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## **Is Public Value Pluralism Paramount? The Intrinsic Multiplicity and Hybridity of Public Values**

### **Abstract**

In current debates on public values too often the assumption is made that unitary conceptions exist of what 'public values' are, and that one universal set of classical public core values guides administrative behaviour throughout the public sector. Studies show, however, that it is very hard to classify specific values and denote their exact meaning, and, moreover, that some of the classical public values show signs of multiplicity, hybridity, and conflict, both internally and in relation to one another. This article tries to enrich the current debate on public values by aligning the values literature to the literature on multiplicity, hybridity and competing values. It shows that the plural conceptions that exist with regard to what exactly constitutes public value and public interest have implications for governance strategies, which should take this value pluralism as a starting point.

**Key Words:** Public Values, Public Management, Multiplicity, Hybridity, Public Interest

## **Introduction: The Current Public Value Debate**

Public values have been at the forefront of many recent debates in Public Administration in different shapes and forms. Some authors discuss the safeguarding of public values in a time of privatization (de Bruijn & Dicke, 2006) or economic individualism (Bozeman, 2007), or reconciliation of public values in a time of business-like public management philosophies (Kernaghan, 2000; Frederickson, 2005). Others address public values in general and propose sets of public values (Gregory, 1999; Tait, 1997) or derive specific sets of public values through empirical research (Beck Jørgensen, 2006; Kernaghan, 2003; Schmidt & Posner, 1986; van der Wal et al., 2008). Subsequently, the examples of *public* values that are mentioned in the literature differ widely (cf. de Bruijn & Dicke, 2006: 718). The first category concerns more those public values at the level of societies and democracies, while the second focuses on those values that (should) guide public sector employees, organizations and policies.

Within the second category, research on two themes has made considerable progress during the last 20 years with regard to conceptualization, methodology and accumulation of research findings. First, there is the administrative ethics debate on which (organizational) values are and should be associated with the public service, which has increasingly been supported by empirical research efforts (e.g., Posner & Schmidt, 1986; Kernaghan, 2003; Vrangbaek, 2006; Beck Jørgensen, 2006; Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; van der Wal, 2008). Second, there is the proliferation of empirical work during the last decade on public service motivation (PSM), which concerns individual values and motivations of public sector employees, mostly in the form of surveys (e.g., Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Lyons et al., 2006; Stackman et al., 2006).

All these studies, however, whether they concern public values on an individual, organizational or system level, predispose that a certain set of values that is undisputed in terms of meaning and that one-dimensionality (should) characterize public sector conduct. With the notion of multiplicity of or even hybridity of public values we hope to nuance and specify the public values debate through synergizing different bodies of values literature (including the literature on hybridity) and recent empirical research.

## **Multiplicity or One-Dimensionality of Public Values?**

Thus, notwithstanding or trivializing the differences in focus and form in the public administration debate, too often the assumption is made that unitary conceptions exist of what 'the public' is and what 'public values' are (cf. Bozeman, 2007; Moore, 1995) often in contrast with equally forced distinct perceptions of private values (see e.g., Frederickson, 2005; Jacobs, 1992). We find this in contrast with large parts of public administration reality. There we find many public values and sets or clusters of public values, such as impartiality and lawfulness on the one hand, and efficiency and effectiveness on the other, that one might consider to be intrinsically contradictory or even hybrid (see studies of Vrangbaek, 2006; Beck Jørgensen, 2006; van der Wal, 2008; van Hout, 2007).

Studies that try to classify public (service or sector) values into mutually exclusive categories often encounter the same problem (see e.g. Rutgers, 2008; Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). Classification, according to Rutgers (2008: 94) is "the

process that results in a (temporary) structuring and ordering of our ideas and knowledge. What is more, the need to provide reasons or arguments for a specific classification is tantamount to any attempt at (rational) discourse.” Many authors, according to the same scholar, recognize the need to distinguish between kinds of values and create classes that are both comprehensive and mutually exclusive (Rutgers 2008: 96-97). We wonder, however, as does Rutgers, whether it is at all possible to come up with such a comprehensive set of public values, that excludes other sets or makes them obsolete. Here, briefly, a number of attempts are discussed.

