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# Roles of professionals in value co-creation: a systematic literature review

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**ABSTRACT**

Value co-creation is a process that aims to improve services by enlisting the cooperation of service users. We reviewed 65 scientific articles using the PRISMA protocol to reveal the distinct roles of public service professionals in value co-creation. We discover the differing values and tensions created by those roles as professionals balance individual and public interests. Our findings indicate that understanding the multiple roles of professionals helps to clarify their influence on value creation at various levels of the service ecosystem. The study also suggests a managerial implication in the form of the importance of identifying professional development and training.

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**KEYWORDS** Value co-creation; professionals; public services; service ecosystem

## Introduction

Value co-creation in public services has gained a lot of scholarly interest recently (e.g. Bryson et al. 2017; Cluley and Radnor 2020; Farr 2016). This interest is based on the conception that the specificity and usability of services determine how valuable they are for service users (S. P. Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2020; S. P. Osborne et al. 2021), who either create value in their lives by using the service (*value creation*) or by sharing the creation process with service providers (*value co-creation*) (S. P. Osborne et al. 2021). With interaction as a value co-creation requirement (S. P. Osborne 2018), it also brings forth possibilities for *value co-destruction*, capturing the diminishment of value for one or more actors involved (Engen et al. 2021; Smith 2013).

Professionals act as nodes between public management and service users as they operate in the public service frontline. Value creation at the micro-level is based on the interaction between service provider and user (Grönroos and Voima 2013), with the professionals' actions supporting the process (Vespestad and Clancy 2019), which affects the power dynamic between the professional and the service user. As street-level bureaucrats, professionals, such as social workers or nurses, have significant discretion in interpreting and applying policies as they engage with the public (Lipsky 1980). As a result, their actions and decisions have a direct and profound

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impact on the lives of service users, either creating or destroying value through services (Engen et al. 2021; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023; Skarli 2021).

In this study, we discern professionals as trained and certified professional actors who are bound by a code of ethics (Wilensky 1964). With a systematic literature review, we approach value co-creation from the point of view of a public service professional, functioning in various roles as they interact with service users.

As professionals translate abstract policies into tangible services and outcomes, they do so through collaboration with service users, addressing individual needs and demands (Hupe 2022). These everyday interactions shape the quality (Baser and Tan 2023; van Ryzin 2015), effectiveness (Vivona 2023; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015), and legitimacy (Kinder et al. 2020; Rivera and Connolly Knox 2023) of public services. Yet, as far as we know, the role of professionals in value co-creation has not been studied systematically thus far. As Kinder and Stenvall (2023) note, the role of professionals in the context of value co-creation merits further investigation. Against this backdrop, we argue that observing the roles of professionals as value co-creators can offer fundamental insights into how the ideals of value co-creation can be operationalized in the public sector.

This systematic literature review synthesizes scientific literature to complement the existing understanding of the roles of professionals in public services (Jaspers and Steen 2019; Moynihan and Thomas 2013; Steen and Tuurnas 2018) and aims to illuminate their impact (Engen et al. 2021; Voorberg et al. 2017) on value co-creation (see, e.g. S. P. Osborne et al. 2022, 2023; Petrescu 2019). Specifically, we ask *how is the role of professionals reflected in the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services?* Based on the results, we aim to formulate a categorization of the variety of roles of professionals in value co-creation.

We first provide an overview of the literature on value co-creation in the context of the public service ecosystem, followed by a section outlining the systematic literature review and the analysis of 65 peer-reviewed articles. The third section presents the results categorized under eight roles for professionals derived from the literature and how value formation manifests through each role. Finally, we conclude by discussing the results and summarizing the study's scientific and practical implications.

## Value co-creation in the public service ecosystem

Public value (Moore 1995) is a multi-faceted concept encompassing various meanings (e.g. Cui and Aulton 2023; Fukumoto and Bozeman 2019; Hartley et al. 2017; Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022). Moore viewed public value as the public sector's equivalent to the private sector's emphasis on shareholder value (Bryson et al. 2017). Since Moore's seminal work, the notion of public value has increasingly captured academic interest, evolving into various definitions. Firstly, the concept is linked to something considered important in society (what the public values) in a way that strengthens a public sphere open to all societal actors (Benington 2011). The issue is not so much about calculating the difference between inputs and outputs but rather about an ongoing debate in which what is valued and what is not is defined. Secondly, public value can be understood as a concept more comprehensive than value realized at the individual level (Moore 2013). This means that a situation can be perceived as valuable even if it conflicts with an individual's immediate interests. Thirdly, public value has been described as encompassing the collective benefits, services, and

outcomes provided by public organizations and government institutions and which are valued by the public (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). Finally, public value can be linked to the fundamental essence of public action. Public value acts as a guiding ethos (Alford and Hughes 2008). At its core is the belief that public services are necessary because many of the needs of citizens are of such a nature that their satisfaction is poorly suited to, or entirely incompatible with, the responsibilities of market-based enterprises (Bozeman 2002). Combining these four features, it can be argued that the public value resembles a 'thick concept', meaning that it both describes and evaluates at the same time (Danielsson and Westrup 2024).

Parallel to public value, the concept of public values emerges as a distinct but interrelated notion. Just like public value, public values also manifest in various ways. Public values represent the collective consensus on citizens' rights, responsibilities, and the guiding principles that should steer governmental actions (Bozeman 2007). A focal aspect in the public sector value discussion is an understanding of the ecosystemic nature of services, in which services are considered on institutional (macro), service system (meso), and individual (micro) levels, but also on the level of individual beliefs (sub-micro) and the interdependent nature of these levels (Engen et al. 2021; S. P. Osborne et al. 2021, 2023). Public service ecosystems consist of linked actors, such as citizens, public service organizations, or advocacy groups, but also private firms, who integrate resources with the purpose of co-creating value for users (S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022; Petrescu 2019; Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024). Public values are therefore not constant; they evolve over time and inherently possess a normative element, shaping what is deemed appropriate within the public service ecosystem.

