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Citizens engaging in public service provision: value co-creation or hard work?

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ABSTRACT

Value co-creation (VCC) in public service provision has become increasingly influential in public administration and management research and practice, although empirical research reflecting on its proposed benefits is lacking. We address this lacuna through a study of social insurance services in Sweden. The findings are analysed based on the literature on VCC and by drawing on research carried out in the private sector, which suggests that exploitative consumer work ensues when citizens engage in service provision. The results show that public service provision entails a mix of VCC and consumer work with an emphasis on the latter.

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KEYWORDS Administrative burdens; value co-creation; working consumers; private value; practices; public value; public service logic

Introduction

Value co-creation (VCC) has become a key focus of public administration and management (PAM) research and practice (Osborne 2020; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019). In particular, the understanding of VCC in PAM has been advanced by the public service logic (PSL). PSL has critiqued the notion that public service organizations (PSOs) produce service in isolation from citizens as well as the idea that citizens co-produce services exclusively with PSOs. By contrast, PSL suggests that citizens co-create mutually beneficial value with a range of actors (PSOs, private firms, professionals, etc.) and create value on their own outside of interactions with other actors when engaging in public service provision (Osborne 2020; Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi 2013; Trischler et al. 2024).

Despite these important insights, prior research has largely overlooked the extent to which VCC, when put into practice in public service provision, results in mutually beneficial value for all parties involved (Cluley and Radnor 2021). While PAM research has acknowledged that engaging in public service provision may create administrative

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burdens for citizens (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Nielsen, Ørholst Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2021), these burdens have so far been theorized separately from the idea of VCC. This separation prevents understanding how citizens' negative experiences of administrative burdens and their positive experiences of VCC interrelate in public service provision (see Baekgaard and Tankink 2022). Furthermore, in the private sector context, a stream of research on 'working consumers' has challenged the notion of VCC, suggesting that exploitative consumer work ensues when consumers engage in service provision (Cova and Dalli 2009; Rieder and Günter Voss 2010). This research raises concerns about how users of public sector services, who may be particularly vulnerable, cope with service provision.

Hence, there is a need to critically examine to what extent citizens experience engaging in public service provision as VCC. To do so, we draw on qualitative research on the social insurance service ecosystem in Sweden, with a particular focus on sickness benefits and personal assistance (PA) services. In this system citizens actively engage in service provision by interacting with other actors, which enables us to study the implications of putting VCC into practice. We are also guided by an emerging body of research suggesting that public service provision can be understood by focusing on the practices, or on the organized and recursive activities, that citizens engage in (Skålén 2024; Skålén and Trischler 2024). We ask the following research question: what practices do citizens engage in to accomplish public service provision and are these practices experienced as mutually benefitting VCC or exploitative consumer work?

We identified five public service practices and analysed these practices to understand citizens' experiences of engaging in public service provision. By doing so, the paper contributes to the existing literature by showing that VCC and consumer work are interlinked in public service practices although we also show that the citizens predominantly experience service provision as hard work. The paper also contributes by introducing the notion of consumer work to PAM research and by demonstrating the benefits of studying citizens' experiences of public service provision by focusing on practices. As a practical implication, we caution public sector managers against uncritically adopting the idea of VCC.

Literature review

Value co-creation

Inspired by service management and marketing research, the PSL-literature describes VCC as a resource integration process that commonly involves multiple actors constituting a public service ecosystem of linked and collaborating actors (Osborne 2020; Osborne et al. 2022; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Petrescu 2019; Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024; Trischler et al. 2024). Based on this notion, PSL suggests a shift of PAM research and practice from focusing on how value is produced by PSOs to the benefit created and co-created for and by citizens and other actors in public service ecosystems. This shift implies that value is perceived as co-created, realized, and determined in use by citizens who engage in public service provision. Focusing on value in use deemphasizes exchange value (defined here as the economic value of a service as determined by its potential transaction value) and monetary value, such as the costs of producing public services.

According to PSL, citizens need to contribute to the resource integration process for value to ensue but not primarily via the co-production of public services with PSOs. Rather, the resource integration activities that citizens conduct by themselves as well as in direct interaction with multiple service ecosystem actors are essential for value creation. Hence, according to PSL, the core of value creation is not production but consumption or usage (Osborne 2020; Trischler et al. 2024). From this vantage point, a central role of PSOs is to offer resources clustered into value propositions that citizens, either by themselves or together with PSOs and other actors, can integrate with their own resources to co-create value (Eriksson et al. 2020). Although a few PSL researchers have shown that value can be co-destroyed or diminished in public service provision (Cui and Osborne 2023; Engen et al. 2021), the emphasis of PSL is on value creation and co-creation as well as on the advantages of organizing the public sector along the lines of these ideas.

In their discussion of value, PAM researchers distinguish between private and public value. Public and private value are commonly created together in one process and are distinguished by different mechanisms of consumption. As Alford (2016), 680, emphasis in original) explains: ‘Public value is public not because of who *produces* it but of who “consumes” it: the collective citizenry, mediated through the political process’, whereas private value is consumed by individual actors. According to Skålén and Trischler (2024), public and private value is co-created through public service practices that citizens engage in. This perspective aligns with Gummerus (2013) who suggests that the VCC process is a continuous series of value-creating transient outcomes, which is both determined and actualized by the actors engaging in concrete practices. Accordingly, Anderson et al. (2016) shows that patients must be involved in three practices – accessing, managing, and appropriating – constituting the VCC process in their setting to ensure beneficial outcomes.

