

Salla Maijala

# **Relational approach to public service professionals in value co-creation**



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## Tiivistelmä

Tämä väitöstutkimus tarkastelee julkisissa palveluissa tapahtuvaa arvon yhteisluomista ammattilaisten työn näkökulmasta. Tutkimus sijoittuu julkisten hyvinvointi- ja sosiaaliturvapalveluiden kontekstiin tilanteessa, jossa hyvinvointialueiden toiminnan alkuvaihe on mullistanut työelämää palvelun käyttäjien, ammattilaisten ja organisaatioiden sekä niiden ohjauksen ja hallinnan näkökulmista. Lisäksi koronavuosiin liittyneet epävarmuudet ja kuormitus näkyvät edelleen puheissa, mutta myös palveluiden digitalisoitumisessa. Erilaisten muutosten aiheuttama kuormittuneisuus julkisten palveluiden eturintamassa onkin ollut korostunutta.

Julkisten palveluiden perustehtävä on tarjota palveluita niitä tarvitseville tavalla, joka sekä tuottaa arvoa yksilölle vastaamalla tämän tarpeisiin että tukee yhteiskunnallista hyvinvointia ja vaalii sen arvojen toteutumista. Tärkeät mutta myös korkeat tavoitteet arvon yhteisluomisesta vaikuttavat julkisten palveluiden käyttäjärajapinnan työntekijöihin moniulotteisin ja kompleksisin tavoin. Ammattilaisilta edellytetään korkean asiantuntijuuden ja palveluosaamisen lisäksi sosiaalisia taitoja ja kykyä yhdistää resursseja innovatiivisesti. Perustyön hallinnan lisäksi onkin kyettävä luomaan, ylläpitämään ja kehittämään suhteita palvelun käyttäjiin, muihin toimijoihin yli instituutio- ja organisaatorajojen sekä hierarkiarakenteiden mukaisesti. Lisäksi toiminta vertautuu kaiken aikaa ammattilaisaseman eettisiin periaatteisiin ja palveluille asetettuihin strategisiin tavoitteisiin. Tämä tutkimus tarkasteleekin, miten relationaaliset tekijät vaikuttavat ammattilaisen työhön ja arvon yhteisluomiseen sitä uudelleen muotoillen.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että julkisten palveluiden ammattilaiset tasapainottelevat roolien ja niihin liittyvien arvojen välillä vuorovaikutuksellisissa suhteissa. Työssä selviytymisen tueksi ammattilaiset kehittävät sekä formaaleja että informaaleja verkostoja kuormitusta ja eettistä taakkaa helpottaakseen. Julkisissa palveluissa kaikilla ei kuitenkaan ole yhtäläisiä mahdollisuuksia hyödyntää suhdeverkostojaan tähän. Tutkimuksen havainnot korostavat, että julkisten palveluiden johtamisessa ja kehittämisessä tulee mahdollistaa tuen saanti ja matalan kynnyksen konsultointi ammattilaisille kuormittuneisuuden vähentämiseksi. Tutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että arvon yhteisluominen julkisissa palveluissa ei ole riippuvaista yksilön ominaisuuksista tai kyvykkyyksistä, vaan sen periaatteiden edistäminen edellyttää relationaalisten ulottuvuuksien rakenteellista vahvistamista käytännön toiminnan voimavaroina.

Asiasanat: ammattilaiset, arvon yhteisluominen, julkiset palvelut, palveluekosysteemi, työntekijät.

## Abstract

This doctoral dissertation examines value co-creation in public services from the perspective of professional work. The study is situated in the context of public welfare and social security services during the early operational phase of the wellbeing services counties, an organisational shift that has profoundly reshaped working life and affected service users, professionals, organisations and their steering and governance. Furthermore, the uncertainties and pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be reflected both in practitioner accounts and in the ongoing digitalisation of services. The cumulative strain produced by these various changes has been particularly prominent at the front line of public service provision.

The core task of public services is to provide support to those who need it in ways that generate value for individuals by responding to their needs, while simultaneously fostering societal wellbeing and upholding the values of the welfare state. These important yet ambitious objectives of value co-creation affect employees working at the service interface in multidimensional and complex ways. Professionals are expected to demonstrate high levels of expertise and service competence, combined with social skills and the ability to integrate resources in innovative ways. In addition to fulfilling their core duties, they must create, maintain and develop relationships with service users and other actors across institutional and organisational boundaries and hierarchical structures. Simultaneously, they evaluate their conduct against the ethical principles of the professional role and the strategic objectives set for the service. Accordingly, this study investigates how relational factors influence professional work and the processes of value co-creation, reconfiguring the essence of professionalism.

The findings demonstrate that professionals in public services navigate multiple roles and related values within interactional relationships. To cope with the demands of their work, professionals develop both formal and informal networks to alleviate workload pressures and reduce ethical strain. However, not all professionals have equal opportunities to utilise such relational networks. The study's insights highlight that leadership and development in public services should ensure accessible support and low-threshold consultation mechanisms to reduce the burden experienced by professionals. The findings indicate that value co-creation in public services does not depend on individual traits or capacities; rather, advancing its principles requires the structural embedding of relational dimensions as practical operational resources.

Keywords: professionals, public services, value co-creation, service ecosystem.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This doctoral dissertation did not come about by chance. From the very beginning at my grandfather's desk, I have enjoyed writing texts of fact and fiction, composing poems and lyrics, rearranging words until they signify something entirely different than what their mere sequence would suggest. I often compare verbal art to painting, where layer upon layer is primed to establish something that at first glance remains invisible, yet gives the finish a depth that can only be achieved through careful deliberation and choices made long ago. What has been a matter of chance, by contrast, is the data of my dissertation and, to some extent, its timing. I have been extraordinarily fortunate to know people who understand what I want and am capable of, as well as those who have dared to take a risk with me despite not knowing these things. Yet the topic of my dissertation is both: On one hand, it is strongly illuminated by my previous professional background in nursing and its management, the career I built through my own work, which will always remain part of my identity. On the other hand, the depth of my examination has been a focused exploration, reflecting not only a researcher's curiosity and a general need for knowledge but also the construction of an understanding through which research itself becomes possible. Like good lyrics, a dissertation is greater than the sum of its parts – a demonstration of how earlier choices support the layers of understanding built upon them.

For me, if conducting a dissertation is like painting with words, the journey that goes along with it reminds me of orienteering. Sometimes problems and proper directions are resolved as a team, and at times entire legs are travelled side by side with more experienced navigators. Along this forested route, I have learned that a doctoral dissertation, much like entire courses of study, can be pursued in many ways and from many kinds of backgrounds. For this reason, I dedicate my dissertation to all those who dream of undertaking a doctorate but doubt their own adequacy or the suitability of their background. My most important lesson, and my encouragement, is that perseverance against headwinds and navigation even in times of uncertainty can still lead to the destination. What matters is not to remain alone, but to continue to ask for directions even when the destination itself is obscure. I have received excellent pieces of advice, ideas, and opportunities along the way so often that it is hardly possible for me to acknowledge all the contributors. Yet at this moment I have reached a finish, and for that many deserve thanks.

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throughout the process has been unwavering and invaluable, and I will do my best to pass forward what I have learned from you, for I could not have had a better starting point for this journey. I also extend my thanks to Marit Engen and Jarmo Vakkuri for their critical examination and valuable comments on my dissertation, which helped it reach its final form, and to Marit Engen for serving as my esteemed opponent.

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In this moment, I am as close to my destination as I can be. Behind me lies something incredible, fortunate, and long travelled. Ahead, in turn, a new adventure opens once again. Although I do not know its direction or destination, I will take my map, compass, headlamp, and my adventure gear, and head on.

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## Sub-studies

- [1] Maijala, S., Rantamäki, A., Kurkela, K., Tuurnas, S., & Jalonen, H. (2024). Roles of professionals in value co-creation: a systematic literature review. *Public Management Review*, 27(11), 2643–2667.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2024.2431609>. © The authors. CC BY.
- [2] Maijala, S., Rantamäki, A. & Kurkela, K. (2025). Value co-creation in service user interface: contribution of public service professionals. *Public Management Review*, 1–29.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2582602>. © The authors. CC BY.
- [3] Maijala, S. & Rossi, P. (2026). Foregrounding Conflicts in Public Service Encounters: Public Service Professionals' Perceptions on Causes of Value Destruction. [Manuscript submitted]. *Public Management Review*.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Research background and motivation

Professional work in contemporary public service provision is built upon expectations that the service provided will be individually tailored (Osborne, 2018), efficient (Christensen & Lægheid, 2025), highly professional (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018), and capable of co-creating value with service users (Acar et al., 2025). These expectations reflect the shift from traditional bureaucratic models toward relational and collaborative paradigms, where professionals are not merely implementers of policy but actively shape service experiences and outcomes as agents (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Torfing et al., 2025). Administrative frameworks, such as public service logic (PSL, see Osborne, 2018) and service dominant logic (SDL, see Vargo & Lusch, 2016), argue that value is not produced within organisations and then delivered; rather, it emerges through the use of services and in service relations (Osborne et al., 2016). This shift positions professionals as collaborators with the service user, whose relational abilities to engage, manage, and adapt to complicated conditions (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018) – arising from individual micro level interaction dynamics, organisational meso level conditions, and societal and public value emphasising macro level demands within complex public service ecosystems (PSEs) – are central to the realisation of value (Acar et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2022; Regal & FitzGerald, 2025).

Research on the relationality of public services is becoming increasingly prominent (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024), yet it lacks conceptual integration and the institutionalisation of its measures (Bartels et al., 2025). This study contributes to the discussion of relational organisation of public services by foregrounding service relations as a constitutive element of professional work, emphasising how everyday encounters and objectives are coloured by ethical dilemmas (Schott et al., 2016; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018), discretionary decision-making (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023), value conflicts (Siverbo et al., 2024; Skálén et al., 2024), and unpredictable interactional dynamics (Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2019). In the context of complex service relations, professionals exercise relationally grounded agency by interpreting situations (Osborne et al., 2022), negotiating competing goals (Wang & Ran, 2024), and sustaining trust-based relationships (Pillitteri et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 1998) that enable co-created solutions (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023).

Public service professionals contribute to the practical functioning and operability of public services by constructing the tangible elements of service delivery (Bureau,

2016; Lipsky, 2010, pp. 201–211; May & Winter, 2007) through interpersonal encounters and collaboration (Osborne, 2018; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018). This task is complicated by the various stakeholders having different and possibly conflicting interpretations of what constitutes a successful service outcome (Skarli, 2023). In these interactions, professionals not only execute predefined tasks but also actively shape service experiences and outcomes by deploying discretion, expertise, and relational capacities (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Torfing et al., 2025). Through its relational dimensions, professional work sculpts abstract public policy goals into concrete, situated actions within complex governance networks (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2025; Osborne et al., 2022).

Regarding the work of public service professionals, the inherent professionalism is often conceptualised as structural attributes (Schott et al., 2016) or individual characteristics (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015). Professionals have also been framed primarily as implementers of policy, a viewpoint which focuses on bureaucratic compliance and efficiency (Hood, 1991). Here, professionalism does encompass professional tasks, ethical codes and values, expertise acquired through education (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013; Caza & Creary, 2016, pp. 264–267), and practical experience (Aschhoff & Vogel, 2019; Tuurnas, 2015; van Bockel & Noordegraaf, 2006), each of which affect professional interpretation in everyday encounters. Notably, professionalism increasingly includes clerical components, such as data entry and record-keeping (Noordegraaf, 2015); however, to differentiate professionals from other public service workers (Sehested, 2002), such as decision-making officials or clerics (Lipsky, 1980), professionalism is considered here to be embedded in the organisational and societal contexts (Schott et al., 2015) of public services. In this dissertation, professionalism is also perceived as including the normative foundations of public values (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007) that mandate professionals with a degree of autonomy (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013).

There is a growing administration trend to view public service professionals through co-paradigms (Dudau et al., 2019). Doing so involves conceptualising professionals as co-producers of public services alongside citizens (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016) and as co-creators of value (Acar et al, 2025; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018) in the form of boundary actors who mediate between organisational imperatives and user needs, shaping how value emerges in service encounters (Osborne, 2018). Although the emergence of co-paradigms has introduced collaboration and co-production to the public administration discourse (Dudau et al., 2019), much of the available research has concentrated on the processes of value creation and the new practices those processes entail (Osborne et al., 2016; Voorberg et al., 2015). Professionalism has previously been examined through lenses including professional competencies (Noordegraaf, 2015), roles and responsibilities (Evetts, 2011), or professional norms

and ethics (Hood & Lodge, 2004). However, these perspectives typically emphasise the formalised knowledge base, autonomy, and normative frameworks that define professional work within bureaucratic and organisational settings. Professionalism is often perceived as a personal quality or status (Evetts, 2011) rather than a process that evolves through practice and interactions (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018). Although the work of professionals is increasingly considered from collaborative and relational perspectives, the role of relationships in shaping professionalism remains less frequently explored (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Noordegraaf, 2015).

The relational perspective on professionals intertwines organically with the administrative discussion on value co-creation: When professionalism is understood as a phenomenon constructed upon interactions, value likewise emerges as a subjectively assessed relational outcome (Osborne, 2018) rather than as the product of a singular organisational process or procedure (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). Value co-creation often refers to collaborative activities intended to generate value for the stakeholders (Osborne et al., 2016; Voorberg et al., 2015). In the context of public services, this implies that the fundamental purpose of services is to benefit their users (Alford, 2014; Osborne, 2018; Ostrom, 1990, pp. 8–23). Accordingly, a service that fails to generate value for its user may be considered to have failed to fulfil its purpose (Brandesen & Honingh, 2016; Pestoff, 2012). This perspective is particularly emphasised in administrative paradigms that prioritise the centrality of the service user, such as PSL and co-production frameworks (Ojasalo & Kauppinen, 2024; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Voorberg et al., 2015). However, all value co-creating interactions have integrated relative elements (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020) and the experience of value generation is, of course, subjective (Osborne, 2020).

Connecting individual-level experiences and the value generated for organisations, instead of societal value, highlights interests that stress operational guidelines and the centrality of service users as customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Service success and customer satisfaction are then assessed by the user's repeated engagement with the service (Grönroos, 2011; Osborne et al., 2016). These perspectives are particularly applicable to the private sector, where generating societal value is not assumed to be a responsibility and repeated service use is considered desirable (Alford, 2014; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In contrast, within public services, effective and meaningful outcomes entail service users receiving support in a way that minimises further reliance on public services (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Osborne, 2018; Torfing et al., 2019). When public service value is grounded in strengthening the users' functional capacity, participation, and autonomy, the role of professionals cannot be confined to technical service delivery (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018). Instead, value

emerges – or fails to emerge – within relationships between professionals and service users (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018), as they negotiate service goals and co-produce solutions within complex governance networks (Sawyer, 2005, pp. 1–9; Torfing et al., 2025; Wang & Ran, 2024). However, the whole-life situation of a service user influences their perceptions of wellbeing and overall collaboration capability, demonstrating the complexity in understanding individual value determinations and the possible conflicts in public service encounters (Skarli, 2023).

Public administration research increasingly emphasises collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Torfing et al., 2019) and networked service delivery (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012; Rhodes, 2017; Stoker, 2006), positioning professionals as relational agents who enable trust, affective dialogue, and joint problem-solving (Pillitteri et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 1998; Wang & Ran, 2024). Studies highlight that professionals' ability to recognise service users as co-creators affects both perceived and actual value outcomes (Acar et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2022). This relational framing aligns with PSL, which asserts that value is realised in use and co-produced through interaction (Osborne et al., 2016).

Institutional and organisational constraints shape the professional's role in value co-creation and require systemic comprehension, as performance regimes, risk management, and legal accountability often limit discretion, creating ethically charged tensions between standardisation and personalisation (French et al., 2023; Tuurnas, 2015). Professionals navigate these tensions by reflexively developing hybrid practices that balance managerial demands with professional norms and user-centred values (Noordegraaf, 2015), illustrating the complexity in operating environments (Regal & FitzGerald, 2025; Riemer et al., 2025; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). These dynamics are particularly salient in public well-being services, where professionals' relational work is critical yet frequently undervalued in managerial metrics (Brodkin, 2011; Lipsky, 1980). The premises of the operating environment of public service professionals in co-creating value are depicted in Figure 1 as a framework, partitioned according to PSE levels to reveal the multifaceted steering and the complexity dimensions that extend to service encounters.



**Figure 1.** Relational operating environment of value co-creating professional work in public service encounters

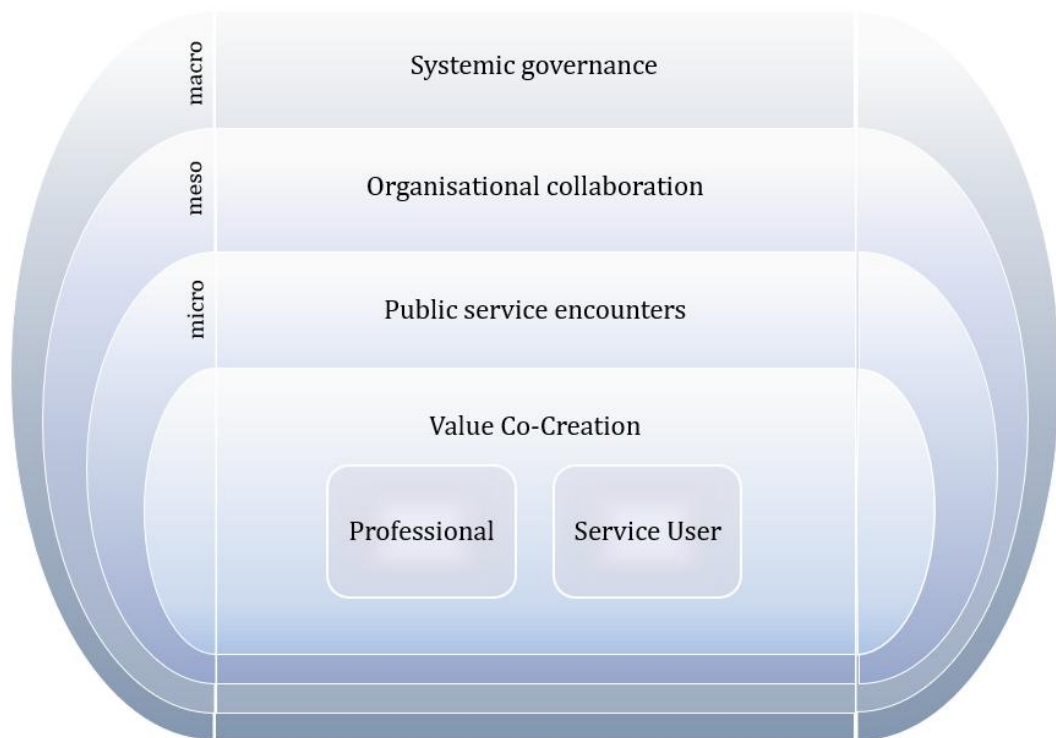
From a historical standpoint, the concept of the professional and professionalism largely retains its core meaning of performing activities related to a specific field (Hughes, 2017; Schott et al., 2016), drawing upon acquired expertise (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013) and craftsmanship (Hughes, 2017). These attributes underpin the trust placed in professional judgement in situations deemed to require specific competence (Paananen, 2022; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Wagenaar, 2004), illustrating how professional discretion is both technically and normatively grounded (Alamaa et al., 2025; Askim et al., 2025). Decision-making at the frontline of service provision requires extensive professional knowledge and situational awareness (Schott et al., 2016) if practitioners are to avoid causing harm (Askim et al., 2025; Hughes, 2017) or distress to the most vulnerable individuals (Pedersen & Pors, 2023; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016).

Continuous compromises between managerial, professional, and service logics are inherently shaped by institutional forces rather than the agency of individuals (Alamaa et al., 2025). Viewed through the lens of continuous transformation, professionalism no longer appears solely as expertise and individual competencies but increasingly as a relational phenomenon constructed through encounters with service users and colleagues. Nevertheless, relational dynamics embedded within administrative processes governing policy implementation remain insufficiently examined in public administration research, frequently centring its analytical focus

on the individual experiences and coping strategies of street-level workers instead (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). This study contributes to the discussion by exploring how professional work is reconfigured within an interactive service logic and how it shapes value co-creation practices in public services. Specifically, this dissertation explores the *why* of relational conditions and dimensions that affect value co-creating professional work in public services. It establishes that practice is broadly shaped by its structural, political, and ideological contexts (Lipsky, 1980; Paananen, 2022).

## 1.2 Objectives and research questions

This doctoral dissertation in administrative sciences examines value co-creating and relationally constituted professional work, seeking to understand the lived reality of public service professionals, the complexity of their operational environment, and the constraints imposed by the diverse value negotiations that shape professional practice. The study explores the public service ecosystem in which various political and ideological perspectives shape the immediate operational context of professional practice (Alamaa et al., 2025; Lipsky, 1980). While public services are situated here within a broader service ecosystem, the analytical focus is specifically on relational actions at the individual micro level, examining professional roles and agency, perceived changes in these roles, and the factors that enable or constrain agency within the conceptual context of value co-creation. These conceptual foundations are illustrated in Figure 2, depicting how professional work relates to the service user in encounters within a public service setting, oriented towards value co-creation. Here, value co-creation is connected not only to the foundational conditions of the micro level encounter itself, but also to the effectiveness of inter-organisational meso level collaboration, reflected in the coherence of services and service chains, all of which unfold within the constraints set by the surrounding macro level systemic governance.



**Figure 2.** Conceptual foundations of the study

This study aims to generate knowledge about conditions that affect micro level value co-creation to support professionals' agency by informing steering actions and policy choices within the macro level, that also guide decision-making on the organisational meso level of PSE. A broader underlying objective is to strengthen both the conditions for professional practice and ensure the smoothest possible formation of value for the service user within public services. In doing so, the research also contributes to a wider societal task: enabling the generation of public value through administrative and steering decisions.

To achieve these objectives, in this study I conduct an integrative examination and reflection on the framework and the constituent Sub-studies of the dissertation. The analysis is undertaken from the perspective of methodological and philosophical choices, whereby it is recognised and acknowledged that the knowledge the research offers reflects the examined phenomenon from a contextually bound standpoint. These choices are accounted for not only in the comprehensive description of the context and in the discussion of methodological decisions, but also in the conclusions of the dissertation.

In public administration, core principles such as efficiency, legality, fairness, and legitimacy coexist in a state of tension (Christensen & Lægheid, 2025; Volodina & Grossi, 2025). Consequently, barriers to value co-creation arise not only from

interactional breakdowns but also from the differing and often implicit normative foundations on which the various actors rely (Acar et al., 2025; Paananen, 2022, pp. 234–235). Because the service system does not rest on a single, unified value base, a relational perspective helps to unveil underlying tensions and to examine how competing value orientations manifest in encounters between professionals and service users (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Torfing et al., 2025). Therefore, this study focuses on relational professionalism and value co-creation among evolving societal and scientific challenges (Christensen & Lægheid, 2025) in the context of public service administration and seeks to address the following research question:

*How does relationality reconfigure professional work and value co-creation in public services?*

Societally impactful and sustainable macro-level value creation requires the assurance of value formation specifically within micro-level service encounter relations (Osborne et al., 2016; Voorberg et al., 2015). However, the challenges in micro-level value co-creation arise from all public service ecosystem (PSE) levels (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016; Pestoff, 2012). To investigate how relational subjects, such as the collaboration or trust-building capabilities of professionals, diverse roles, and the multifaceted practices required for value co-creation, have fundamentally challenged and transformed professional work, this dissertation examines the topic through three peer-reviewed research articles. These articles explore: (1) the value co-creation enabling roles of public service professionals<sup>1</sup>, (2) what constitutes an effective professional contribution, and, from the perspective of professionals<sup>2</sup>, (3) the conflicts associated with pursuing value co-creation on various ecosystemic levels<sup>3</sup>. The synthesis and the three sub-studies are conjoined by their goal to explain

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<sup>1</sup> In this original article (Sub-study 1), the author of this dissertation held primary responsibility for the research. The introduction, research question, and theoretical framework were co-written by the author team of five researchers. The author of this dissertation independently conducted the database search. Abstract and full-text screening were performed by three authors. Full-text analyses were undertaken by two authors, with the author of this dissertation completing the majority of the work. The results were written primarily by the author of this dissertation, with co-authors contributing to the refinement of the findings. The conclusions were co-written by the full author team.

<sup>2</sup> The original article (Sub-study 2) is co-written by three researchers. The author of this dissertation served as the corresponding author, steering the writing process and assuming primary responsibility for it. The research design and analytical framework were jointly developed with a second author. The data analysis was conducted by the entire author team, and the author of this dissertation was responsible for writing up the analysed material, constructing the results, and formulating the conclusions together with the co-authors.

<sup>3</sup> The original article (Sub-study 3) is co-written by two researchers, with the doctoral researcher taking responsibility for the writing process. The idea for the article originated from the doctoral researcher, while the research design and the application of the chosen method were developed jointly with the co-author. The doctoral researcher conducted the

the relational conditions regarding value co-creation through explorations on *how value co-creating professionalism is constructed in the public services context*, revealing conditions that foster or hinder it.

Studying professional roles, contributions, and interpretations relating to value co-creation is significant for several reasons. First, this study reflects the empirical reality of modern public services, where outcomes depend on the quality of relationships (Wilson et al, 2024) rather than the mere execution of predefined tasks (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Torfing et al., 2019). Second, public service failures often stem from relational breakdowns, such as lack of trust or role ambiguity (Palumbo et al., 2020), rather than technical incompetence (Brodkin, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015; Volodina & Grossi, 2025). Understanding why service encounters may lead to value destruction rather than creation can inform interventions extending beyond observing service efficiency and strengthening collaborative capacities.

Third, studying professionalism from the perspective of value co-creation links micro-level practices and macro-level governance in PSEs by exploring how institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012) and organisational policies translate into actual service encounters (Lipsky, 1980; Osborne, 2018). Fourth, the same action informs professional development through capability building and by revealing those factors affecting professional identity. Professionals increasingly navigate hybrid roles under conditions of complexity and digitalisation (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Rantala & Karjaluoto, 2017; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), balancing managerial imperatives with user-centred values (Noordegraaf, 2015). Therefore, research on value co-creating professionalism can guide organisational design, training, and reflection to support relational agency and ethical practice. Finally, this study aims to advance administrative theory and societal relevance by integrating relational ontology and practice theory, while producing pragmatic insights capable of improving quality, equity, and trust in public services (Gherardi, 2012; Osborne, 2018).

### 1.3 Research context of Finnish public services

The Finnish public well-being and social welfare services that form the empirical context of this dissertation are designed to guarantee individuals adequate subsistence levels and care in all life situations. Finland represents the Nordic welfare state model, which Norden (n.d.) summarises as “a sound public economy that

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data analysis, consulting the co-author as necessary, assumed responsibility for the active progression of the content analysis, and wrote the results. The shaping and editing of the results, as well as the formulation of the conclusions, were carried out entirely as a co-authored process.

creates the conditions for a high and even standard of living, and promotes the equitable distribution of well-being across the population". A defining feature of the Nordic model is a strong public sector that provides citizens with welfare services and a social safety net (Greve, 2021). In practice, this comprises parental benefits and leave, predominantly free healthcare services and hospital care, and a societal commitment to supporting the ill, unemployed, or elderly (Christensen & Lægheid, 2020; Norden, n.d.).

The Nordic model is a product of post-WW2 reconstruction and produced welfare states characterised by high levels of trust in both other people and public authorities, and sustained through relatively high taxation (Christensen & Lægheid, 2020; Greve, 2021; Rousseau et al., 1998). Importantly, welfare benefits are not distributed according to the amount of tax paid but based on need arising from life circumstances (Norden, n.d.). In Finland, the purpose of social security is to provide basic income in situations where individuals cannot secure it themselves (Kela, 2023). Finnish social security comprises services and monetary benefits. It is administered by *the National Insurance Institution of Finland* (Kela) for residents or those working in Finland, with citizenship not a prerequisite for eligibility (Kela, 2023). Kela is responsible for residence-based social security in cooperation with 21 *wellbeing services counties* (WSCs) (Kela, 2023). The WSCs are autonomous regional entities responsible for organising social, health, and rescue services under the Wellbeing Services Counties Act (Law 611/2021; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026) and commenced operations at the beginning of 2023<sup>4</sup>.

The relationship between WSCs and Kela is distinctive in that, although both are primarily funded by the state, they are governed by very different administrative authorities. Kela's activities are governed by the *Act on the National Insurance Institution of Finland* (Law 731/2001). Its administration and operations are supervised by 12 trustees appointed by Parliament, meaning that Kela reports directly to Parliament. Kela's finances may be audited by *the National Audit Office of Finland* if it so chooses, but the Office does not have the authority to audit the activities of Kela's trustees (§19a). These 12 parliamentary trustees appoint up to ten members to Kela's governing board (§6). WSCs, then, fall under the oversight of three ministries: *The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health* is responsible for social welfare and healthcare, *the Ministry of the Interior* oversees emergency response services, and *the Ministry of Finance* monitors their activities and finances (Law 611/2021).