This paper posits that public value and public values, while separate, are intimately interconnected concepts (Rutgers 2015), with public values serving as the normative foundations that guide actions and behaviours in the public sector. It is expected that public value is appreciated by public service professionals (cf. Meynhardt, Hermann, and Bardeli 2024). Following several scholars (e.g. Meynhardt 2009; Page et al. 2015; Parker et al. 2023) who have emphasized the need to focus not just on defining public value but also on understanding how it is created, this paper assumes that public value is not a panacea or a 'silver bullet' but potentially an 'idea' that helps to understand professionals' decision-making within the public service ecosystem.

An emerging view in recent public service management discussions is that public service operations should produce not only public but also individual value through co-creation, making citizens an active part of the service process (S. P. Osborne et al. 2021; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). The success of the service is thus measured, for example, by assessing how individuals utilize the value potential of services (Matthies et al. 2016). Accordingly, public service organizations are seen to make value offerings, which service users then integrate into their own lives for value co-creation (e.g. Engen et al. 2021). It is also essential to recognize value co-destruction that may occur, for example, due to non-transparency of operations, misuse of services, or lack of bureaucratic competence (Engen et al. 2021).

The idea of value creation originally stems from the scientific discussion concerning the private sector and is a central aspect, for example, in service dominant logic (SDL) (Grönroos 2019; Petrescu 2019), but the ideals are also exploitable in public services (Grönroos 2019; Poocharoen and Ting 2015). Recently, public service logic (PSL) has attracted attention as a lens on value co-creation (S. P. Osborne 2018; S. P. Osborne

et al. 2022), drawing on SDL with value co-creation at the centre of public service processes but also connecting it to ecosystemic thinking (Grönroos and Voima 2013; S. P. Osborne et al. 2021, 2023; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Although in the concept of service ecosystems the manifestation and experiencing of value at the individual level are seen as defining aspects, public services also produce value in terms of community and society, for example, through the upholding of rights and democratic principles or access to services (Engen et al. 2021; S. P. Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2020). When combined with other characteristics, such as political mandate and the presence of unwilling service users (S. Osborne 2020), principles from the private sector, especially within the concept of public value creation (Engen et al. 2021; Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019) become an unfit lens for public service examination.

Overall, the perspective that public service provision involves active collaborative engagement is becoming increasingly influential in public management discourse (e.g. Voorberg et al. 2017), emphasizing the significance of collaboration in the design and delivery of public services. It contends that realizing the full potential of value co-creation is reliant on delineating and understanding the roles and competencies that professionals bring to that collaborative process (e.g. Tuurnas 2021). The relatively new discussion concerning PSL can be criticized, as Kinder and Stenvall (2023) noted, for not considering the role of public service professionals as focal actors in value co-creation but also for its extreme positivity towards collaboration (Eriksson et al. 2022). These issues highlight the need to examine how professionals contribute to developing and implementing public policies and services (Hupe 2022; Lipsky 1980) and thus affect the value co-creation process. This article is premised on the notion that fulfilling the value co-creation promise necessitates a clear understanding of the roles of professionals.

## Data and methods

This study is based on a systematic literature review that delivers a rigorously formed synthesis of previous research to address the research question (Petticrew and Roberts 2006; Snyder 2019). As building on previous research is a core idea of academic research (Xiao and Watson 2019) and subsequent studies fill research gaps identified previously (Kunisch et al. 2018; Linnenluecke, Marrone, and Singh 2020), this article delves into the hitherto relatively little examined role of public service professionals in value co-creation processes (see, e.g. Kinder and Stenvall 2023).

The first aim of the review was to identify all relevant scientific articles examining *how the role of professionals is reflected in the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services*. The analysis focused on scientific discussion in the form of articles, ensuring that the data had gone through a peer-review process. The systematic database search, selected keywords and databases, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the progress of the database search, are reported in detail in Figure 1.

The selection of databases and keywords was based on a previous scoping review, which aimed to map existing research and useful search terms. Web of Science, Scopus, and EBSCO were chosen as source databases, as they contain a wide range of journals related to research in the public sector. In the scoping review, it was determined that the use of terms 'value co-creation' or 'co-creation of value', combined with 'professional', 'street-level bureaucrat', or 'public service clerk', resulted in a comprehensive pool of academic research articles that could be used to formulate a coherent answer to