Hardyman, Daunt, and Kitchener (2015) called for more research about VCC in practice within the public sector. Heeding this call, Lindqvist and Westrup (2020) found that the resources of legislation, structures, norms, and political priorities need to be accounted for when considering VCC in the public sector. In addition, Magnussen and Rønning (2021) showed that co-creation is characterized by the struggle to realize public and private value simultaneously. In a similar vein, Varman, Vijay, and Skålén (2022) conducted a study of a community-based care initiative. They argued that the notion of resource integration foster people to act according to market conventions which hinders the creation of public value.

Furthermore, PAM research, which has not studied VCC but closely related phenomena, such as co-production and bureaucratic encounters of citizens, implies that VCC is associated with costs and burdens. These burdens have been conceptualized in the form of three costs: (1) learning costs (e.g. how to access service), (2) psychological costs (e.g. stress and stigma), and (3) compliance costs (e.g. the need to complete applications and provide documentation; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Nielsen, Ørholst Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2021; Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020). However, the association between VCC and burdens as co-evolving and interrelated has been obscured in PAM research. The concept of working consumers can help sharpen our understanding of this association.

Working consumers

Work has been extensively studied in sociology. It is commonly understood as a goal-oriented activity involving some kind of mental or physical effort conducted by a person that produces value for someone the person has a social relationship with (Taylor 2004). The notion of working consumers resonates with this understanding of work; by engaging in consumption practices, consumers become involved in producing value not only for themselves but also for providers, despite lacking formal employment and compensation (Cova and Dalli 2009; Rieder and Günter Voss 2010; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008).

In particular, the literature on working consumers argues that consumers produce surplus value, a notion Marx (1990) developed in his analysis of industrial wage labour. Surplus value denotes the exchange value produced by workers which exceeds production costs and are captured as profits by the capitalists. To Marx, surplus value is associated with exploitation, defined as taking unjust advantage of someone else – the worker in Marx’s case. Researchers have elaborated this idea by suggesting that not only do wage labourers within organizations produce surplus value and suffer from exploitation, but so do consumers who engage in service provision (Charitsis, Fyrberg-Yngfalk, and Skålén 2019; Cova and Dalli 2009). Clearly, exploitation occurs when a person is harmed or used without consent. However, exploitation can also occur when a person consents, such as when a disadvantaged party is taken advantage of (Valdman 2009; Wolff 1999). Hence, the concept of working consumers goes beyond the focus on costs in research on administrative burdens (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) by highlighting that citizens may be exploited when they engage in public service provision.

Research on consumer work has been carried out in the private sector. While the focus has predominantly been on how working consumers create exchange value (e.g. by engaging in practices that benefit firms financially), how working consumers create use value without compensation (e.g. by providing help to other consumers who are part of the same brand community) has also been addressed (Cova, Pace, and Skålén 2015; Denegri-Knott and Zwick 2012; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). Within PSL, use value is considered to be relevant for the public sector while exchange value is considered to be of little importance (Osborne 2020). However, the notion of working consumers can also be understood from the basis of exchange value in the public context, since some forms of public service provision inspired by New Public Management (NPM) operate under marketized conditions, including when profit-oriented firms compete in the provision of public services.

While the outcome of consumer work has been discussed as exploitation in prior research, the process of consumer work is not commonly portrayed in such terms. Although Denegri-Knott and Zwick (2012) describe the working consumer process as evolving from enchanted to disenchanting, consumer work is most often described as intertwined with hedonistic consumption experiences (Cova and Dalli 2009). One such example reported in the literature includes consumers contributing to the marketing of a favourite car brand by engaging in a brand community in their free time (Cova, Pace, and Skålén 2015). This contrasts with critical research on wage labour which suggests that the labour process is associated with exploitation or is characterized by mental, social, and physical effort that may have negative effects on the well-being of workers by causing stress, occupational

Table 1. Summary of the value co-creation and the working consumer literature.

Key elements	Theoretical frameworks	
	Value co-creation	Working consumers
Foundation	Service marketing and management	Sociology
Focus	Resource integration	Work
Understanding of value	Value-in-use	Exchange value and use value
Service provision outcome	Benefitting	Exploitation
Service provision process	A series of value-creating transient outcomes	Hedonistic value creation
Public value	The value consumed by the collective citizenry	Not explicitly theorized

injuries, and emotional strain (Knights and Willmott 2016). In addition, the administrative burdens that citizens face in the interaction with PSOs seem to be intrinsically linked to the processes of public service provision (Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020). However, these burdens have neither been considered in relation to value co-creation nor as work that citizens may need to engage in to realize the core service.

Since the consumer work literature has been developed in a private sector context, it does not account for public value. However, when applied to a public-sector context, such as social insurance, it must do so. For example, if citizens as a part of service provision are required to work hard in order to produce public value, they may feel exploited when they are entitled to this public value by virtue of being citizens.

Table 1 summarizes the research on VCC and working consumers. Both research streams suggest that citizens are engaged in public service provision by themselves and together with other actors. The literature on VCC is grounded in research on service management and marketing, focuses on resource integration, and suggests that value is created and co-created in use. The working consumer literature is a sociological discourse focusing on work and takes both exchange and use value into account. The VCC research stream describes the output of public service provision as benefiting the citizens while the literature on working consumers describes this outcome as exploitation of citizens. With regard to the citizens/consumers involved, the process of service provision is described in positive terms by both research streams; as a continuous series of value-creating transient outcomes as determined by the benefiting actors within PSL, and as hedonistic in the working consumer literature. Public value is conceptualized as the value consumed by the collective citizenry in the VCC literature while it is not explicitly theorized in the working consumer research stream. We now turn to our study of social insurance services in Sweden, with the aim of illuminating citizens experiences of engaging in public service provision from the perspective of the VCC and the consumer work literature.