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<sup>4</sup> The responsibility for organising social, healthcare, and rescue services was transferred from municipalities to 21 newly established wellbeing service counties (WSCs) from 1.1.2023. The counties are mainly based on regional divisions, except within the capital region of Uusimaa. The reform aimed to promote equality in service availability across Finland, to reduce inequality in the health and wellbeing among people, and economical retrenchments. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026.)

The highest decision-making authority within a WSC is the council, whose members are elected in regional elections (Ministry of Finance, n.d.a). Although WSCs are self-governed and have broad legal responsibilities for service provision within their regions, they do not possess the right to levy taxes (Law 611/2021; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026).

Finland has approximately 300 municipalities, each responsible for providing public services to local inhabitants. Some of these services are linked to WSCs, complicating institutional guidance and introducing more political elements to decision-making (e.g. Rossi et al., 2026). For example, in unemployment-related cases, municipalities are responsible for employment services, Kela grants unemployment benefits, and the WSCs allocate supplementary social benefits and provide related employment-supporting health services. Collectively, WSCs and municipal governments navigate a multi-level governance structure that reflects broader trends in networked and collaborative public administration (Council of Europe, 2024). These arrangements both enable comprehensive service provision and pose substantial challenges for effective coordination and democratic accountability.

This institutional framework reflects the principles of universalism and solidarity that underpin Nordic welfare governance (Greve, 2021). Scholars note that such systems rely on high trust and strong state capacity, which enable comprehensive service provision and inclusive social protection (Christensen & Lægheid, 2020). However, contemporary reforms introduce managerial logics and performance regimes that challenge these principles, creating tensions between efficiency-driven governance and relational, user-centred approaches (Osborne et al., 2016; Sehested, 2002; Torfing et al., 2019). These dynamics are particularly salient in well-being and social welfare services where professionals' relational work is essential for value co-creation (Tuurnas, 2015), yet often undervalued in managerial metrics (Brodkin, 2011).

The empirically inclined Sub-studies 2 and 3 of this dissertation utilise data collected in the Finnish public services context. Sub-study 2 reviews interview data from participants from Kela and three WSCs. Sub-study 3 explores data collected also from an electronic expert panel (eDelphi), among the interview data from the WSCs<sup>5</sup>. Finland was selected as the empirical context of this study for various reasons. In Finland, the public service network ensures societal functionality and supports individuals in an equitable and dignified manner, even in situations where their ability to care for themselves is diminished (Greve, 2021). Changes in basic income security and general healthcare significantly impact the individual experience of

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<sup>5</sup> Data characteristics and collection are described in detail in each sub-study, and the methodological choices and reasoning under chapter 3.3 of this dissertation.

service functionality and value formation, as well as societal value creation by challenging established safeguarding practices (Christensen & Lægheid, 2020; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026).

This doctoral research was conducted in a period marked by global crises and societal transformations. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted established modes of governance and elevated the role of political decision-making as a mechanism for interpreting societal values (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Greve, 2021). In Finland, decisions were made regarding the extent to which restrictions could be justified as essential for protecting the well-being of individuals, even at the expense of individual rights and freedoms. Following the subsiding of the pandemic's acute phase, Finland implemented a long-prepared healthcare reform, establishing the WSCs. The reform innovated the integration of rescue services administratively under the same umbrella as social and healthcare services (Law 611/2021; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026). This architectural service integration with shared accountability arrangements improves system coherence, reduces duplication, and creates conditions for relational coordination across organisational boundaries (Council of Europe, 2024) that enhance preparedness, surge capacity, and equitable access during complex incidents (Kapucu, 2006; Wolf-Fordham, 2020). The logic of integrated care and "whole-system" emergency response steers multi-actor networks through common operating procedures, seamless information infrastructures, and harmonised risk and incident management (Kapucu & Garayev, 2011; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026).

The major changes brought about by the public service reform in Finland, which included the introduction of WSCs along with altered demands for organisational operations due to cost containment, workforce shortages, and demographic shifts (Council of Europe, 2024), justify examining what those changes demand from the service system and its professionals. While public sector reforms have been widely studied from an administration perspective (e.g. Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; De Vries & Nemeč, 2013; Rossi et al., 2026), the role of professionals has received less attention, although their commitment is critical to both the implementation and the success or failure of the reforms (Hupe & Hill, 2016; Sehested, 2002). Public service professionals adapt to changing approaches and diverse roles in service encounters to ensure value co-creation even as change occurs around them (Osborne et al., 2016; Tuurnas, 2015).

However, neither the reform nor the residual effects of the pandemic fully explain the transformation of the operational environment in which public service professionals currently work. The cost structure of healthcare had already been identified as burdensome relative to the demographic trends and population structure of Finland

well before the beginning of the current reform (Ministry of Finance, n.d.b). Consequently, efforts to reduce costs have been ongoing for decades, including through staffing solutions and changes in work practices. More recent expansions in digital service delivery (Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021) add to the changes in operational environments. Today, these cost-saving measures show no signs of being curtailed (OECD, 2023).

In addition to this, the administrative logic of public services is undergoing a paradigmatic shift from producer-purchaser models towards approaches emphasising co-development and co-production (Osborne et al., 2016; Skålen et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2019). Service users and citizens increasingly participate in service delivery, contributing information and engaging in self-care based on system guidance (Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021; Tuurnas, 2015; Wang & Ran, 2024). This shift increases the risk of transferring responsibility to individuals in matters that should remain the responsibility of the welfare state, institutions, or organisations (Tuurnas, 2015), placing undue burdens on service users and exposing them to adverse consequences (Brodkin, 2011; Greve, 2021).

## 1.4 Structure of the dissertation

This qualitative dissertation is based on three peer-reviewed articles, referred to as sub-studies, and a synthesising summary. The sub-studies explore various features of professionalism and perceptions of professional work through the lens of value co-creation. The structure of this dissertation, together with the synthesis of its findings, is built around the insights generated in the sub-studies, with the summary interpreting the relationality inherent in the value co-creating work of professionals in public services.

First, the theoretical context of public service value co-creation and its origins is discussed in Chapter 2, *Theoretical Framework*. This historically oriented exploration of paradigm shifts in public administration, and the emergence of the “co-paradigms”, provides the synthesis with a conceptual foundation upon which the elements and dimensions of contemporary value co-creating professionalism are constructed. Second, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological commitments and research design choices applied in the sub-studies. The examination of the abductive reasoning processes both clarifies and situates the study within broader administrative and ontological contexts, while also ensuring the integrity and coherence of the dissertation as an ensemble of chapters and sub-studies.

In Chapter 4, the sub-studies and their respective contributions to the dissertation are examined. Chapter 5 then offers a discussion on how this study conceptualises

value co-creating professionalism through the findings of the sub-studies, situating this analysis in relation to earlier scholarly understandings of the topic. Finally, the conclusions presented in Chapter 6 seek to offer a robust rationale for how relationality in professional work reconfigures professional agency and value co-creation in public services. In pursuing this, the study also acknowledges its limitations and, through them, identifies avenues for future research.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 From control to collaborative value creation: rethinking relations

The theoretical context of this study, value co-creation, signifies a profound transformation in the conceptualisation, production, and distribution of value within complex societal systems. Its roots are dug deep into the shifts in research paradigms from management to governance, and from control to collaborative value creation. As a concept, a *paradigm*, entrenched in Kuhn's (1962) philosophy of science, is understood as a broad, overarching framework or worldview that shapes how a discipline understands reality, formulates questions, and interprets evidence into valid knowledge and practice (p. 10).

For public administration research, the concept of a paradigm serves as a foundational lens through which scholars and practitioners interpret the nature, purpose, and practice of governance (Kuhn, 1962, pp. 11–16). Kuhn describes paradigms as “accepted examples” (p. 10) of scientific practice that resolve foundational debates and establish consensus around methods, values, and assumptions. In public administration, paradigms are not merely theoretical constructs – they shape how governments operate, how reforms are designed, and how administrative systems evolve (Røiseland et al., 2024). Paradigms provide a coherent worldview, offering both a description of reality and a set of tools for solving problems (Henry, 1975). They are composed of models and approaches that reflect dominant phenomena at a given time (Røiseland et al., 2024). Importantly, paradigms are dynamic; they shift in response to crises or failures in existing models, leading to new ways of thinking and organising public institutions. Partially, however, observing this progress “lies simply in the eye of the beholder.” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 163.) The dominant administrative paradigm may therefore vary depending on whether it is examined from a theoretical perspective or, for instance, from the standpoint of practical operational steering.

Historically, Western public administration has experienced several major paradigmatic shifts. The *Traditional Public Administration* (TPA)<sup>6</sup> model, rooted in bureaucracy, emphasised hierarchy, rules, and neutrality (Weber, 1978) and focused on efficiency through formal procedures (Henry, 1975). From TPA, changes in the underlying post-WW2 political economy led to the emergence of an efficiency

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<sup>6</sup> Traditional Public Administration has been both criticised and defended in the administrative discussion, for example by Alford (2008), Bryson et al. (2014), and by Lynn Jr. (2001).

paradigm, driven by principles of performance rather than balance (Clarke & Clegg, 1999). In public services context, positions to service value were adopted from paradigms created to serve the economic life and the private sector management focusing on financial interests (Clarke & Clegg, 1999, pp. 486–487; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020), and service value was perceived as something generated by organisations and delivered to consumers (see Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Turning to the public services context, the ideal of creating value through the production and consumption of goods was adopted from the paradigm of *New Public Management* (NPM, see Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). The introduction of NPM emerged from realisations regarding the heavy cost structure of public services, demographic changes, and the consequent demands for efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Gruening, 2001). Under NPM, services are conceptualised as products delivered to clients, with the aim of minimising waste and delays to reduce operational costs (Hood, 1991; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). Although the appeal of NPM in the public sector during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is understandable, particularly in light of increasing fiscal pressures (Gruening, 2001), the model failed to account for human and contextual factors such as individual needs, preferences, and the capacity of service users to engage with standardised services (Mongkol, 2011). The ethical limitations of this approach are particularly evident in relation to vulnerable service-user groups, especially in terms of service accessibility, and particularly problematic in public social and healthcare services, upon which many such individuals are dependent.

As the limitations of producer–consumer paradigms in public services became increasingly evident (Eriksson & Andersson, 2024; Grönroos, 2019), management thinking began to emphasise the transformation of organisational culture with improvements on the quality and trust in services (Clarke & Clegg, 1999; Siverbo et al., 2024). The survival of democratic public services was seen as dependent on their capability to change and adapt to arising social demands (Roberts, 2024). This shifted the locus of both the managerial authority and budgetary responsibility closer to the point of delivery and the public, attempting to shift the “balance of power” in favour of those whom the organisation is intended to serve (Clarke & Clegg, 1999, p. 486). Public services were recognised as serving broader societal functions beyond the passive delivery of value (Eriksson & Andersson, 2024; Osborne et al., 2016; 2022). Societal changes, such as the concentration of economic power<sup>7</sup> and the rapid advancement of information technology (Danziger & Andersen, 2002; Khanal et al.,

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<sup>7</sup> The concentration of economic power has been subject to academic discussion for the past hundred years, appearing, for example, in a 1934 article “On the Alleged Concentration of Economic Power” by W.L. Crum, which refers to statistics and chapters published even earlier. The discussion has been continued, for example, by Greer (1988), and more recently by Thompson (2020, pp. 207–226).

2025), further intensified the criticism of approaches prioritising organisational self-interest and economic rationality, and underscored the need for interpretive approaches in public service delivery (Bryson et al., 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

The emergence of the *New Public Governance* (NPG) paradigm in the 2000s can be seen as a response to societal transformations, ideological developments, and the shortcomings of previous paradigms. Preceding criticism was directed at the fragmentation of public services, the erosion of their perceived relevance, and the diminishing significance of citizenship (Bryson et al., 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015, p. 550; Osborne, 2006). In return, NPG emphasises networked governance, inter-organisational collaboration, and citizen participation (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024; Rhodes, 2017, pp. 158–173), recognising the ecosystemic nature of public services (Osborne et al., 2022). Shifting attention away from market orientation and towards supporting public value creation, the inclusion of citizens as service users came to be pursued through collaborative initiatives, deliberative processes (Stoker, 2006, p. 42), and partnerships characterised by trust within service networks (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012; Osborne, 2006; Torfing et al., 2019).

The paradigm shift from organisation-centredness towards a more dynamic, networked perspective paved the way for the thought that service value emerges through interactions among diverse stakeholders, including service users, public service professionals, and communities (Nordberg & Aflaki, 2024; Ojasalo & Kauppinen, 2024), and is recognised as a defining feature of NPG (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024; Torfing et al., 2019). Consequently, service users here refer to those individuals who create value by using a service, whether in their own way or by sharing the creation process with service providers (Kurkela et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2021a). For example, Vargo et al. (2017) acknowledge that the context of the service user, their needs, expectations, prior experiences, and societal environment – captured as *value-in-context* – explain why service use alone does not explain the full service value. In this continuum, value and its creation become relational: the emergence of value is dependent on contexts, networks, and interaction details, but also its setting varies due to these dynamic complexities.

The trajectory of paradigmatic change in public administration reveals a decisive movement away from hierarchical, organisation-centric models toward frameworks that privilege relationality (Wilson et al., 2024), collaboration (Stoker, 2006), and shared agency (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024; Rhodes, 2017, p. 77), outlined in Table 1. Contemporary governance in public services is no longer conceived as a unilateral exercise of authority but as an ongoing process of negotiation within complex networks of actors (Osborne et al., 2022; Regal & FitzGerald, 2025; Smets &

Jarzabkowski, 2013; Wilson et al., 2024). Value is not delivered but co-created through reciprocal interactions among governments, professionals, citizens, and communities (Nordberg & Aflaki, 2024; Ojasalo & Kauppinen, 2024), embedded in trust-based relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998) and interpretive practices. This *relational turn*<sup>8</sup> underscores that governability depends less on rigid control and more on cultivating adaptive, dialogical spaces (Cornford et al., 2013; Roberts, 2024; Wilson et al., 2011) where diverse perspectives converge to define and enact public value. In this sense, governance becomes a collective endeavour – anchored in mutual learning and accountability – reflecting the plural, dynamic, and situated nature of modern public service ecosystems.

**Table 1.** Paradigms of contemporary public administration

<b>Paradigm</b>	<b>Dominant features</b>	<b>Perspective on service value creation</b>	<b>Perspective contributions</b>
Traditional Public Administration (TPA)	Bureaucratic hierarchy, rule-based control	Value is determined by elected officials or technical experts Value is measurable through efficiency	Weber, 1978; Henry, 1975; Clarke & Clegg, 1999
New Public Management (NPM)	Market-oriented efficiency, managerialism	Value creation happens in public-private partnerships Value is measurable through efficiency and effectiveness	Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Gruening, 2001; Hood, 1991; Lapiente & Van de Walle, 2020
New Public Governance (NPG) <sup>9</sup>	Networks, collaboration, co-creation	Value is co-produced in service networks through stakeholder collaboration Public value creation requires deliberate citizen participation	Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024; Rhodes, 2017; Osborne et al., 2022

Within paradigms, a dominant logic is a common cognitive orientation or frame that guides decision-making and resource allocation, and can be defined as a socially constructed and culturally bound way of providing meaning to daily activities, experiences, and ways of organising time and space (Thornton et al. 2012, p. 2). A dominant logic thus steers thoughts and actions regarding common assumptions,

<sup>8</sup> Concept of “a relational turn” as per Eacott (2017) in “The relational turn in social sciences.”

<sup>9</sup> Additional notions on public value management through network governance by Stoker (2006) are also interpreted in the NPG frame.

values, and beliefs, explaining patterns in organisational diversity and performance (Prahalad & Bettis, 1986; Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2). Multiplicity of institutional logics generates institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011; Rossi et al., 2026) and increases jurisdictional complications (Regal & FitzGerald, 2025; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Vivier et al., 2024). For example, under NPM, the dominant logic can be captured as public services bring products that are delivered to customers. In contrast, under NPG, the dominant logic shifts towards definitions of public value emerging through networks and relationships, emphasising trust, collaboration, and co-production in service delivery.

Similarly, the formation of value takes place in different ways depending on the school of thought<sup>10</sup>. Building towards the aim of this study to understand how relationality reconfigures professional work and value co-creation in public services, first, *Service Dominant Logic* (SDL) represents a shift of thought in research attempts to conceptualise a logic suited to the services-production context (Grönroos, 2008). SDL emphasises the activity of the service user, stating that value is only realised in the service user's life as they use the service (*value-in-use*) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, cf. Grönroos & Voima, 2013) and considers service value beyond linear processes of producing commodities, understanding also the significance of relationships in co-creating services and in ecosystemic contexts (Mele et al., 2014). From this viewpoint, value is co-created by the actors involved in the value process (Grönroos, 2019). According to Osborne (2018), the co-creation requirement indicates that the value of the service cannot be captured in its characteristics, as the perceived value of the service is affected by the user's individual situations. Consequently, it is the service user who creates value in their lives by their use of a service either in their way (value creation) or by sharing the creation process with service providers (value co-creation) (Osborne et al., 2021a).

Second, as Grönroos (2019) argues, while SDL offers a useful philosophical foundation, it collapses under the weight of practical implementation (p. 777). *Public Service Logic* (PSL), as proposed by Osborne (2018), also builds on this thought by focusing on how public service organisations can facilitate value co-creation through well-designed service processes (cf. Skarli, 2023), conjoining marketing theory and public service management thinking (Kinder & Stenvall, 2023). In its approach, PSL shifts the emphasis from organisation-driven delivery to collaborative value

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in *Goods-Dominant Logic* (GDL) the creation of value is seen as a process where the consumer's activity or contribution is not relevant, but value is created as a result of a production process as consumers acquire the commodities (*value-in-exchange*) (Mele et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) and value is destroyed as the commodities are consumed (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). As a consequence, service production is complicated by the strong requirement of continuously innovating new products to attract consumers (Toivonen & Tuominen, 2009).

generation, where users may actively participate in shaping outcomes (Osborne et al., 2016; Skålén et al., 2018). On this emphasis, the core of PSL lies truly in the concept of value-in-use (Osborne, 2018; Skarli, 2023).

According to PSL, value emerges through co-creation processes, in which the service user is an active participant and the service process is initiated by their actual need (Osborne, 2020; Osborne et al., 2022). Therefore, service user individuality and the experiential nature of the service's value are central in PSL (Osborne, 2020). Accordingly, a public service organisation cannot produce value in itself but rather makes “a value offering” to co-create value with service users. PSL further recognises the ecosystemic nature of public services formed by different operators and service entities, with aims to fulfil the expectations of service users and to create public value (Osborne, 2020; Trischler et al., 2023). However, also PSL has been criticised for drawing on core ideas—such as the notion that value-in-use is the source of public value—from earlier theories, while also downplaying the role of experienced service professionals and their expertise by emphasising voluntary action as the primary driver of public value co-creation (Kinder & Stenvall, 2023). A key point for this study, therefore, is this previously unaddressed question regarding how PSL conceptualises the role of the professional in value co-creation.

The evolution of value co-creation thus aligns with broader paradigm shifts in management and the social sciences, also moving from bureaucratic and hierarchical models towards complex, adaptive, and participatory frameworks (Roberts, 2024). In value co-creational emphasis, organisations are no longer isolated entities, but components of value-creating ecosystems characterised by porous boundaries and fluid roles, accentuating relational features of dialogue, mutual learning, and shared agency (Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021; Vargo et al., 2017). These characteristics challenge expectations of control, predictability, and linear causality of earlier models (Torfing et al., 2021). As discussed by Virtanen and Jalonen (2023), value co-creation is a systemic phenomenon, with potential for “a dark side” and value destruction (Cui & Osborne, 2023; Steen et al., 2018), denoting that the creation of value for one can result in the destruction of value for another (Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021; Skarli, 2023). With this in mind, in the digital age, platforms, data, and user participation further redefine how value is generated and perceived (Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021). This development reinforces the need for ecosystem-based approaches to innovation and governance (Aksoy, 2023; Toivonen & Tuominen, 2009). *In the context of this study, value co-creation is seen as both a consequence and a catalyst of changing paradigms and the logics within them, signifying a transition from individual to collective, from static to emergent, and from transactional to relational understandings of value.*

The relationality of value co-creation shapes the development and governance of the public service landscape more profoundly than a mere reframing of value in services. Contemporary public administration is characterised above all by systemic complexity (Riemer et al., 2025; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) that spans across network governance, inter-organisational relationships, co-creation and co-production, and the multidimensional accommodation of citizen participation (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). While structural integration remains important in the deliberate design of public service environments, it is insufficient on its own to sustain value-generating relationships (Strokosch & Roy, 2025).

In public services, it proves invaluable to attend to the micro level relational interactions among actors both within service domains and across their boundaries (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). The *relational integration*, in this sense, privileges the dynamics of human relationships over structural fixes or procedural redesigns (Osborne et al., 2022; Strokosch & Roy, 2025). Advancing relational integration implies identifying the actors<sup>11</sup> involved in value co-creation and strengthening participatory structures that enable meaningful involvement (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013), while creating opportunities for learning across institutional silos so that local service needs and place-based resources are recognised (Beirão et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2022; van der Heijden et al., 2025). This advancement also requires careful preparation for structural integration as well as innovative methods (Skålén et al., 2018) supporting service user and community actor participation (Regal & FitzGerald, 2025; Strokosch & Roy, 2025). Rules, routines, and performance regimes can either enable relational integration across professions and sectors (Tuurnas, 2015) or constrain it (French et al., 2023), shaping not only frontline practice but also the conditions for learning, networking, and collaboration (Strokosch & Roy, 2025). Consequently, relational conditions either enable or curtail value co-creation at the service interface, depending, for example, on whether dominant governance logics emphasise efficiency and standardised measurement (Osborne et al., 2016) at the expense of responsiveness to individual context and experience (Osborne et al., 2022).

Recognising, identifying, and accepting the relational characteristics of public services, administrative practices, and governance inevitably leads away from the consumer–producer logic typical of the NPM paradigm and its emphasis on efficiency as the primary measure of value (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). While Strokosch and Roy (2025) acknowledge that relationality has become a prominent

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Berger and Neuhaus (2021) discuss the role of third sector in connecting the community domain with decision makers, whereas Skarli (2023), and Bast et al. (2024) consider the responsabilisation of service user representatives and family carers in value co-creation processes.

feature of contemporary public administration, they emphasise that it is not a new phenomenon. Earlier scholarship in public administration also addressed relational dimensions, albeit indirectly<sup>12</sup>. These studies do not conceptualise relationships *per se*; rather, relationality is framed as a contextual feature of administrative action (Strokosch & Roy, 2025). The growing prominence of relational factors underpins the NPG paradigm instead, reframing the concept of value co-creation to account for the administrative and political constraints that shape professional practice, the complex human factors that both challenge and support it, and the influence of values and value conflicts on professional priorities (Osborne et al., 2016; Osborne et al., 2022).

Within NPG, trust, relational capital, and relational contracts operate as primary governance mechanisms (Osborne, 2006). A consistent theme in NPG-oriented research is the assertion that relationships and interaction explain both the outcomes and processes of network-based governance models (Strokosch & Roy, 2025), though the inherent complexity of these dynamics often renders conclusions ambiguous (Cairney & Geyer, 2015, pp. 1–18). Furthermore, NPG conceptualises network governance (Strokosch & Roy, 2025) and ecosystem thinking (Osborne et al., 2022) as distinct yet interdependent units of analysis, whose collective value exceeds what they achieve apart because of the interactional nature of value co-creation. However, the challenge for governance and management lies in the emergent behavioural patterns of networks, which may diverge significantly from the behaviour of individual actors (Cairney & Geyer, 2015, pp. 1–18; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). While this thesis situates public services within a broader service ecosystem, its analytical focus is on relational actions at the individual level, examining professional roles and agency, perceived changes in these roles, and the factors that enable or constrain agency within the conceptual context of value co-creation.

## 2.2 Value co-creation in the public services context

Specifically, this study examines professional work from a public service value co-creation perspective. To reveal the relational dimensions in the value creation viewpoint, it is essential to distinguish between the concepts of *public value* and *public values*, both of which play a critical role in shaping the normative foundations of public administration. For example, in *Creating Public Value* (1995), Moore conceptualises public value as the enhancement of societal well-being through effective, legitimate, and operationally sound public institutions (p. 29). This

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Lindblom (1957) explores relational aspects in public decision-making, such as ideologies relation to actions (p. 244), parties relations with voters (p. 245), and “class conflicts” relation to societal agreement capabilities (p. 250), whereas Barrett and Fudge (1981) discuss the relationship of policy and actions in public services context.

perspective is also supported by Vargo et al. (2008), who depict public value as the improvement in system well-being, rooted in SDL and collaborative resource integration (cf. Beirão et al., 2017). Because of “the assets entrusted to them by the public”, public value creation should be the focus of public managers (Moore, 2021, p. 1). Publicly valuable institutional effectiveness includes the administrative capacity to ensure resource availability, political legitimacy, and service productivity (Moore, 1995, pp. 29–36; Volodina & Grossi, 2025), combined with the necessary operational capacity to deliver the desired results (Moore, 2021). However, Alford (2015) suggests that public value is also “enjoyed by the citizenry” (p. 681), revealing the experiential, subjective, and relational dimensions of public value (cf. Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Complementing the managerial perspectives, the concept of public value was later expanded to include value co-creation (Alford, 2015; Vargo et al., 2008), emphasising that public value is not only delivered by institutions but also created through interactions between citizens and service professionals. Although participatory perspectives emphasise the external, service-user experience-based, relational, or other abstract definitions of public value, in practice, service efficiency and cost-effectiveness are paramount (Strokosch & Roy, 2025). These practical perspectives steer value interpretations with ecological terminology, following the traditions of the NPM paradigm. This, in turn, affects decision-makers’, service buyers’, and providers’ impressions on how and where service effectiveness is measured. The dominant paradigm steering practice can thus prevent the observation of co-created service value, as it may focus on measuring internal processes, instead of the relational effects of individual, community, or third-sector actor participation. In well-being services and social welfare contexts, relational factors affect service processes and their results extensively.

In contrast, *public values* refer to the normative principles and societal expectations that guide public sector behaviour (Rutgers & Overeem, 2014, p. 806). Bozeman (2007) defines public values as the collectively held beliefs about the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of citizens, and the principles upon which government and policies should be based (p. 63). These values are not static; they evolve, reflecting shifts in societal consensus and democratic deliberation. As such, public values serve as a moral compass for public institutions, shaping what is considered appropriate, just, and legitimate in governance (Bozeman, 2007; Moore, 1995)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Davis and West (2009) and Meynhardt (2009) discuss public values in relation to public value creation.

While public value and public values are conceptually distinct, they are closely connected. Public value is often realised through the operationalisation of public values in policy and practice. The lack of consensus on public values complicates the development of analytical tools for public value measurement (Bozeman, 2002; Rutgers & Overeem, 2014), yet it also underscores the importance of understanding the normative pluralism in public administration. Both concepts are embedded in the architecture of public policy, influencing how professionals make decisions (Schott et al., 2016), interpret their roles, and interact with service users (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). Recognising the interplay between public value and public values is key to understanding the ethical, strategic, and relational dimensions of public service. Instead of being merely implementers of policy, *public service professionals are co-creators of value*, whose actions are shaped by, and contribute to, evolving public values (Kahn, 2018; Meynhardt et al., 2024). This dual orientation demands reflexivity, accountability, and a commitment to democratic principles in everyday administrative practice from professionals (Kahn, 2018).

In the context of public services, value co-creation refers primarily to the value generated for participants during a service encounter, particularly pertaining to the formation of individual micro-level value (Cluley & Radnor, 2020; Skarli, 2023). However, service encounters can also generate value for other stakeholders, and organisations aim to achieve value through encounters as well, even though in the public services context their funding would not be derived directly from service users (Osborne et al., 2022)<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, value co-creation occurring within service encounters contributes to the formation of public value at the societal level, as citizens and other members of society receive support and assistance. Co-creation occurring within service encounters contributes to the formation of public value at the societal level, as citizens and other members of society receive support and assistance in their role as service users (Kurkela et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2022). The dissertation's focus on the context of public services directs the analysis towards services produced at the societal level and their distinctive characteristics (Osborne et al., 2022).

Although value co-creation is dependent on value facilitation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), Grönroos (2019) distinguishes between the two concepts by arguing that, although connected and mutually interdependent, value facilitation and value co-creation describe different phases of the process (p. 783). This distinction foregrounds the role of public service professionals, whose interactions during service encounters

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<sup>14</sup> As a supplementary note, public services vary from private producers not only in terms of financial interests, but also in the aim to reduce service user needs for further services, whereas private services desire customers return (Best et al., 2019). Furthermore, not all public service users are voluntary (e.g. Cluley & Radnor, 2020).

transform value-facilitating public service structures and protocols into actual value co-creation events. Grönroos (2019) conceptualises this distinction by introducing a “joint sphere” of relational value co-creation, which intersects the service sphere and the individual sphere, each representing the respective stakeholders separately (pp. 782–783). The joint sphere highlights that as service users engage with public services, they interact with other individuals at various stages of the process. Consequently, when the service user enters this joint sphere, value-facilitating institutional structures have the potential to enable and foster value co-creation.