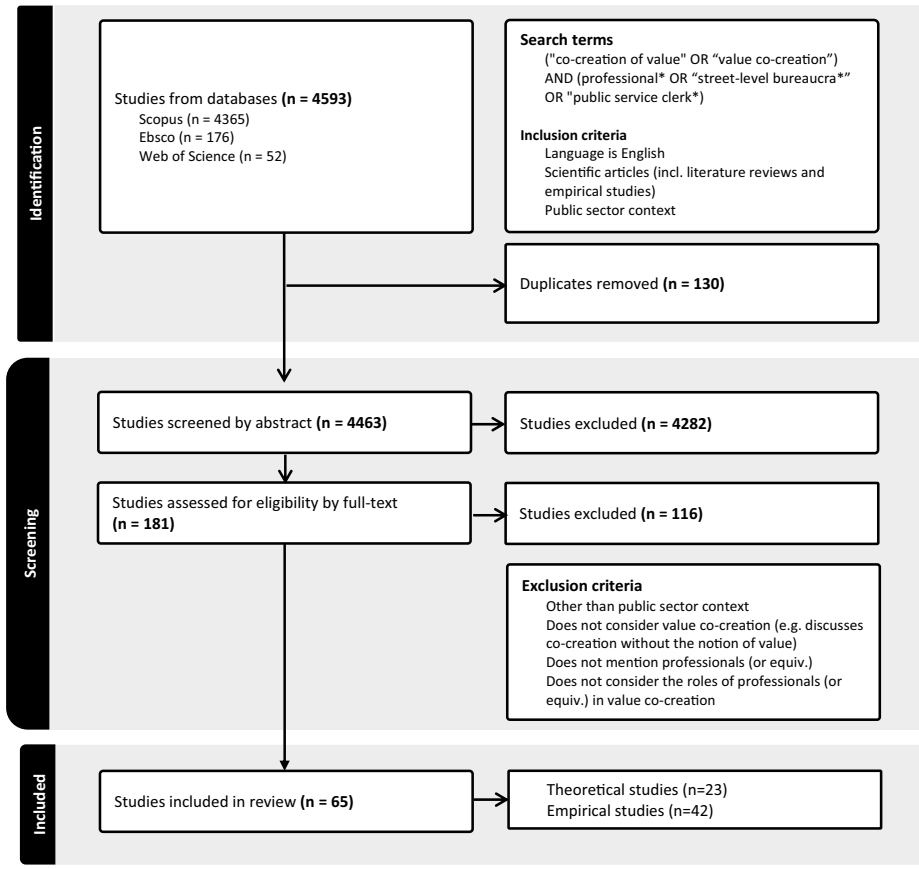


**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow chart (from Covidence).

the research question. Related terms of 'co-production', 'co-design', or 'co-creation' did not result in any additional relevant articles to satisfy the research interest concerning value co-creation. Test searches with other terms for professionals (e.g. 'civil servant') did not provide additional relevant results, although in some cases the articles discussed value (creation) unrelated to co-creation in the service-user interface. Furthermore, the term 'public service provider' provided results that tended to emphasize governmental or other organizations as operational agents, being in line with previous research findings (e.g. Haug 2023). This surveying process was carried out to ensure the study adhered to the requirement for a meticulous and transparent process (M. T. Pham et al. 2014) to counter the criticism that a lack of thoroughness and methodological rigour in literature reviews can undermine the reliability and quality of the information they produce (Snyder 2019; Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart 2003).

The finalized database search for the systematic literature review was conducted by two researchers, and screening was undertaken independently using the web-based collaboration software platform Covidence, as demonstrated in detail in Figure 1. Two researchers first reviewed each abstract ($n = 4{,}463$) and

then the applicable full texts ($n = 181$) to assess the eligibility in relation to the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the research question. Conflicts during the screening phase were resolved in a dialogue utilizing a third researcher when necessary, based on discussions amongst the whole collaborative writing team about the underlying rationale for the choices. This dialogic researcher triangulation approach eventually included only studies that considered the roles of professionals or their equivalents ($n = 65$). The most common terms to describe the professionals in the service-user interface were *professional* ($n = 30$), *employee* ($n = 10$), *provider* ($n = 10$), and *staff* ($n = 10$).

The data were analysed using inductive content analysis. First, the articles were read several times, looking for prevailing themes under which the data was coded in the next phase. Descriptive keywords were identified for each coded role. The number of keywords varied between nine and 14 depending on the role, and the focal keywords for each role are displayed in Table 1. These keywords were used as a frame of reference as we analysed the roles more thoroughly with the aim of finding their most central and descriptive essence. For each role, we also describe how value formation takes place on individual, organizational, and system levels through the actions and responsibilities of professionals.

## Description of the data

Of the 65 studies included in the review, 42 used an empirical design, such as case studies or longitudinal studies. The remaining 23 were theoretical works, such as conceptual articles or literature reviews. Although there were no limiting geographical search or eligibility criteria, we restricted the sample to articles written in English to ensure reliable analysis. Thus, if the full text was written in any other language, the article was not included in the study. Therefore, this study may not represent all public service value co-creation literature globally. The area distribution of the empirical studies included in the analysis is presented in Figure 2, with significant emphasis on public service value co-creation studies in Europe ($n = 27$) compared to the rest of the world ($n = 15$).

The inclusion and exclusion criteria did not specify a publishing period. The articles selected were published between 2013 and 2023, with the lowest annual number of articles occurring in 2013 ($n = 1$) and the highest in 2021 ($n = 12$). The temporal distribution of the articles indicates both the recent increase in research interest related to the studied phenomenon and the rather limited amount of research carried out so far.

The review includes articles from 36 scientific journals targeting a wide range of public administration and public service management sectors. The greatest number of articles were published in *Public Management Review* ($n = 9$), *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* ($n = 5$), *Journal of Services Marketing* ($n = 5$), and *Australasian Marketing Journal* ($n = 4$). Although journals with a focus on marketing provided a significant amount ($n = 13$) of the eligible 65 articles, they exclusively considered either public sector healthcare in general ($n = 9$) or specifically physiotherapy ($n = 1$), midwifery ($n = 1$), elderly patients ($n = 1$), or developmental disorders ($n = 1$).

**Table 1.** The formation of roles in inductive content analysis.

| Role | References (n) | Articles (n) | Focal keywords | Core characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborator | 143 | 52 | interaction, collaboration, knowledge integration | Mutual exchange of resource and knowledge.<br>Adaptation to individual service user needs.<br>Collaborative formation of a common service plan. |
| Empowering agent | 109 | 40 | trust, security, empowerment | Sensitive approach to service user's conditions.<br>Empowering service user interaction capabilities.<br>Enhancing service user's trust in benevolence (of professional and service system). |
| Professional service provider | 102 | 43 | service provision, professional ethics, consultation | Ensuring appropriate service provision.<br>Professional assessment and discretion on service provision.<br>Bearing administrative burden in service encounters. |
| Co-creator of service experiences | 85 | 34 | relationship, user experience, engagement/ motivation | Enhancing service user's experience on services.<br>Fostering positive service user attitude towards the whole service chain.<br>Encounters based on relationships instead of exchange. |
| Educator | 83 | 36 | knowledge imbalance, professional guidance, learning | Interpretation of public services and service language.<br>Integrating information and co-learning.<br>Educating service user to induce wellbeing and to prevent harm. |
| Boundary spanner | 57 | 36 | resource exchange, boundary spanning, knowledge gathering | Cooperation between other professionals and service operators.<br>Generation of shared competence.<br>Granting and sharing common resources. |
| Self-developer | 42 | 29 | training, professional development, expertise/skills | Accumulation of (technical) skills, abilities and capabilities.<br>Realisation of own value conceptions.<br>Development of empathetic and supportive behaviour. |
| Asset | 28 | 19 | performance, resource, policy implementation | Representing the service organization and public values.<br>Being a human resource for service user value creation.<br>Conveying service user information to organization. |