Method

Since public service provision that engages citizens is understudied, we adopted an explorative qualitative design. Our focus was on the Swedish social insurance ecosystem, which operates within the framework of the Nordic Model. This model is characterized by a robust welfare state, collective bargaining in the labour market, and functioning markets rooted in capitalistic principles. The Swedish social insurance system, a cornerstone of the welfare state, is tax-funded and based on the principle of collective risk sharing. In international comparison, Sweden is characterized by high

institutional trust, a well-educated workforce, and a well-functioning public sector (Esping-Andersen 1990). As such, it represents an extreme yet optimal case for studying how VCC works in practice.

Over recent decades, the Swedish public sector, including the social insurance system, has been influenced by the market-oriented rationality of NPM (Hasselbladh, Bejerot, and Gustafsson 2008; Karlsson 2024). For instance, in various parts of the Swedish public sector, such as personal assistance services studied here, private providers are permitted to operate and compete alongside public institutions for ‘customers’ and the public funding that comes with them. Marketization has contributed to reorganize the social insurance system in such a way that citizens need to engage with multiple actors and take greater responsibility for conducting certain activities by themselves (Bankel 2021; Kaluza 2018).

Data collection

We studied the activities of citizens and their interactions with each other, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA), which administers the social insurance in Sweden, and other relevant actors of the public service ecosystem to understand how citizens experience engaging in public service provision. The second and third authors conducted the data collection but for simplicity we will use the pronoun ‘we’ when describing the process. We focused on two social insurance benefits: sickness benefits and PA services. This allowed us to explore our research question under different yet connected conditions. Sickness benefits and PA services are similar in the sense that they require engagement from citizens with multiple actors but differ in terms of the concrete activities that citizens must engage in. Whereas sickness benefits are realized in terms of compensation for reduced work ability due to illness, PA services are purchased using a publicly funded personal budget and are intended for disabled people to be able to live an independent life.

The study consisted of three main datasets. First, interaction data between citizens and employees at the SIA’s call centres were collected. The SIA’s call centre is the first line of interaction with respect to sickness benefits, where citizens can ask questions and submit information. During the data collection, 472 randomly selected calls regarding sickness benefits were transformed into short stories by case officers. The short stories summarized the interaction based on the interviews and captured citizens’ experiences of engaging in public service provision. A listening-in method that the SIA uses for training purposes was employed to conduct the interviews. The case officers involved in the data collection worked in pairs, with one of them handling the errand with the citizen calling in and the other listening to and conducting the interview after the call was finished. The case officers received training in interview techniques and the tools used for data collection. Citizen participation in the interviews was voluntary.

The next set of data consisted of 100 personal records randomly selected from the SIA’s Customer Relationship Management (CRM)-system regarding citizens’ sickness benefits. These records ranged in diversity from short cases, with an application form, doctor certificate, and administrative notes, to more complex errands consisting of hundreds of pages with notes, email conversations, medical records, and documents from a range of agencies and other actors, such as employers.

The third dataset consisted of semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2006) within the context of PA. We performed interviews with PA beneficiaries, beneficiaries’ next

of kin acting as legal guardians, and employees at the SIA working with prolonged sickness benefit errands. Informants were selected through self-selection and chain referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Self-selection in the context of PA risks overrepresentation of informants who are in control of their life situation and that the most burdened beneficiaries are excluded. In addition, participation might be motivated by a wish to draw attention to deficiencies. These risks were mitigated by supplementing self-selection with purposeful theoretical sampling later in the process as a means of exploring themes emerging from the data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings where the informants felt most comfortable. A total of 23 interviews were conducted with PA beneficiaries and their next of kin, and seven interviews were conducted with employees at the SIA. The interviews lasted 50–90 minutes. PA beneficiaries and their next of kin were asked questions such as ‘explain the process of when you applied for personal assistance?’, ‘how did you learn about your service provider?’ and ‘how do you handle staff shortages?’. The questions were intended to capture the full experience of PA services from the point of first contact up to the time of the interview. The interviews with employees focused on the interactions and relationships with the citizens and involved questions such as ‘how do you communicate with citizens and their employers?’ Overall, we used open-ended questions to capture our informants’ lived experiences of engaging in public service provision. We never suggested to the informants that this provision could be experienced as either mutually beneficial VCC or exploitative consumer work. However, when our informants described it in terms related to these concepts, we asked probing and follow-up questions.

The sampling was influenced in part by the availability of data. We gained access to naturally occurring interaction and case data from the SIA through a research collaboration with the Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate. This data provided valuable insights into how citizens experienced engaging in public service provision as it unfolds. However, it did not allow us to directly ask citizens’ specific questions about how they experienced service provision. To address this limitation, we conducted the interview study within the context of PA services, which enabled us to delve deeper into citizens’ lived experiences of engaging in public service provision. Hence, the different types of data collected supported each other. By triangulating them against each other, we obtained a comprehensive view of the public service provision studied.

Data analysis

We used the constant comparative method to analyse the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Iteration between the data analysis and collection characterized the research approach. Using the coding programme *NVivo*, our data analysis began with an open coding process in which we identified codes in the form of simple descriptive concepts or phrases about citizens’ experiences of engaging in public service provision that appeared in the data. We also began grouping the identified codes into crude categories and themes. As the open coding was followed by axial coding, the grouping of codes into different categories and themes became more refined. During this stage, we identified five overlapping public service practices – realizing, qualifying, choosing, managing and verifying – that citizens engage in within the Swedish social insurance

service ecosystem to accomplish service provision, as described in the findings section. By selective coding we also distinguished between different effects of the practices that citizens perform and linked the findings to research on VCC and consumer work.