Public service value co-creation is grounded in the understanding that collaboration is a dynamic, interactive human process (Beirão et al., 2017; Hardyman et al., 2015; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013), requiring mutual resource exchange and the co-development of strategic goals between professionals and service users (Keeling et al., 2021; Palumbo et al., 2020)<sup>15</sup>. This interaction cultivates shared spaces where values, beliefs, and practices are negotiated across multiple levels and networks (Pillitteri et al., 2021; Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021). In this context, the service user is not a passive recipient but a knowledgeable partner (Payne et al., 2008), while the professional contributes institutional expertise and interpretive capacity (Eriksson & Andersson, 2024). Trust, mutual respect, and strong communication skills are essential to sustaining lucrative partnerships (Keeling et al., 2021; Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021; Rousseau et al., 1998). To facilitate value co-creation, professionals must continuously adapt to the unique needs and capabilities of each service user, making the collaboration an iterative and relational process (Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021). Hence, a collaborative strategy often evolves through repeated negotiation, enhancing ethicality and knowledge integration (Beirão et al., 2017; Pillitteri et al., 2021).

The integration of resources – knowledge, skills, and relational capital – is central to value co-creation. Reciprocity in co-creative relationships also reconfigures traditional power dynamics (Skarli, 2021). While professionals retain institutional authority and responsibility for service continuity, they must also support the user’s agency and participation (Chen et al., 2025; Farr, 2018). This includes clearly articulating the benefits of co-creation and the risks of disengagement, particularly in long-term service contexts such as chronic care (Cramm & Nieboer, 2016). Importantly, professionals act as interpreters of public service systems, translating bureaucratic language and processes into accessible knowledge for users. In return, they gain insights into users’ lived experiences, enabling more personalised and

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<sup>15</sup> Value co-creation, the required collaboration, resource exchange, and co-creation of strategic goals are discussed further in Sub-study 1 of this dissertation, and the collaboration, especially with service users and representatives from other institutions in Sub-study 2 of this dissertation.

responsive service delivery (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). However, this dual role also imposes administrative burdens and may constrain creativity, as professionals must balance systemic requirements with individualisation<sup>16</sup>.

High-quality interactions not only improve service outcomes but also enhance professionals' sense of competence and purpose (Osborne et al., 2022; Cluley & Radnor, 2020). When successful, interactions extend beyond the immediate encounter because users may become advocates for services or assist others, contributing to extending societal value (Kurkela et al., 2025). Conversely, failed collaboration can lead to value destruction (Bozeman, 2002), undermining trust and service effectiveness (Engen et al., 2021). Accordingly, professionals bear a critical responsibility: to initiate, sustain, and monitor collaborative processes, ensuring that service users are not left to navigate systems alone.

In contemporary public administration, the concept of value is increasingly understood as being shaped by the perceptions and experiences of service users: Rather than being a static output defined by institutions, public service value emerges through dynamic interactions and relations between users and service providers (Osborne, 2020; Trischler et al., 2023). A successful service encounter may also generate value for stakeholders other than the immediate parties, including public service organisations (Osborne et al., 2016). Even if funding is not derived directly from service users, organisations still aim to achieve value through improved outcomes, efficiency, and legitimacy (*ibid.*). The epochal role of contemporary public service organisations is thus not only to deliver services but to facilitate value creation processes that are meaningful to individuals and communities (Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021). Secondly, value co-creation within service encounters contributes to the formation of public value at the societal level, as citizens and other service users, in their role as members of society, receive support and assistance as a result of successful encounters, which in turn foster social cohesion, trust, and democratic legitimacy (Alford, 2015; Moore, 1995).

Public services differ from private ones in their financial logic and normative goals. While private services often aim to encourage repeat use by satisfied customers, public services are designed to reduce the user's future need for assistance, promoting autonomy and well-being (Needham, 2008). Moreover, not all public service users engage voluntarily; some are obliged to (Alford, 2015; Osborne, 2018). However, that does not preclude value being created in non-voluntary service encounters (Lindqvist & Westrup, 2020). On the contrary, as an example, the prison system – when conceptualised as extending beyond its custodial function – can

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<sup>16</sup> More on public service professionals balancing public and individual value creation in Sub-study 1, and in chapter 2.4 of this dissertation.

contribute to public value through rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, and the protection of social order. Public value, in this context, refers to outcomes that enhance societal well-being, democratic legitimacy, and institutional trust (Rousseau et al., 1998; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2023), and are generated by upholding human rights and dignity within operations: Transparent governance, ethical treatment, and participatory decision-making enhance institutional legitimacy and public trust. Additionally, the implementation of a non-voluntary service may also result in individual value gain through the improvement in the quality of life as a result of a successful rehabilitation process, experienced by all stakeholders of the value co-creation process, whether recuperative or correctional.

In this regard, value co-creation is particularly important in the public services context. Public services consist of a chain of service interactions, the links of which are connected according to individual needs. Seamless policy delivery and communication in service chains is sought after, as each service encounter is shaped by the outcomes of previous ones and, in turn, influences subsequent encounters (Lindqvist & Westrup, 2020). From the perspective of professional practice, it is important to recognise that the effects of individual service encounters also reflect on the professionals themselves (Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021). The multidimensional impacts of value co-creation are transmitted within complex social systems, often in unpredictable ways, and value is not always generated where it was originally intended (Steen et al., 2018). Despite the challenges, the recognition of service users as central to public value creation has profound implications for public service governance (Strokosch & Osborne, 2020), calling for a shift in institutional logic to embrace relational, participatory, and adaptive approaches to service design and delivery (Osborne et al., 2016; Roberts, 2024). In this view, public value is a negotiated outcome shaped by the lived experiences, expectations, and contributions of diverse service users.

### 2.3 Public service professionals as value co-creators

The term *professional* fundamentally refers to the act of practising an occupation. From a normative, administrative perspective, professionalism is therefore understood to encompass an occupational station (Aschhoff & Vogel, 2019) grounded in a specialised skill or education (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013; Caza & Creary, 2016, p. 262). In the context of public administration, this broader interpretation implies that any public sector employee may be regarded as a professional, provided they acquire the requisite competences through specialised education and training (Aschhoff & Vogel, 2019; Tuurnas, 2015; van Bockel & Noordegraaf, 2006). This view aligns with scholarship emphasising that professionalism in public governance is

shaped by formal qualifications and also by organisational expectations, occupational norms, and evolving service-user relationships (Croft et al., 2014; Noordegraaf, 2015). Professional status can thus be seen as emerging, first, from the occupation itself; second, from the acquisition and accumulation of the competencies required for that occupation; and third, from the official recognition of such competencies through certification granted by an authorised professional body (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013; Wilensky, 1964). This administrative understanding reinforces the idea that professionalism is both a formal and socially constructed, and is shaped by institutionalised standards, jurisdictional boundaries, and the perceived legitimacy of expertise within public sector work (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2020).

*Professionalism* is constituted not only by formal professional status but also through the capacity to perform in a professional role in ways required by both the occupation and the specific demands of work tasks. Although PSEs are shaped by organisational, administrative, and policy frameworks that guide decision-making, the defining elements of professionalism are closely tied to perceptions of agency<sup>17</sup> and the factors that constrain it. Professionalism is therefore embedded within broader organisational and societal contexts rather than residing solely in specialised knowledge, occupational status, or professional autonomy (Noordegraaf, 2020; Schott et al., 2015).

While professionals in public organisations have traditionally been characterised as autonomous actors within professionalised bureaucracies (Sehested, 2002), the contemporary landscape of public administration reflects a significant reconfiguration of professional work. Professionalism increasingly incorporates clerical and administrative components, such as data entry, digital documentation, and extensive record-keeping (Dunleavy et al., 2008; Noordegraaf, 2015)<sup>18</sup>. These elements permeate conventional markers of professionalism by introducing practices more commonly associated with administrative or managerial tasks. As administrative processes become more integrated into everyday professional work, the boundary between professional discretion and organisational routines becomes more fluid (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010). Within administrative sciences, it is therefore reasonable to incorporate this shift in work content into the definition of professionals. Recognising the hybrid nature of professional tasks highlights how

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<sup>17</sup> Professional agency is a common research focus in a sociology context, and reviewed, for example, from an agency relationship perspective by Shapiro (2005), and from the sociological interpretations on professionalism perspective by Evetts (2003), who also discusses the relationship between professional and organisational logics (Evetts, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Hybrid professionalism is discussed by Noordegraaf (2015) from the perspective of autonomy and control integrated into contemporary professional work, but also by Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) as emerging from mutual adjustment requirements. Rantala and Karjaluoto (2017) explore the complexity in contemporary operational settings, requiring adaptation of various co-existing roles, implying hybridity within professional practice.

professionalism is increasingly enacted through a blend of expert judgement, administrative compliance, and interaction with service users (Wagenaar, 2004), thereby reflecting evolving expectations of public organisations and their workforce (Noordegraaf, 2015; Schott et al., 2015).

Professional status is intertwined with the normative foundations of public values (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). This connection provides the practitioner of professional work with a degree of autonomy grounded in the legitimacy of public value commitments (Brandsen & Hohning, 2013). Conversely, people who could be classified as street-level bureaucrats (e.g. Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala, 2025) or clerical bureaucrats (de Andrade & Pekkola, 2025) have increasingly sought to attain professional status and incorporate elements of professional discretion into their roles in response to expanding administrative complexity (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Wagenaar, 2004) and growing reliance on individual judgement (Noordegraaf, 2015; Schott et al., 2015). However, borrowing a sociological perspective, bureaucrats are not regarded as professionals in the same sense as, for example, healthcare workers or police officers (see Lipsky, 2010, p. 14), reflecting differences in occupational training, organisational expectations, and the nature of expertise (Evetts, 2011). This distinction highlights how different traditions of knowledge, service-user interaction, and organisational authority shape understandings of professional work in the public sector. In this dissertation, the concept of professional therefore refers to *a public service employee mandated by their organisation to employ discretion in decision-making processes during service encounters, irrespective of a clerical component in their role or their specific educational background.*

The definition of a professional above foregrounds the authority to exercise discretion as the core attribute of professionalism in public service delivery. From a historical perspective, public servants operated within rigid institutional frameworks, implementing policies and delivering services according to predefined procedures. This approach was rooted in NPM, which emphasised the cost-efficiency and market orientation in service production<sup>19</sup>. Under NPM, moreover, the professional role was reduced to a mechanistic function as an organisational resource, limiting the scope for discretion and the application of professional expertise (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). The role of public service professionals has since evolved through management reforms aiming to change the functional culture in the public sector (Sehested, 2002). Nevertheless, research on street-level bureaucracy recognised the connections between administrative roles (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Hupe & Hill, 2007) and that public policy is made tangible in service-level encounters (Lipsky, 1980).

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<sup>19</sup> New Public Management is discussed further in Chapter 2.1

A relationally aware perspective on professional work has emerged alongside the recognition that administrative actors are integrally connected to other individuals in their practical work (O’Leary & Vij, 2012; Wagenaar, 2004), and that discretionary professional actions are, in practice, relational interactions involving service users, co-workers, managerial policies, and contingent situational factors (Evans, 2010, p. 21; Hupe & Buffat, 2014). These insights reflect a broader paradigmatic shift from transactional to relational understandings of public service delivery and help reconfigure public service work as a process of collaborative sense-making rather than as the execution of predefined administrative routines. Consequently, public service professionals are increasingly viewed as more than implementers of bureaucratic policy and as adopting the role of agents of democratic renewal who can navigate complexity and foster inclusion (Bast et al., 2024). They can, moreover, contribute to co-creating public value in diverse and evolving governance contexts (Henry, 1975; Osborne et al., 2022).

The emergence of value co-creation as a central tenet in public administration reflects a broader ontological shift from hierarchical, bureaucratic governance models to more participatory, networked, and citizen-centric approaches (Osborne et al., 2021a). However, Wilson et al. (2024) argue that although academics may have entered a relationally aware post-NPM era in the research context, in practice, the world is often viewed through the transactional legacy of NPM, deeply affecting the lived experience of public service work. The divide between relationally aware public administration research (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020) and lived practice is highlighted in public service reform (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). The partition challenges administrative scrutiny, creating a knowledge deficit, and therefore challenges the practical implementation of research.

## 2.4 Interactions and relation building in service encounters

Value co-creation is understood as a process of dynamic and iterative negotiation between multiple stakeholders (Strokosch & Roy, 2025). Their interdependence is not peripheral but a defining characteristic of the service ecosystem and a crucial determinant of its capacity to create public value (Vargo et al., 2017). This relational interdependence situates value co-creation as a collective, negotiated accomplishment embedded within evolving networks of meaning, authority, and resources. Service encounters are not merely transactional moments – they are dynamic interactions that hold the potential to either create (Strokosch & Osborne, 2020) or destroy value (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010; Skarli, 2021; Steen et al., 2018).

In contemporary public service settings, single service encounters connect through individually inclined service paths into chains of events to become embedded within public service ecosystems, in multilevel, multi-actor, and interdependent constellations (Osborne et al., 2022; Trischler et al., 2023)<sup>20</sup>. In service ecosystems, value co-creation is not confined to the immediate interaction but extends to broader societal impacts (Ojasalo & Kauppinen, 2024; Osborne et al., 2022). Cluley and Radnor (2020) describe value co-creation in the public services context as a systemic and flexible process, where no single actor dominates, but instead, individual professionals, users, or other stakeholders collaborate within service chains that adapt to individual needs. Value co-creation is thus “in a constant state of becoming” (p. 215), as each encounter is shaped by the outcomes of previous ones and influences subsequent interactions, making seamless continuity critical to value creation (Lindqvist & Westrup, 2020; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020).

The boundaries between professional and lay knowledge are becoming increasingly permeable due to the digital transformation that dominates the contemporary public service landscape, leaving public service professionals to operate in environments where diverse forms of knowledge and perspectives converge (Beirão et al., 2017; Bynner & Terje, 2021; Tuurnas, 2015). The changes in the knowledge environment challenge conventional notions of expertise, foregrounding the capability for critical reflexivity on personal assumptions, policy practices, and power dynamics inherent in complex governance ecosystems (Mergel et al., 2019). Professional legitimacy can no longer be derived solely from formal authority, but from their ability to build trust, foster open dialogue, and engage in mutual learning (Cluley & Radnor, 2020; Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021), emphasising the relational dimensions of service encounters.

Digitalisation has intensified changes in work strategy by enabling new ways of engagement and service delivery (Lember et al., 2019; Rantala & Karjaluoto, 2017). As interactions are increasingly supported by technology (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014), co-creation positions professionals as facilitators of collaborative processes that define problems and co-design solutions (Osborne et al., 2016). This shift requires professionals to develop relational competencies, emotional intelligence, and adaptive capacity, in addition to traditional technical expertise (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2023). While digital platforms and data-driven tools offer opportunities for innovation and responsiveness, they also introduce ethical complications, necessitating inclusiveness in their design (Rodriguez Müller et al.,

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<sup>20</sup> The interdependency referred to relates to the complexity of public service systems, discussed, for example, by Vargo et al. (2008), who argue that service ecosystems comprise complex constellations of integrated resources. Palumbo et al. (2020) similarly note that environmental complexity complicates inter-organisational relationships, while insights from Beirão et al. (2017) demonstrate how systems thinking enables a more nuanced understanding of complex services.

2021). The co-creation paradigm thus introduces both opportunities and tensions for professional work. It enhances responsiveness and democratic legitimacy yet simultaneously complicates decision-making and increases emotional and cognitive demands on professionals (Voorberg et al., 2017).

The informational dynamics of service encounters are increasingly interdependent owing to both the growing recognition of the active role of the service user in enabling value co-creation (Osborne, 2018) and information technologies enhancing access to information. Value co-creation is intended to enhance systemic well-being (Vargo et al., 2008; Voorberg et al., 2015) but is not immune to failure (Steen et al., 2018). When material, informational, or relational resources are misused, the intended value may not only fail to emerge but may be actively undermined (Engen et al., 2021; Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala, 2025). Accordingly, if value is defined as an improvement in systemic well-being, deviations from appropriate or expected resource use can result in value destruction, particularly when the integrity of the broader system is disrupted (Williams et al., 2016).

Value co-destruction can be understood as a consequence of mutual resource misuse during interactions (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010; Williams et al., 2016). Such misuse may originate from either service providers or service users and be accidental – for instance, due to insufficient training – or intentional, as in cases of the abuse of authority or unethical behaviour by service users (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006; Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala, 2025; Lumivalo et al., 2024). In this evolving context, individuals and organisations benefit from accessing relationship-based information, social connections, and influence (Regal & FitzGerald, 2025), which can jeopardise integrity. In addition, Williams et al. (2016) extend the concept to incorporate value co-contamination, which occurs when either party misuses its resources or those of another, resulting in diminished trust, reduced legitimacy, and compromised service outcomes. A poorly executed rehabilitation programme, for example, may fail to support the target individual but also erode trust (also Skarli, 2021) and public confidence in the institution responsible for delivering it.

Crucially, the consequences of service encounters are not confined to their immediate temporal or social surroundings but ripple through the service ecosystem, shape future interactions, and influence individual and stakeholder perceptions of public institutions. The outcomes of service encounters feed back into professional practice, reputation, and capacity to create value (Jakobsen & Andersen, 2013; Osborne et al., 2016). Because of the profound effects, understanding the relational dimensions in value co-creation processes and mitigating resource misuse are essential for safeguarding public value and ensuring that co-creation efforts do not inadvertently trigger co-destruction. *The same interactions that enable co-creation also carry an*

*inherent risk of value being diminished or destroyed when relational, informational, or material resources are misapplied* (Steen et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). For example, declination of an application for early retirement may diminish immediate, experienced value at the individual level, insofar as the user does not obtain the desired outcome, yet may simultaneously create societal value through fiscal savings and from an equity perspective. Over time, the individual may also experience positive value through successful reintegration into society with the education they received instead of retirement. This transformation underscores the temporal and relational nature of value-in-use, which is not always immediately positive and is highly dependent on the quality of service interactions (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020; Skarli, 2021).

The example above also illustrates that the counterpoint to the risk factors associated with value destruction is the potential for a public service encounter to produce indirect positive value effects that extend into future interactions (Voorberg et al., 2015). This underscores the importance of professional awareness, as the outcomes of service encounters reflect on both users and the professionals involved in delivering them (Gyllenhammar et al., 2023). The multidimensional impacts of value co-creation and co-destruction reverberate through complex social systems, often unpredictably. Accordingly, service encounters are critical nodes in a network of interactions, where public value is negotiated, shaped, and sometimes lost.

The exploration of administrative changes in professional working environments reveals that in the public services context, the shift towards relational understandings has been profound. In addition, both the treatment and the engagement of service users have evolved from targeting standardised equality to pursuing equitable individualisation. The implication is that professionals must now formulate a tailored service that encompasses a constellation of services rather than a standardised one (Kurkela et al., 2025). The current study's focus on micro-level relationships and partnership mechanics emphasises quality factors, such as equity, strengths-based work distribution, and active co-creation, which are also commonly proposed in practice-oriented accounts (Wilson et al., 2024). Shifting public practices from transactionalism to embrace a more relational systemic perspective also involves a shift in narratives on service emphasis from the reactive to the preventative (Wilson et al., 2024). The transformation fundamentally alters roles, competencies, and relational dynamics, and thus has significant implications for the working life of public service professionals (Vandenbussche et al., 2025).

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Interpreting interactions through a relational ontology

Scientific enquiry seeks to observe reality as it presents itself in the present moment (Behn, 1995; Meier & O'Toole, 2011; Ostrom, 1990, pp. 22–34). In this study, I aim to reveal realities of public services in the Finnish research context, but also to draw informative conclusions more generally. This research does not seek to present statistically representative findings but to provide analytic generalisations derived from the theoretical insights elicited by its sub-studies, which can be extended to broader conceptual understandings (Pines & West, 1986). Broadly, public administration research aims to enhance efficiency (Moynihan & Pandey, 2005), effectiveness (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025), and responsiveness in public management and policy implementation (Bryer, 2006). To this end, administration is also conceptualised in this study as a scientific problem of governance and bureaucratic design (see Meier & Krause, 2003), situated within the study of structures and routines that shape organisational and individual behaviour (Hattke & Vogel, 2023).

To understand this administrative reality, in this study I acknowledge not only structural conditions and normative or linear process descriptions (Hood, 1991; Peters, 2019), but also the dimensions that influence public service systems beyond direct causal pathways operating systemically, relationally, and often unpredictably (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Gerrits & Verweij, 2015; Klijn, 2008). When administrative phenomena are understood this way as complex entities, their interpretation becomes inherently challenging (Comfort, 1994; Kettl, 2000)<sup>21</sup>. Complexity implies the presence of multiple interacting components whose combined effects cannot be inferred from their individual behaviour alone (Gerrits & Verweij, 2015; Klijn, 2008). Consequently, administrative realities resist simplistic or linear explanations (Bozeman, 2007, p. 2; Osborne, 2006), instead demanding analytical approaches attentive to reflexivity (Feindt & Weiland, 2018), emergence, contingency, and interdependence (Meier & O'Toole, 2002).

To respond to these interpretative challenges, in this dissertation I adopt a relational ontology to distil the results of the sub-studies, denoting that reality is understood via relationships and processes. This approach allows acknowledging that in public administration research, decision points are pivotal junctures where interaction,

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Jalonen (2025) discusses complexity in politico-administrative systems settings.

power, resources, and interpretations condense to become action (Skarli, 2021; Torfing et al., 2025), often within multi-actor governance arrangements and public service ecosystems (Osborne et al., 2016; Wang & Ran, 2024). From this perspective, *value co-creation is not merely continuous meaning-negotiation; it is a process of opening, delimiting, and closing options under uncertainty and in the presence of competing value criteria* (Mikkelsen & Røiseland, 2024; Torfing et al., 2025). Consequently, value co-creation cannot be portrayed as a linear input–output chain; it must be considered a complex event (Polese et al., 2017), in which roles, meanings, and goals are continuously negotiated within relationships (Cluley & Radnor, 2020). Successes and breakdowns in value creation do not stem simply from individual attributes or motivation but from the ordering of relations and the nexus of practices (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012, p. 44). This perspective illuminates why, in practice, short appointment times, performance-driven metrics, or rigid information systems are significant nodes that reconfigure the value that can be created collaboratively (Osborne, 2018; Osborne et al., 2021b).

Accordingly, the study does not treat value as a static attribute that the public service professional or user possesses or produces. In contrast, value is considered *emergent* and arising from encounters where individually negotiated meanings, expectations, and resources intertwine, an insight integral to the public service logic (PSL) and ecosystem perspectives (Osborne et al., 2016; 2021a)<sup>22</sup>. Adopting a relational ontology means this imposition becomes entwined with the assumption that the world consists of “modes of association”, affecting and being affected by the actors and their environment (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020, p. 1328). Value co-creation emerges, therefore, as a relational, negotiated, and emergent phenomenon from a network of interactions; it is not a transaction or step in a linear process, but a relational event in which actors and their identities are sculpted simultaneously (Acar et al., 2025; Cluley & Radnor, 2020).

In this sense, drawing on a relational ontology sharpens understanding of decisions and non-decisions in value co-creation, referring to moments through which certain forms of value become possible while others are sidelined (Mikkelsen & Røiseland, 2024). The relational ontology, therefore, supports the objectives of this study by shifting the focus from individuals and their attributes to relations and processes that shape both actors and social phenomena (Eacott, 2017; Emirbayer, 1997). This perspective also resonates strongly with the service research concept of value-in-use, which asserts that value is realised in use and encounters, not because of service production (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2016). Finally, the relational lens resonates with

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<sup>22</sup> Sawyer (2005) discusses social emergence as resulting from societal complexity, which causes global behavioural patterns to form from actions and interactions of individuals (p. 2).

the Finnish context through current contemporary public administration debates about interactive governance and multi-level decision-making, where local political leadership (Paananen, 2022) and professional practice co-evolve with citizens' roles across service cycles (Paronen et al., 2022, pp. 175–196).

In the public services context, PSL emphasises that value is co-created within service systems, and as such, is not a measurable organisational output (Osborne, 2018; Osborne et al., 2016). Relational ontology deepens this perspective by highlighting that the conditions for value co-creation are embedded in the quality of relationships, in practices, and in physical arrangements, which enable certain forms of value while constraining others (Cluley & Radnor, 2020; Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012, pp. 46–48). Recent public administration research reinforces this view by framing co-creation as a fluid and emergent phenomenon shaped by interactions among professionals, citizens, and institutional logics (Acar et al., 2025; Mikkelsen & Røiseland, 2024). Hence, public administration does not operate on a single shared value base; principles such as efficiency, legality, fairness, and legitimacy often coexist in tension (Christensen & Lægheid, 2025). Therefore, barriers to value co-creation arise from both breakdowns in interaction and from actors' reliance on divergent and frequently implicit normative foundations (Torfing et al., 2025). A relational approach, adopted in this study, helps to identify such tensions and assess how competing value frameworks materialise in encounters between professionals and service users.

From a relational standpoint, agency manifests in who is permitted to participate in decision-making, with what knowledge, and under which evaluation criteria (Torfing et al., 2025), intertwining contributions of actors, organisational emphasis, digital solutions, public policies, and normative regulation into a networked configuration (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). Professionals aiming to create value thus require the relational capacity to navigate between interaction and decision-making. Only then can they interpret situations, reconcile competing objectives, and advance solutions that are both professionally justified and institutionally possible (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Torfing et al., 2025; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

In the context of this study, I interpret professionals as elements of larger networked structures, working with service users, colleagues, organisations, and institutional architectures in relational configurations. Here, the professional identity and responsibility are not fixed, internal resources either, but emerge through interaction (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018) with other actors, hierarchical arrangements, professional norms, regulatory frameworks, and technological infrastructures (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Emirbayer, 1997; Tuurnas et al., 2022, pp. 245–268). Further, when viewed from a relational ontology perspective, the actions of public service

professionals can be understood as situated, relationally constituted, and continuously negotiated. The professional capability to co-create value thus refers to the ability to sustain relationships in which problems are defined collaboratively, realistic and mutually acceptable goals are negotiated, and accomplishing a shared understanding of progress becomes possible (Gherardi, 2012; Osborne, 2018; Wang & Ran, 2024). The relational ontology view understands that barriers to value co-creation do not only result from individual choices or a lack of resources, but can also stem from conflicts in relationships<sup>23</sup>. When a professional's capability to co-create value encounters relational disruptions, such as breaches of trust, role ambiguity, conflicting institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011), or friction caused by extrinsic factors, for example regarding information systems, value co-creation is obstructed, despite individual competencies (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 77–85; Palumbo et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Finally, relational ontology has supported this dissertation's aim of foregrounding the co-constitution of meaning, material arrangements (Daniguelo, 2020), and institutional expectations in micro level interactions (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). It emphasises that social constructions arise through relations while remaining inseparable from the tangible settings in which they are enacted, including physical tools, spaces, and policy rules (Daniguelo, 2020). In public services, this orientation is particularly pertinent because value is intertwined with individual experiences of value-in-use, collective public value goals, and system-level sustainability concerns (Feindt & Weiland, 2018; Osborne, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Adopting a relational ontological perspective in administrative sciences directs empirical attention to relational dynamics and nexuses of practice (Daniguelo, 2020; Vandenbussche et al., 2025). In this dissertation, this orientation helps me to discuss where relations enable or constrain value creation and what reconfigurations of practices and arrangements may alleviate these constraints. Accordingly, adopting a relational ontology signifies more than an abstract philosophical commitment: it also illustrates the chosen orientation for inquiry by linking professionals' lived experiences with the structures and practices in which they are embedded.