## Results of the systematic literature review: eight prevalent roles for public service professionals

The analysis revealed eight distinct roles of public service professionals in value co-creation. The roles were labelled *collaborator*, *empowering agent*, *professional service provider*, *educator*, *co-creator of service experiences*, *boundary spanner*, *self-developer*, and *asset*. Although some of these roles have similarities and may be present simultaneously in service situations, we argue that all eight roles are individually relevant with differing core characteristics and purposes in the daily actions of service professionals.

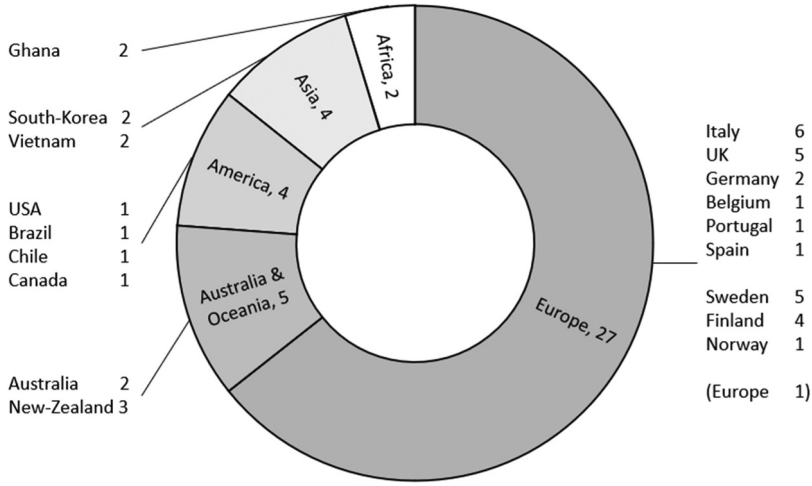


**Figure 2.** Geographical distribution of the empirical studies.

Enabling and coordinating roles of public service employees are becoming more significant (OECD 2021) in increasingly complex service settings (Cassidy et al. 2021). Accordingly, the identified roles also reveal conflicts between them and differing values, simultaneously describing what is expected of professionals in the service-user interface. The analysis prompted interesting notions on how value is formed at different levels of the service ecosystem, sometimes also emerging in the lives of professionals through service encounters. Table 1 demonstrates the formation of the roles through the inductive content analysis.

When viewed through the lens of value co-creation, public services consist of human encounters in which information is shared and service strategies created with the purpose of creating value beyond what the operators could accomplish on their own (Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019; Peng et al. 2022). In this section, we reveal the roles of professionals identified in previous value co-creation literature.

## *Collaborator*

Among the reviewed articles, the foremost recognized role for public service professionals was *collaborator* (143 references in 52 articles), which is based on the fundamental idea in value co-creation of collaboration as an interactive human encounter (e.g. Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019). The core characteristics of this role include mutual exchange of resources and the formation of common plans with service users (Keeling et al. 2021; Palumbo, Tummers, et al. 2016). Also, as frontline professionals face a wide variety of service users, they need to adapt to differing needs and capabilities (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021; Suárez-Álvarez, Suárez-Vázquez, and Del Río-Lanza 2021).

During service encounters, professionals and service users are at the nexus of interrelated values (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), objectives, beliefs, and practices (Palumbo, Annarumma, et al. 2016; Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021).

Reciprocal relationships and dialogic approaches result in fewer value conflicts (Davey and Krisjanous 2023; Keeling et al. 2021). In return, the professionals receive information on service users' needs and capabilities (Kim 2018; Palumbo, Annarumma, et al. 2016) and the services required.

Value creation for an individual, even in mandatory services, benefits from the frontline professional's interaction skills (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020). Professionals that understand the significance of the service encounter, the implied power relations, and the options to influence service user wellbeing (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019) also have an opportunity to reflect on their own capabilities and competences with more empathy (Chwialkowska et al. 2023). Accordingly, professionals can extract value from the co-creation process themselves (Tuan 2018).

Fuelled by collaboration, the creation of societal value is based on the service users' increased ability to function effectively in the service system (e.g. Kim 2019) performing some tasks themselves (Robertson, Polonsky, and McQuilken 2014). The value co-creation chain can reach beyond the initial service encounter, for example, through service recommendations or the assistance of fellow service users (Tuan 2018). Unsuccessful collaboration, in contrast, can similarly spur progressive value co-destruction (Espersson and Westrup 2020; S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022; Robertson, Polonsky, and McQuilken 2014).

### *Empowering agent*

The *empowering agent* role (109 references in 40 articles) derives from the service user's confidence in the professional. The core characteristics of this role are formed through high-quality encounters, mutual respect, trust, communication, and careful consideration of the service user's individual characteristics and needs (Jenhaug 2020; Keeling, Laing, and de Ruyter 2018).

Trust in the benevolence of professionals enhances service users' positive emotions and experiences (Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021; Vespestad and Clancy 2019). Such trust can also elicit deep and hidden information and help formulate more comprehensive service need assessments (Chwialkowska et al. 2023). An empathetic approach is especially important with young people, as trust in professionals must be built repeatedly with every encounter (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). In contrast, among the elderly, trust in public service professionals is somewhat intrinsic (Kim 2019). Trust in professionals' benevolence also helps maintain cooperation in the face of cultural or value conflicts (Beirão, Patrício, and Fisk 2017; Vespestad and Clancy 2019).