A number of different classifications of public values exist. There are empirically based classifications, such as between public and private (van der Wal, 2008). Others use theoretical or systemic arguments to come up with different sets, types or systems of values, such as individual, professional, organizational, legal, and public-interest values (Van Wart, 1998), ethical, democratic, professional, and people values (Kernaghan, 2003) or, on a more fundamental level, espoused values vs. values in-use (Schein, 2004). Rutgers (2008: 97-98) mentions three general approaches to order (public) values: focus on *core* values, or those values that are most frequently referred to; use chronological ordering by distinguishing between old and new values; or put forward some basic bifurcation of or other kind of dimensional distinction (as illustrated by the examples that were just mentioned) between values. He concludes that “most attempts to classify values lack adequate criteria and arguments to be assessed at all, and as such, fail at even minimum requirements for discussing their theoretical or practical viability” (2008: 94). In addition, despite all the classifications that do exist, almost all authors (ideologically) assume that there is a distinct and consistent set of *public* values.

The same might go for the way in which values are classified in codes of conduct or value statements, in public institutions themselves or by international organizations, such as the EU or the UN. Among these, one well-known moral framework for public officials was developed in the United Kingdom by the Committee on Standards in Public Life chaired by Lord Nolan, which sketched the following Seven Principles of Public Life (1995). First, holders of public office should make decisions based on the public interest: private interests or obligations to outside individuals and organizations should have no influence (‘selflessness’ and ‘integrity’). Similarly, they should make choices on the basis of merit (‘objectivity’), be accountable for their decisions and actions (‘accountability’) and be as open as possible (‘openness’). Holders of public office also have a duty to declare any private interests and resolve possible conflicts of interest (‘honesty’). Finally, they should promote and support these principles through leadership and example (‘leadership’).

Many of these values have also been used in other contexts; for instance, by the Committee of Independent Experts (1999), which reported on fraud, mismanagement and nepotism in the European Commission; in the Queensland *57 Public Sector Ethics Act*; and in codes of conduct such as the United Nations’ *International Code of Conduct for Public Officials* (1996: A/RES/51/59). The UN code contains a set of basic standards of integrity and performance expected from public officials. The term ‘public officials’ is deemed to include all persons vested with the power and authority to make, implement, enforce, amend or revoke government decisions and to render services to the public, with or without remuneration. The code includes the following general principles: public officials

shall act in the public interests; function efficiently and effectively, in accordance with the law and with integrity; and shall be attentive, fair and impartial. The code also contains rules pertaining to “conflicts of interest and disqualification, disclosure of assets, acceptance of gifts and other favours, confidential information and political activity” (Pieth & Eigen, 1999: 665–666).

The values mentioned in the research on the 59 codes of conduct for Dutch government organizations (Ethicon 2003) show some similarities to the Nolan Committee principles (moreover, 3 of the 7 principles appear in the list of prominent values, while the other 4 principles resemble some of the values mentioned). Somewhat striking is the absence of ‘accountability’ and ‘lawfulness’ in the Dutch public sector codes, although ‘responsibility’ and ‘serviceability’ are to some extent related in meaning.

Overall, there is considerable overlap and congruence between the values that are mentioned in the different codes and frameworks, but again, it can be questioned to what extent the organizational reality within the – internally very diverse – public sector reflects such a unitary conception of culture and values. There might be much more value plurality and even multiplicity and hybridity within the public domain.

In a recent article, Pesch (2008) discusses exactly this plurality of values in the public domain. He argues that “much procedural arrangements generally assume a univocal set of moral values,” but “public administration is characterized by a plurality of sets of values” (2008: 335). Moreover, in alignment with our terminology, he describes that although consistency of public values is oft-assumed; values compete with one another in daily institutional reality, and subsequently “public administration involves a multiplicity of value systems” (2008: 335).

The idea of incongruence between and multiplicity or even hybridity of public values is further supported by bodies of literature that are at the periphery of the public values debate, such as those on conflicts of interest, competing values (O’Neill & Quinn, 1993; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) and hybridity and hybrid organizations (Koppell, 2003; Blundell & Murdock, 1997, Evers & Laville, 2004; Brandsen, van de Donk & Putters, 2005). The next section discusses this literature and explores the possibility that public values are intrinsically multi-interpretable in the way they guide daily conduct in government organizations.

### **Exploring Public Value Multiplicity**

We notified that the mainstream public value debate starts from the assumption that any individual or organizational entity builds a consistent and congruent set of public values. This may be the case in many organizational contexts. This starting point however seems to neglect the vast and growing amount of (empirical) academic literature that focuses on the multiplicity and the contradictory, incongruent character of public value(s) and its consequences for management and organizational behaviour. In his section we will present some of the main theoretical concepts in the literature on administrative multiplicity: ‘ambiguity’, ‘competing values’ and ‘hybrid organizations’.

