistemological status of public values is without

problems, but rather it stresses that reductionism as dominant in economic individualism cannot adequately deal with public values.

Correspondingly, values may easily be identified at several non-individual levels: by reading constitutions, mission statements, strategic papers, and legislation; values may be elicited by studying cases of decision making; and values may be expressed in buildings, construction details, and artifacts such as uniforms, decorations, symbols, logos, and so on. Old institutions, for example, monarchies and the Catholic Church, certainly display values in a richly faceted manner. Next to reductionism, it is important to be aware of reification: portraying values as concrete objects.

In sum, public value researchers face a number of fundamental questions and challenges. The basic challenge in public values research can be put in this way: Does public values research contain a core that entails a possibility of transcending traditional empirical and theoretical boundaries or is there a major risk of creating confusion? This challenge can further be illustrated by asking how public value research relates to other areas of inquiry, such as political theory/philosophy, moral philosophy, administrative reform, organizational culture and identity, studies in integrity and corruption, administrative ethics, good governance, and administrative evil. Can public value research form a core, that is, grasp an essence of these diverse areas or is it much more likely that public value research is confused by too many approaches?

We believe the study of public values must include a broad perspective. From this starting point, a descriptive (theoretical and empirical) research agenda can be formulated concerning the nature, development, (social) meaning, coherence, legitimacy, priority, universality, and so on of public values. This in turn can be the basis for an evaluative and prescriptive research agenda, bringing research to practice. A number of questions derived from those outlined above can be used as a research agenda framing the PVP we proposed at the beginning of this introduction.

1. A basic question is simple, yet not easy to answer: What is the universe of possible public values? Several researchers have dealt with this question. Early starters were, for example, Stewart and Walsh (1992), Lawton and Rose (1994), Rainey (1997), and Van Wart (1998) followed by more systematic attempts such as Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007), Van der Wal (2008), and Van der Wal and Huberts (2008). There is a need to further compile and specify the possible values. Which values are actually pursued in the public sector, across the board as well as limited to certain policy areas or specific types of public services? For examples on empirical investigations utilizing quantitative and qualitative methods, see Beck Jørgensen (2007), Van der Wal (2011), and Vrangbæk (2009).
2. A second question concerns typology: How public values can be classified? Some suggestions are available (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Hodgkinson, 1996; Hood & Jackson, 1991; Van Wart, 1998; cf. Rutgers, 2008).
3. Third, we turn to an examination of the history and epistemology of public values: What are the historical and philosophical roots of specific public values, what are the cultural bases of values, and how do cultural and political forces interact to shape values? The answers are important to understanding and interpretation of actual values, because values always must be understood in a context. Nevertheless, one may ask whether some public values can be classified as constitutive public values, such as “the general interest,” “the common good,” “regime values,” the “inherently governmental,” and how their development and variations in and over time and place can be detected?
4. A fourth question is as follows: How do public values interact? Can they be arranged in hierarchies or can they be related as “friendly neighbors”? If not, how are value conflicts handled and what trade-offs can be identified? These are crucial questions because values presumably often do conflict. Part of the literature has dealt with this highly important

- topic, both theoretically and empirically (cf. Beck Jørgensen & Vrangbæk, 2011; de Graaf & Van der Wal, 2010; Goodsell, 1994; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981; Steenhuisen, 2009).
5. Closely related to the previous is the specific question, how are public and private values related? To what extent are they identical, complementary, opposites, or mutually exclusive? This brings to the fore that the values strived for in a “private corporation” are “collective values” (not public values, for even the values of a specific public organization can be at odds with “public values”) from the perspective of the individual employee(s) and customer(s). It may actually be preferable to avoid the confusing notion of “private values.”
 6. Who is to safeguard public values (de Bruijn & Dicke, 2006)? Is it (only) a responsibility of public organizations, or should private organizations and individuals also be expected to ensure public values? A sub-question here is how and where a *public domain* for addressing these questions can be constructed (Fox & Miller, 1995; Rhodes, 1997). It includes the following question: How can we create instruments that may help in everyday situations to discover what is in the public interest? For such an approach, see Bozeman (2007). How do we implement public values? Here we are concerned with moral, instrumental, and/or symbolic means and effects. They regard all the different levels and relations between “state and society,” public functionaries, citizens, and private organizations.
 7. Finally, coming full circle, there is the meta-issue of how to approach and study public values in the first place. This concerns again all the previous questions and encompasses the very philosophy of the social sciences and humanities.

There is no singular PVP, but rather, there are different theoretical and methodological approaches required. The positivist idea of one coherent, all-encompassing theory does not fit the PVP. To conclude, a PVP requires that public values are taken as the core of our concerns, not as some icing on the cake of empirical, factual, and/or causal analysis, and recognized as the substance of public administration: the recipe according to which the (factual) ingredients are mixed and baked to make the cake—As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, in empirical reality where public values may serve humanity or not, where they are kept in order, or neglected.