Ethical considerations

The study contains sensitive information about individuals. The interview study conducted within the context of PA underwent an ethics review, and written consent was obtained from informants. Verbal consent was obtained from the citizens from whom we collected interaction data. However, it was not practically feasible to obtain consent from the 100 individuals whose personal records were selected for the study. Nonetheless, the interaction and records components of the study were conducted on behalf of the Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate, with which we signed confidentiality agreements about sensitive information. All data has been stored in accordance with ethical standards, and no sensitive personal information has been stored in a compiled database. We have ensured the confidentiality of all our informants.

Findings

This section presents the public service practices that citizens engage in to accomplish service provision within the Swedish social insurance service ecosystem. The findings are also analysed through the lens of research on VCC and working consumers.

Realizing

The public service practice of ‘realizing’ denotes the recursive activities citizens engage in to accomplish the core service provision. Realizing services is commonly a demanding, complex and time-consuming practice for citizens, given the need to interact with multiple actors, follow established procedures, and engage in public service provision. The demanding practice of realizing is illustrated below by a father who needs to conduct PA services for his son due to the failure of the service provider to recruit staff:

When I get home from work, I relieve the personal assistant of her duties, which include feeding, administering medicine, and the whole evening routine. It’s quite hard. The evenings aren’t very fun. For example, I cannot go out and play basketball or jump on the trampoline with [my other son]. Sometimes it works. It’s not always a disaster, but it’s a direct consequence of the fact that we cannot hire . . . (Father of a child entitled to PA)

This vignette shows that, after completing a full day of paid work, the father needs to take on care work by attending to the special needs of his child because the service provider is unable to hire an assistant for the evening shift. This care work is, in his own words, not ‘very fun’, as it is mentally and physically demanding in alignment with how the labour process literature describe wage labour (Knights and Willmott 2016). The father’s experience contrasts sharply to the hedonistic or mutually beneficial view of citizen engagement in service provision process proposed by the working consumer and the VCC literature (Cova and Dalli 2009; Osborne 2020). The vignette further illustrates that although citizens commonly perform the practice of realizing without coercion, their dependency upon service providers within the public service ecosystem

puts them in a subordinate power position. In fact, a common theme in our findings is that the service users themselves or their next of kin needed to realize much of the core service provision when other actors fell short of their formal responsibilities.

At the same time, our findings suggest that citizens realize both private value for themselves and others, such as their next of kin and service providers. For example, the vignette above suggests that the caring father creates use value for his child and himself, although the work is demanding. In addition, citizens' engagement in service provision creates public value for the society as a whole, by contributing to the production and reproduction of the social insurance service ecosystem. As prior research suggests, private and public value are created together in the same processes and practices (Alford 2016; Meynhardt 2009; Skälén and Trischler 2024). While creating some value in the process for themselves, the flip side is that citizens are left with no choice but to also produce private exchange value for another party that does not fulfill its obligations. In the above vignette, this is reflected in the non-disruption of the service relationship enabled by the care work of the father in the face of personnel failures by the service provider. Furthermore, the fact that citizens are charged with creating public value for society at large by having to realize a service for themselves or their next of kin can be interpreted as a form of exploitation. This indicates that citizens in the process of realizing public services can simultaneously co-create value and be exploited as working consumers (Cova and Dalli 2009; Rieder and Günter Voss 2010; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008).

However, exploitation is the significant experience of citizens engaging in the realizing public service practice. In many cases, exploitative relationships are associated with exhaustion and severe stress, as is apparent in the critique against the public service ecosystem expressed by a mother who had been attending to her middle-aged son for most of her life, despite PA entitlements:

I have enormous stress I'm my son's only next of kin, and I have to be there for the rest of his life Imagine being forced into a job. You don't have a future. You feel that you've worked a lifetime. You want to be able to do what other people do, retire, and be free. But you can't. You're forced to work and it's like mental or emotional extortion. It's tough. (Mother of a son entitled to PA)

The vignette shows that the mother has to keep working for her son her whole life, even after retirement age. She says explicitly that she feels 'forced' into the 'job'. PA is designed to give independence to users and relieve next of kins (DeJong 1979). However, this vignette clearly shows that realizing PA services is experienced as conducting exploitative work by citizens (Cova and Dalli 2009) rather than as an activity that benefits all parties involved, as the notion of VCC suggests (Osborne 2020). The vignette also supports the notion that public service provision may involve physical and mental effort incurring psychological costs for citizens (Nielsen, Ørholst Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2021; Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020). Our results extend these observations to the practice of actually realizing the service, thus upending untenable divisions between mere compliance practices and VCC practices. We argue that the public service ecosystem is set up in such a way that unjust advantage is taken of the vulnerable, amounting to a form of exploitation (Valdman 2009; Wolff 1999) in the provision of public value.

From the citizen's perspective, realizing the sickness benefit service is about recovering from illness and rehabilitation from injury, which denotes VCC both in terms of private value for the individual who may recover (Osborne 2020) and public value creation for the society that regains access to a healthy population and labour power (Moore 1995). However, people on sick leave constantly have to put a lot of work into performing the practices of qualifying, managing, and verifying to receive or keep their sickness benefits, which is associated with feelings of frustration, anger, and stress, as well as physical and mental effort.