Very different academic disciplines recognise that the set of values that guides human behaviour is by definition ambiguous (van den Munckhof 2006). From a linguistic perspective semantics, as an expression of meaning, are in different ways ambiguous. Words and sentences have more than one meaning, and are often vague,

inconsistent and on top of all subject to change (Richman, 1959; Levine, 1985). March and Olson (1979) differentiate between ambiguity in several domains of knowledge. The authors distinguish between *historical ambiguity* (i.e., colonialism now has a complete different association and meaning than 100 years ago (also recognised by Martin & Meyerson, 1988)), *administrative ambiguity* (the (un)deliberately inconsistent of vaguely defined goals or choices), and *functional ambiguity*, which has to do with technical or multicultural issues, which are simply too complex to grasp (also found by Shapira, 1997; Reed & deFillipi, 1990 and earlier defined as bounded rationality by Simon, 1945). Functional ambiguity is often seen as a result of the information overload created by the current information society (REF). The fourth category, *social ambiguity*, is about the intrinsic ambiguous character of people, which is ambivalent by nature, subject to change and emotions of individuals. As a result, March and Olson (1979) define organizations as an artefact of changing and fluid participation patterns of individuals. The overview of ambiguous artefacts by McCaskey (1982) is a perfect example of ambiguity in an organizational context.

Several researchers studied the work perception of professionals and managers (Kotter, 1982; Reddy, 2001; Sayles, 1989; Noordegraaf, 2000, Boine et al., 2003). Crucial in their work is the fact that every organization contains sets of competing values. The values and perceptions that are of importance within any organization, may conflict fundamentally. Based on extensive research, Cameron and Quinn (1989) found that organizations basically contain four contradictory normative orientations (which they call cultures) that simultaneously determine managerial and professional behaviour: hierarchical culture, market culture, clan (family) culture and ad hoc culture. The contradiction of values in organizations seems so large that some authors portrait managers as marionettes or puppets and their work as an impossible job (Hargrove & Glidewell, 1990). This brings Noordegraaf (2000) to his statement that all managers (must) deal with a certain amount of ambiguity or even more: that ambiguity is actually the ground for management of organizations.

Hybrid organizations are characterised as a mix of pure, but incongruent, contradictory and conflicting behavioural rationalities (Brandsen, van de Donk & Putters, 2005; Brandsen, van de Donk & Kenis, 2006); In 't Veld, 1995, 1997, 2005; Koppell, 2003; van Hout, 2007). The mere existence of hybrid organizations shows that in many, especially public organizations several, incongruent value patterns appear. On the one hand, the concept of the hybrid organization is based on extensive research of public organizations that increasingly operate in a businesslike manner (see for example, Bozeman, 1991; Simon & Verhoeff, 2001; Jacobs, 1992; In 't Veld, 1995, 1997). On the other hand, the concept is built on the increasing studies of third sector organizations and social enterprises like hospitals, housing corporations, educational and vocational institutes forced to operate in the multiple force field of contradictory behavioural rationalities and incongruent values (see: Pestoff, 1992; Zijderveld, 1999; Evers & Laville, 2004; Frumkin, 2002; Putters, 2001).

The empirically based concepts of ambiguity, competing values and hybrid organizations show the multiple or even conflicting character of public value. It warns us to be very prudent with the starting point that any individual or organizational entity contains or should contain a consistent or even uniform set of public values. The contrast between the apparent one-dimensionality and the unitary conception of public values in the current public value debate on the one hand, and the multiplicity

and the contradictive, incongruent character of public value(s) on the other, will be elaborated in the two remaining sections.

### **Contrast Between Unitary and Multiple Perception of Public Values**

Public administration practice shows the unitary perception as well as the multiplicity of public values, often in strong contrast with each other. The influence of the public value debate is quite obvious in the political debate about integrity of public organizations and the international debate on good governance. Governmental organizations, third sector organizations and their representative bodies exhaust themselves in formulating all kinds of codes of conduct (how to interact with civilians and private enterprises), organizational ‘passports’, restricted salary conditions (income ceiling), regulations concerning the distribution of profit, financial accountability systems, and so on. Various aspects of public service delivery have to live up to an enormous variety of regulatory frameworks that aim at maintaining the public character (in terms of predictability, reliability, availability, accessibility and solidary financing) of the delivered services.

Despite the intentions, practice proves the codes, guidelines, rules and conditions to be quite problematic. In the first place because the codes are vulnerable and susceptible for multiple interpretations: it has shown to be quite difficult to design rules which are exclusive and clear for all parties involved. The concept of profit for example: in general it is widely agreed that public organizations may not make or strive for profit. In practice however it is discussed whether dividends which are not distributed but directly invested in public service delivery can also be called profit (and will therefore be allowed to realize). Another example is customer friendliness or customer service which is sometimes seen from a market perspective (the “customer is king” principle) and sometimes as the professional, functional, educational, technical, vocational or medical duty to serve families, tenants, students and patients (and in doing so may violate the customer is king principle).