### 3.2 Hermeneutic epistemology in promoting comprehensive conceptions

Epistemologically, this dissertation adopts a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective on knowledge, recognising that reality is subjective, relational, and constituted through individual comprehensions and lived experience. Within administrative sciences, hermeneutic approaches emphasise that meaning is

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<sup>23</sup> More discussion on service encounter conflicts in the Sub-study 3 of this dissertation

generated through interpretation and contextual embeddedness (Wagenaar, 2014, pp. 41–48; Yanow, 2007). Knowledge about value co-creation is therefore not viewed here as a mirror of a pre-given object but as a situated accomplishment emerging through encounters, practices, and interpretative acts. From this standpoint, in this dissertation I seek an extensive and holistic understanding rather than the provision of universally applicable or unambiguous predictions. Hermeneutic and interpretive public administration scholarship highlights the importance of grasping the plurality and contextuality of meanings rather than reducing administrative behaviour to linear causal models (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Wagenaar, 2014, p. 10; Yanow, 2007). Here this work proceeds abductively, moving iteratively between empirical material and theoretical sensibilities to reveal approaches, meanings, and relational configurations that enable or obstruct value co-creation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

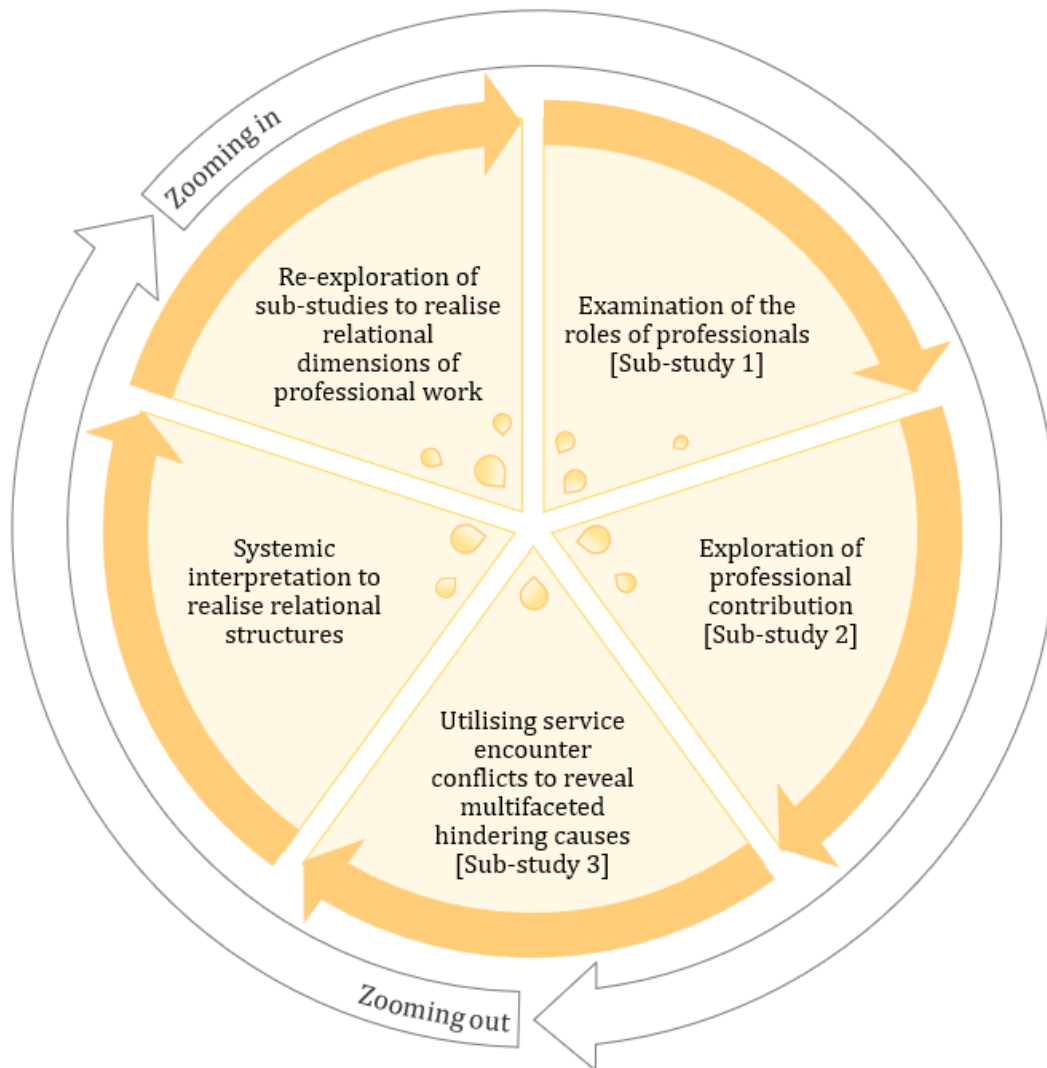
This dissertation treats value as something that manifests within lived practice, hence knowledge about it is experience-proximate and formed through engagement with the interpretive horizons (Wagenaar, 2014, pp. 202–205) of public service professionals and service users (Osborne, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). The phenomenological-hermeneutic view recognises that although understanding occurs through interpretation (Habermas, 1990), these interpretations are themselves shaped by prior understandings, situated contexts, and socio-cultural environments (Hattke & Vogel, 2023). Accordingly, hermeneutic epistemology is considered here particularly fitting for the relational scrutiny of value co-creation in this dissertation, because it enables the examination not only of the empirical world and experiential accounts of public service professionals but also of the interpretative framings, pre-understandings, and meaning-making processes they employ in everyday decision-making.

Hermeneutics originates in the field of interpretation and fundamentally represents a dialectical engagement between the interpreter and the text mediated through linguistic constructs (Habermas, 1990). The interpretative process requires a preliminary horizon of understanding to guide it (Wagenaar, 2014, pp. 202–205). Consequently, in the context of this dissertation, I acknowledge that the generated insights are not universal; instead, they are shaped by traditions embedded within contexts and data, informing also the interpreter's understanding (Habermas, 1990). As hermeneutics enables nuanced and contextual sensitivity (Balfour & Mesaros, 1994) to the obstacles to value co-creation, it is however able to reveal significant insights into the actions, decisions, and conflicts influencing the everyday practices of public service professionals (Hay, 2011; Skálén et al., 2024).

The process of understanding the value co-creation phenomenon is explored in this dissertation through a hermeneutic cycle, moving from the parts to the whole and returning to the parts again (Bleicher, 2017; Debesay et al., 2008; Macdonald & Pinar, 1995; Paterson & Higgs, 2005). This process begins by “zooming in”<sup>24</sup> to observe service-user-centred value co-creation and the roles of professionals as described in value co-creation literature (Sub-study 1), as well as the professional contributions that foster value co-creation (Sub-study 2). Thereafter, the dissertation identifies and interprets conflicts (Sub-study 3) to illuminate factors and moments in value co-creation encounters that jeopardise the core purpose of the process. Finally, the synthesis “zooms out” to examine value co-creation through an integrative, systemic lens and, completing the hermeneutic circle, returns to its parts to articulate the systemic interpretation of the value co-creating dimensions of professional work in public services (Figure 3).

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<sup>24</sup>Zooming in as used here refers to examining specific interactions within service systems, and accordingly, as per Trischler and Charles (2019), value co-creation zooms out to enable a holistic analysis of the value constellation.



**Figure 3.** The hermeneutic cycle of understanding the value co-creation phenomenon in this dissertation

Sub-study 1 explores existing publications in a systematic literature review to establish the state of knowledge on the roles of public service professionals at the point of enquiry. To fully merge the meaning horizons of the text and the interpreters, the sub-study incorporates an additional analytical dimension concerning how these roles shape value formation within co-creation processes. From an epistemological perspective, the systematic nature of the review enables a cumulative understanding of existing knowledge (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield et al., 2003) regarding the roles of professionals in value co-creation literature. Consequently, eight roles are presented. Viewed through the lens of value co-creation, public services fundamentally consist of human encounters (Osborne, 2018; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020), in which relational, emotional, and individual factors shape information sharing and the development of service strategies (Bryson et al., 2014; Nabatchi et al.,

2017). From a hermeneutic perspective, Sub-study 1 therefore first zooms out to observe broader structures and make systemic interpretations before shifting the focus towards the lived experiences of value co-creation in encounters. That process involves zooming in to examine micro-level interactions (Trischler & Charles, 2019), through which the meanings attributed to value co-creation by public service professionals and service users are more fully interpreted.

Sub-study 2 focuses on examining the value-co-creating actions of public service professionals through empirical data. The sub-study concentrates on micro-level practices, aiming to identify activities that could be beneficial at a broader scale and in contexts beyond the immediate research setting. This is pursued by formulating conclusions that transcend individual cases while remaining credible due to their grounding in human experience and theoretically informed interpretation. The objective is to produce insights that are both contextually authentic and analytically robust. Sub-study 3 then reflects on the findings of the preceding Sub-studies by acknowledging that efforts toward value co-creation inherently carry both opportunities and risks, including the potential for value destruction. The study also explores how conflicts reveal not only hindrances but also supportive factors for value co-creation in public service encounters. From a hermeneutic standpoint, Sub-study 3 functions as the interpretive integrator of the whole: challenges identified earlier in the theoretical phase of the dissertation are now examined in terms of both their existence and their potential to be constructively addressed in support of value co-creation.

This study investigates public service value co-creation from multiple vantage points, generating new insights into the phenomenon while re-examining earlier interpretations. According to hermeneutic epistemology, all knowledge constructions are situated historically (Habermas, 1990), and the meanings attributed to professional work by real actors, such as experts, professionals, managers, and leaders, are inherently tied to their specific organisational and societal contexts. As the empirical data for this dissertation were collected in the context of Finnish well-being services, with particular emphasis on co-creation between organisations and service users, the generalisation of the findings to other contexts should be approached critically, in line with broader discussions on research integrity and contextual transferability in interpretive public administration (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). Overall, with a phenomenologically inclined hermeneutic interest in knowledge, this dissertation understands human consciousness as being shaped by historical and social conditions, and therefore as irrevocably situated within specific times and contexts (Habermas, 1990).

### 3.3 Reflection of the research strategy and methods

The research strategy adopted in this study is qualitative and interpretive in its approach to knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, pp. 13–15). A qualitative perspective on knowledge, understanding, and both textual and empirical material is considered suited for an investigation of the effects of relational professionalism (e.g., Bartels, 2017; Noordegraaf, 2015) on value co-creation and professional work, because it allows for understanding the phenomenon from a multidimensional perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2016, pp. 35–40). It also makes it possible to interpret socially constructed reality, which is coloured especially in the empirical data by personal perspectives and the discursive ways in which individuals express themselves.

The chosen interpretive analysis of practice seeks to understand and articulate the practical ways in which interactions are enacted and experienced, how they are in relation to others, and embedded within specific situational contexts (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). A qualitative orientation enables the researcher to observe relational connections within rich narrative expressions, irrespective of linguistic variations. Moreover, the qualitative enquiry mode allows to continuously integrate an underlying awareness of the systemic nature of public services (Beirão et al., 2017). This systemic view emerges in the empirical material, for example, in interviewees' reflections on the factors that influence professionals' daily work, their understanding of service users' lived realities, and the complexities of individual life situations. Furthermore, by exploring relational practices, the interpretations made in this study aim to identify the interactive processes of meaning-making and becoming (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020) within the context of public services.

In this dissertation, I employ multiple data-collection and analysis methods (Table 2) acting as the responsible researcher in all of the sub-studies. Sub-study 1 utilises a systematic literature review of prior research (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, pp. 1–23; Tranfield et al., 2003) on value co-creation in public services, paying particular attention to the actions of professionals within these processes. Through this approach, the sub-study identifies a wide range of literature which, when interpreted inductively in a content-driven manner, enables the formation of identifiable categories illustrating the roles of professionals in value co-creation with an approach not previously conducted at this scale for this topic. The reliability of the literature review is enhanced by its being systematic (Snyder, 2019) and a transparent and detailed description of its implementation (Booth et al., 2021, p. 298), including the use of a PRISMA flowchart to illustrate the literature selection and

exclusion criteria (Moher et al., 2009; Rethlefsen et al., 2021)<sup>25</sup>. The systematic literature review utilises triangulation, meaning it was composed by, in addition to myself, a team of four other researchers, ensuring that the most relevant and reliable material was incorporated (Patton, 1999). Researcher triangulation also assured that the review was executed rigorously and that the reliability of the findings remained high.

Whereas Sub-study 1 relies on prior scientific literature to draw conclusions about professionals in value co-creation, Sub-studies 2 and 3 employ empirical data collected within the Finnish context from three WSCs and Kela.<sup>26</sup> Data collection was conducted through semi-structured thematic interviews by five researchers, myself participating in all but few interview situations calling attention to discussions on perspectives to public service professionals and their work, supplemented by an electronic eDelphi panel composed of public service experts. The full interview dataset is utilised in Sub-study 2, co-authored by myself and two other researchers, allowing the inclusion of perspectives from leaders at various organisational levels alongside those of frontline professionals. The empirical material of the Sub-study 2 is analysed abductively (Aliseda, 2006; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), meaning that emerging themes are iteratively compared with the existing literature through a three-stage analytical process<sup>27</sup>.

The entire eDelphi dataset is reviewed and reported in co-authored Sub-study 3, which examines both the written eDelphi material and anonymised interview transcripts using conflicts as an analytical tool (Rossi & Skarli, 2025). In practice, this entails that in the sub-study, we pinpoint conflicts within the material and systematically tabulate them. In this inductive process, we identified how conflicts contribute to the destruction of value and how that risk might be prevented.

**Table 2.** Summary of the data and methods of the sub-studies

	<b>Sub-study 1</b>	<b>Sub-study 2</b>	<b>Sub-study 3</b>
<b>Study type</b>	Systematic literature review	Empirical study	Empirical study
<b>Data</b>	Prior academic literature	Semi-structured thematic interviews with 56 public service professionals,	Semi-structured thematic interviews with 19 public service professionals and

<sup>25</sup> The method of the systematic literature review of Sub-study 1 is detailed in the peer-reviewed article in the “Publications” section of this dissertation

<sup>26</sup> An introduction to the Finnish context and wellbeing services counties (WSCs) can be found in Section 1.3 of this dissertation.

<sup>27</sup> The analytical process of Sub-study 2 is detailed in the peer-reviewed article in the “Publications” section of this dissertation

	<b>Sub-study 1</b>	<b>Sub-study 2</b>	<b>Sub-study 3</b>
		managers, and executives	managers, and eDelphi panel data by 21 public service experts
<b>Context</b>	Not limited to any specific place or region	Public services in Finland	Public services in Finland
<b>Method of analysis</b>	Qualitative	Qualitative	Qualitative
<b>Reasoning</b>	Inductive	Abductive	Inductive
<b>Ontology</b>	Critical realist <sup>28</sup>	Relationist / Social constructionist <sup>29</sup>	Interpretivist / Social constructionist <sup>30</sup>

As is the case for much administration research, this study also strives to combine scientific evidence and public policy, thereby contributing to the institutionalisation of research-informed governance (Christensen, 2025; Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025). By utilising variety in methods, datasets, and researchers to compose the results of the sub-studies, this dissertation contributes to the administrative discussion with evidence-based, justified, and current information. As examples regarding implications, first, evidence from strategic management demonstrate that structured planning and data-informed routines enhance organisational effectiveness (Bartolacci et al., 2025; George et al., 2019). Second, responsiveness in the public service context is increasingly understood as a collaborative engagement between administrators and stakeholders (Bryer, 2006; Paananen, 2022) that is central to ecosystemic value co-creation discussions (Osborne et al., 2022). Both examples align with the strategies of this study, its sub-studies, and the previous systematic reviews of evidence-informed governance, all of which identify enabling capacities, incentive structures (Christensen, 2025), and the role of knowledge brokers (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025) in bridging the gap between science and policy (Bednarek et al., 2018; Bynner & Terje, 2021; Knox et al., 2025; Vandenbussche et al., 2025).

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<sup>28</sup> Critical theory assumes social phenomena are real and causally influential, while being contextually shaped (Sayer, 2000). Here, professional roles (Steen & Tuurnas, 2018), their impacts (Engen et al., 2021; Voorberg et al., 2017), and value co-creation (Osborne et al., 2022) constitute a phenomenon that is systematically examined across the scientific literature.

<sup>29</sup> A relational, social constructionist perspective assumes that reality is multiple, contextually situated, and continually produced through social interactions and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Interpretivist social constructionist ontology assumes that reality is neither fixed nor universal but varies according to people's roles, histories, and organisational locations. This research considers the reality of professional work to be context-dependent, emerging through interactions and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 2016).

Contemporary trends such as digitalisation (Haug et al., 2024; Lutsenko, 2024; Rantala & Karjaluoto, 2017), equity considerations (Blessett et al., 2019; Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021), and governance complexity (Eppel & Rhodes, 2018; Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024) continue to reshape administrative processes, necessitating agile practices and adaptive strategies (Palomäki, 2020). For example, artificial intelligence (AI) and digital auditing introduce both opportunities for and risks to public accountability (Mergel et al., 2024; Volodina & Grossi, 2025). Simultaneously, navigating governance complexity demands learning-oriented practice designs (Jalonen, 2025; Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024) and research frameworks that support experimentation and outcome-oriented inquiry (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021). This study aligns with these developments through a relationally aware philosophical orientation, acknowledging that although bureaucratically inclined policy or professional practices that hinder value co-creation may be identified and addressed, unforeseen events and contextual contingencies can still result in unprecedented consequences.

The study complies with established research-ethics requirements. The empirical datasets used in the sub-studies were collected under organisation-specific research permits approved by all participating organisations. Data collection employed only university-approved tools, and all materials were stored on secure institutional network drives. The interview data were transcribed by an external service provider, which also followed strict and publicly documented data-handling procedures. The material was analysed only after anonymisation, and no individual informant could be identified from any of the publications at any stage. In the digital eDelphi environment, contributions were produced anonymously.

Second, all interview participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. The consent forms were stored in the university's secure digital environment with access restricted to authorised users only. By giving consent, informants agreed to the recording of their interview for transcription purposes. The consent process also included explicit permission to use any information provided up until the point of withdrawal, should the participant choose to terminate the interview – an option available to them at any stage. None of the participants exercised this right. As noted earlier, participation in the eDelphi panel was voluntary and anonymous, and included only participants interviewed previously and who had thus provided informed consent after receiving the relevant information on data protection.

Third, the involvement of multiple researchers and a sufficiently large group of informants ensured that the multiplicity and interpretive variability of knowledge were captured through the comparison and integration of diverse perspectives

(Denzin, 2012; Patton, 1999). The pool of informants drawn from multiple organisations supported the anonymity of each participant. For example, in Sub-studies 2 and 3 the respondents are referred through their general role and background, such as “manager, WSC” or “expert in eDelphi”, their anonymity supported further by the large number of respondents. In addition, all the empirical data was initially provided in Finnish and all quotations translated to English for publication purposes, anonymising the data even further. The formulation of interview questions and the design of the eDelphi panel were carefully considered and collaboratively developed by the researchers listed as co-authors of Sub-study 1. Finally, the sub-studies of this dissertation are subject to rigorous peer-review processes (Bornmann, 2011; Lee et al., 2013) before publication in journals, contributing to the ongoing value co-creation discussion within public administration research (Osborne, 2018; Osborne et al., 2022). Consequently, the data collection and interpretation processes in this dissertation can be regarded as reliable (Tracy, 2010), and the findings and conclusions as credible, trustworthy, and accurately reflective of the contextual reality in which the research was conducted (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 4 RESULTS OF THE SUB-STUDIES

### 4.1 Sub-study 1: Roles of professionals in value co-creation: A systematic literature review

#### Objectives and research question

Sub-study 1 establishes a robust theoretical understanding of the roles of public service professionals in value co-creation. The study identifies relevant scientific articles examining the subject and explores the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services. Systematic examination is here considered essential for constructing a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge and for identifying those professionals' roles that are most critical for supporting value co-creation.

The research question posed in Sub-study 1 is: *How is the role of professionals reflected in the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services?* The findings of the study develop a categorisation of the diverse roles of professionals in value co-creation, which are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Summary of Sub-study 1

<b>Sub-study name</b>	Roles of professionals in value co-creation: A systematic literature review
<b>Research question</b>	<i>How is the role of professionals reflected in the theoretical debate on value co-creation in public services?</i>
<b>Method</b>	Systematic literature review
<b>Key findings</b>	<p>Through service-level encounters, value is formed at different levels of the service ecosystem, emerging also in the lives of professionals. Inductive content analysis revealed eight various value co-creating roles for public service professionals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Collaborator</i>: Emphasises mutual planning and adaptive interaction to co-create value.</li> <li>– <i>Empowering Agent</i>: Builds trust to foster service-user autonomy and emotional well-being, though over-reliance may lead to increased service-user vulnerability.</li> <li>– <i>Professional Service Provider</i>: Centres on ensuring expert-driven service delivery, especially when service users are passive or unable to express their needs.</li> <li>– <i>Co-creator of Service Experiences</i>: Enhances service-user satisfaction and trust in the service system through empathetic, relationship-based encounters.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Educator</i>: Guides service users in understanding services and provides reliable information, supporting informed participation and autonomy.</li> <li>- <i>Boundary Spanner</i>: Facilitates collaboration across organisational, institutional, sectoral, or other boundaries, integrating diverse expertise to support innovation and vulnerable groups.</li> <li>- <i>Self-developer</i>: Realises the importance of continuous professional growth, improving service quality, and organisational adaptability.</li> <li>- <i>Asset</i>: Understands and exploits their role as an organisational resource, shaping institutional reputation, and mediating between users and systems.</li> </ul>
<b>Contribution to dissertation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theoretical foundation and conceptual conformity</li> <li>- An analysis framework for the empirical data set</li> <li>- Increased understanding of how value co-creation has influenced professional work</li> </ul>

### Approach

Sub-study 1 is a systematic literature review, which delivers a rigorous synthesis of previous research observing the role of public service professionals in value co-creation processes. The analysis focused on scientific discussion in the form of articles, ensuring that the data underwent peer review.

The systematic literature review was conducted by two researchers, who also each reviewed the resulting 4463 abstracts. The process identified 181 applicable full texts, which were approached similarly. Conflicts during the screening process were resolved by dialogue and involving a third researcher when necessary. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed through discussions among the whole writing team. This dialogic researcher triangulation approach ultimately ensured that only studies that considered the roles of professionals or their equivalents were incorporated (n = 65).

The 65 eligible studies were analysed using inductive content analysis, which led to 23 being categorised as theoretical and 42 as empirical. Prevailing themes were identified during a coding process, and descriptive keywords were identified for each code. The keywords were used as a frame of reference as the data was analysed thoroughly with the aim of finding their most central and descriptive essence, providing names for the roles inductively. The data also revealed how value formation takes place on individual, organisational, and systemic levels according to each role through the actions and responsibilities of professionals.

### Key findings and implications

Sub-study 1 identified eight distinct roles of public service professionals that contribute to value co-creation within service systems. Of these roles, *collaborator* is the most frequently cited, emphasising mutual resource exchange and joint planning with service users. The role requires professionals adapt to diverse needs and foster societal value through empowered user participation. Failure to perform it adequately can lead to value co-destruction. The *empowering agent* role is rooted in trust, which enhances emotional well-being and enables deeper engagement. Professionals support users in recognising their own capacities, although excessive dependence may introduce vulnerability.

The *professional service provider* role highlights expertise and responsibility, especially when users are passive or unable to articulate their needs. This role involves navigating power asymmetries and balancing user preferences with institutional expectations. A *co-creator of service experiences* focuses on enhancing user satisfaction through empathetic and relational interactions, which promote emotional well-being and reduce reliance on external support. *Educator* role involves guiding users in acquiring reliable information, facilitating co-learning, and reducing uncertainty, thereby fostering autonomy and informed decision-making.

The *boundary spanner* role entails collaboration across organisational boundaries, integrating diverse expertise and coordinating responsibilities to support vulnerable groups and promote service innovation. The *self-developer* role reflects professionals' ongoing growth, improving their capacity to support users and contributing to organisational resilience and societal well-being. Lastly, the *asset* role positions professionals as organisational resources whose actions influence service delivery, institutional reputation, and ethical standards while simultaneously acting as conduits between service users and systems.

The analysis of professionals' roles in public services reveals their multifaceted contributions to both theoretical understanding and practical application of value co-creation. Theoretically, the study advances conceptual clarity by distinguishing roles such as collaborator, educator, and boundary spanner that each reflect distinct relational, ethical, and systemic dimensions of service interaction. The study's practical value lies in underscoring the dynamic agency of professionals in shaping service experiences, fostering user empowerment, and enhancing the institutional responsiveness fostered in service relationships. The roles illuminate how professionals mediate between individual needs and organisational structures, thereby influencing societal outcomes. The framework offers a nuanced lens for future research that aims to evaluate service quality, guiding professional development, and informing policy design in complex service ecosystems.

### Contribution to the dissertation

Sub-study 1 provides a comprehensive theoretical grounding for the dissertation, which facilitates the subsequent analysis of the empirical data. From the perspective of structural integrity, the systematic approach was also intended to provide a solid theory-based foundation for the terminology of the study as a whole.

Most importantly, however, Sub-study 1 explores how the pursuit and even the expectation of value co-creation have influenced professional work. An important realisation concerns the extent to which the nature of professional work and the expectations placed upon it have been transformed through the shifts in focus regarding activities brought about by value co-creation and the adjacent emphasis on diverse value orientations. These developments have redirected professional practice towards relationship-based approaches, rather than merely providing a service or performing a task. Sub-study 1 succeeds in its aim of prompting credible conclusions based on previous scientific discussion on the value co-creation effects of public service professionals' roles and work-creation-based approaches, rather than viewing them as merely providing a service or performing a task.

## 4.2 Sub-study 2: Value co-creation at the service-user interface: The contribution of public service professionals

### Objectives and research question

The objective of Sub-study 2 was to provide an empirical perspective on the scientific value co-creation discussion with a focus on professional contributions and the complexity that surrounds professional work owing to value co-creation processes.

Sub-study 2 poses the research question: *How do public service professionals and managers perceive professionals' roles in and contributions to value co-creation?* The findings uncover five focal elements that represent the understanding and perceptions of the interviewed public service experts on professional contribution in value co-creation, summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Summary of Sub-study 2

<b>Sub-study name</b>	Value co-creation in service-user interface: Contribution of public service professionals
<b>Research question</b>	<i>How do public service professionals and managers perceive professionals' roles and contributions in value co-creation?</i>

<b>Method</b>	Abductive content analysis of thematic interview data with 56 Finnish public service professionals and managers
<b>Key findings</b>	<p>Although collaboration with the service user was identified as the most significant value co-creating role for public service professionals in the theoretical discussion, empirical findings suggest it should guide practice even more extensively. The <i>Boundary Spanner</i> role emerged as the most prominent in the data, consistently recognised by both professionals and the management. Boundary-spanning actions were typically initiated in response to collaboratively identified service-user needs, indicating their aim to enhance service-user well-being. These insights informed the development of the elements defining professional contributions to value co-creation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Collaboration with the service user</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Empathy and professionalism empower service users</li> <li>– Trust-building is critical, especially for vulnerable users, requiring transparency and mutual respect</li> <li>– Listening and integrating narratives promote personalised service pathways</li> <li>– Support and education enhance service-user engagement and well-being outcomes</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. <i>Collaboration over institutional boundaries</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Multi-professional collaboration ensures humane, effective service delivery</li> <li>– Boundary spanning reduces institutional silos, improves efficiency, and supports mutual learning</li> <li>– Shared information and low-threshold communication enhance continuity for professionals and service users</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. <i>Consultation and collegial support</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Shared expertise across multi-professional networks supports adaptability and prevents value co-destruction</li> <li>– Real-time consultation, including digital platforms, enhances responsiveness and service-user involvement</li> <li>– Reciprocal support within and beyond teams is vital in ethically or emotionally challenging situations</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. <i>Continuous development</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Continuity issues or high staff turnover challenge competence, entailing continuous learning and development</li> <li>– Service encounters generate valuable insights that should inform organisational improvement</li> <li>– Rendering upward communication from the service frontline also promotes responsive policy evolution</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. <i>Realisation of value tensions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Power imbalances in service encounters necessitate trust and respect for service-user autonomy</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ethical conflicts arise from complicated situations, policy constraints, and limited resources, creating a burden</li> <li>– Professionals balance individual needs with public policy, aiming to co-create both individual and societal value</li> <li>– Value tensions entwine with all elements of the value co-creating professional contribution</li> </ul>
<b>Contribution to dissertation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Continues the exploration of value co-creation effects on professional work with an empirical data set, linking the perspectives of Sub-studies 1 and 2 herein</li> <li>– Emphasis on boundary spanning reveals that in practice, professional collaboration and multi-professional relations are overarching to value co-creation, enabling effective application of the service network</li> <li>– Further analysis of service encounter conflicts is required to understand underlying causes and to utilise them for service system benefit, informing the objectives of Sub-study 3</li> </ul>

### Approach

Sub-study 2 draws on empirical data collected from four Finnish public service organisations operating within the national social and healthcare system. Among these, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) functions as a nationwide entity responsible for administering social security benefits, while the remaining three represent regional WSCs tasked with delivering health and social care, and rescue services regionally<sup>31</sup>. The differing mandates of these organisations shape the roles and responsibilities of the professionals working within them.

A total of 56 people were interviewed via Microsoft Teams between June 2023 and February 2024. In total, 38 interview sessions were held, lasting between 44 and 90 minutes. Some interviews were carried out as individual sessions, with an average duration of 51 minutes, while others took place as group interviews lasting an average of 75 minutes. Of the informants, 26 represented Kela, and 30 represented the three WSCs: 11 interviewees worked for WSC1, 11 for WSC2, and eight for WSC3. All participants provided informed consent before being interviewed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a dataset comprising 749 pages of material. Initial participants were selected based on their job descriptions and relevance to the research topic, with subsequent interviewees recruited through snowball sampling. The interviews were continued until a clear saturation of data was evident. This method ensured that the interviewees represented different organisational levels in all four organisations: those levels were senior management

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<sup>31</sup> The context of the study is discussed further in the section 1.3 of this dissertation and also in the published article.

(n = 20), supervisors or middle management (n = 25), and frontline professionals at the service user interface (n = 11).