Since trust also reduces service-user resistance in service processes, a sense of security is an essential aspect of both mandatory and voluntary public services (Palumbo, Tummers, et al. 2016). However, psychological dependence on professionals may increase the risk of emotional vulnerability and feelings of alienation (Kim 2019). This power asymmetry between professionals and service users is accentuated with vulnerable groups (e.g. children unable to make choices about their social activities) that are highly dependent on the benevolence of professionals (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019; Westrup and Danielsson 2019).

Service-user empowerment can be deliberately fostered (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021) or be a by-product of effective value co-creation. Professionals

nurture service-user commitment by offering support (Davey and Grönroos 2019; Hau, Tram Anh, and Thuy 2017; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020) and encouraging service users to awaken dormant resources, empowering their interaction capabilities (Breidbach, Antons, and Salge 2016; Palumbo, Annarumma, et al. 2016). Ideally, when a service process has fulfilled its purpose, the service users trust their own abilities to maintain wellbeing (Krisjanous and Maude 2014).

Value co-creation through empowerment requires meeting both perceived and service-based needs (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021). Thus, destruction of value can manifest as a reduction in trust or as an inappropriate service (Magnussen and Rønning 2021; S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022). The perceived trustworthiness of professionals reflects the reliability of the entire service system (e.g. T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019). Accordingly, service users that trust the system can also take more responsibility in service processes (Espersson and Westrup 2020). On the micro-level, improved wellbeing and the reduction of complications increase trust in services, and a sense of justice, accessibility, and equality in public services strengthens the value experienced by service users as members of society (Kim 2018; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021).

### *Professional service provider*

For the *professional service provider* (102 references in 43 articles), the most important function is to be the expert entity providing the service (Magnussen and Rønning 2021; Tiitola et al. 2023). Core characteristics of this role are ensuring appropriate service provision even in situations where the service user is unable to express their needs (Beirão, Patrício, and Fisk 2017) or is unwilling to receive services (Tuan 2018), and even making decisions on behalf of the user (Beirão, Patrício, and Fisk 2017; Magnussen and Rønning 2021).

The power imbalance in public service encounters (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) is also reflected in the input efforts of value co-creation participants. This means that the professional supplements as much service provision effort as the service user needs for value, as the intended outcome, to be created. Service users might desire to just receive services without becoming that involved (Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022) or accepting an active role in value co-creation (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019), thus emphasizing professionals' input. Therefore, the required effort, similarly to power (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), is distributed unequally in multi-actor settings, and not all the actors have similar possibilities to influence value co-creation. This may lead to conflicts between service-user wishes or needs and the expectations imposed by stakeholders or policies (Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021; Sønderskov and Rønning 2021). Although professional assessment may conflict or even override service-users' wishes, for example when an alcoholic is denied alcohol (Damali et al. 2016; Sønderskov and Rønning 2021) or possibly when a neglected child is taken to foster care, such situations demonstrate how co-destruction of individual value at a certain point in time may turn to added (individual or public) value later (Magnussen and Rønning 2021).

The creation of societal value through professional service provision is primarily dependent on the equality and fairness of service production (Davey and Grönroos 2019; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021) and also on factors enhancing quality

and efficacy, such as service-based motivations (Magnussen and Rønning 2021), the flexibility of the service network (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023; Vredenburg and Bell 2014), and clear division of responsibility (Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019). As for individual value co-creation, the professional's role is to provide services efficiently and effectively while maintaining the required social and ethical standards (Hau, Tram Anh, and Thuy 2017; Sønderskov and Rønning 2021).

### *Co-creator of service experiences*

Core characteristics for a *co-creator of service experiences* (85 references in 34 articles) are enhancing the user's service experience (e.g. da Silva et al. 2015; Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019), fostering a positive service-user attitude (e.g. Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021), and building encounters based on relationships (e.g. Janamian et al. 2022; Kaartemo and Känsäkoski 2018), as presented in Table 1.

Service-user satisfaction derives naturally from offering a suitable service and a pleasant atmosphere (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021) but also require flexible, adaptable, and empathetic professional support (Chwialkowska et al. 2023; Palumbo, Tummers, et al. 2016; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019). Other recognized professional features relevant to service-user satisfaction are good social and interaction skills (Sønderskov and Rønning 2021), competence (Leite and Hodgkinson 2021), encouraging attitude (Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor 2021), and helpfulness (Gustavsson, Gremyr, and Kenne Sarenmalm 2016). In turn, positive experiences motivate service users to value co-creation and encourage interaction (Kaartemo and Känsäkoski 2018; Osei-Frimpong, Wilson, and Owusu-Frimpong 2015).

Professionals who facilitate meaningful communication create service encounters based on relationships instead of exchange (Janamian et al. 2022; Osei-Frimpong, Wilson, and Owusu-Frimpong 2015). The service user ideally feels that the professional understands and cares about their needs (Chwialkowska et al. 2023; Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021). Positive emotions experienced in service interactions affect experiences of service quality and enhance its benefits (da Silva et al. 2015; Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019; Kim 2019), fostering a positive attitude towards the entire service chain (Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor 2021; Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021). Successful, value-enhancing service experiences are linked to maintained wellbeing and feelings of reassurance (Kim 2019; Palumbo and Manesh 2023; Suárez-Álvarez, Suárez-Vázquez, and Del Río-Lanza 2021).

Service experiences in an interactively and inclusively designed process ideally results in exceeded service expectations (Janamian et al. 2022; S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022). The formation of societal value arising from the co-created service experience is based on the perception of access to professional support (Kim 2019; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021) and the security conferred by a positive service experience. Thus, service users have more courage to handle events unassisted, reducing the need for external resources (Suárez-Álvarez, Suárez-Vázquez, and Del Río-Lanza 2021).