This brings us to the second issue. The public domain appears so extensive, differentiated and complex that codes of conduct may be inherently contradictory. From various sides public bodies are torn apart, or to put it differently: public organizations are obliged to answer to different incongruent regimes. An average public organization has to obey to different professional, legal, economical, managerial, political, scientific, technical, environmental and civil service demands, wishes and expectations. Managers and professionals in public organizations are confronted with various ‘wicked’ impossible situations. They find themselves to be in a split situation more than once a day. One can think of the doctor who cannot fulfil the wish of a terminal patient because of the medical codes and professional vows, the CEO with an insufficient budget who is torn between a sufficient amount of staff and balancing the books, or the manager of a decentralized public agency who has to be entrepreneur (compete, innovate, operate flexible, take risks) but at the same time has to “walk the line” in terms of the civil service regime (be reliable, predictable, work transparently and controllable). In short, for an important part public values appear to be competing values. Especially third sector organizations, operating in the midfield between market state and civil society, have a hard time coping with the incongruence of their multiple regimes: they are rightfully hybrid organizations.

### **Conclusions: Contributions to the Current Public Value Debate**

What, then, are the implications of this ‘multiplicity perspective’ on public values in daily organizational life, for the current academic debate on public values? Or put more explicitly in the famous words of Hill (1952, 1965), however interesting an intellectual endeavour such as the one that was just displayed may be; “what does it all mean anyway?” First of all, with the notion of multiplicity of or even hybridity of public values we hope to have nuanced and specified the current public values debate through synergizing different bodies of values literature (including the literature on hybridity) and recent empirical research. Despite the many recent and laudable attempts that have been mentioned, to come up with sets of public sector core values, as it is now, the current public value debate is very normative and even ideological in nature, since it presupposes that one set of values with undisputed meanings (should) characterize global public governance. This predisposition is reflected even more in the various value statements of (international) public organizations that have been presented, which often show single value statements without presenting a definition or a suggestion on how the value should be implemented or actualized, let alone a guideline for how one should manage competing or contrasting values.

Secondly and subsequently, the concept of public value(s) is not as unitary in meaning and usage as many people would like it to be. The current debate would benefit greatly from much more specified and in-depth discussions on which public values at which values are congruent or contrasting with one another. Such discussions would move at least one step beyond the many classifications that *are* there between the levels and domains to which specific values should apply. It might very well be, for instance, that efficiency and effectiveness can be actualized in public agency decision making in some situations, but political irrationality, in combination with the value of loyalty to political superiors, makes it impossible to actualize these values in other situations. Although some qualitative studies exist that attempt to contextualize and situationalize this gradual and contrasting importance of specific public values (de Graaf & van der Wal, 2008; van der Wal, 2008), the public values debate needs more advanced empirical attempts to provide the specific context in which certain public values can or cannot coincide with others.

Thirdly and finally, a reason for the desired unitary conception of the public value concept might be fuelled by a desire for a unitary and tangible conception of how governments create public value, or more explicitly, contribute to or fulfill the public interest. As Bozeman (2007) shows convincingly in his latest monograph, contributing to the public interest, and creating public value for society (Kirlin, 1996), are laudable goals to strive for and are at the core of what governments should do, but determining what constitutes *the* public interest in a given community or society is in fact a mission impossible. Moreover, the literature on multiplicity and hybridity that has been presented in this article makes such a desire obsolete, because it shows that there cannot be one public interest. If that would be the case, than public governance and management would be rather easy endeavours and we, as a public administration community would not spend so much time on discussing the difficulties of coming up with governance and management strategies for the public sector. Just as Noordegraaf (2000) and others have shown, managing a public sector organization comes down to coping with ambiguity on a daily basis.

We want to stress that this notion does not only go for managerial dilemmas that are relatively amoral in nature (if such dilemmas exist at all), but especially applies to ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making (cf. Cooper, 2006). Different settings, roles, loyalties, and interests (Bovens, 1998; Cooper, 2006) make it impossible to make use of the same set of core values in most decisions, although the law is considered to be a moral minimum at all times. Different organizational and sectoral contexts even complicate the actualization of specific value statements, such as efficiency, because its realization and implementation is simply not possible in every situation due to contrast with other values such as irrationality on a political level or lawfulness on an organizational or procedural level. Accepting a priori that incongruence between specific public core values and the intrinsic multiplicity of certain others is a fact of administrative life would improve the current public value debate and make its outcomes more feasible for the practice of public administration.

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