The articles included in this symposium clearly demonstrate the broad scope of the PVP. The articles have been ordered, ranging from more general issues concerning the use of public values in Public Administration (PA) to studies on more specific values, and approaches to public values.²

The article written by Zeger van der Wal, Tina Nabatchi, and Gjalt de Graaf (2015) presents a broad picture of Public Values Research. Based on a database including all publications explicitly taking “public values” as object of study from 1945 to 2012, the article demonstrates the remarkable growth in this research area, in particular from 2007 and onward and especially within Public Administration (compared with, for example, economics, political science, and law). Actually, it is noteworthy and somewhat troublesome that the interest in public values within political science and economics has declined. In the period 1969–1979, the relative shares of public values publications within the three disciplines were close to even. In the period 2000–2012, the relative share of public values (PV) publications within public administration was 51% compared with 4% in economics and a very modest 2% in political science.

How mature is the field? One may say that the relatively even distribution of the publications on empirical research, normative application, and theoretical development, respectively, witnesses about maturity. On the contrary, two facts signify the research area as a fragmented newcomer: First, 76% of PV publications do not provide an explicit definition of public values, and second, about 81% of the publications are journal articles, suggesting a severe dearth of book-length treatments of the subject.

The increasing attention for public values does not necessarily result in accumulative understanding. In his article, Mark Rutgers (2015) returns to the old nagging question of what values and public values in particular are. The existing stances are being considered and a range of characteristics of public values as presented in the literature is discussed. Special attention is devoted to the distinction between facts and values that is so common, yet, often overlooked as not being as clear-cut as often assumed. This further establishes the fundamental normative nature of public administration and the need to acknowledge this in our field of study. At the same time, it is noted that the term “public value” is used in fairly different senses (i.e., concepts) to refer to some specific kind of value under consideration, or as a generic concept denoting all possible values, and, even as denoting a specific approach or paradigm for studying PA. The article concludes with a tentative encompassing definition of public values, which includes even some opposing characteristics. Perhaps the fuzziness of the concept can never be resolved entirely, but at least we can be aware of the major pitfalls.

The next contribution to this symposium provides an example of more focused research into particular values of constitutive importance to PA. As mentioned earlier, regime values can be regarded as such a specific class of public values. The concept of regime values can be understood in several ways. First, regime values can be defined as the values that are regarded as crucial for the functioning of the public sector or the state. As public values may well vary in time and space, regime values can be considered as contingent to the state in question. Second, one may argue that given the nature of the state, it is not unlikely that regime values tend to be universal. Actually, an empirical investigation of codes of good governance in 13 countries (Beck Jørgensen & Sørensen, 2013) suggests that a certain class of public values (e.g., public interest, political loyalty, transparency, impartiality, efficiency, and accountability) may be universally widespread.

However, there is a third version of regime values that is the topic of the article by Patrick Overeem (2015). He discusses in depth the concept of regime values taking his point of departure in Rohr’s writings on the constitutional approach. Regime values are regarded as the building blocks of the normative foundation of the state thus functioning as a source of legitimacy and as a moral compass for public servants. Regime values can be linked to the public administration as a whole (e.g., balance, continuity) and to a concrete level (e.g., equal treatment, user orientation). Regime values are not necessarily in harmony, as an inevitable dilemma originates from the conflicting demands of acting autonomously (with “statesmanship,” discretion, and integrity) and subordination (political loyalty, neutrality). He suggests that the concept should have a distinct normative orientation. Regime values are not values *of* a regime but values *for* a regime. Regime values are thus prescriptive and not descriptive. This requires us to specify the best version of actual regimes in their particular circumstances, which obviously transcends the scope of empirical research.

Although a number of studies have presented a host of public values, there are relatively few surprises in these studies. They tend to center around public values such as accountability, integrity, innovation, user orientation, rule of law, and public interest, that is, the “usual suspects” in our field. Recall, for example, the set of universal public values mentioned earlier. There are also studies focusing on the meaning and origins of established values, such as Rutgers and Van der Meer (2010) on efficiency. In the article written by Barry Bozeman and Japera Johnson (2015), two specific public values are presented and discussed in detail and argued as demanding attention in PA: *the public sphere* and *progressive opportunity*. The public sphere is defined as “open communication and deliberation about public values and about collective action pertaining to public values” (p. 3) In connection, “the place . . . functioning as a setting for expansive communication” (p. 3) about public values is a public value enabling institution. Progressive opportunity is defined as “the social conditions requisite to ensure that members of a society have equal

ability to exploit their individual abilities and to achieve the goals they have set for themselves.”