The analytical process involved reading the interview transcripts and coding them using the content analysis software NVivo. That coding process drew upon the eight categories based on the roles of professionals in value co-creation developed in Sub-study 1. The categories provided a robust theoretical structure for the analysis and initiated a necessary dialogue between data and theory (Paavola, 2021), both of which are central to abductive reasoning (Lipscomb, 2012). Second, the coded material was examined to identify excerpts that connected with previous understanding as well as those that extended or refined it. Third, by comparing the coded data with the research question, the analysis revealed how professionals' value-creating contributions were interpreted within each role. These interpretations were then categorised according to their congruent content, leading to insights into the agency-related aspects of professional contribution to value co-creation. Finally, the abductive reasoning process, characterised by the back-and-forth movement between the data and the theoretical framework (Paavola, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), uncovered elements of the professional contribution to value co-creation and highlighted opportunities to advance value co-creation despite hindrances, by recognising underlying value tensions in service encounters.

The primary aim of the interviews was to elicit perceptions regarding the objectives and rationales behind service-related decisions, and to explore how value co-creation between professionals and service users is realised in practice. The current data provides insights into the multifaceted nature of value co-creation in public services, reflecting a range of professional perspectives. By examining these perceptions, the study sought to refine and expand existing theoretical understandings of value co-creation, particularly in the context of public sector service delivery. The findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of how professionals interpret and enact value co-creation, thereby informing future research and practice of public service development.

### **Key findings and implications**

The previously recognised diversity of professional roles in value co-creation generates conflicting pressures, demands, and expectations on the management of professional expertise and actions. Sub-study 2 identifies specific barriers to value co-creation, and the adjacent discussion reveals that the recognition of these hindering elements may prevent value destruction. In summary, recognising factors contributing to value destruction can be utilised to support the development of professional competence, organisational practices, and the service system.

Sub-study 2 contributes to the understanding of value co-creation in public services and reveals that professionals play critical enabling and coordinating roles in increasingly complex service environments. The study also offers insights from the perspective of organisational representatives – a less commonly explored viewpoint. The findings underscore the significant role of professionals in facilitating value co-creation, particularly in situations where service users face multifaceted challenges. The study highlights that professionals must address the complex life circumstances of service users, societal norms, resource limitations, and communication barriers, all of which influence their capacity to identify and act upon genuine service needs. Failure to perform in any of these areas can trigger value destruction, leading to repeated service use and straining resources.

### **Contribution to the dissertation**

Sub-study 2 continues the exploration of professional roles and contributions initiated in Sub-study 1 with an empirical data set. Sub-studies 1 and 2 were designed to complement the theoretically derived understanding with empirical findings to explore the relevance and significance of value co-creation endeavours to the professional work in the public services context.

The research in Sub-study 2 identifies value tensions as a central challenge in service encounters, affecting not only service users but also professionals themselves. These tensions, often arising from conflicting institutional logics and ethical dilemmas, can be distressing and require organisational support mechanisms such as consultation and debriefing. The sub-study emphasises the importance of recognising and managing these tensions to enhance service quality and professional well-being. It also demonstrates the relational perspectives of, for example, professionals deriving value from perceiving positive outcomes in service users' lives, and collegial support among professionals, mitigating the negative effects of value destruction in service encounters. Therefore, Sub-study 2 concludes that examining tensions and support needs identified by harvesting professionals' perspectives facilitates the identification of essential strategies for effective leadership, which were explored in Sub-study 3.

Finally, Sub-study 2 argues for a dual-aspect conception of professional work that considers professionals as ethical interpreters of public policy and as contributors to service development through experiential knowledge. Organisations that can establish channels through which professionals share insights from service encounters could align resources and strategies with real-world needs informed by practice. The sub-study concludes that addressing value tensions is essential to improve service delivery and ensure equitable access to public services.

### 4.3 Sub-study 3: Foregrounding conflicts in public service encounters: Public service professionals' perceptions of the causes of value destruction

#### Objectives and research question

Sub-study 3 aims to understand professionals' reasoning in decision-making processes and what they perceive to be the conditions that hinder value co-creation in public service encounters. The sub-study utilises conflict analysis to pinpoint factors that professionals believe can result in value co-creation or destruction.

Sub-study 3 poses the research question: *What do conflicts reveal about professionals' perceptions of value destruction in public service encounters?* The findings of the study focus specifically on micro-level interactions to increase understanding of how professionals engage with institutional, organisational, and individual conditions as they interpret public policies and organisational frameworks to respond to service-user needs. The study indicates that the frequent occurrence of value destruction in value co-creation processes should be systematically recognised in the design and development of public services across research, policy, and practice. A summary of these findings, along with other key insights from the sub-study, is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Summary of Sub-study 3

<b>Sub-study name</b>	Foregrounding Conflicts in Public Service Encounters: Public Service Professionals' Perceptions on What Causes Value Destruction
<b>Research question</b>	<i>What do conflicts reveal about professionals' perceptions of value destruction in public service encounters?</i>
<b>Method</b>	Inductive content analysis of thematic interview data with 19 respondents and eDelphi panel data from 21 public service expert responses
<b>Key findings</b>	Scrutinising PSEs reveals relational dynamics in value co-creation and destruction processes between service users and professionals, between professionals, between organisations, and in the interplay of institutional, organisational, and individual elements. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Micro-Level Causes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Insufficient identification of service-user needs and failure to engage in dialogue reduces perceived value</li> <li>– Professionals' social and trust-building skills are critical for user engagement; distrust leads to service avoidance</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflicts between organisational demands and professional norms diminish job satisfaction and affect service quality</li> <li>- Lack of multi-professional collaboration undermines holistic service-user support</li> <li>- Language barriers, distrust, and limited knowledge of entitlements exacerbate exclusion among service users and can trigger crises</li> </ul> <p>2. <i>Meso-Level Causes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor coordination and spatial arrangements between organisations impede service accessibility and continuity</li> <li>- Limited discretion and inconsistent collaboration practices hinder adaptive responses to complex cases</li> <li>- Failures in collecting and utilising service frontline data lead to fragmented decision-making</li> <li>- Managerial focus on short-term cost control and quantitative metrics neglects qualitative impact and user needs</li> </ul> <p>3. <i>Macro-Level Causes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluation metrics prioritise efficiency over timely and adequate support, undermining the system rationale</li> <li>- Fragmented governance and bureaucratic complexity create systemic barriers and increase administrative burden</li> <li>- Digitalisation reduces in-person contact, limiting professionals' ability to assess well-being and reach marginalised groups</li> <li>- Utilising AI in decision-making risks losing contextual sensitivity and fairness</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contribution to dissertation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reveals the pronounced relationality in interpreting the underlying causes and consequences of conflicts in service encounters</li> <li>- Not only is value co-creation in service encounters dependent on professionalism, practices, personal characteristics, and the tools for implementing professional work, but it also relies heavily on the expectations and previous experiences of service users</li> <li>- The most effective actions to forestall and overcome hindrances to value co-creation seem to emerge from different ecosystemic levels than those at which the conflict appears</li> </ul>

### Approach

Sub-study 3 is also set in the Finnish welfare services context and relies on data collected from public service professionals working either for Kela or for a WSC<sup>32</sup>. The dataset consists of 19 thematic interviews with public service professionals, and electronic eDelphi panel data from 21 invited public service expert respondents. All

<sup>32</sup> The study context is discussed in more detail in Section 1.3

panel members participated anonymously in two Delphi rounds conducted between May and June 2024. Those 21 participants provided 33 textual contributions to the electronic environment, producing expert commentaries and responding to one another's insights. The questions and tasks used in the eDelphi environment were developed by five researchers, and all participants had been interviewed before being invited to join the panel. From the eDelphi dataset only conflict situations relating to the frontline of service provision were included in the analysis. Thirty-five conflict scenarios were identified from the eDelphi data, 109 from manager interviews, and 77 from interviews with professionals.

The interview data set is the same as that utilised in Sub-study 2, other than excluding senior management and Kela representatives. The dataset parameters were set to focus on service-level conflicts observed in recorded service encounters. The 19 interview-derived informant datasets analysed in this sub-study are from three WSCs: eight from WSC1, nine from WSC2, and two from WSC3. Seven informants were classified as frontline professionals, and 12 held managerial positions.

The inductive analysis thoroughly reviewed each textual reference, utilising conflicts as an analytical tool. An initial simplified formulation was produced from the original expression, followed by an interpretation of how the identified conflict might contribute to the destruction of value for the service user. After this stage, each reference was further interpreted to assess how the risk of value destruction could be prevented. This meticulous approach yielded a robust, data-driven interpretation of how conflicts emerge as continuous and ordinary components of the processes driving value co-creation, but also how they could be used to identify the risk of value destruction and to prevent that risk from materialising. The study reveals that conflicts originating from differences in interpreting and acting upon institutional guidelines, managerial choices, and professionalism, combined with complexity in service-user circumstances, entail possible value destruction in public service encounters. The study ultimately reveals capabilities to utilise conflicts for value co-creation, but also explores reasons for the incapacity to prevent value destruction.

### **Key findings and implications**

The findings highlight micro-level interactions in PSE to reveal how public service professionals engage with institutional, organisational, and individual conditions as they interpret the reasons underlying value co-destruction. Professionals emphasise that the fundamental purpose of the public service system is to safeguard societal welfare and ensure equitable access to essential services. However, current evaluation metrics fail to reflect this rationale, prioritising organisational efficiency over timely and adequate support for service users. Suboptimal targeting and an emphasis on rapid processes undermine effectiveness, particularly for vulnerable

groups such as young adults, the elderly, and individuals facing mental health challenges. Failure to provide sufficient outreach and support risks social exclusion and exacerbates crises.

The causes of value destruction at the micro level of PSE are primarily linked to conflicts arising from professional competence, social capability, and relational dynamics. Professionals identify three key factors influencing value creation: the ability to recognise service-user needs, the development of expertise through practice, and social skills, particularly trust-building. However, service encounters uphold potential value even if service users do not receive their desired outcome, if they come to understand long-term service objectives. Therefore, professionals' ability to engage, guide, and respond effectively is critical to shaping positive service experiences. The professionals' ability to establish trust enables open communication and prevents value destruction.

At the meso level of PSE, value destruction is primarily associated with organisational and spatial solutions, practices, managerial approaches, and the utilisation of service-user information in service co-development, and the exercise of professional discretion. Addressing tensions requires balancing procedural fairness with sensitivity to personal circumstances, ensuring that decisions reflect both organisational priorities and the lived realities of service users. Professionals stress that multi-professional, inter-organisational activities can enhance both the effectiveness and ethical integrity of public service delivery. Enhancing co-development practices mitigates service-user dissatisfaction and service re-engagement, which increases systemic burden. On the macro-level of PSE, the conflicts relate to the service system's effectiveness and evaluation, and its ability to support particularly vulnerable service-user groups. Service system failings risk socially excluded individuals not receiving the necessary services they are entitled to, causing unnecessary suffering.

Sub-study 3 concludes that value destruction in service encounters may stem from a deficiency of trust, which can be experienced by any actor and stems from various sources, such as previous experiences, communicational or interpretational issues, or even cultural differences. To prevent its value-destructive effects, the execution of professional duties requires both domain-specific expertise and the ability to engage meaningfully in social interactions. In conclusion, value co-creation appears through relations, and public service professionals' social skills and competences greatly affect these relations. However, when zooming out from the micro level to organisational conditions, the findings indicate that conditions endangering value creation often do not arise at the individual PSE level. Therefore, conflicts in the service frontline cannot be resolved purely on the micro level, but require changes

and process design on the meso- and macro-levels of the PSE. For example, in the Finnish service system, service-user value is affected by the division of functions deriving from institutional conditions related to service system governance. The relational processes on different PSE levels (here, especially at the micro level between professionals and service users, but importantly also between the analytical levels) suggest that even though we are looking at micro-level service encounters, the causes and solutions are distributed across all PSE levels.

### **Contribution to the dissertation**

Whereas Sub-studies 1 and 2 unveil how professionals contribute to and support value co-creation in public service relations, Sub-study 3 continues the path of understanding conditions for effective value co-creation by studying conflicts as hurdles hindering access to that goal. Because Sub-study 3 utilises conflicts to pinpoint value destruction triggering conditions, the work reveals moments of decisions and non-decisions that result in relationally contradictory lines of action, with the potential to promote value destruction instead of its creation. Therefore, as Sub-studies 1 and 2 aim to reveal the elements of professional work that promote value co-creation, Sub-study 3 demonstrates that a lack of relational capabilities and unfortunate previous experiences affect service relations to the extent that value co-creation may be obstructed even in otherwise perfect conditions, if the conflicting aspects are not addressed.

Sub-study 3 concludes that because the underlying conditions that manifest as conflicts in service encounters are relational, so too are their solutions. For example, rigid policy guidelines may restrict the action available to a professional, but can foster value creation from the service user's perspective. Value creation can be a result of encouraging mutual interaction and access to the service network that benefits the service user. The relationality in encounters, decision-making, and collaboration across boundaries demonstrates that professional work in public services is increasingly complex. Sub-study 3 thus furnishes the dissertation with important deeper insight into the dimensions of value co-creating professionalism, further discussed in the synthesis.

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Relational conditions as structural enablers of value co-creation

This doctoral research addresses public service professionals who co-create value and whose work and actions at the service interface determine the extent to which that aim can be realised. By examining professional action, the study seeks to develop an understanding of agency and the means through which it may be supported, to strengthen the capacity of public services to deliver the impact expected of them. To advance this understanding, the study asks: *How does relationality reconfigure value co-creating professional work in public services?*

The objective of value co-creation in public services is to generate value for service users (Osborne, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), to reflect the values of the surrounding society (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Rutgers & Overeem, 2014, p. 806), to allocate resources effectively (Gruening, 2001; Volodina & Grossi, 2025), and to provide a meaningful and valued working environment for public service professionals (Pillitteri et al., 2021). The relational ontology framing adopted means that value in public services is understood as an emergent, situational outcome of the configuration of relations, practices, artefacts, and institutional logics (Emirbayer, 1997). Delicacy applied while building trust, mutuality in interactions, and capability to activate networks are thus not merely personal attributes that make encounters propitious; they are constitutive conditions of the relational work required in PSEs that shape the collaborative opportunities that materialise in encounters between professionals and service users.

Because agency is distributed and arises from relations, the presence or absence of these conditions reconfigures the capacity of actors to act and thus the likelihood that value-in-use, or public value, can be realised (Osborne, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In essence, trust, mutual collaboration, and clear role allocation within public service encounters function as structural enablers, organising the relational space in which joint problem framing, goal alignment, and sustained cooperation become possible (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012, pp. 113–114). The framing dictates that it is essential to understand why the pursuit of value co-creation has emerged in the institutional logics that govern the Nordic welfare states, and how it has reshaped the work and priorities of public service professionals over time. Earlier scholarly discussions illustrate the relational nature of value co-creation (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020), referring to how both value and the processes that

generate value emerge in relationships (Strokosch & Roy, 2025; Vargo et al., 2017), ultimately bridging the institutional logics (Vivier et al., 2024).

In the pursuit of value co-creating relationships in public service encounters, the ability to recognise value conflicts becomes particularly significant (Engen et al., 2021; Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021; Skarli, 2023). This research establishes that anticipating, identifying, interpreting, and responding to tensions and conflicts often fall to individual professionals, even though many of these conflicts originate beyond the immediate service encounter (Skålén et al., 2024). Previously, contemporary professionalism has been thought to evolve through establishing non-hierarchical relationships and interdisciplinary collaboration, based upon a common set of values and social accountability (Vivier et al., 2024). When viewed through a PSE lens, the sources of conflict may be located at any of its levels, yet they materialise within micro-level interactions. As an example of multilevel impacts in PSE governance, meso-level ambiguity in collaborative role allocation among service providers hinders cooperative actions and seeds misunderstandings affecting micro-level service-user guidance, thus undermining the macro-level effectiveness of the service system and its pathways, and ultimately impeding value co-creation (Palumbo et al., 2020; Strokosch & Roy, 2025).

The presence of value tensions within the weighting of professional work practices (e.g., Vivier et al., 2024) and the many sources of conflict that affect service encounters is discernible in each sub-study and features regularly in scholarly discourse on value co-creation (e.g., Rossi & Skarli, 2025; Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021; Skålén et al., 2024). Sub-study 3 therefore treats conflict as an ordinary and integral feature of everyday service encounters, arising as service users present with diverse backgrounds, expectations, and needs. Their familiarity with system procedures and official administrative language varies, and without careful guidance, they may struggle to identify the information essential for decision-making. Service users may be vulnerable and require significant support, or they may be experienced and independent but be influenced by prior negative experiences of public services. Hence, the roots of conflict stem from relational dynamics within the relevant encounter and from factors originating in earlier interactions or systemic non-acknowledgement (Vandenbussche et al., 2025).

Although the data do confirm that the value experienced by a service user is a core mandate of public service provision, the objective of generating value for service users is not entirely straightforward. Nevertheless, public services do simultaneously serve broader societal functions that can conflict with the immediate value perceived by individuals. Although emerging conflicts can be mitigated by fostering a collaborative environment (Vivier et al. 2024), the possibility that tensions will arise

or actually manifest does not negate the value potential of the services. Even when value-in-use is emphasised, certain situations – such as police detainment or with child protection decisions – can prompt users to experience a destruction of value rather than its creation (Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala, 2025). In these cases, the primary objective is not to generate value for the non-voluntary service user, but rather to fulfil a societal need by creating value for other members of the community (Osborne, 2018). Although service and value co-creation balance the relationship between service user and professional, an additional responsibility over the welfare of citizens is transferred from society to professionals. This signifies that when there is a clear service need, professionals take responsibility for maintaining the service process and make decisions accordingly. Nevertheless, the same power differentials between service users and professionals sustain the hierarchy and can hinder the potential to co-create value in a mutual relationship (Skarli, 2021; Vivier et al., 2024). The historical patterns of relating and interacting, especially institutionalised hierarchical relations, hinder the establishment of relational connections and shared meanings (Vivier et al., 2024).

Another finding of Sub-study 2 is that users might initially perceive a loss of value under certain conditions. However, value creation may still occur over time, as the user receives a service that, while not aligned with their immediate wishes, is deemed necessary from the perspective of society and the professionals representing the service system. Sub-study 3 also reveals that the destruction of value in service encounters and its subsequent consequences can be mitigated if conflicts are acknowledged and addressed. Furthermore, the manner of the encounter itself may become a meaningful source of value for the service user, protecting them from value destruction in further encounters. *Most notably, professionals who engage in relational collaboration with other service actors and the service users, emphasising trust and respect for one another, are not only capable to co-create value effectively, but also gain value from the encounters as work satisfaction and reduced strain.* From a governance perspective, relations across professional, organisational, and sectoral boundaries pronounce collaborative contributions, abating power asymmetries (Skarli, 2021; Strokosch & Roy, 2025).

## 5.2 Reflection on the dimensions of relationality in the work of professionals

To sculpt a representative form of relationality in value co-creating professional work, the research question is reflected upon here with reference to the sub-studies. In both the examination of earlier literature in Sub-study 1 and the empirical contexts of Sub-studies 2 and 3, the multidimensional nature of professional practice and its

relational structures, essential for value co-creation, is clearly evident. In combination, the sub-studies support and complement the findings on relativity in previous literature, and add depth to the interpretation of its dimensions. However, the critical review undertaken also evaluates how the relational lens accurately reflects the reality of public service encounters.

The eight roles of professionals in value co-creation identified in Sub-study 1 support the perspective that value co-creating professional work in public services is fundamentally relational: First, the roles that include interpreting contextual signals, integrating diverse forms of knowledge, and making situational judgements accentuate a reflexive dimension to the relationality in value co-creating professional work. The roles of “Collaborator”, “Co-creator of Service Experiences”, “Educator”, and “Boundary Spanner” illustrate how value formation necessitates recognising interdependencies and a holistic orientation to interaction. These roles reflect the broader understanding in the PSL literature that value emerges through dynamic interactions rather than through linear inputs and outputs (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Osborne, 2018).

Second, roles that rely on empathy, emotional attunement, and trust-building (Pillitteri et al., 2021) suggest *an affective dimension* in professional work. In Sub-study 1 this dimension is most clearly expressed in the roles of “Empowering agent”, “Co-creator of service experiences”, and “Self-developer” since they underscore how affective labour – also recognised as central to street-level bureaucratic practice (Lipsky, 1980) – is vital to enable co-creation, particularly when service users must deal with vulnerability, uncertainty, or prior negative experiences. Building trust and supporting service users’ emotional readiness to engage are central mechanisms through which value is either created or destroyed (Engen et al., 2021).

Third, in balancing individual and public interests, exercising discretion, and safeguarding procedural fairness, relationality in professional work is elucidated through *an ethical dimension*. The roles of “Professional service provider”, “Empowering agent”, “Educator”, and “Asset” exemplify this orientation. These roles reflect the recognition in public administration that professionals act within normative frameworks shaped by public values, ethical codes, and expectations of integrity (Bozeman, 2007; Wilensky, 1964). Ethical sensitivity is particularly critical in contexts where value conflicts arise, and is an inherent feature of public service co-creation (Kinder & Stenvall, 2023).

Finally, fourth, professional roles that require navigating organisational interfaces, aligning actors within the service ecosystem, or translating institutional structures into accessible guidance for service users, reveal the necessity for relative interpretations through *a systemic dimension*. As an example, the “Boundary

Spanner”, “Professional Service Provider”, “Educator”, and “Asset” roles illustrate vividly how professionals affect and operate simultaneously at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the service ecosystem (Engen et al., 2021; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013). These roles specifically highlight how professionals’ actions contribute not only to individual value-in-use but also to organisational learning, system functionality, and the realisation of broader public value.

The four key elements of professional contribution to public service value co-creation presented in Sub-study 2 also illustrate the constellation of relational dimensions of professional work. It is clear that professionals’ contributions extend beyond procedural competence to include the relational and interpretive work necessary to ensure public service encounters are meaningful. First, the element of “Collaboration with the service user” highlights the centrality of empathy, trust-building, and genuine engagement. According to the element, professionals need to be especially attentive in service encounters, integrate fragmented information, and understand the service user’s narrative in a holistic way. This notion foregrounds both *reflexivity*, which allows professionals to combine personal and contextual information into an individually tailored service path, and *affectivity*, which enables supportive and empowering encounters. *The ethical dimension* also appears implicit, as professionals must respect the service user’s perspective and exercise responsibility when balancing individual needs with professional knowledge.

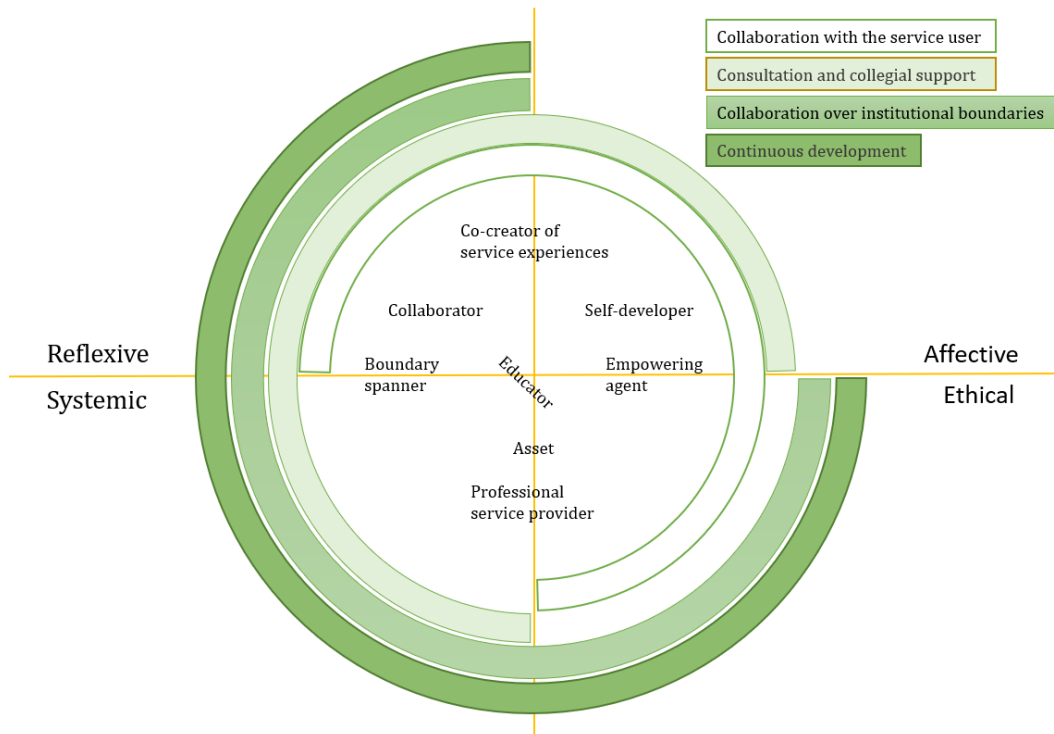
Second, the element of “Collaboration over institutional boundaries” that emerged in Sub-study 2 highlights the systemic nature of value co-creation. Effective service provision is portrayed as inherently requiring cooperation across organisational and sectoral interfaces. Boundary-spanning interactions prevent siloed practices, minimise redundant burdens on service users, and enhance the integration of service pathways (van der Heijden et al., 2025). This element, therefore, reflects *systemic* awareness, but it also depends on *ethical* sensitivity, particularly when professionals advocate for service users in multicultural or linguistically complex situations. *Reflexive* capability supports this work by enabling professionals to interpret differing institutional priorities and align them within a shared understanding of the service user’s situation.

Third, the element of “Consultation and collegial support” from Sub-study 2 emphasises the need for reflective humility and shared expertise. Recognising one’s limitations is treated as an important competency, enabling professionals to anticipate risks of value co-destruction and seek information from colleagues or other organisations when necessary. Real-time consultation and multi-professional deliberation illustrate the *systemic* and *reflexive* aspects of collaborative problem-solving. At the same time, consulting others requires a foundation of trust

and relational safety, signifying that the *affective* relational dimension of professional work is embedded within collegial support.

Fourth, the element of “Continuous development” reveals professionals’ concerns for maintaining competence, ensuring equity, and upholding the standards necessary for high-quality service provision. Their efforts to adapt organisational resources to individual service-user needs illustrate both *ethical* responsibility and *systemic* understanding. Continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation align this element with the *reflexive* dimension, emphasising the evolving nature of expertise in complex service environments. In combination, the four elements associated with professional contribution to public service value co-creation demonstrate that value co-creation at the service interface relies on a dynamic blend of relational capabilities.

Ultimately, this study identifies four dimensions of relational professional work. These dimensions are (1) Reflexive – referring to the professional’s capacity to comprehend value creation in terms of interactional wholes (e.g., van Beveren et al., 2024); (2) Affective – displaying empathy, as well as the ability to cultivate trust (e.g., Bentzen, 2023; Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023), and regulate emotions in relationships (e.g., Boswell et al., 2025); (3) Ethical – attentive to their responsibilities to others and sensitive to conflicts (e.g., Odeh, 2024); and (4) Systemic – demonstrating an understanding of how individual actions are connected to broader organisational and societal dynamics (e.g., Carrubbo et al., 2025). Reflection on the dimensions of relationality in the work of professionals (Figure 4) illustrates how professionalism in public services is not merely technical or procedural; it emerges in the professional’s ability to interpret complex situations, engage empathically, act ethically, and navigate institutional structures.



**Figure 4.** Reflection on the dimensions of relationality in the work of professionals in Sub-studies 1 and 2

Sub-study 3 offers a final perspective on the relational nature of value co-creating professional work as it demonstrates that, in addition to the elements of collaboration oriented towards value co-creation, the stewardship of trust constitutes one of the most consequential structuring elements of professionalism. For conflicts that originate in, and are sustained by, complex causes that must be articulated, the construction of a climate of trust is essential. Sub-study 3 demonstrates that trust is easily fractured, and the negative experiences of both service users and professionals carry over into subsequent service encounters, bringing underlying conflicts. The importance of the *affective dimension* of value co-creating relational professionalism is here highlighted due to the observation of articulating and giving language to these conflicts requires deliberate building of trust in a manner that the service user is convinced of the professional's intention to help, daring to disclose prior negative experiences as well as individual, sensitive circumstances that could evoke feelings of shame. In this way, the stewardship of trust proves to be a key enabler of value co-creation in service encounters. In addition, *reflexive* actions are able to operationalise the relationship networks to benefit the service user, and help to align professionals' interpretations to situational circumstances that rebuild trust.

However, the strongest finding from Sub-study 3 is the *systemic dimension* of relationality in professional work. Understanding the systemicity of public services

and service encounters as nodes in service chains and networks illuminates how discrete acts connect to service ecosystems and the ensuing multi-level governance. Sub-study 3 highlights how zooming in to micro-level encounters reveals conflicts attributable to factors and circumstances originating from entirely different levels of the PSE. In return, several conflicts that originate at the micro level, such as language barriers or distrust in the service system, can be addressed in the encounter to resolve one situation, but addressing them on the organisational meso level to enhance service-user guidance, interpretation services, or translation of forms would improve conflicts systemically.