### Educator

The service-user *educator* role (83 references in 36 articles) is defined by core characteristics of professional interpretation of public services and their specific language (Beirão, Patrício, and Fisk 2017), professional knowledge, and supporting the service user in their efforts to collect beneficial information (Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021) for their personal value-creation processes. Therefore, as the service users shift from their role of service recipients to become more active participants (Palumbo, Tummers, et al. 2016; Tuan 2018), the emphasis for frontline professional work shifts from service provision towards consultation (Jenhaug 2020; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019).

The integration of professional and service-user knowledge offers opportunities for reducing the service users' uncertainty caused by their lack of knowledge (Gustavsson, Gremyr, and Kenne Sarenmalm 2016; Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019) but also for co-learning (Krisjanous and Maude 2014). As the amount of information available to service users increases, the balance of information changes (Kim 2018), challenging the requirements for added information (Lam and Bianchi 2019). Service users might need professional guidance on what information is reliable (Davey and Grönroos 2019; Robertson, Polonsky, and McQuilken 2014). With contradictory or incorrect information, a professional is required to take corrective measures (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2019) and prevent harm by creating opportunities for service users to make suitable choices (Krisjanous and Maude 2014; Robertson, Polonsky, and McQuilken 2014). Optimally, service users enhance their learning capabilities with the professionals (Krisjanous and Maude 2014) and with increased amounts of reliable information (T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021); consequently, the formation of knowledge-based value chains beyond the service encounter are enabled (Damali et al. 2016).

The formation of value through the educator role at the micro-level is based on service users' perceptions of the significance of information (Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019) and the capabilities to receive information (Palumbo, Tummers, et al. 2016; Vredenburg and Bell 2014). To ensure value creation, professionals need to present new information in such a way that the service user can trust its reliability (Damali et al. 2016; Vredenburg and Bell 2014) and accept it as relevant (Palumbo and Manna 2018), possibly even preventing value co-destruction caused by the exchange of negative information (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). The formation of societal value is based on the increased wellbeing and motivation of citizens through essential knowledge, reflected in a reduced need for public services (Hardyman, Kitchener, and Daunt 2019; Virlée, Hammedi, and van Riel 2020).

### Boundary spanner

The efficiency of public services depends on resource exchange and collaboration between a number of professionals, all of whom have their own expertise and views on the public service system (Black and Gallan 2015; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2017). The need to understand and utilize relevant actors and their areas of expertise generates shared competence (e.g. Keeling et al. 2021) for value co-creation and reveals core characteristics of the professional's role as a *boundary spanner* (57 references in 36 articles). Furthermore, boundary spanners utilize diverse interactions promoting

accessibility, sharing, and reorganization of resources, monitoring their use and institutional development (Breidbach, Antons, and Salge 2016; Davey and Grönroos 2019).

A multi-sector collaboration has various ways of enabling value co-creation: it creates a more holistic view of service user needs (Breidbach, Antons, and Salge 2016), the goals of service organizations (Westrup and Danielsson 2019), and the development of service provision and quality (Keeling et al. 2021; Tuan 2018). In order to foster effective multi-actor knowledge integration, professionals allocate provisional responsibilities between different operators (Moretta Tartaglione et al. 2018) and communicate the importance of their mutually supporting roles (Westrup and Danielsson 2019). The coordination of resources among various actors entails the acknowledgement and acceptance of accompanying institutional arrangements and the capability of balancing them (Damali et al. 2016; Westrup and Danielsson 2019). Cooperation between organizations is particularly relevant in value co-creation with vulnerable groups (Westrup and Danielsson 2019).

Further, co-creation holds opportunities to influence the development of public services (Leite and Hodgkinson 2021; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Tuan 2018). Multi-stakeholder cooperation can identify and reduce overlapping work and processes, contributing to the improvement of service-system efficiency and responsiveness to service needs (Magnussen and Rønning 2021). In change processes, institutional arrangements push professionals towards former operating models, requiring awareness of the existing arrangements and their conscious re-creation (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Changes in operating culture thus require engaging professionals in the process, enabling genuine, knowledge-based, and valuable change (Espersson and Westrup 2020; Palumbo, Cosimato, and Tommasetti 2017). Experience in co-creation strengthens the value created in future co-creation situations, generating far-reaching added value that transcends organizational boundaries (Janamian et al. 2022). Additionally, tensions caused by the complex nature of co-creation innovation, manifesting as change resistance, can be harnessed to detect problems in the process and value propositions, improving service development outcomes even further (Jenhaug 2020).

### *Self-developer*

The cumulation of specific skills and abilities (Suárez-Álvarez, Suárez-Vázquez, and Del Río-Lanza 2021) and the capability of service professionals to understand and implement resources affect both internal and external value-creation processes (S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022), revealing core characteristics of a professional's role as a *self-developer* (42 references in 29 articles). Professionals benefit from an enhanced ability to structure and clarify information for the service user, enabling value co-creation processes and maximizing achievable positive effects (Damali et al. 2016). Particularly in the healthcare context, value co-creation is dependent on professional development in empathetic and supportive behaviour (Hendricks et al. 2021; Janamian et al. 2022) and in being conducted in accordance with strategic values (Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor 2021).

Challenges in professional work, such as language skill deficiencies, complicate promoting co-creation efforts and can lead to realizations of personal development needs (Osei-Frimpong and Owusu-Frimpong 2017). Successful self-development endeavours strengthen both wellbeing at work and technical competence (Peng et al.

2022). Activities corresponding with the formation of societal value promote the desire to develop even further (Espersson and Westrup 2020). Further, strong proficiency in inclusive methods also reduces professionals' resistance to changes aimed at enabling co-creation and production (e.g. Palumbo and Manesh 2023).