Qualifying

The public service practice of qualifying concerns the activities citizens perform to access public services. It consists of concrete activities, such as applying for services and partaking in inquiries with PSOs. The practice of qualifying for service is based on rules, regulations, and conditions that citizens must follow, which often results in a subordinate position of power in relation to public service providers and their employees. The vignette below describes the experiences of a citizen who had gone through multiple inquiries attempting to qualify for sickness benefits:

The customer calls and asks when he will receive his payment for sickness benefits. He has been to the service offices in both [X-town] and [Y-town] and has been told that the information in the application is inadequate. He has been without money for three months. According to a journal entry, an administrator tried to call him yesterday, which the customer was unaware of. He states that he was at the service office at that point in time to report on his illness. He is upset and demands that the SIA fixes this, and that he receives payment. He states that he has already provided supplementary information when he was at the service office. (Notes by the case officer at SIA)

This vignette illustrates that citizens are involved extensively in the practice of qualifying. Citizens need to provide correct information in the application documents and provide supplementary information, such as medical certificates. This involvement can be interpreted as citizens engaging in mutually benefitting activities. As suggested by the VCC literature (Osborne 2020; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021) they create private use value for themselves (e.g. ensuring progress is made towards receiving sickness benefits), exchange value for the SIA (e.g. by reducing costs through the contribution they make), and public value for the social insurance service ecosystem at large (by reproducing this system).

However, we note that this partly involuntary practice of qualifying is part of a continuous process of qualification associated with administrative burdens and hard work. In contrast to prior PAM research (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020), we argue that burdens for citizens associated with public service provision cannot be considered in isolation from VCC. Instead, burdensome qualification practices follow logically from the expectations on citizens to integrate resources in order to co-create value. We further note that the involvement is not perceived as beneficial or hedonistic, as prior research on the process of service provision within the VCC and consumer work literature suggests (Cova, Pace, and Skálén 2015; Osborne 2020). Rather, citizens must put in a lot of time and effort to receive service, which causes frustration, stress and anger and is primarily experienced as work.

One of the key traits of the practice of qualifying is that citizens, as an effect of their subordinate power position, not only have to comply, but even adapt their personal view to the requirements of PSOs. They commonly find this adaptation emotionally exhaustive, as illustrated by the following vignette from a mother to a daughter entitled to PA:

We are trained to always try to see [our daughter's] strengths. That she is able to do this, that she can fix that You cannot think like that [when you apply for PA], because then they [the SIA case officers] may think that if she can put on a shirt herself, she does not need personal assistance. No, you always have to think in a totally different manner, that no, she can't go and pull out a shirt from the closet and put it on by herself. (Mother of daughter entitled to PA)

This vignette shows that when applying for PA parents feel a need to downplay their children's strengths, which they normally emphasize and are proud of. Instead, they need to emphasize the child's weaknesses, which they are uncomfortable with. The reason for this is that the SIA approaches the qualifying process for PA with a negative view of disability, emphasizing what the disabled individual is unable to do. Adapting to this negative view of disability can be experienced as a distortion of the positive view of functional variations that many disabled and their next of kin embrace. This further implies that the SIA, apart from engaging citizens in work to create public value which have a psychological cost, involves them in a way that may eventually undermine or co-destroy the public values underpinning contemporary disability discourse (Cui and Osborne 2023; Engen et al. 2021).

The main outcome of citizens performing the practice of qualifying is that they are either denied or granted access to the service. Getting access to public services like PA and sickness benefits is associated with positive feelings and gives citizens a sense of relief, which resonates with VCC research (Osborne 2020; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021). However, the primary finding is that qualifying for public services is perceived as work that involves mental and physical effort.

Choosing

Public services are sometimes organized as quasi-markets where citizens need to make informed and rational quality-based choices between competing service providers, while the government alone provides funding. In Sweden, PA is organized as such a quasi-market. We identified the public service practice of choosing as encompassing the activities citizens engage in when selecting and switching between service providers.

Our findings suggest that choosing service providers is frequently perceived as time-consuming work that involves a lot of mental effort. There are many providers to choose between, and it is hard for citizens to evaluate the differences in service quality between different providers. Our findings of PA specifically suggest that a palpable learning cost (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) is associated with choosing and switching service providers for citizens. The burden of this learning cost is exacerbated by the fact that the choosing practice has to be performed by the citizens on their own on their free-time. Choosing is described thus by a mother of a child entitled to PA:

There isn't the energy, time, or strength to switch [service provider]. For someone with a disability, switching comes with a great deal of work I've done inquiries and everyone

[service providers] promises the moon and the stars beforehand. But I can't subject him [informant's son] to switching and bringing in new personal assistants. It's too much work. You become vulnerable in that way too. (Mother with child entitled to PA)

The vignette suggests that switching service provider implies hard work and is associated with risks that exacerbate the vulnerability of already vulnerable citizens (Valdman 2009; Wolff 1999) that parents are unwilling to subject their children to. Our findings thus align with studies critiquing the harmonic view of market relations embedded in the VCC literature (Varman, Vijay, and Skålén 2022). An other main finding is that citizens entitled to PA refrain from engaging in choosing and stay with their initially chosen service providers, leading to normalization of the consumer work that the other public services practices we identified entail. Furthermore, while the existence of choice may create public value reflected in the image of an empowering public service sector, the implications of choosing in terms of private value is not only hard work but also that citizens experience themselves as responsible for failures, resulting in doubt and self-blame. Accordingly, the benefits of implementing 'choice' according to a market-based logic in the public sector seems to be overshadowed by the negative outcomes and processes associated with it.