Technological solutions, while intended to enhance service delivery, introduce further systemic challenges. Difficulties in inter-organisational information sharing impede decision-making, often placing the burden of process management on service users. Legislative measures and broader data permissions could address these barriers. Additionally, the increasing reliance on digital platforms reduces in-person interactions, limiting professionals' ability to assess users' overall well-being and creating accessibility issues for certain groups. The integration of AI raises ethical concerns regarding discretionary decision-making, as professionals question whether AI can adequately account for nuanced, context-specific factors. Safeguards would be needed to ensure that entitlements are not compromised by algorithmic limitations or procedural ambiguities.

Governance-related conflicts contribute further to value destruction. The Finnish public service system's fragmented structure, characterised by distributed responsibilities and unclear oversight (see Rossi et al., 2026), complicates user navigation and increases vulnerability to crises. Current arrangements require service users to seek assistance from multiple sources, while resources are disproportionately allocated to administrative compliance rather than user needs. Bureaucratic processes, regulatory frameworks, and procedural requirements impose additional burdens, exemplified by increased applications for supplementary assistance following benefit reductions and mandatory job-seeking obligations for individuals unable to work. These inefficiencies strain both service users and professionals, highlighting the need for adaptive governance, streamlined processes, and intersectoral collaboration to prevent systemic value destruction.

### 5.3 Discussion on the relational dimensions of value co-creating professional work

The multidimensional character of the professional contributions underscores why relational comprehension of professional work is indispensable for achieving

meaningful value outcomes in the growing complexity of public service encounters. This multidimensionality, perceivable through the sub-studies, demonstrates that public service professionals do not merely execute predefined tasks; they continually interpret, negotiate, and reshape value processes within the complex and tension-laden environments characteristic of contemporary PSEs (Engen et al., 2021; Osborne et al., 2021a; Trischler et al., 2023).

This dissertation examines value-co-creating professional work emerging through relationships, focusing on collaboration across multiple dimensions, levels, and actors, the formation of trust, and conflict management in service encounters. The essence of professional work and professionalism in public services does not crystallise in expertise derived from knowledge and experience alone, but in the capability to maintain, interpret, and renew relationships within a complex operating environment. Public encounters are a shared space in which professionals and service users can listen to, challenge, and learn from one another (Bartels et al., 2025). The same encounters can also foster misunderstanding, distrust, and inequality (Bartels et al., 2025). Failures in relational work reverberate as value destruction across levels (Engen et al., 2021; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010; Williams et al., 2016): at the individual (micro) level for service users, stakeholders, and professionals; at the organisational (meso) level through bypassed objectives and missed opportunities for resource use; and at the societal (macro) level through unrealised public value and negative spillovers for citizen well-being (Bartels et al., 2025).

This study draws on its sub-studies to operationalise the relational perspective, arguing that value co-creating professional work consists of multiple overlapping and mutually reinforcing roles upon which everyday service encounters are built. Moreover, professionals' contribution to value co-creation manifests not only as their ability to sustain equitable collaboration with service users and other actors, but also as their capacity to develop and adapt within increasingly complex environments (de Graaf & van der Wall, 2013, p. 148; Lowe et al., 2021). Both daily practice and the maintenance of collaboration are grounded in interpersonal relationships and in the social capability to act within them. The relational *reflexive*, *affective*, *ethical*, and *systemic* dimensions of value co-creating professional work, identified in the synthesis of this study as an independent conceptual contribution, are also reflected in earlier public administration scholarship.

### **(1) Reflexive – Seeing value in terms of interactional wholes.**

Reflexivity in relational professionalism refers to the capacity to comprehend value co-creation as being embedded in webs of relationships (Kessl, 2009), to critically review the organisational circumstances under which professionals operate (van

Beveren et al., 2024), and to align interpretations to situational cues rather than rigid policies (Garrett, 2019; van Beveren et al., 2024). In encounters, reflexive recognition signals that the standpoint and contribution of each party are socially valued. Van Beveren et al. (2024) explore reflexive professionalisation in social work as a countercheck to the reduction in professional autonomy due to managerial framings, the growing privatisation of public services, and social inequality. For service users, being recognised as co-creators rather than passive recipients supports agency, commitment, and the articulation of lived priorities; for professionals, recognition of their expertise and conditions they work under sustains motivation and relational responsibility (Voorberg et al., 2015).

Reflexivity shapes the terms of participation by widening the discursive space for joint meaning-making and legitimises the redistribution of voice in encounters (Emirbayer, 1997; Gherardi, 2012). If reflexive actions are obstructed (perhaps by rigid policies), asymmetries in the balance of power intensify: service users' accounts are unrecognised, and the relational work of professionals is undervalued. Either scenario propels service encounters towards collisions of logic and conflicts that obstruct value creation (Noordegraaf, 2015; Osborne, 2018). Reflexivity enables reflections on unintended consequences. For example, services provided on digital platforms have progressed, yet from the perspective of many service users, that digital shift might both contribute to and hinder the accessibility of social assistance (van Beveren et al., 2024).

Reflexivity could be cultivated in public service design by institutionalising collaborative agenda-setting and recognition practices that deepen stakeholders' understanding of operational conditions, objectives, and policies and reconfigure the relational field to support co-creation (Torfing et al., 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015). However, reflexive professionalisation requires a shared commitment by social work educators and institutions, students, and social work professionals (van Beveren et al., 2024). Echoing the reflexiveness required in professional work, evidence from public management education shows that structured reflective practice enhances managers' self-reflexivity and problem-solving amid complexity (D'Cruz et al., 2007), while relational public administration synthesises reflexive, practice-based, and network perspectives into a coherent agenda for situated judgement (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Kessl, 2009). Developing relational reflexivity is not, however, just a matter of personal professional development processes, but is necessarily an inter-relational process (van Beveren et al., 2024).

## **(2) Affective – Empathy, emotion, and trust work in relationships.**

The affective dimension of professional work refers to professionals being attuned to emotions, cultivating empathy, and managing trust dynamics in encounters, whether

of the service type or other forms. Although policy and administration research increasingly recognises the importance of emotions (Boswell et al., 2025), the focus has been on measurable experiences (Scherer, 2005), and the research has concentrated on the social sciences (Mastracci et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2009). However, the PSE concept recognises emotions as policy-governing at the sub-micro level of individual beliefs, with potential macro-level societal consequences (Osborne et al., 2022), as is evident in contemporary political polarisation. Trust within service encounters reduces perceived risk and enables openness (Bentzen, 2023; Rousseau et al., 1998), thereby expanding the relational bandwidth available for co-creation. In complex public services where uncertainty, asymmetries of information, and power differentials are common, trust permits mutual disclosure, perspective-taking, and joint decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Edelenbos & Eshuis, 2011; Osborne, 2018). This work considers trust to be more than a psychological state. It is a relational mechanism that configures the encounter (Bentzen, 2023). As such, it affects how roles are negotiated, how artefacts (e.g., information systems) are interpreted, and how institutional rules are enacted *in situ* (Emirbayer, 1997; Hasche et al., 2021).

Empirically, trusted relationships are associated with a greater willingness to participate on the part of service users (Bentzen, 2023) and greater recognition of experiential knowledge by professionals, both of which are essential for value co-creation (Osborne, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Conversely, trust breaches manifest as relational disruptions that narrow the scope for co-creation and increase defensive, transactional behaviours (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Further, public personnel research links emotional intelligence to engagement and better service outcomes (Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2019), while leadership studies show that relations-oriented leadership supports affective commitment in public organisations (Moldogaziev & Silvia, 2015). At the system level, trust-based leadership and management rebalance control and discretion to enable professional judgement (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023; Edelenbos & Eshuis, 2011; Siverbo et al., 2024).

Besides trust, the affective dimension of relational professionalism reveals how emotions – positive, negative, and neutral – affect policy and administrative processes in PSE beyond singular service encounters. Regarding the emotions inflicted by the government, utilising crises as a focal point of scrutiny, Boswell et al. (2025, p. 963) discuss *ethos* – aspirations, ideals, values, and morals, and *pathos* – specific feelings and displays of emotion or an organisational central pattern of sensibility (cf. Gagliardi, 2007) in public administration research. Extending the discussion to institutional pathos, the study examines challenges in public administration beyond frontline service encounters. It complements the affective dimension of relational professionalism by characterising four institutional–affective

orientations: *acquiescence*, defined as the reflexive suppression of emotions alongside the option of reflective questioning; *devotion*, understood as adherence to administrative traditions while allowing interpretive flexibility; *proficiency*, referring to the performance of civil-service tasks while recognising a broader repertoire of frontline roles (e.g. “loyal servant”, “honest broker”, or “boundary spanner”); and *personification*, denoting the maintenance of a consistent public persona together with the enactment of institutional ethos (Boswell et al., 2025). Recognising emotions as an affective dimension of relational professionalism that shapes administrative processes beyond frontline encounters also resonates with the findings of this dissertation’s sub-studies, which emphasise the role of relationality in professional work.

### **(3) Ethical – Responsibility to others and sensitivity to conflicts.**

The ethical dimension of relational professionalism rests on the ethical awareness required for professional conduct. It encompasses the ability to recognise and balance value conflicts (Kinchin, 2007) and to orient action toward responsibility, care, and fairness. Acting in accordance with ethical codes requires both internalisation of values and an understanding of how to operationalise them (Ash, 2010; Odeh, 2024). A characteristic of public services is that normative values of pursuing public interest and a commitment to social equity (Cooper, 2004; McCandless & Ronquillo, 2020) dominate the relevant codes of ethics (Odeh, 2024). Ethicality in public management leadership highlights both individuals’ personal morals and the moral management to sustain integrity and stakeholder trust (Moldogaziev & Silvia, 2015; Odeh, 2024). However, personal integrity and virtues also colour professionals’ actions concerning transforming ethical duties of public services (Odeh, 2024) into value co-creating interactions and tangible services. This makes professional codes of ethics authoritarian in terms of ethical decision-making in the public sector (Odeh, 2024). Accordingly, from the perspective of a professional, codes of ethics represent both the duty to a profession and to the public interest, constitutional fidelity, and the support of social equity.

Conflicts are integral to the ethical dimension of relational professionalism and a distinctive feature of the sub-studies. Interestingly, in ethical conflicts, the perceived responsibility to safeguard public interest overrides the duty to the organisation represented (Odeh, 2024), which can appear in the form of “whistleblowing”. An example is public administrators having a duty to consider whether the public deserves to know something, and who the release of information could harm. Therefore, the ethical dimension of public service conduct holds the potential to shape public policy throughout the service system (Odeh, 2024).

#### **(4) Systemic – Perceiving the interconnectedness of local actions with organisational and societal dynamics.**

Finally, in the context of public services value co-creation, the decisions and non-decisions at the service frontline arise from the interaction of systemic elements (Laud et al., 2015). For example, PSL frames the co-creational nature of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) as emerging across institutional, organisational, and individual levels, in service ecosystems (Frow et al., 2014), not as a single organisational output (Osborne et al., 2022a). Relational professionalism is thus seen as systemic in its dimensions, because it entails understanding how discrete acts connect to each other, to service ecosystems, and to multi-level governance.

The systemic dimension acknowledges decision-making is dynamic rather than static, referring to decision-making in the service frontline or on the organisational level, never occurring in isolation (Carrubbo et al., 2025). The systemic service constellation is connected in ways that create meaning, and therefore, the behaviour of single elements varies when exposed to other elements (Carrubbo et al., 2025). The systemic dimension assumes collaborative roles are relationally constituted and continually negotiated in encounters (Emirbayer, 1997; Field et al., 2021; Gherardi, 2012). Consequently, value co-creating decision-making in public services is a collaborative activity (Skålén et al., 2018), pointing to the importance of applying a systemic lens to understand decision-making (Carrubbo et al., 2025).

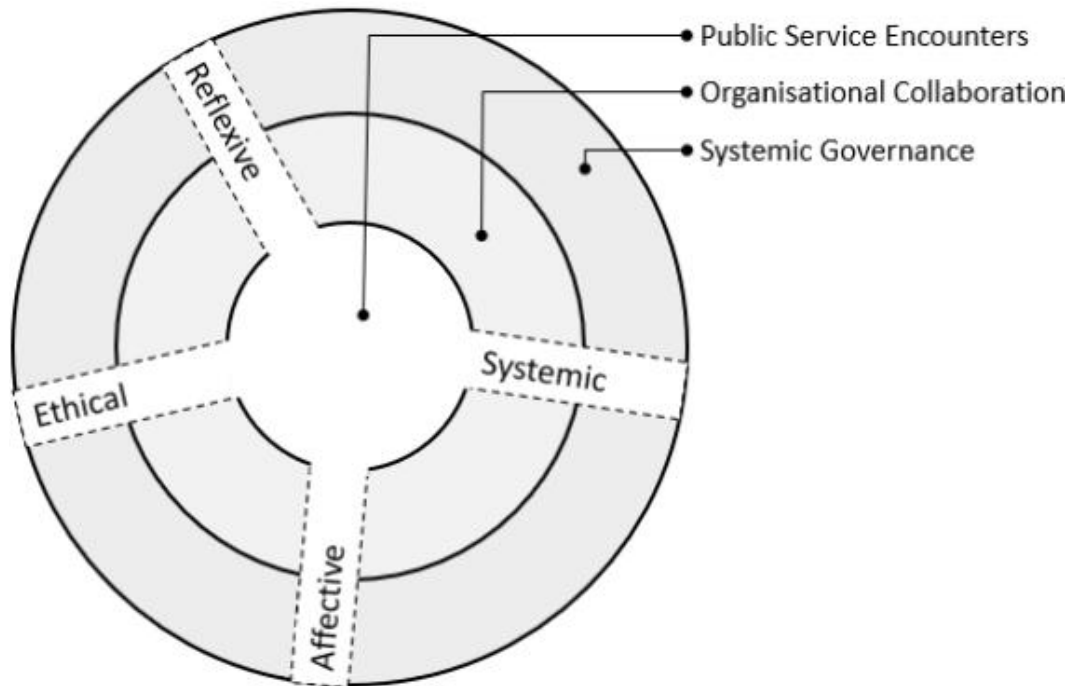
Systemic understanding reduces the ignorance and uncertainty that can impact the allocation of responsibility, decision rights, opportunities to exercise discretion, and expectations, thereby supporting coordination and adaptability in complex service settings (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 1–7; Noordegraaf, 2015). The alignment of personal objectives with evolving environments and broader collective goals emerges through a deep understanding of environmental dynamics and an assessment of how individual intentions correspond with shared purposes, characterised by interconnected, non-linear, and mutually reinforcing processes in governmental settings (Carrubbo et al., 2025). The inherent complexity of such environments underscores the importance of individual cognitive capability when confronting problems, avoiding errors, and resolving complications (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Ng et al., 2012). However, systemic ignorance can trigger relational disruptions of duplicated efforts or misaligned expectations that emerge as conflicts, which may hinder agency and obstruct pathways to value (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Nicolini, 2012, pp. 108–110). Therefore, interacting through a systemic understanding provides flexibility to the dialogue in service encounters, promoting joint problem definition, and fostering distributed action: efforts that are underpinned by institutional complexity and resource constraints (Osborne, 2018; Riotta & Bruccoleri, 2021; Roberts, 2024; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 Relational dimensions as structural elements of value co-creation

This doctoral dissertation examines relationally constituted professional work to identify the administrative choices and structures that support professionals' value co-creating agency. A significant motivation underpinning that examination was an aspiration to generate evidence-informed knowledge to support the work of professionals at the service interface, as well as the value created for the service user. To achieve this aim, the study reflects upon the findings of its sub-studies through the lens of value co-creating professional work. Specifically, this dissertation asks: *How does relationality reconfigure professional work and value co-creation in public services?*

The results of this dissertation's sub-studies indicate that first, value co-creating professional work is inherently multidimensional and relationally constituted. Although the roles of professionals in value co-creation entail different emphases – ranging from collaboration with service users to systemic bridging across organisational boundaries – an underlying relational logic can be discerned. However, no single dimension alone is sufficient; instead, professionals integrate reflexive interpretation, affective competence, ethical judgement, and systemic awareness as part of their everyday practice. In Figure 5, these dimensions are presented as structural elements of value co-creation, cutting across the layers that shape the dynamics of the service encounter. This multidimensionality explains why professionals occupy such a pivotal position in operationalising value co-creation in public services: They are simultaneously interpreters, empathic supporters, ethical stewards, and systemic connectors. Through these intertwined contributions, they shape not only service-user experiences but also the legitimacy, effectiveness, and public value outcomes of the PSE as a whole.



**Figure 5.** Relational dimensions of value co-creating professional work

The complexity inherent in governing the public services is revealed through the aggregated interactions of its elements and actors, and enquiry reveals properties that cannot be explained by the constituent elements alone but are emergent and characterised by non-linearity and unpredictability<sup>33</sup>. A relational interpretation emphasises that professional roles and expertise are constituted within ongoing, multi-level interactions in which knowledge, power, and responsibility are shared and continuously negotiated. The complexity that emerges cannot be governed hierarchically; rather, doing so requires the collaborative capability that is generated within relationships to be strengthened.

Second, this dissertation concludes that the relational dimensions co-vary and are socio-materially embedded. Examining the interwoven nature of these dimensions revealed that, for instance, the affective dimension of professional conduct is easier to sustain where practices supporting reflexivity are institutionalised. When reflexivity is cultivated through increased systemic understanding, the systemic dimension supports ethical decision-making supported by transparency in policy reasoning and metrics that encourage dialogue. Accordingly, this study concludes that the dimensions of relational professionalism are best understood as an interrelated configuration, and should be studied as an assemblage: their effects are configurational, arising from the interplay of people, practices, artefacts, and

<sup>33</sup> see also Carrubbo et al. (2025)

institutional logics in specific encounters<sup>34</sup>. This interdependence supports abductive enquiries by tracing how particular combinations of relational conditions and socio-material arrangements promote or obstruct value-in-use, for example. Accordingly, contemporary systems-oriented scholarship uses ecosystem and complexity lenses (Riemer et al., 2025) to propose systemic management practices that help local governments adapt to polycrises (e.g. Roberts, 2024).

Third, this dissertation argues that the relational dimensions of professional work are structures supporting value co-creation, and are institutionalised at the system level rather than in individual attributes. However, anticipating, identifying, interpreting, and responding to tensions and conflicts often remains the responsibility of individual professionals, despite many of those conflicts originating from different PSE levels where upstream decisions—or non-decisions—surface in service interactions. Accordingly, the study argues that building trust, fostering mutuality, and mobilising networks are not simply individual attributes but relational conditions embedded in public service encounters that shape value co-creation in service encounters. Recognising the structural nature of relational factors and dimensions illuminates their effects at the societal, organisational, and service levels among professionals and service users. From an ecosystem perspective, macro-level system changes appear particularly in relation to enabling seamless collaboration, involving technical, structural, and administrative solutions. At the organisational meso level, the essential concern lies in organising professional work flexibly so that crossing institutional boundaries, when necessary, is unproblematic, alongside ensuring continuous opportunities for peer support. At the micro level of professional practice, the meaningful utilisation of individual capabilities, resources, and expertise is key. That requires understanding the significance of relational work in practice.

The relational approach employed in this study, therefore, provides an analytical language for identifying where value co-creation collapses and the interventions that could strengthen it. Positioning the relational dimensions as structural enablers of value co-creation clarifies both diagnosis and design in public services. From this viewpoint, breakdowns in value co-creation appear as relational failure modes signalling deeper misalignments between practices, policies, system tools, and institutional logics. Designing improvements to them thus requires a focus extending beyond individual competencies to reconfigure the relational operating environment. That stage is likely to require instigating collaborative practices, re-designing roles and workflows, and aligning metrics and the IT systems with dialogical coordination. Under a relational ontology, these conditions are levers that shape the opportunity

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Nicolini (2012, pp. 226–227); Timmermans & Tavory (2012); Vargo & Lusch (2016)

space of value co-creation, making them central to both theorising and improving public service encounters.

## 6.2 Ethicality, reliability, and limitations

### **Ethical considerations on researching relational work in public services**

The current research adopted a relational and interpretivist ethical orientation to reflect its methodological choices. The choice acknowledges that ethical judgements arise within ongoing encounters rather than only in review-board environments (see Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Researchers obtained approvals to conduct research from all participating organisations<sup>35</sup> and from the participants individually<sup>36</sup>. Data processing adhered to the University of Vaasa's policies on secure storage and retention. A documented decision trail was maintained throughout the design, fieldwork, and analysis stages.

Relational work in public services often unfolds amid asymmetries of authority and vulnerability (cf. Lipsky, 1980). Organisational permissions were negotiated with clear assurances that individual employees' decisions on participation would not affect employment conditions or performance management (see Kaiser, 2009). Each organisation involved agreed to the informants participating during working hours. Participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling. Colleagues nominated key informants on the research subject. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and reaffirmed as situations evolved (see Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The eDelphi panel comprised only informants who had previously consented to the process and participated voluntarily.

This dissertation acknowledges that the access route of the researcher, the professional background, and analytic commitments shape the narration of insights into what is said and what remains unsaid. Given the smallness of certain premises within the organisations and the distinctive role profiles of many participants, particular attention was paid to deductive disclosure risks in analysis and reporting, including aggregation, careful paraphrase, and removal of identifiable particulars (see Kaiser, 2009). The risks of distress or reputational harm were mitigated by paraphrasing any allegations that could have been identifiable, removing all references to names, working locations, or teams; participants could answer openly from any viewpoint they saw fit, decline to respond to particular questions, or withdraw without consequences.

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<sup>35</sup> The research context and the organisational data are presented in Chapter 1.3

<sup>36</sup> The data collection and the process to secure participants' consent are described in Chapter 3.3

### **Reliability and trustworthiness**

The study's qualitative design is suited to examining how value is co-created in everyday encounters between professionals and service users, where meanings and practices are negotiated in situ<sup>37</sup>. The transferability of the dissertation's conclusions is enhanced by the thorough description of the service and organisational context of the empirical data and the transparent disclosure of the research process. The findings of this study are particularly relevant to public well-being services, yet the conclusions regarding value co-creation are generalisable to other public domains where value is pursued through interpersonal service encounters. Therefore, the results do not address value formation in fully automated services, where no human interaction occurs, but do encompass service encounters facilitated through digital channels, provided that at least two individuals are present and engaged in communication<sup>38</sup>.

In this case, credibility is enhanced through triangulation (see e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). Researcher triangulation stretches across interviews, data analysis, result formulation and interpretation, and all stages of the systematic literature review of Sub-study 1. The analysis methods in the sub-studies range from inductive to abductive, utilising not only the conclusions arising in the process of systematic coding of data, but also in the back-and-forth iteration between data and theory, when applied. The analysis also attends to critical or disconfirming literature to challenge the emergent interpretations (see Tracy, 2010). Contextually, Sub-studies 2 and 3 review data from three WSCs and Kela, which encompass various organisational levels to unveil heterogeneity in relational practices and constraints. Data triangulation combines data from a total of 56 semi-structured interviews, a two-round eDelphi panel, and previous academic value co-creation literature in the public services context.

The sub-studies of this doctoral dissertation have undergone a peer-review process, strengthening the credibility of the conclusions drawn and their academic comparability<sup>39</sup>. This dissertation, too, benefits considerably from the critique and developmental feedback received through the peer-review process. The sub-studies showcased perspectives on the realisation of professional agency and the importance of its support, as well as on the significance of constructing, maintaining, and

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<sup>37</sup> Discussion on meaning-negotiations as a prerequisite to value-in-use discussed, e.g., also by Osborne (2018), and Steen and Tuurnas (2018)

<sup>38</sup> Implementation and utilisation of AI is an ongoing public sector administration discussion. Read more, e.g., in Mergel et al. (2024) and Volodina and Grossi (2025)

<sup>39</sup> Within the research community, peer review functions as a mechanism of self-regulation of critical thinking, the aim being to eliminate, as far as possible, biased or erroneous interpretations from scientific debate (Bornmann, 2011). For criticism on peer review see e.g. Hope & Munro, (2019), and for a discussion on the current situation regarding peer review, see Vigmond and Coronel, (2025).

managing relationships in the value co-creation process within public services. The varied perspectives generated during the peer-review process have enriched the reliability of the work. Peer reviewers themselves are recognised as relationally embedded, environmentally shaped, and subject to influences; consequently, their diverse backgrounds, knowledge interests, and philosophical orientations affect their viewpoints, thereby broadening the analytical lenses available to this research. A detailed description of the research process and the repeated justification of methodological and philosophical choices strengthened the coherence of the theoretical foundation, the precision of the contextual account, the methodological rigour, and ultimately the reliability of the findings.

### **Limitations inherent to a relational, situated study**

First, relational work must be acknowledged as being situational and co-constituted; the findings of this study are therefore context-bound to societal regimes that support the agency of service users and to contemporary public services, and should be read as encouraging transferability rather than universal generalisation. Given the interdependence of actors and constraints in public service ecosystems, attributing outcomes to specific professional actions is inherently difficult. Second, access to informants negotiated in the snowball sampling via organisational gatekeepers can bias participation toward motivated or “showcase” units; some sensitive yet relevant information may have remained unobserved. The study mitigated these risks via triangulation, extended engagement where feasible, and attention to discrepant evidence.

Third, since service users were not directly recruited for this study, the analysis necessarily privileges professionals’ accounts of value co-creation. The increasing emphasis on the role of service users has, however, brought about significant changes in the work of professionals. This study reveals that the changes relate to relational structures, not service professionals’ personal attributes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sub-study 2 aligns with prior notions that professionals emphasise boundary spanning over the theoretically dominant role of collaborator with the service user (Sub-study 1). However, this study acknowledges that its commitment to ensuring confidentiality meant it was impossible to reproduce some details verbatim that might facilitate deductive disclosure, potentially constraining the transparency of the inference (see Kaiser, 2009). Nonetheless, a meaningful dialogue between theory and empirical findings emerges.

Fourth, relational practices evolve alongside organisational development, performance regimes, and resource pressures. A cross-sectional research design limits the capture of longer-term capability building or the durability of trust within relationships, as concurrent policy changes and reforms may confound

interpretations. Nevertheless, the study concludes that the transformation in relation-grounded professional work stems from shifts in societal values. Specifically, this refers to the paradigmatic transition in public administration from the principles of NPM towards more service-oriented operational models.

Although this study approaches paradigms in the theoretical framework through the lens of change, in reality, it is not possible to identify a specific point in time at which any given paradigm would have ceased to exist; the reality in paradigmatic shifts is quite the opposite<sup>40</sup>. Ultimately, service-oriented governance models may not be universally applicable across all sectors of working life. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to argue that, within the prevailing value framework, the principles of service orientation are particularly well-suited to the organisation of public services and are approached as dominant. This school of thought emphasises co-production, citizen engagement, and the relational nature of service delivery, aligning more closely with the expectations and complexities of contemporary public service environments. From this perspective, NPG and PSL offer credible and nuanced explanations of the current realities of public service governance, acknowledging the relational structures that enable value co-creation.

### 6.3 Future research

The theoretical framing and the empirical conclusions of this dissertation illuminate several promising directions for future research on relationally constituted professional work and value co-creation in public services. These suggestions reflect the need to deepen conceptual clarity, strengthen methodological innovation, and illuminate multilevel dynamics that shape professionals' relational agency within complex public service encounters.

This dissertation demonstrates that relationally enacted professional work is multidimensional. It comprises reflexivity, affective competence, ethical judgement, and systemic awareness. The study concludes that these dimensions are interdependent rather than additive, forming socio-material configurations that shape value-in-use. Nevertheless, further research should seek to integrate institutional logics, socio-material arrangements, and interactional conditions with relational professionalism in a refined assemblage discussing their interdependencies. Exploring how relational professionalism interacts with public values, legitimacy expectations, and accountability regimes would strengthen

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<sup>40</sup>: Ontologically, paradigmatic transitions remain ongoing with paradigms remaining as co-existing (see, e.g., Kuhn, 1962, p. xi; Røiseland et al., 2024) and, for example, the transactional legacy of NPM remains entrenched in the lived experience in public service work (see also Siverbo et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024).

theoretical integration across relational public administration, PSL, and PSE scholarship.

The findings of this study demonstrate that relational agency emerges from ongoing, multi-level interactions characterised by complexity, non-linearity, and distributed responsibility. This raises important research opportunities for multi-actor studies involving professionals, service users, managers, and partner organisations that map how relational conditions are co-constructed across different levels. For example, an ecosystem-conscious examination of how system reforms, governance instruments, and policy tools shape the possibility space for relational work would provide a service-encounter-level perspective on service development. Public services would also benefit from comparing organisational architectures that enhance or hinder collaborative capabilities within and among organisations. Furthermore, investigating how professionals navigate contradictions between system demands and relational practice, for example, between performance metrics and dialogical coordination, would illuminate how relationality scales from micro-interactions to institutional design, addressing a significant theoretical gap.