Professionals evaluate co-created value by the fulfilment of service-user needs and experiences, but also by the efficiency of the service (Osei-Frimpong, Wilson, and Owusu-Frimpong 2015; Peng et al. 2022). These evaluations are reflected in job satisfaction and advanced competence (Pillitteri, Mazzola, and Bruccoleri 2021). Thus, service provision offers professionals an opportunity to assess and develop their abilities and expertise (S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022; Sønderskov and Rønning 2021), illustrating value emergence also in the life of the professional.

Self-development promotes value co-creation at the micro-level by increasing service-user wellbeing and preventing its future deterioration, induced by the amplified expertise of professionals (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2017). The formation of value at the meso-level is based on resilience achieved through professional development, promoting organizational flexibility (Vredenburg and Bell 2014), whereas macro-level value creation is based on the appropriate and efficient utilization of society's resources to create as much value as possible for citizens (Espersson and Westrup 2020).

### *Asset*

As professionals implement service practices, they also adopt the role of an *asset* (28 references in 19 articles). For value co-creation purposes, the professional resource is offered as an organizational asset to service users to function in dynamic cooperation with their other resources (S. P. Osborne and Strokosch 2022; T-A. N. Pham, Sweeney, and Soutar 2021; Westrup and Danielsson 2019). The actions of professionals affect the implementation of operating methods (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) and, accordingly, create impressions on the organizations (Tuan 2018). Therefore, professionals' activities, performance, and levels of expertise influence the formation of organizational brands, either strengthening or weakening them (da Silva et al. 2015; Tuan 2018).

Public service production involves numerous conflicting values (Sønderskov and Rønning 2021), combining political decisions, professional judgement, and service users' individual views and wishes that can influence decision-making. As a citizen, the service user expects public service organizations to reflect societal values (Tuan 2018) and professionals to act in accordance with these values (Magnussen and Rønning 2021). To maintain high ethical standards in public service production, professionals are expected to demonstrate impartiality, equality, and predictability in decision-making (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). However, service user orientation does not bypass public policies or professional ethics, and the support of political decisions is significant for professional activities and the exercising of power (Sønderskov and Rønning 2021). For example, professional street-level bureaucrats navigate between values as they impose financial sanctions to deter undesirable behaviour (e.g. in unemployment services or the police) (Rossi, Tuurnas, and Stenvall 2024).

According to Tuan (2018), professionals also act as intermediaries or conduits between the service user and the organization, establishing a dyadic relationship.

Professional conduits deliver information, such as direct service-user feedback that otherwise would not be provided for the organization (see also da Silva et al. 2015), indicating a need for channels for systematic utilization of this informal information. Furthermore, as organizational assets, professionals may need to perform certain tasks to 'satisfy the system' at the expense of human encounters (Westrup and Danielsson 2019). Nevertheless, when acting as an asset for service-user value creation, professionals may comprehend their vital role in optimal service provision (Vespestad and Clancy 2019).

## Discussion

According to Magnussen and Rønning (2021), adopting service-user-based thinking, as in public service logic, implies taking for granted that the service user is the one to decide what counts in service encounters and putting less weight on professional competence, albeit that they ensure that decisions follow public policies. To enlighten the role of professional input in co-creating value in service encounters, the results show how professionals can generate value in several ways at diverse levels of the service ecosystem through their varied roles (see Table 2). In addition, the results of this study highlight how professionals balance their distinct roles in everyday work and service encounters.

**Table 2.** The impact of professional roles on value at diverse levels of the ecosystem.

| Role | Macro | Meso | Micro |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborator | Efficiency,<br>Citizens impacting societal value creation | Increased trust in organization and conveyance of service experiences | Autonomous ability to act within service ecosystem |
| Empowering agent | Responded service needs,<br>Trust in service system | Trust in service operator | Sense of security,<br>Appropriate service (outcome) |
| Professional service provider | Equality and fairness,<br>Social and ethical standards | Service-basedness,<br>Service network flexibility,<br>Responsibility division | Ethical interaction |
| Co-creator of service experiences | Inclusiveness and accessibility,<br>Adaptability to actual service needs | Interactive resource integration,<br>Increased commitment in service processes | Exceeded expectations,<br>Increased satisfaction,<br>Reduction of fear |
| Educator | Increased citizen well-being,<br>Prevention of value co-destruction | Understanding shared information,<br>Accepting shared information as relevant | Personalised education,<br>Meaningful information |
| Boundary spanner | Quality of services,<br>Consensus on service priorities,<br>Systemic transformation | Elimination of overlapping processes,<br>Consensus on service goals,<br>Multisector collaboration | Holistic view on service needs,<br>Enhanced trust and respect,<br>Appropriate system navigation |
| Self-developer | Efficient utilization of societal resources | Strategic values conveyed to customer interface,<br>Organisational resilience | Maintained wellbeing,<br>Development of skills and expertise |
| Asset | Public values guide service production,<br>Citizens emphasized | Organisational performance,<br>Power-balance | Service user orientation |

What is noteworthy about the eight observed roles is that, despite having their core characteristics and serving different purposes in the daily work of professionals, this does not mean that only one role is adopted in each encounter or that a specific role is always used for a particular service: professionals need the ability to work in a way that ensures the balance between user needs, solution feasibility, and the organizational context (OECD 2021). With each role, professionals contribute to value co-creation in specific yet intertwined ways. In each encounter, they adapt accordingly to whatever needs and conditions the service user may have to enable value formation. While doing this, a professional utilizes and combines several approaches to the service user's overall situation and their need for service and support (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020).