Another outcome of the practice of choosing is absolute exit, whereby citizens choose to refrain from public services they are entitled to as illustrated by the following vignette:

The customer calls because she wants to know how her sickness benefits case is progressing. The call center administrator informs her that a letter has been sent to her regarding the lack of a medical certificate. The customer would rather skip the days for when a doctor's certificate is missing than contact the primary care center. (Notes by case officer at the SIA)

In our interpretation, this vignette shows that citizens may avoid the burdensome work required to contact their doctor to supplement an errand even in cases when this implies accepting a personal economic loss. This is at odds with the public values underpinning social insurance services and could be avoided in a service ecosystem not dependent on the work of citizens.

Managing

The public service practice of managing concerns activities conducted by citizens to coordinate the actors involved in public service provision. It often become a time-consuming and demanding activity. The managing activities reported by one of our PA informants resemble work:

Informant: I'm the supervisor for our group of assistants [that provides PA to my child]. I do the scheduling, and I handle all workplace-related issues except determining the salaries, which the service provider does. It works pretty well. I will try to transfer it [the supervisory responsibility] . . . to someone else.

Interviewer: Is it possible to transfer it to your service provider?

Informant: No. In that case, I would probably have done so. But I cannot see them [service provider] managing it. (Mother of child entitled to PA)

The vignette shows that managing involves a lot of concrete work tasks, such as 'scheduling' and 'handling all workplace-related issues'. To some extent, involving themselves in the practice of managing can satisfy a need for control and care work

transparency among PA beneficiaries, which corresponds to the notion of VCC. At the same time, most of our informants engage in managing practices because they feel obliged due to dysfunctionalities in the public service ecosystem. They also report being exhausted by the efforts they put into managing. Thus, several of our informants felt unjustly treated and exploited (Valdman 2009; Wolff 1999) due to how the public service ecosystem is set up. This system compels them to work and manage the service provision to realize both the public value that they are entitled to as citizens and the private value related to their loved ones being taken care of.

Citizens applying for sickness benefits are commonly compelled to coordinate and manage the other actors in the public service ecosystem. For instance, citizens must inform and coordinate employers, doctors, SIA officials, other public servants, and involve relatives in different tasks, such as signing forms or attending meetings. The following vignette from a personal case file shows a father managing his son's errand with the SIA and other aspects of his illness. He is required to participate in meetings, coordinate information between actors, and involve his sick son in this process:

[X, the insured's father] called today. He called because the insured was still worried about his compensation and the future. We discussed the compensation and conditions for being granted sickness benefits. We also discussed work-oriented rehabilitation, and I informed him about the collaboration between the Unemployment Office and the SIA. During the conversation, it emerged that a psychological investigation is still ongoing and that the insured must have a head X-ray in November. We agreed that [X] will notify me when the psychological investigation is finished and that I will book a meeting with a doctor to clarify the medical condition, the need for rehabilitation, and what is appropriate/possible. (Extract from a SIA case file)

As in the case of PA, citizens' engagement in the practice of managing sickness benefit is associated with mental and physical effort. Whereas these citizens benefit from engaging in managing by gaining some insight and control over service provision, most of them were required to engage more than they prefered. They nevertheless remained committed due to a loyalty to their next of kin, hence reproducing an exploitative public service ecosystem.

Verifying

The final public service practice we identified is verifying. This practice concerns the activities citizens perform to ensure that the service provision is progressing, for example by contacting PSOs. The practice of verifying is engaged in multiple times during the qualifying for service provision, and citizens may perform the practice in relation to several actors of the service ecosystem, which is time-consuming and involves significant effort. In the vignette below, the citizen was trying to verify where in the process her application submission for sickness benefits was:

The customer asks for sickness benefits for an illness she had last year. It turns out that her application was received on October 23. The administrator informs her that her SGI [sickness benefit qualifying income] has not yet been determined [which is needed to receive benefits]. The customer states that she is starting to get tired of this process because she sent in the required paperwork on her hourly job a long time ago. She is informed that the income request was sent to her employer on January 13 and that the employer needs to confirm the income, which they have not yet done. She will contact the employer to speed up the submission of income information. (Notes by case officer at the SIA)

The citizen has not received her sickness benefits after 3 months of waiting. In contrast to the prior literature on both VCC and consumer work (Cova and Dalli 2009; Osborne 2020), the vignette displays that verifying activities do not signify a hedonistic or mutually beneficial process. Instead, the vignette gives a Kafkaesque impression of a person caught in administrative processes involving effort and mental costs (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). More strikingly, these verifying activities simultaneously constitute administrative burdens demanded of citizens to create private value for themselves and contribute to reproducing the public value for the entire service ecosystem, as they make sure that this system remains functional. Hence, verifying goes beyond mere compliance practices as personal time and effort goes into ensuring that the system works. As the vignette above suggests, these resource integrating efforts are carried out because the citizen is in a vulnerable position as she depends on receiving sickness benefits for subsistence.

Although verifying is associated with consumer work, one of the main outcomes when citizens perform this practice is that they commonly receive information or assurance that the service provision is progressing as intended. This may give citizens a sense of relief and even accomplishment, which is beneficial to them, as the research on VCC suggests (Osborne 2020). However, verifying can also render unsatisfactory results (i.e. not receiving any benefits) and lead citizens to invest more effort in the other public service practices (i.e. realizing, qualifying, choosing, and managing) to secure the best possible outcome. As we have shown above, vulnerable citizens are inclined to conduct the work that someone should do for them themselves.