This study emphasises that relational conditions are structural enablers, not individual traits. More research is required to explore how policy and organisational design cultivate or constrain relational capability. That research should evaluate interventions and study how organisational norms, governance routines, and digital infrastructures shape professionals' ability to enact relational agency. Examining the institutionalisation of relational structures and how they become durable components of a PSE capability would support evidence-informed administrative choices that strengthen value co-creation. Relational conditions are likely to vary across institutional settings, and therefore comparative research could examine variations in relational professionalism across different nations and administrative traditions, or differences across policy domains with divergent governance logics. These studies could provide an understanding of how relational structures adapt under digitalisation, polycrisis governance, or rapid policy reform, illuminating how PSE structures shape relational agency.

Because this dissertation argues that relational professionalism is emergent, situated, and socio-materially embedded, expanding upon it will call for methodological approaches capable of capturing interactional complexity. Future research might therefore employ longitudinal, ethnographic, or shadowing designs, for example, to observe how relational practices develop, stabilise, or erode over time, informing interventions that strengthen co-creation capacity. Complexity-informed and other methods that consider the systemic nature of public services could map or trace paths

of emergence within public service encounters, and thus enrich understanding of how relational structures become institutionalised, or why they fail to do so.

Finally, given the current study's focus on professionals, it is important to expand on how service users experience, contribute to, and shape relational conditions. Future studies could elucidate this side of relational structures in service encounters by examining service users' relational agency and how it interacts with professional practices, or analysing alignments and misalignments between user expectations and professional interpretations. A worthwhile investigation would be one honing in on how relational conditions and professional capability influence trust formation, emotional safety, and perceived value, aligning with PSL's emphasis on value-in-use and deepening understanding of relationality as a shared accomplishment.

Collectively, the proposed avenues for future research, grounded in the conclusions of this study, coalesce around a common objective: the generation of knowledge that is both theoretically rigorous and practically applicable. By elucidating mechanisms, devising interventions, and conducting comparative analyses of contexts, subsequent research can enhance the understanding of relational structures within public service delivery. This framework acknowledges value as emergent, contingent, and co-created through the intricate interplay of relationships, practices, structures, and institutional logics. Such an approach not only bridges academic inquiry and practical enhancement but also supports the evidence-informed public management vision at the heart of this dissertation.

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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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### 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; Skälén, 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

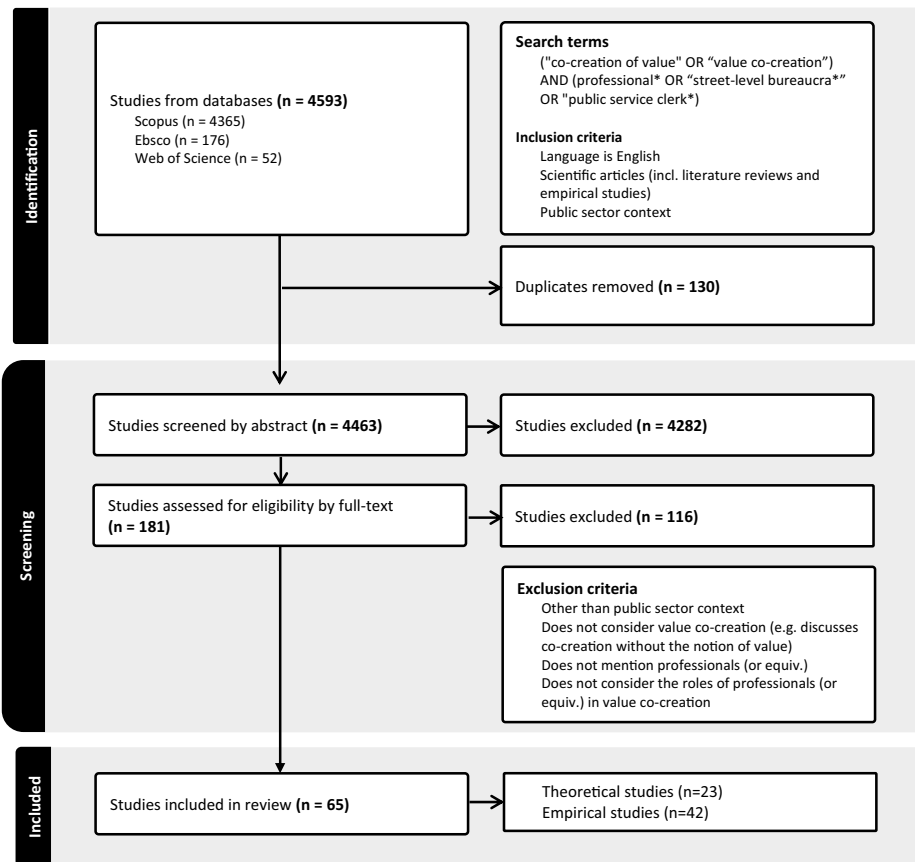


Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart (from Covidence).

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. Adaptation to individual service user needs. Collaborative formation of a common service plan.
Empowering agent	109	40	trust, security, empowerment	Sensitive approach to service user's conditions. Empowering service user interaction capabilities. 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. Professional assessment and discretion on service provision. 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. Fostering positive service user attitude towards the whole service chain. Encounters based on relationships instead of exchange.
Educator	83	36	knowledge imbalance, professional guidance, learning	Interpretation of public services and service language. Integrating information and co-learning. 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. Generation of shared competence. Granting and sharing common resources.
Self-developer	42	29	training, professional development, expertise/skills	Accumulation of (technical) skills, abilities and capabilities. Realisation of own value conceptions. Development of empathetic and supportive behaviour.
Asset	28	19	performance, resource, policy implementation	Representing the service organization and public values. Being a human resource for service user value creation. 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.

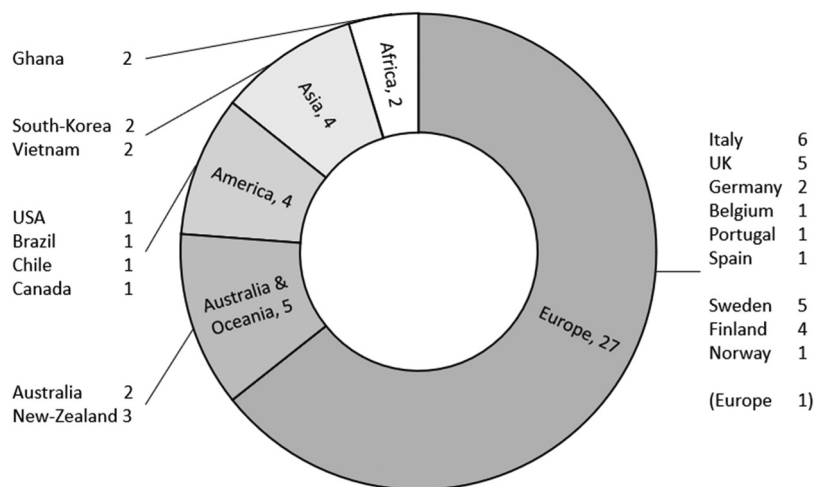
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Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the empirical studies.

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; Sønderkov 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 Käsäkoski 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 (Sønderkov 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 Käsäkoski 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; Virleé, 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, 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, Trust in service system	Trust in service operator	Sense of security, Appropriate service (outcome)
Professional service provider	Equality and fairness, Social and ethical standards	Service-basedness, Service network flexibility, Responsibility division	Ethical interaction
Co-creator of service experiences	Inclusiveness and accessibility, Adaptability to actual service needs	Interactive resource integration, Increased commitment in service processes	Exceeded expectations, Increased satisfaction, Reduction of fear
Educator	Increased citizen well-being, Prevention of value co-destruction	Understanding shared information, Accepting shared information as relevant	Personalised education, Meaningful information
Boundary spanner	Quality of services, Consensus on service priorities, Systemic transformation	Elimination of overlapping processes, Consensus on service goals, Multisector collaboration	Holistic view on service needs, Enhanced trust and respect, Appropriate system navigation
Self-developer	Efficient utilization of societal resources	Strategic values conveyed to customer interface, Organisational resilience	Maintained wellbeing, Development of skills and expertise
Asset	Public values guide service production, Citizens emphasized	Organisational performance, 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 service 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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## Value co-creation at service user interface: contribution of public service professionals

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### ABSTRACT

Value co-creation is a process aimed at improving services by engaging the cooperation of service users. In this process, service frontline professionals directly influence service pathways, outcomes and service users' experiences. Drawing on interviews with 56 public service professionals and managers, we explore how professionals contribute to value co-creation in public wellbeing services in Finland. Through abductive analysis, we identify key elements of professional contribution to public service value co-creation and the persistent presence of value tensions. We discover that, given the opportunity, professionals convey information on the functionality of co-creation processes at the service interface and enable organizational learning. Therefore, this study concludes that recognizing the multi-faceted roles of professionals and value tensions also promote the development of professional competence, organizational practices and the service system.


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### Introduction

In public services, value co-creation refers to the interplay between service users and professionals that aims to create value as a service outcome. Value co-creation is enabled in encounters based on realizing service user needs, conditions and value-adding possibilities (Trischler et al. 2023) and therefore defined by the concept of 'value-in-use' (e.g. Scutella, Plewa, and Reaiche 2024; Virtanen and Jalonon 2023). Paradigms that emphasize value-in-use posit that the main purpose of public services is the creation of value for service users (e.g. Osborne et al. 2022), stressing individuality (Engen et al. 2021) and the experiential nature of service values (Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021;

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Trischler et al. 2023). Rather than referring to moral values, service value denotes an experience of improvement in an individual's life. Within complex service systems, value is experienced and defined not only by service users but also by other individuals involved in the service process (Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor 2021; Grönroos and Voima 2013), as well as by indirect stakeholders (Grönroos and Gummerus 2014), and emerge also on organizational and societal levels of the service system (Osborne et al. 2022).

The extent to which frontline cooperation can lead to desirable outcomes depends on how professionals interact with service users (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020). Similarly, to other co-creation and -production endeavours (Steen and Tuurnas 2018), value co-creation is dependent on the professionals' willingness, but also the ability to tap into the individual and situational knowledge of the service user (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Skarli and Stokke 2025), navigates the process of value co-creation (Nasi et al. 2024) and adapt according to the individual needs and capabilities of the service user instead of following a process chart or service template (Skarli and Stokke 2025). In the constantly changing epistemological and practical contexts in which public service professionals conduct their daily work (Noordegraaf 2015), realizing the full potential of value co-creation is heavily reliant on a profound understanding of the roles and competencies that professionals bring into the collaborative process (Tuurnas 2021).

Previous research highlights that professionals navigate between various value orientations, institutional logics and goal-settings in their daily work (e.g. Maijala et al. 2024; Vivier et al. 2024), necessitating constant adaptation and situational learning (Skarli and Stokke 2025). Although the roles of public service professionals are embroidered by the complexity of value co-creation processes, the exploration of public service professionals' contribution has not yet gained much focus in the scientific value co-creation discussion (Kinder and Stenvall 2023; Steen and Tuurnas 2018), especially lacking exploration in empirical settings (Maijala et al. 2024). Therefore, to uncover focal understanding on professional contribution in value co-creation, this study poses the question: *How do public service professionals and managers perceive professionals' roles and contributions in value co-creation?*

Empirical data for the current examination were collected from four Finnish public service organizations operating within the national social and healthcare system. One of these organizations—the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela)—is a nationwide entity responsible for administering social security benefits. The remaining three organizations represent Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs), which operate at the regional level and are mandated to deliver health and social care services. Although the responsibilities of these organizations differ, this variation affects the roles and

functions of the professionals within them. By analysing data collected from 56 Finnish public service professionals and managers, we examine their perceptions of professionals' contributions to value co-creation.

Co-creative processes in public services might also enable a rather common emergent phenomenon of value co-destruction (Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2024; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), the mitigation and management of which has called for further research (Bal et al. 2023). Accordingly, this study explores how barriers to value creation are identified and how their recognition can be utilized to prevent value co-destruction. Also, the diversity of professionals' roles in value co-creation generates conflicting pressures and demands, leading to expectations around the management of professional expertise and actions (Maijala et al. 2024; Wieke and van Hulst 2022). By examining the tensions and support needs arising from professionals' perspectives, it becomes possible to identify essential requirements and strategies for effective leadership.

In this article, we begin by providing an overview of the existing scholarly discourse on public service professionals in value co-creation. We then outline our research design and methodology, followed by the presentation of our empirical findings. Finally, we discuss and reflect on our results, and conclude that recognizing factors contributing to value co-destruction can support the development of professional competence, organizational practices and the broader service system.

### **Theoretical framing: public service professionals at the heart of value co-creation**

Value creation research in public service administration paradigms emphasizes the role of service users as initiators (e.g. Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023), developers of democratic innovations (Sønderskov 2020; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019) and participators in the value co-creation process (Nguyen, Drejer, and Marques 2024). The value of a public service cannot be captured in discernible characteristics, as service users perceive and experience value individually (Osborne 2018). This individuality is a key reason for the cruciality of the role of professionals in value co-creation, since they act as mediators between service providers and users (see e.g. Skarli and Stokke 2025). Indeed, paradigms such as public service logic (PSL) highlight the active role of the service user (e.g. Engen et al. 2021; Osborne 2018). However, in line with Cui and Aulton (2023), we emphasize professionals as crucial contributors but also possible beneficiaries of the values created in service encounters.

In public services, values can also be obtained indirectly (Grönroos and Gummerus 2014) as material or immaterial benefits (Alford 2016), but also as process values (Alford and Hughes 2008; Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger

2023). Service users can either create value in their lives by using the service their own way (value creation) or by sharing the creation process with service providers (value co-creation) (Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021). Although value co-creating service interactions can varyingly be digital, service users may prefer reciprocal human encounters (Scutella, Plewa, and Reaiche 2024). Either way, human work is required in complex public services, at least behind the scenes or in conjunction with virtual assistants (Vogl et al. 2020).

Perceptions and definitions of value by numerous actors affect expectations and operating methods in public services (Trischler et al. 2023). Due to their complexity, the relationships between service users and professionals are more interpenetrative than the concept of value-in-use suggests (Kinder and Stenvall 2023). Professionals bear the responsibility of translating operating policies into tangible services and practical outcomes (e.g. Eriksson et al. 2022) and their actions have a significant impact on the lives of service users (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). Therefore, everyday service interactions shape the quality (Virtanen and Jalonen 2023), efficiency (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015) and legitimacy (Bryson et al. 2017) of public services.

### **Can value co-creation yield public value?**

Value, as a concept, is not without contradiction and defining it unambiguously seems to be a tall order: In public administration, value is considered pluralistic with inevitable conflicts (Wagenaar 1999). Some paradigms entail public services to support individuals in their personal wellbeing efforts (i.e. PSL, Osborne 2018), but despite this focal concept of individual value creation, public services are responsible not only for fulfilling the expectations of service users (Trischler et al. 2023) but also for creating value for society (Alford 2016). Therefore, in the context of public services, value is addressed from a perspective that also includes public value creation (Alford 2014; Engen et al. 2021).

According to Alford (2016), public value is considered 'public' not because of who produces it, but because of who consumes it. Although public value and individual value are produced simultaneously and co-dependently (Engen et al. 2021), they are perceived through different processes and realized mostly by different actors (Alford 2016). Further, value creation research in the public service administration context emphasizes the aspects of delivering legitimate services, achieving social outcomes and maintaining trust (Bozeman 2019; Virtanen and Jalonen 2023). Then, again, the effects of co-creation processes are considered extensive and somewhat unpredictable (Cui and Osborne 2023).

Osborne et al. (2022) emphasize that complex societies need an inclusive and open way of co-creating and co-producing public services, requiring

innovations to find means to include individuals in the most vulnerable positions. Drawing on Vargo and Lusch's (2008, 740) definition of value as a change in the wellbeing of either system or actor', we perceive public value and service user value as more intertwined than separate. Both public and service user values are co-created (Bryson et al. 2017; Vargo and Lusch 2016) and evaluated by individuals (Meynhardt and Jasinenko 2021; Vargo and Lusch 2008), emerging as impact on both societal and individual levels (Cui and Aulton 2023).

Due to the complexity and systemicity of public service delivery processes (Virtanen and Jalonen 2023), the encounters may also result in co-destruction of value as a rather regular part of service provision (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Value co-destruction refers to a phenomenon in which value creation for one party can result in the destruction of value for another (Steen, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2018; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). However, value co-destruction can be thwarted and its effects diminished through proper research and preparation (Cui and Osborne 2023).

### ***The roles of public service professionals in value co-creation***

This study considers public service professionals at the heart of value co-creation processes. In this context, the interviewed employees, experts and managers are referred to as 'public service professionals' for the mandate they have from their organizations to perform in their specific jobs, together with the skills and morals (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019) obtained in specialized education or training (Tuurnas 2015; van Bockel and Noordegraaf 2006). The concept of professionals has been described previously, for example, by certified training, peer authorization and common code of ethics (Wilensky 1964), or scantily by a certain line of work (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019). Administratively, professionals possess specific knowledge and expertise to perform specialized tasks with a degree of autonomy (Brandsen and Honingh 2013). Alongside meticulous definitions, recent scholarly understanding perceives professionals widely as persons belonging to an occupation based on skill or education (Caza and Creary 2016), and, according to Schott, van Kleef and Noordegraaf (2015), professionalism is embedded in broader organizational and societal contexts instead of being just embodied in specialized knowledge, status, or autonomy.

The perceived purpose of public services is yet in another transition: The focus on public interest seems to be shifting towards more individually defined targets of service user needs (see Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). This shift is also reflected in the work of professionals, adding layers to actual work specifications. With aspirations to understand the ongoing shifting of balance in public service professional work, and the tensions created by

advocacy towards value-in-use while simultaneously cherishing public value creation, this study draws from previous literature on the role of professionals in value co-creation. Specifically, this study utilizes eight previously recognized roles (*collaborator, empowering agent, professional service provider, educator, co-creator of service experiences, boundary spanner, self-developer* and *asset*) for public service professionals (Maijala et al. 2024) as analytical framing for empirical data.

The multitude of roles recognized demonstrates that public service professionals' need to balance between differing individual and societal values as they implement public policies in practice (Osborne and Strokosch 2022; Sønderkov and Rønning 2021), and displays the ample ways in which professionals perform and deliver public services, varying their approach according to individual needs and circumstances (Maijala et al. 2024). In addition, inadequate professional skills or lack of willingness to share control of the service process can hinder the opportunities for successful value co-creation (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012), highlighting the need to understand professional contribution.

To conclude, with value co-creation as the lens of scrutiny, public services consist of human encounters between professionals and service users (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022) in which information is shared and service strategies created in collaboration (Edvardsson, Per, and Bård 2012; Engen et al. 2021). In these service encounters, professionals act according to information from various sources, such as organizational guidelines, public policies and personal information from the service user (Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Robertson, Polonsky, and McQuilken 2014; Tiitola et al. 2023 Skarli and Stokke 2025). Ultimately, however, it is the service user that decides which resources to implement in their personal value creation process (Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022). This influences the possibilities for value co-creation but also the methods and strategies chosen by the professional (Keeling et al. 2021), highlighting the importance of professional contributions not only to service users but to public value creation as well (Alford 2016).

## Methodology

The research for this study was conducted in the context of Finnish public services that provide publicly funded social, healthcare and social insurance. This service provision is carried out in collaboration with 21 Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs) that operate regionally, and the Social Insurance Institution of Finland *Kela*, which operates nationally. The four case organizations, *Kela* and three of the WSCs, occupy distinct positions within the Finnish service system bound by their specific institutional and organizational contexts, which in turn

shape the roles and reality of the professionals working within them. Ontologically, this study recognizes that professional roles and experiences vary depending on organizational position and background (Schwandt 2003), therefore considering the reality of professional work as not fixed, but context-dependent and emerging through social interactions and shared meanings (Berger and Luckmann 20162016).

### **Research context**

Kela is a nationwide organization responsible for administering a range of social security benefits across various life circumstances, including unemployment, illness, disability, old age, childbirth and bereavement. These benefits encompass social assistance, child benefits, unemployment benefits, parental allowances, certain pension components, reimbursements for medical expenses, student financial aid and rehabilitation subsidies (see Kela 2025). In contrast, the Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs) are regional, self-governing and democratically led public organizations tasked with the provision of healthcare, social services and rescue services.

While Kela has a long-standing institutional history, the WSCs were established more recently as part of a significant and historic reform implemented in 2023 (see STM 2024). Prior to this reform, responsibility for social and healthcare services lay with 309 municipalities. Although these organizations operate independently, they share a wide array of joint processes and are therefore considered key actors within the Finnish social and healthcare ecosystem. The reforms of 2023 and the current post-reform setting present a unique opportunity to examine operational practices and collaborative arrangements in novel ways, enabling an assessment of how service organizations can enhance the delivery of services that are more oriented towards the needs of service users.

Since the employees of the participating organizations have different professional backgrounds, this study acknowledges the varying viewpoints on what professional contribution and work signifies, depending on the organization and the organizational position of the interviewee. To clarify, WSC representatives deal with issues regarding implementing social and healthcare locally in their daily work, whereas interviewees from Kela represent a national organization. In this study, we consider the everyday work and collaboration that takes place in public service encounters and requires the skills and morals obtained in specialized education and training as professional modes of action (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019; Tuurnas 2015; van Bockel and Noordegraaf 2006).

### Data

For this study, the emphasis of data collection was on understanding professional viewpoints and collaborative arrangements. The study values subjective experiences and contextual knowledge (Junjie and Yingxin 2022), especially in how professional roles and contributions are perceived, therefore leaning epistemologically towards interpretivism with a focus on meaning-making rather than objective measurements (Scauso 2020). Such a positioning is well suited for examining how public service professionals articulate their contribution to processes of value co-creation. The empirical data was collected with semi-structured thematic interviews with 56 informants, from which 26 represented Kela and 30 represented the three Wellbeing Services Counties, 11 interviewees worked in WSC1, 11 in WSC2 and 8 in WSC3. All participants were required to provide informed consent before being interviewed. The interviews were conducted remotely between June 2023 and February 2024 using Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted between 44 and 90 minutes, each group interview lasting 75 and individual interview 51 minutes in average. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 749 pages of data.

Data collection starts with a limited number of initial contacts from each organization, based on the estimated understanding of the research interest according to their job descriptions. The following interviewees were selected utilizing snowball sampling (see e.g. Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019), in which informants refer to people from their own networks that they perceive to have significant information on the theme of value co-creation. From the references, we invited those willing people that fit the research criteria to be interviewed. The snowball sampling continued until all four organizations had representatives on different levels of their organization: from both upper management ( $n = 20$ ), supervisors or middle management ( $n = 25$ ) and professionals from service user interface ( $n = 11$ ).

Within all organizations, professional work at the service user interface typically takes place in office or bureau settings, where service users meet professionals in person. In contrast, collaboration between institutions and organizations in shared service user cases was primarily conducted via digital means. Although many interviewees supported the idea of locating various public service bureaus in close proximity to facilitate collaboration, this was by no means the prevailing arrangement. Informants from two out of the three WSCs reported having individual service centres within their jurisdiction that hosted a Kela bureau under a shared roof. Experiences with such integrated service centres were described as promising.

Although this study primarily focuses on professionals' perspectives regarding their work in service encounters, the inclusion of views from leaders at various organizational levels can be considered both consistent with this

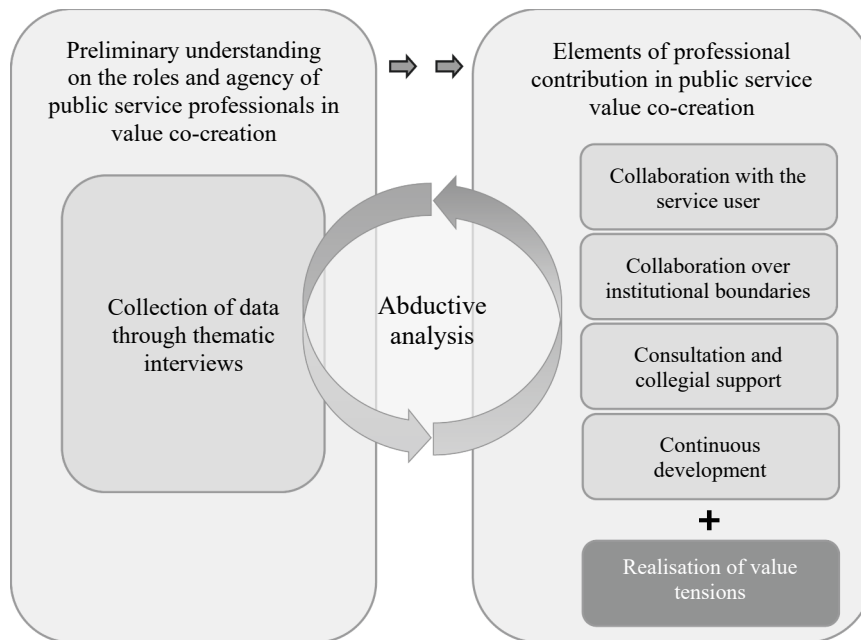
approach and enriching to it. In addition to their formal education, leaders typically possess substantial professional experience that supports their leadership roles and enhances their understanding of frontline practice. Moreover, they bring a broader managerial perspective to their insights. To ensure the intended focus, the interviews were continued until a clear saturation of data was observed, particularly regarding views on professional practice. These perspectives were supported by both current frontline professionals and managerial representatives, many of whom also reported having prior experience in frontline roles.

The aim of the interviews was to achieve a deeper understanding of co-creation as well as the formation of value and the enhancement of the service's value-in-use. To achieve this, the interviews addressed three themes of 1) inter-organizational value co-creation, 2) value co-creation with other actors and 3) value-in-use of the service and the service-based nature of operations (Appendix 1). These themes inspired the interviewees to discuss value co-creation and co-development possibilities between organizations, professionals and service users, but also the necessary future steps in making public services more service-oriented and valuable for the service users. Throughout the interviews, the common purpose was to reveal the perceptions of the professionals and managers on what they perceive as the most important aims and justifications behind service-related decisions, and how value co-creation between professionals and service users is realized in practice. Therefore, the data were assumed to reveal significant aspects of public service value co-creation from a variety of views, giving new insights on the studied phenomenon, thus considered relevant for examination to specify the previously formed understanding.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed qualitatively by three researchers following abductive research logic (see e.g. Aliseda 2006; Sætre and Van de Ven 2021), in which emerging themes were compared to the existing literature in an iterative process consisting of three stages. First, the transcripts were read line by line and coded with a content analysis program NVivo utilizing eight categories of *collaborator*, *empowering agent*, *professional service provider*, *educator*, *co-creator of service experiences*, *boundary spanner*, *self-developer* and *asset* as analytical framing (e.g. Heinisuo 2025) based on the role of professionals in value co-creation (Maijala et al. 2024). Utilizing framing based on previous literature, we provided the analysis with a robust theoretical structure to support abductive reasoning (Lipscomb 2012) and initiated a crucial dialogue between data and theory (e.g. Fischer 2001).

Second, the analysis proceeded with an exploration of the coded data by recognizing excerpts both connecting to the previous



**Figure 1.** Abductive content analysis approach.

understanding of the roles of professionals in value co-creation and emphasizing novel nuances supplementing the understanding. This led to observations of the overlap of the professionals' roles supporting value co-creation: The roles of the framing did not appear in the empirical data as separate from each other in service encounters, but rather as a compilation intermingled with personal competences and process-related instructions, through adaptation to individual situations. Different roles appear to be present in each service encounter, even if they are not always clearly visible, or alternative to each other.

In the third stage of the analysis, the data were compared to the research question, observing how professionals' contribution is perceived in the data as part of the value co-creation process within each role. These perceptions were then further categorized based on their congruent content, resulting in realizations of agency-related aspects of professional contributions in value co-creation. The abductive reasoning process of travelling back-and-forth between the data and the theoretical framing thus uncovered four categories as the elements of professional contribution in value co-creation, and their interconnecting element relating to the realization of value tensions as a possibility to promote value co-creation further despite hindrances. Each category was then named to describe the perceptions of public

service professionals and leaders regarding the elements of professional contribution and the related value tensions. The progression of the analysis is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

### **Results: elements of professional contribution in value co-creation**

The analysis process revealed some interesting features in the empirical data in relation to previous value co-creation literature, which emphasized the professional roles of collaborators and empowering agents more than the others (Maijala et al. 2024). In turn, our empirical data highlight the role of boundary spanner—a result which may stem from interview themes. Furthermore, representatives from organizations with different societal tasks had different viewpoints on which professional role was more significant to value co-creation. For example, the role of boundary spanner had a greater significance to informants from the National Social Insurance Institution (Kela), with a prevalence of 25 percent, whereas informants from Wellbeing Services Counties (WSC) emphasized the same role in 19 percent of the excerpts. The emphasis on the roles in our data is presented in [Table 1](#) with some exemplar quotes representing each role.