To illuminate this intertwined nature of their roles, professionals, for example, utilize the role of empowering agent to ensure macro-level societal value formation of induced trust in the service system, and micro-level value of service users' sense of security towards appropriate service outcomes. Simultaneously, they may realize a need to help the individual navigate the service system to enhance their trust and respect as boundary spanners utilizing multi-sector collaboration at the meso-level of value co-creation (Table 2). As another example, self-developed competence is needed to act successfully as a collaborator or as an empowering agent. In addition, the technical competences that professionals may self-develop strongly influence the co-creation of service experiences.

The perspective of professional roles presented in this article is connected to previous research on the roles of professionals and service providers (see, e.g. Aschhoff and Vogel 2019; Haug 2023), while also highlighting novel views on the specific and concrete ways professionals operate to co-create value at the servicer user interface. For example, Aschhoff and Vogel's (2019) three-fold framework identifies the professional as a protective expert, a tripartite professional, and a collaborative professional, while Haug's (2023) study on public service providers' roles in co-production highlights the categorization into micromanagement, facilitation, and empowerment. Although there are similarities in the roles identified in this study compared to previous research, key differences can also be recognized, thus contributing to the novelty of this article. For example, the role of public service providers studied in the context of co-production emphasizes resources from the perspective of service users' time and effort (Haug 2023). However, the role of assets highlighted in this study reveals how the time, focus, and effort of the professional are resources made available for the service user, creating opportunities for value co-creation.

Whereas previous categorizations highlighted the role of professionals in public service provision, ensuring service quality, and facilitating citizen participation, the approach presented in this article can help professionals carry out the identity work required for hybrid professionalism, which refers to the need to combine professional and managerial logics and practices at work (Compagni et al. 2024). Regarding value co-creation, hybrid professionalism can be understood as such: professional actions are guided not only by professional logic, knowledge, and ethics but also by the perspectives necessary for managing the co-creation process. In other words, a professional is, on one hand, responsible for advancing the process and providing service to the service user in a value-creating manner. On the other hand, they operate by offering their expertise, network, and resources (i.e.

time and effort) for the benefit of both the process and the service user. The need to combine managerial and professional capabilities is particularly evident in the roles of boundary spanner and co-creator of service experiences linked to tripartite professionalism (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019). However, it can also be identified as part of other roles identified in this study, especially when examining professionals' need to work under conflicting values.

## Conclusions

This research amplifies the findings of previous research on how the role of professionals in the context of value co-creation merits further investigation (e.g. Kinder and Stenvall 2023). Specifically, this research examines how the role of professionals is reflected in the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services. However, each of the roles described in this paper portrays professionals mostly from the perspective of either the service user or the organization, and only on a few occasions has previous research addressed the perceptions of professionals on their own roles. Accordingly, empirical research on the roles of professionals in the context of value co-creation is required to fully understand the relevance of these roles in both theoretical and practical terms, thus developing theoretical thinking on value co-creation in general.

The role of professionals has been studied previously, for instance, in the co-production literature (e.g. Jaspers and Steen 2019; McMullin 2023; Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Tuurnas 2016). The novelty of this study is the research strategy of a systematic literature review, providing a robust foundation for evidence-based practice. This helps policymakers, practitioners, and academics make informed decisions based on a comprehensive understanding of the evidence. The study also contributes to the development of a sturdy conceptual framework concerning the role of professionals in public service delivery.

Specifically, in this study, we focused on value co-creation. The roles detected align with former findings: professionals play a key role in supporting service users in the value co-creation process. Professionals are not merely deliverers of pre-defined services but actively engage with citizens, shaping and being shaped by the interactions that occur within the service delivery process (Kinder and Stenvall 2023). The role of professionals is crucial, particularly for individuals in a vulnerable position (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020). The results of this study imply a prominent need for professionals' systematic training on co-creation methods. These professionals are often key actors, providing essential support and conducting interventions. Their expertise and training enable them to understand, assist, and make evidence-based decisions that can significantly impact the wellbeing of vulnerable people.

This article addresses a noteworthy gap in the existing literature and contributes to a comprehensive and balanced understanding of PSL by offering a nuanced analysis of professionals' different roles in value co-creation in a systematic way. From the dynamic interplay with citizens, this article illuminates the conflicting pressures professionals face in service encounters and reveals contradictions as professionals weigh whether public or individual value formation is paramount. The study also connects with previous studies associated with the co-production literature. For instance, Jaspers and Steen (2019) note that professionals play a key role in

implementing public values in co-production with citizens but also experience the tensions between diverse (and often conflicting) public values.

S. P. Osborne and Strokosch (2022) stress that PSL holds that public services are not a linear production process but rather are complex and interactive, as service users interact with societal values and norms, organizations, local communities, and service delivery processes. Scholarly attention in the realm of PSL has focused on the role of service users rather than that of professionals (Kinder and Stenvall 2023). One major reason behind this emphasis is the concept of value-in-use, which stresses the significance of the user perspective in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of public services. Value-in-use posits that the real value of a service is determined by the user in context rather than being embedded in the service itself. This focus tends to understate the integral role played by professionals in co-creating this value.

Future research could focus on the phenomenon of value co-destruction (e.g. Engen et al. 2021) in relation to the roles of professionals, addressing the need to understand the circumstances in which value is inadvertently or intentionally destroyed. The examination of value tensions in value co-creation processes could be advanced further in the context of public service ecosystems (Kinder and Stenvall 2023), for instance, by reviewing how professionals cope with value tensions between the different ecosystemic levels. Furthermore, integrating complexity thinking (e.g. Eppel and Rhodes 2018) within the roles of professionals could help in exploring how understanding systems and their properties enables professionals to navigate the intricate, interconnected landscape of public service delivery for effective and sustainable value co-creation within the PSL framework. Finally, this study highlights the importance of systemic development of communication paths by emphasizing the significance of professional networks in value co-creation. Future research aiming to develop these paths could explore how digital technologies and artificial intelligence influence this dynamic as professionals employ digital tools and platforms to facilitate value co-creation with citizens, and how technology alters traditional roles and responsibilities in the context of public service delivery.

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