Summary

Table 2 summarizes the findings. It defines the public service practices and describes their primary outcome and process of engaging in these practices for citizens as exploitation and work, respectively. It also describes secondary outcomes and provides an overview of the relationship between public service practices. We discuss the implications of the findings in relation to the VCC and working consumer literature in the next section.

Discussion

Organizing public service provision along the lines of VCC has become an increasingly popular notion in PAM research (Osborne 2020; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019). However, empirical research that substantiates the proposed benefits of this approach within the context of public services is lacking (Cluley and Radnor 2021). Research in the private sector context on working consumers has critiqued the idea of VCC for enabling exploitation in practice (Cova and Dalli 2009; Rieder and Günter Voss 2010). Our approach reveals a similar problem in public service provision. In what follows, we offer three contributions to PAM research and some practical implications.

The first contribution of our study is that the notion of the working consumer reflects what happens in practice when citizens engage in public service provision to a greater extent than the notion of VCC. Our case reveals an imbalance between the benefitting and exploitative experiences of citizens with the latter outweighing the former. This conclusion is likely to hold in other contexts than the Swedish social

Table 2. Public service practices and their interrelationships.

Definition	Outcome			Relationship between practices				
	Primary	Secondary	Process	Realizing	Qualifying	Choosing	Managing	Verifying
<p>Realizing: The recursive activities citizens engage in to accomplish the core service provision</p>	<p>Exploitation: Citizens are situated in a subordinate position of power and unjust advantage is taken of them</p>	<p>Private use value: for the citizen involved and other citizens. Private exchange value: for service providers. Public value: producing and reproducing the beneficial and exploitative elements of the social insurance service ecosystem</p>	<p>Work: Citizens experience physical and mental effort incurring psychological costs</p>	N/A	<p>Citizens need to qualify for service provision in order to be involved in realizing</p>	<p>Citizens choose the service they like to realize. Failure in realizing may trigger choice and exit</p>	<p>Managing key actors involved in realizing the core services</p>	<p>Verifies that the realizing of service provision is done appropriately</p>
<p>Qualifying: The activities citizens perform to access public services</p>	<p>Exploitation: Citizens are put in a subordinate position of power, and they feel stress, anxiety, and exhaustion</p>	<p>Private value: For citizen involved. Exchange value: For service provider. Public value: Producing beneficial and exploitative elements of the social insurance service ecosystem</p>	<p>Work: Takes time and effort and involves mental and psychological costs</p>	<p>During qualifying, citizens are realizing administrative procedures</p>	N/A	<p>Qualifying is a precondition for choosing</p>	<p>Managing is done in relation to the activities conducted to access public service</p>	<p>Checks rules, regulations, and conditions for qualifying</p>
<p>Choosing: The activities citizens are involved in when selecting and switching between service providers</p>	<p>Exploitation: Reproduction and normalization of consumer work. Transferring responsibility to the individual.</p>	<p>Private exchange value: Choosing can help citizens exit poor services. Exiting the public service ecosystem implies a personal economic loss. Public value: Full exit is associated with co-destruction of public value</p>	<p>Work: Takes time and mental effort and is associated with learning costs, which hinders switching</p>	<p>Through activities citizens are realizing their choices</p>	<p>Choosing service providers is a precondition to get access to the service</p>	N/A	<p>Managing is done of the activities related to switching and selecting public service</p>	<p>Verifying is done in relation to the activities of switching and selecting public service</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Definition	Outcome			Relationship between practices				
	Primary	Secondary	Process	Realizing	Qualifying	Choosing	Managing	Verifying
<p>Managing: The activities conducted by citizens to coordinate public service provision</p>	<p>Exploitation: Unjust advantage is taken of citizens by making entitlements conditional on managing efforts</p>	<p>Private value: Managing creates control and transparency. Public value: producing and reproducing the beneficial and exploitative elements of the social insurance service ecosystem</p>	<p>Work: Takes time and demands physical and mental effort</p>	<p>Managing is realized through encouragement and control of other actors</p>	<p>Actors may need to be managed when qualifying for service provision</p>	<p>The ideal that citizens should be able to choose the actors they will manage is seldom fulfilled</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Citizens coordinate multiple service ecosystem actors in order to verify compliance</p>
<p>Verifying: The activities citizens perform to ensure that the service provision is progressing</p>	<p>Exploitation: By engaging more in the other public service practices and destruction of value when not receiving benefits</p>	<p>Private value: For citizens involved, assurance of the progression of service provision. Public value: Producing the beneficial and exploitative elements of the social insurance service ecosystem</p>	<p>Work: Takes time and effort and demands physical and mental costs</p>	<p>Realizing the practice of verifying is accomplished through direct or indirect contact with other actors</p>	<p>Citizens verify qualifying to make sure that is done correctly and progresses</p>	<p>Citizens are likely to verifying the switching or exiting of service provider and provision</p>	<p>Verifying is integrated with or done as a part of managing practices</p>	<p>N/A</p>

insurance setting studied by us, as Sweden – with its high institutional trust, well-educated workforce, and well-functioning public sector (Esping-Andersen 1990) – serves as an optimal case for putting VCC into practice.

In addition, although our study deploys the broader concept of working consumers rather than that of administrative burdens, it is the first to heed the call of Baekgaard and Tankink (2022) to explicitly consider the negative experiences of administrative burdens in parallel with the positive experiences that may co-exist. When we analysed the five public service practices, we found that citizens had to put in a substantial amount of mental, emotional, and physical effort when engaging in public service provision, thus putting administrative burdens in a broader perspective while simultaneously underscoring the importance of previous findings (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Nielsen, Ørholst Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2021; Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020). This general theme in our findings suggests a need to add more nuance to concepts based on VCC that tend to emphasize mutually benefitting value creation as an outcome of citizens' engagement in service provision (Osborne 2020).