The two values are presented as cornerstone values and as nodal values. Both are considered having salutary effects on many other values. The public sphere is a linchpin for other values inasmuch as it reinforces trust, respect, and cooperation, and it is argued that progressive opportunity and the public sphere are reinforcing public values. One reason that these values are judged to be particularly important values is that the dominant neoclassical political economy not only fails to encourage these two values but also undermines them. Although not labeled as such, the two values may serve as examples of regime values in Overeem’s sense of the concept. They are discussed as prescriptive and fundamental principles of a polity.

Bozeman and Johnson’s argument to include specific values in deliberation and evaluation points at an important question: How are public values linked to decisions? In a public setting, decisions can be made through democratic majority rule approaches. However, public managers often face multiple stakeholders with varying needs and may thus have to arbitrate substantive and significant value conflicts. Non-majority decisions may then involve different value considerations compared with majority decisions and take us to different choices. A major problem in value-based decisions is, however, that choice between conflicting values is difficult. One way to solve value conflicts is establishing a value hierarchy.

How this may be achieved is the topic of the article by Eva Witesman and Lawrence Walters (2015). They wrestle with two different empirical views of the structure of values and their relationship to decision making. While the research in personal values and decision making suggests that people create hierarchies of personal values to aid in selecting between value-laden decision options, research in public values suggests that values cannot be ordered hierarchically, but are rather viewed as “constellations” or a “pantheon” of values from which public administrators choose when justifying decisions. In their article, Witesman and Walters seek to examine ways in which both of these views of public values might coexist. Specifically, as universal values, public values exist in a non-hierarchical arrangement as described by public management scholars. However, in any given decision context, relevant values can be selected from this larger group of values and ordered hierarchically to aid in making and justifying decisions.

The notion of majority decisions and value-based decisions is in a certain way further elaborated on in the article by Colleen Casey (2015). She presents an analysis of varying governance contexts and the link to management approaches and public value authorization and creation in two cities: St. Louis, Missouri, and Cleveland, Ohio. The two cities are comparable on a number of economic and demographic variables but they differ in terms of governance context, for example, Cleveland has a long tradition for including citizens in decisions on local community and economic development. The analysis reveals that Cleveland has adopted a public values management approach, whereas St. Louis relies on traditional management and decisions in the formal political system. This has implications for public values authorization and creation.

One may say that this case study illustrates several points made in earlier mentioned articles: Public values are a social construct, they differ in space, history plays an important role, and a closer study could possibly reveal that Cleveland and St. Louis opt for different regime values.

Although the articles in this symposium show the breadth of the PVP, it remains a limited representation of the full scope of research. At the same time, it is also evident that there are many linkages between the articles. Most important, all authors in this issue—despite their particular take on public values—have one thing in common: The normativity of the public sector is a fundamental issue and PA research should reflect this. The public sector and its study should not be put in a situation that—metaphorically speaking—resembles that of the little boy in H. C. Andersen’s fairy tale *The Snow Queen* when facing a serious threat: “He was quite frightened, and he tried to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, but all he could do, he was only able to remember the multiplication table.” (1844).

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Note

1. In 2006, researchers were invited to participate in a research workshop on public values hosted by the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) at the annual conference, which took place in Milan. The background was clear. Although workshops on ethics, corruption, and the like could be found on international conferences, the workshop conveners (Barry Bozeman, Georgia Tech, and Torben Beck Jørgensen, University of Copenhagen) were unsatisfied with the marginal attention at international conferences and also wanted a broader perspective. In 2008, University of Copenhagen hosted a research workshop on public values and public interest (this time, the conveners included Mark Rutgers, Leiden University). The workshop concluded by founding the Public Value Consortium. This consortium has no rules, no statute, and no obligations besides an agreement that a workshop should be organized every second year. The next workshop took place in Leiden (convened by Mark Rutgers and Patrick Overeem, both Leiden University) in 2010, followed by a workshop in 2012 at University of Illinois in Chicago (conveners were Mary Feeney, University of Illinois, and Stephanie Moulton, Ohio State University). The fourth workshop took place in 2014 at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore (convener was Zeger Van der Wal). The articles in this symposium originate from the Chicago Workshop.
2. The articles in this symposium have been published online in 2013 and 2014. The references here are to the online versions to ensure this introduction is serviceable to all readers.

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Author Biographies

Torben Beck Jørgensen is a professor emeritus at University of Copenhagen. Former affiliations include positions in the Ministry of Finance and at Copenhagen Business School. His research interests include public values, organization and governance of public organizations, public organization theory, and public sector reform.

Mark R. Rutgers is a professor of the philosophy of public administration and dean of the Graduate School of Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His main research interests include public values, the history of public administration, and the foundations of administrative thought.