Our second contribution concerns the application of the notion of working consumers in a public sector context. By doing so, our study moves beyond task-related administrative burdens overwhelmingly associated with access to service provision to reveal an exploitative relationship that permeates the citizens' experiences throughout the public service ecosystem. This exploitative relationship is preconditioned on the subordinate power position that citizens commonly have *vis-à-vis* PSOs and private service providers. While we heed the call by Osborne (2020) to study power relations in public service provision, the results of our study contrasts with the emphasis on benefit within PSL instead emphasizing that the operation of power in public service provision is linked to exploitative consumer work.

In line with prior studies of working consumers within the private sector (Charitsis, Fyrberg-Yngfalk, and Skälén 2019; Cova and Dalli 2009; Cova, Pace, and Skälén 2015), we further found that citizens who engage in public service practices are exploited financially by putting in work that reduces the costs for public service providers and contributes to generating profit for private providers of public services. Based on our findings, we add knowledge to prior research by suggesting that the exploitation of people's physical, emotional and mental capacities manifested in stress, frustration, exhaustion, despair, disappointment, anger, and other negative feelings are related to working as a consumer in the public sector (Valdman 2009; Wolff 1999). This is in contrast to prior private sector research, which suggest that the process of service provisions is associated with hedonistic consumption experiences (Cova and Dalli 2009). Furthermore, besides showing that citizens engaging in public service provision are exploited in terms of private value, we identify a similar effect with regard to public value (Alford 2016; Meynhardt 2019). Although citizens' entitlement to the public value of the services described here are formally unrelated to their consumer work efforts, in reality, citizens have to put in a lot of effort to receive it. In fact, the public service ecosystem is to some extent produced and reproduced through the work that citizens carry out.

Our third and final contribution concerns the identification of five public service practices – realizing, qualifying, choosing, managing, and verifying – that citizens engage in to accomplish public service provision. Of the five practices we identified, accessing and managing have been described in prior research on VCC (Anderson et al. 2016; Skälén, Pace, and Cova 2015). We add

to existing research by highlight realizing, qualifying, and choosing and show that engaging in these practices often involves undesirable work for citizens. We further note that while qualifying implies activities that are associated with administrative burdens such as compliance costs stemming from interactions with PSOs (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015), we reveal how this practice can entangle citizens in complex relationships with other actors in public service ecosystems. In other words, we show that consumer work and administrative burdens are interlinked with the logic of VCC that engages citizens in various practices. The finding that choosing is associated with exploitation and work may seem counterintuitive given that freedom to choose is a core value in the neoliberal discourse informing NPM (Karlsson 2024). However, our findings shows that the actual practice of choosing implies efforts and risks not counter-balanced by potential positive outcomes. Based on our findings, the market-based rationality of freedom underlying choice appears to be more rhetorical than substantive.

Following prior private sector research (see review in Skålén and Gummerus 2023) and some recent PAM research (Skålén and Trischler 2024), we have further demonstrated that the public service provision that citizens engage in and the associated transient outcomes of VCC and exploitative work may be analysed favourably by attending to practices. In particular, focusing on public service practices that are shared by several actors makes it possible to illuminate the activities that citizens perform themselves and in direct interaction with other actors, as well as those that citizens engage in as a part of co-production with PSOs. As such, our emphasis on practices constitutes a contribution to the research that has restricted the study of the negative costs for citizens who engage in service provision to the collaborative production of services between PSOs and citizens (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020).

Our focus on practices rather than individual behaviour also contributes to the transferability of the study's findings beyond the unique traits of the Swedish social insurance context. It is likely that the public service practices that we have described are essential facets of public service provision in other contexts, especially in contexts related to social insurance and welfare services characterized by administrative burdens. In addition, the findings may be applicable to service provision in private sector contexts that share similarities with the social insurance system, including the banking sector and the insurance industries. The fact that prior research has identified practices similar to the ones we have uncovered strengthens the transferability of our findings (Anderson et al. 2016; Skålén, Pace, and Cova 2015).

PSL is not a value-neutral framework. It also suggests that the public sector should be organized according to the tenants of VCC (Osborne 2020). Since our findings suggest that engaging in public service provision places citizens at risk of being exploited as working consumers, we caution public sector managers against embracing VCC uncritically. We advise public sector managers that the adoption of VCC should be supplemented with individual-based measures to assist citizens who lack the means needed to integrate resources. This appeal is particularly relevant to highly multifaceted and delicate issues, such as caregiving for disabled and vulnerable people. As our findings suggest, citizens are prepared to do almost anything in their power to facilitate caregiving services for themselves and their next of kin, which increase the likelihood of exploitation.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

We set out to study how citizens experience engaging in public service provision against the backdrop of prior research on VCC and consumer work. Using a qualitative method design, we studied the social insurance service ecosystem in Sweden. We found that engagement in public service provision predominantly entails hard work rather than VCC for citizens. As with all research, our study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future work. First, the fact that the study is based on qualitative research on social insurance services in Sweden is a limitation. Although our focus on public service practices contributes to the transferability of the study's results, other contexts and services need to be studied with the aim of scrutinizing and extending our research. Furthermore, when empirical research on citizen engagement in public service provision has matured, it should be tested and validated statistically. We look forward to future studies about the important topic of the engagement of citizens in public service provision.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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