The results of the study do show, on the one hand, how professionals perceive their role in co-creating value in service encounters. On the other hand, the results also represent the viewpoints of public service managers on how professionals ought to act in order to support both service user value co-creation and organizational value creation. As the interview themes focused on value co-creation among public service organizations, and that between organizations and service users before discussing the roles of professionals in this equation, the interviewees were in a mindset that would emphasize collaborative actions, as discussed above. Also, other differences to the theoretical understanding occurred. Compared to previous understanding on professionals' roles, the role of empowering agent was presented in our data in such a way that reminded actions of a partner or a companion—with aspects demonstrating empowerment—thus indicating that professionals are simultaneously supporting and advocating for the service user. These realizations formulate an understanding that professionals, through their various value co-creation supporting roles, have specific contributions in value co-creation processes, which may benefit value to be created as intended, but also risk value to be co-destructed, depending on how each role is applied and how each element of contribution is substantiated.

We present four categories that arose in our analysis as the elements of professional contribution in deliberate value co-creation ([Figure 2](#)) but also reveal a fifth category of realization of value tensions as interconnecting the four elements. Within itself, the realization of value tensions carries vital

**Table 1.** Emphasis on professional roles (according to Majjala et al. 2024) in data and the evolution of the elements.

Role	Keywords	total %	WSC %	Kela %	Example quote	Outlining	Element
Boundary spanner	service integration, liaison, knowledge gathering, resource exchange and allocation	21	19	25	'They had enormous trust in each other that they were doing things the same way ... They were constantly coaching each other.' (Manager, Kela)	Creating trust and shared understanding	Consultation and collegial support
					'There [at the client interface] we encounter obstacles and also create good practices ... ones that should be expanded and embedded'. (Executive, Kela)		
Collaborator	collaboration, interaction, knowledge gathering	13	15	11	'Why do we want to do this together, is that we all have noticed that as we work, it is not possible to get done with high quality if you are alone, or actually it is not possible to get it done alone at all'. (Professional, Kela)	Facilitating holistic and collaborative problem-solving	Collaboration over institutional boundaries
					'I haven't learned as much about other services anywhere else as I have in these situations, when we work on client cases together.' (Professional, Kela)		
					'The best successes have been those, where you can genuinely see how the client benefits when different actors are brought to the same table and everything is sorted out in one go ... instead of the issues being dragged through different service counters and ending up like a game of broken telephone.' (Professional, Kela)	Facilitating holistic and collaborative problem-solving	Collaboration over institutional boundaries
					'Instead of running to three different service points they can come to one, save time, create value there. [...] It saves time and trouble. The customer doesn't need to know what they need. They just have to show up.' (Professional, WSC)	Supporting service users through relational continuity	Collaboration over institutional boundaries

(Continued)



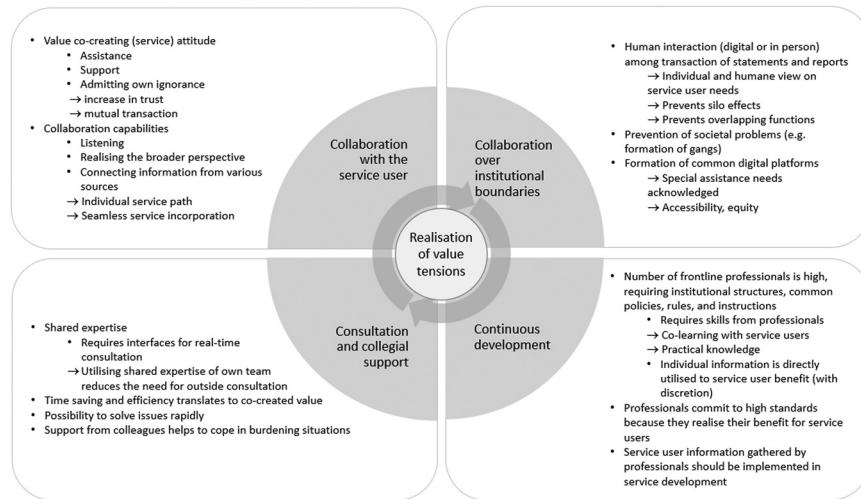
Table 1. (Continued).

Role	Keywords	total %	WSC %	Kela %	Example quote	Outlining	Element
Professional service provider	service provision, consultation, professional ethics, integrity	13	14	10	'And you have to tolerate the fact you don't have to be able to do everything [...] but you have to be brave and say that I can't do this, I don't know this, but I will discover this'. (Professional, WSC)	Facilitating holistic and collaborative problem-solving Developing professionally due to intrinsic motivation Developing professionally due to intrinsic motivation	Collaboration with the service user Continuous development
					'Our professionals, by their own interest and conscientiousness and high work ethics, of course network and perform their jobs. Our professionals are, in this sense, equipped with such moral and work ethic that we are able to move forward. [...] And it is a good thing in Finland that our professionals are ethically on high level. This brings a certain "buzz" to it, that the customer is very much centric'. (Manager, WSC)	Facilitating holistic and collaborative problem-solving	Continuous development Collaboration over institutional boundaries Collaboration with the service user
Supporting companion	advocacy empowerment, support, sensitivity, trust, security	12	13	9	'We have a strong client advocacy point of view amongst our staff, they are really strongly on the customer's side, and what I am happy about is that in all our operations and development, they always raise the first question of what the client will benefit from this'. (Manager, WSC)	Advocating service users	Collaboration with the service user Continuous development
Educator	professional guidance, knowledge imbalance, (co-)learning	11	10	12	'The most wonderful thing from the clients' perspective is that the client sees different actors working on the same issue ... the responsibility for moving the issue forward doesn't fall on the client'. (Professional, Kela) 'We also do it by explaining our decisions, in other words, explaining why this pension has been rejected. And then the customer may feel very strongly that they have been heard, that it is okay that I am not going to apply for pension for the 75 <sup>th</sup> time'. (Professional, Kela)	Supporting service users through relational continuity Professional guidance and support	Collaboration over institutional boundaries Collaboration with the service user

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Role	Keywords	total %	WSC %	Kela %	Example quote	Outlining	Element
Self-developer	expertise, skills, professional development, training	11	10	12	'About competencies, at least a desire to develop and a strong desire to learn new things and good interaction skills, of course, to be able to work in these networks and such.' (Manager, Kela)	Developing professionally due to intrinsic motivation	Continuous development
Asset	policy implementation, conduit, resource, performance	10	9	12	'I don't believe that the service organisers are the only ones who possess the right knowledge about what is good and how things should be done. Instead, we need a wide range of perspectives. I...J sometimes it's perfectly reasonable to just ask the users themselves.' (Manager, Kela) 'A huge amount of knowledge has accumulated and continues to accumulate there about how services function; what kinds of things concern clients ... what can we possibly influence?' (Executive, Kela)	Acting as knowledge brokers and connectors	Continuous development
Co-creator of service experiences	user experience, relationship, engagement, motivation	9	10	9	'However, quite a few say that they were heard and "this certainly made things easier". It is the kind of feedback we need and ask. And someone can say that "this was of no use", so it is also important that we think about why this didn't do you any good, why do you feel that way. But still, it may have been useful for that customer's case to move forward'. (Professional, Kela) 'I also feel that the people who work with our clients are in a key position to bring our clients' voices into the planning process.' (Manager, Kela)	Acting as knowledge brokers and connectors Professional guidance and support Facilitating holistic and collaborative problem-solving	Continuous development Collaboration over institutional boundaries Collaboration with the service user



**Figure 2.** The elements of professional contribution in value co-creation.

factors to overcome hindrances in value co-creation, and to prevent value co-destruction in public service encounters. According to our results, value tensions between individual, organizational and societal points of view are realized throughout wellbeing services on all organizational levels, and are apparent in all the interviews. The realization of value tensions is therefore discussed in our results as a combining factor promoting the identification of helping to identify aspects that negatively affect value co-creation aspirations in service encounters.

### ***Collaboration with the service user***

To enable frontline collaboration and value co-creation, our findings stress that the service attitude of professionals is emphasized in empowering service users for mutual transactions. An empathetic approach is perceived as a tool for service user empowerment in co-creating service experiences. Informants describe this as having a genuine interest in the service user, comprehensive knowledge of the service and as a determination to understand the service user point of view. The most important way to enable mutuality is perceived as the capability to listen and to consider the service user narrative from a broader perspective, connecting pieces of information from various sources. Collaboration capabilities are described to be entwined with professionalism and expert knowledge. Combining the personal information of service users with professional knowledge enables service path formation that is both individually considered to address actual service needs

and logically formatted so that service providers are able to function seamlessly as the path is incorporated.

Support, assistance and education affect service user abilities to find correct services and understand their possibilities, but also induce compliance with the service:

If we take lifestyle counselling for example, and that you have diabetes and high cholesterol, then what type of food you actually buy from the store for yourself . . . Then yes, there is that, what the patient gets from the counselling and to support their coping in life. (Manager, WSC).

Thus, the increased well-being is the co-created value service user gains from the service.

Vulnerable service users are typically not represented adequately in well-being services development. To get reliable information on their beliefs, needs and experiences is seen to take shape by trusting the interacting professionals. According to the informants, some public service users display mistrust in officials not only due to personal circumstances, but also because of previous value-destructing encounters. Trust generation in service user interaction requires, for example, admitting that professionals do not always know the answers either. Confidential relationships enable professionals and service users to discuss the quality and significance of the services.

### ***Collaboration over institutional boundaries***

According to our results, value co-creation requires interactive encounters. Mere formal written communication is considered to present a risk of losing an individual and humane view on service user needs. Specifically, in social and youth services collaboration is a lifeline for effective service provision, and, for example, the collaboration between wellbeing services and the police is perceived to prevent joining in and formation of gangs.

Collaborative interactions prevent operational and institutional silos, which would cause ineffective resource allocation, hierarchy and extra work. Working together on service user cases helps operators to learn from and about each other. Therefore, practical cooperation and solving challenging issues can happen more rapidly. Accordingly, ignorance causes ineffective task performance, for example, if a professional statement lacks crucial information causing a need to alter the original statement, while a service user waits for the process to proceed. Consensus induced by successful boundary spanning also diminishes service users' need to explain their affairs repeatedly, reducing the risk of miscommunication.

In collaborative multi-professional meetings, professionals describe their role as advocates for the service users, highlighted in multicultural situations or issues with formal language comprehension.


Especially the elderly as well as immigrants are described as needing more assistance navigating the service system. Furthermore, professionals express a need for a system that notifies them about special assistance received in other services to adjust their own efforts accordingly and pay extra attention to adequate support. Additional support is also proposed as a solution to ease the burden of service users in delicate situations: *'This could be a low threshold situation mapping thing, not some heavy-duty social work. Like a companion walking alongside for some time in your life'*, (Professionals, Kela). A similar temporary support structure is already in use in social services, and Kela professionals, in their collaboration with social services, have discovered the importance of the arrangement for service users.

### **Consultation and collegial support**

Realization of personal limits is a factor in professional work and helps the professional to pinpoint possibilities for value co-destruction. Consensus among informants seems to be that no-one in any position is required to be an expert of all fields. Rather, the service network adaptability is based on shared expertise and multi-professional groups that discuss issues. Knowledge sharing requires interfaces for consultation beyond written requests, preferably as a real-time option. Interaction, on the other hand, does not need to happen in person, and is considered appropriate also via digital platforms. In some cases, digital meetings are even preferred for the greater possibility of gathering experts to discuss matters directly with the service user. In any case, the real-time aspect of the interaction is integral.

Professionals solve consultation issues spontaneously by establishing formal and informal partnerships with co-workers, but also with operators from different organizations. This emergent boundary spanning behaviour is reported to have mainly positive effects, such as the ability to solve individual service user issues rapidly saving time for both professional parties and the service users. Time savings and the efficient use of service network resources are interpreted as co-created values both from the service user and the societal point of view.

If professionals can utilize shared expertise in their own teams better, they do not feel the need to consult third-party experts as much. Especially within social and healthcare services, the interviewees highlight the importance of reciprocal professional support enabled by consultation in challenging ethical or otherwise stressful situations. These supporting networks also span across organizational boundaries, as a professional from WSC describes:

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Many times, together with a Kela employee, we say that ‘aha, it worked out, it went so well, we feel good’, we share that success right away. We had so many common [customers] today, we would never have survived without each other.

The more challenging side of spontaneous partnerships is that their success depends on individuals because the collaboration channels and tools are not embedded in organizational structures.

### **Continuous development**

Common policies, rules and instructions ensure equity and high quality of service interactions regardless of the individual in the encounter. However, informants from various organizational levels report that professional output in public services should not focus solely on enforcing common policies but be increasingly allocated towards development and education. This is based on the belief that professionals commit to high standards regardless because it benefits service users. Trust in professionals is a load-bearing part of the service network and its development. Accordingly, professionals report utilizing discretion directly in encounters to adapt systemic resources to individual service user needs.

Professional representatives disclose concerns about maintaining an appropriate level of expertise and competence in public service provision, which are challenged by increases in staff turnover rates and the resulting inexperience on the service frontline. Also, higher management representatives describe that among competence and interaction skills, front-line professional work requires a strong will to develop to be able to navigate in service networks. Thus, there is a continuous need to develop wells up from endogenous will to learn, internal pressure to develop the skills that are needed in the job and various external signals that derive from service encounters, the needs of service users, or organizational communication.

According to informants, professionals simultaneously gather information on service functionality and their effectiveness in service user value creation. Operators from different organizational levels in all three WSCs report that their managers realize the importance of the information arising from the service user interface.

It is at utmost importance that how the situation picture from professionals in customer-patient-interface is conveyed to upper management. Many things affect this: how is the operating culture, internal communications, and how multi-faceted our organization is. (Executive, WSC).

Continuous development reaches thus to enhancing organizational policies to benefit service users with the information provided in service encounters.

### **Realization of value tensions**

According to our results, value tensions are realized throughout wellbeing services on all organizational levels. The informants express trust in public service professionals, their ethics and professionalism in navigating value tensions, but also highlight the importance of the delicacy that comes with experience. Especially with vulnerable service users, professionals report the need for sensitivity in building trust and delivering realistic information on the services in each situation. Professionals are described to balance between requirements for individual value creation and public policy implementation. Yet, both individual and societal values may emerge using the same recipe:


I am working here for the customer. That doesn't mean that the customer is always right and that they should get everything. But I think that if I have heard the customer, I know them and their situation, I feel that I am capable of making decisions and doing the work in such a way that the right options for each customer are realised. (Professional, WSC).

Ethical conflicts at the service user interface are accentuated by multi-faceted and complex service users life situations. For instance, in a housing initiative where substance use is permitted, the lifestyle of service users may conflict with the moral values of professionals. Nevertheless, the autonomy and self-determination of service users are upheld, while guidance and educational support are offered where appropriate. Ethical burden can also increase due to policy factors conflicting with professional ethics or from time and resource constraints. An executive from WSC describes their experiences on ethically burdening conflicts in the frontline:

There's no time, nor . . . I close my eyes, there would be some much more to address here, but I have other things in line waiting, so I will just do this one thing. This is the worst situation right here.

The setting for a public service encounter is often between an authoritative person and a person in need of help and benevolence, which creates power imbalances. A described 'balancing of support and control' requires mutual trust to be successfully value co-creating. If interaction is not in parallel with service user's personal values and motivation, it affects their commitment to the services. Importantly, service users should be allowed to make 'bad decisions' from a professional point of view.

The realization of value tensions relates to all the four elements of the the professional contribution, both emerging from within the elements but also as connecting them. For example, tensions in striving for either individual or public value arise from realizations relating to the element of *Collaboration with the service user*, but can also simultaneously affect the elements of *Collaboration over institutional boundaries*, *Collegial support* and *Continuous development*. In

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burdening situations professionals seek validation from their peers, which can benefit service users by receiving carefully considered decisions.

## Discussion

Through the data, we were able to uncover professionals' activities that are significant to the functionality of value co-creation processes. Aligned with previous scientific literature (Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor 2021; Virtanen and Jalonen 2023), the enabling and coordinating roles of service employees seem to become more significant in increasingly complex service settings. In our study, we were able to reveal conceptions that public service managers and professionals themselves have regarding their roles in value co-creation, contributing to prior empirical research on the subject in the context of public services (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; van Eijk 2018; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020) yet providing information from a perspective that has received less attention previously.

### *Public service professionals support service user value co-creation*

According to the value co-creation paradigms, the role of service users in defining service value is central, and thus constitutes the primary locus of observation (Hafer and Sharif Hossain 2025; Kinder and Stenvall 2023). By choosing instead to focus on the perceptions of organizational representatives, our aim is to contribute to the understanding of the service user's counterpart in public service value co-creation—the professional engaged in the encounter. The professional contribution is undoubtedly significant to understand in order to managerially support value co-creation in each encounter, for example, because if the service user finds the situation unpleasant and the professional incompetent or otherwise incapable of realizing the user's actual service needs (Virtanen and Jalonen 2023), value co-creation might be hindered or precluded.

Our study aligns with previous notions on the complexity of service user life situations (Hafer and Sharif Hossain 2025), which makes public service delivery likely to have some inequalities, albeit contrary attempts (e.g. Jakobsen and Calmar Andersen 2013). According to our research, when service users have multiple problems and require many different services, the professionals in the service user interface are challenged with identifying underlying causes for complications and interdependencies, complicated by complex life situations, environmental factors and diversity of problems. Additionally, societal norms, lack of resources and, for example, communication difficulties shape the possibilities of professionals to address the comprehensive needs of the service users. If genuine service needs are not recognized adequately, our research suggests that value creation will not

occur as desired. In such cases, the service user may repeatedly return to the service sphere, consuming both their own resources and the resources of society. The complexity of the public service system as well as the intricacies of individual life and value worlds hinder professionals' ability to acknowledge all the factors and details that lead to value co-destruction instead of its creation. Therefore, we suggest further investigation on the reasons for value co-destruction in public service encounters.

### ***Value tensions disrupt value co-creation processes in service encounters***

As such, the elements of professional contribution in value co-creation reveal aspects of agency and value tensions that challenge professional work. Previous studies have, for example, determined that professionals face conflicting situations due to professional, organizational and societal factors (Schott, van Kleef, and Noordegraaf 2015). In align with conceptual notions by Alford (2016) and studies on causes for value co-destruction in public services (e.g. Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2024) our study contributes to the discussion with empirical evidence on value emergence—and the possibility for its destruction—also in the lives of professionals themselves through service encounters. These complementing realizations highlight the importance of enabling quality encounters organizationally and managerially, to support well-being on both sides of the service user interface in practice.

We argue that value tensions in public service encounters are significantly distressing for public service professionals and that such a burdening issue entails the need for interactive and immediate support and debriefing channels for professionals. From the managerial point of view, our results suggest that value tensions should be approached with acknowledgement and acceptance, after which they can be utilized in service development, consistent with findings of Rossi and Tuurnas (2021).

### ***Supporting networks and protocols compensate inexperience***

According to our data, value is not derived through professional interpretations, but from the service user receiving something valuable in their life through the service. Interestingly, this appreciation in value was perceived as the main reason for value emergence in the life of the service professional as well. In situations that led to value co-destruction in a service encounter, the interviewed professionals identified that value diminution in their lives could be prevented or at least hindered through collegial support.

Steen and Tuurnas (2018) ascribe professionals with a specific role in shaping the institutional context in which co-creation of both individual and public values happens. In practice, this notion highlights the importance of

consultation and support structures on the public service frontline, which, if not addressed institutionally, will burden especially those junior professionals who are yet to build their personal support networks.

### **Limitations and future research propositions**

Although the ample empirical data in our study provide grounds to review the theoretically built (Maijala et al. 2024) and conceptual insights (Alford 2016) on the role of public service professionals in value co-creation, and on which our outlook on the contribution of said professionals is built upon, we recognize that this study does not go without limitations.

One key limitation regarding the general applicability of the results of this study relates to the context of the interview data: Since the interviews and the questions asked are linked to the co-creation of services, it is to be expected that the roles related to interprofessional and -organizational cooperation are emphasized in the results as they appear. Therefore, the centrality of the boundary spanner -role is recognized as possibly a context-dependent result, suggesting that value co-creation may not be as dependent on the boundary spanning capabilities or mindsets of professionals as our analysis indicates. This is why it would be important to carry out empirical studies on the roles and contributions of professionals in value co-creation also with further data collected in different circumstances, but also in contexts other than social and welfare services co-creation.

Another limitation relates to our data with the lower number of interviewed professional representatives ( $n = 11$ ) compared to middle and higher management representatives ( $n = 45$ ). Whereas the current display does not render the analysis of perceptions of current public service professionals solely, it does provide us with a multitude of viewpoints ranging from the service frontline to the institutional and managerial levels instead. With their views and profound understanding of the roles and contributions of public service professionals from a higher organizational perspective, we revere the perceptions provided by the managerial informants. We argue that by combining the views of professionals and managers with background also vastly in professional work, we build a comprehensive conception on both the practical work as it is, but also a unique framing through which, on the one hand, the professional work may be observed in further studies and, on the other hand, managed with in practice.


### **Conclusions**

Through our study, we conclude that the prioritizing of service user value in public service production (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021) requires bipartite conception of

professional work: 1) Professionals are public service experts who interpret public policies ethically, creating value both to service users and to society. 2) The information that professionals produce, gather, and filter throughout service processes should be implemented in service development. By giving professional channels to convey information on the functionality of co-creation processes, the organization can learn straight from the service interface to direct their functions, resources and efforts accordingly. In addition, our results reveal significant value tensions that affect decision-making processes and realize conflicting pressures due to differing expectations in service encounters, some of which push professionals towards the public and some towards individual value creation.

Despite co-creation efforts, value is not always realized as desired in service encounters. Therefore, we conclude that it is important to recognize challenges in value co-creation and the features that contribute to value co-destruction and to utilize these insights in developing competence, organizational operations and even the whole service system. Tensions are particularly evident between various institutional logics and policies. According to our results, ethical debates may cause professionals to occasionally 'twist' or apply guidelines in ways not explicitly allowed. On the one hand, professionals need to act as empathetic partners standing by service users' side but, on the other, inevitably cause also occasional disappointments. Sometimes service users translate this as poor service quality, but the value co-destruction with this interpretation can be hindered by revealing and explaining the justifications behind a negative decision. Even though the service user may feel value destruction at the very moment, the reasoning may be realized later on and the co-created value revealed. Thus, actively recognizing value tensions can identify aspects that affect value co-creation aspirations in service encounters.

As for the practical implications of this study, we argue that, in terms of enhancing service development, it is crucial to first develop a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted role of public service professionals in creating value for service users. The expertise of professionals, who recognize and navigate these simultaneous roles, is essential for the development of well-functioning services. Second, we emphasize the importance of acknowledging the emergent value tensions that arise in the everyday interactions between professionals and service users, as these tensions significantly influence the value experiences of both parties. In practice, and according to our findings, effective value co-creation requires interaction either face-to-face or via digital platforms, preferably with real-time capabilities. Even professionals with appropriate training and expertise continue to encounter challenges and must reflect on ethical decisions, which underscores the importance of ongoing training and peer support.

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### Disclosure statement

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

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**Foregrounding Conflicts in Public Service Encounters: Public Service Professionals' Perceptions on Causes of Value Destruction**

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## **Foregrounding Conflicts in Public Service Encounters: Public Service Professionals' Perceptions on Causes of Value Destruction**

This study focuses on public service professionals' perceptions of value destruction in public service encounters. We utilize conflicts as an analytical tool to pinpoint conditions that, from the perspective of professionals, can consequent in value co-creation or destruction. By inductively analyzing thematic interview and eDelphi panel data, the study zooms in to the public service encounters to reveal how professionals engage with institutional, organizational, and individual conditions of public service ecosystems (PSEs) as they attempt to respond to service user needs. The findings illustrate how value for the service users might be destroyed, for example, due to service users' experiences arising from previous encounters at micro-level, stolid organizational structures and practices or managerial emphasis on efficiency at meso-level, or fragmented public service system at macro-level. To conclude, conflicts originating from macro and meso-level conditions of PSEs influence and require attention in micro-level service encounters. Therefore, we propose that overcoming value destruction for service users requires organizational and institutional solutions, illustrating the need for administrative actions within and across all levels of PSEs.

Keywords: value destruction; value co-creation; public service professionals; public service ecosystem; conflicts

## Introduction

Value co-creation refers to a process in which value is generated through equitable interaction and encounters between participants, producing benefits not only for those directly involved, but also for other stakeholders and surrounding society. In the public services context, value co-creation occurs within complex public service ecosystems (PSEs) spanning institutional (macro), organizational (meso), and individual (micro) levels, rendering value a dynamic and relational construct rather than a product of service organizations alone (Osborne et al. 2022; Osborne et al. 2024).

In practice, value co-creation is far from straightforward, as encounters between service users and professionals are shaped by tangible conditions—such as physical spaces, electronic solutions, and available tools—but also by abstract elements, including individual experiences, support needs, contextual conditions, operating practices, and ethical principles. This multifaceted interplay reflects the wider PSE, within which interactions determine both value creation and destruction (Osborne et al. 2022). Risks embedded in value co-creation processes include, for example, the limited service user influence over professionals, contributing to power asymmetries and vulnerability in encounters (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023), or misaligned expectations that may diminish value for one or more actors (Cluley and Radnor 2019; Engen et al. 2021). Moreover, conflicts within service encounters illuminate underlying structural conditions and relational dynamics shaping value outcomes and informing service design to support value co-creation (Cluley and Radnor 2019; Kurkela et al. 2025; Maijala et al. 2024).

This study analyzes public service professionals' perceptions of value destruction by using conflicts as an analytical tool (Rossi and Skarli 2025) to identify phases in which varying institutional, organizational, and individual conditions trigger contradictory lines of actions and decision-making, affecting intended service outcomes (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Skålen, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024). By zooming in on public service encounters through professionals' perceptions, we focus on conditions that hinder value creation or may lead to its destruction in PSEs (Cui and Osborne 2023; Rossi, Tuurnas, and Stenvall 2025). Indeed, professionals play a pivotal role in shaping service users' opportunities for value creation, as for example, discretionary judgement (Maijala et al. 2024) and capacity for collaborative work (Maijala, Rantamäki, and Kurkela 2025) fundamentally influence how value is realized in practice.

To deepen understanding of how professionals perceive the causes of value destruction, this study asks: *What conflicts reveal about professionals' perceptions of value destruction in public service encounters?* Empirically, the study draws on the Finnish welfare services context, with data collected from professionals working in the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) or a

regional wellbeing services county (WSC). The data comprise thematic interviews with 19 informants and eDelphi-panel data from 21 public service experts. Using conflicts as an analytical tool, the inductive content analysis focus on professionals' perceptions—interpretations and meaning-making processes (Scauso 2020)—of why service user value creation may be obstructed or destroyed in public service encounters. The findings enhance understanding of how professionals engage with institutional, organizational, and individual conditions of PSE when responding to service user needs. The study further contributes to scholarly understandings of value (co-)destruction commonly occurring in value co-creation processes (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) and suggests that the systematic utilization of this phenomenon should inform public service design and development in research, policy, and practice (see also Rossi and Skarli 2025).

### **Conflictual dynamics of value creation and destruction in public service ecosystems**

Both value creation and destruction are inherently relational processes occurring in complex, multi-level, multi-logic, and multi-actor PSEs (Rossi 2026; Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016). Accordingly, this study understands value destruction primarily as a relational process resulting in a decline in service user wellbeing (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010). As value co-creation centres on relationships formed in service encounters (Osborne 2018), insufficient trust or pressure to participate (Hardyman, Daunt, and Kitchener 2015) may undermine relationships and lead to value destruction (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023; Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018). Establishing a balanced co-creating partnership requires navigating conflicting beliefs and diverging aims of the participants; however, such efforts may also generate struggles that co-destroy value (Palumbo 2016). In welfare services, failed value co-creation does not merely limit service effectiveness but may actively harm service users (Hardyman, Daunt, and Kitchener 2015).

The analytical significance of conflicts in this study builds on earlier findings that conflicts are inherent features of value co-creation processes (Maijala, Rantamäki, and Kurkela 2025; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). This perspective highlights, first, that conflicts may result in value being co-created in one part of the PSE while simultaneously being destroyed elsewhere (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas 2021, 257). Second, addressing conflicts enables the identification of challenges and conditions hindering value co-creation—issues that may be addressed through administrative or managerial interventions. Thus, conflict does not inherently signify value destruction; rather, it exposes conditions and dynamics that may lead either to value creation or destruction in PSEs.

Previous public service research identifies multiple conditions contributing to service user value destruction, including insufficient transparency, limited bureaucratic competence, procedural errors, and an inability to respond adequately to service users' needs (Engen et al. 2021; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). Importantly, value destruction may arise unintentionally through resource misuse (Engen et al. 2021; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023), for instance when professionals operate with ambiguous or fragmented understandings of roles and responsibilities (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Sønderkov and Rønning 2021). At the same time, organizational emphases on process efficiency may also lead to intentional resource misuse (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023), particularly when short-term outputs are prioritized over long-term service quality. While such practices may produce immediate gains, they risk generating unsustainable frontline workloads and undermining service user wellbeing over time (Espersson and Westrup 2020; Nordgren and Loodin 2014).

#### ***Individual-level view to value destruction in public service encounters***

Engaging service users and professionals at the public service frontline to co-create value is challenging. Micro-level hurdles within the PSE constrain value-creating interactions, for example through conflicting perspectives on value (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) or individuals' unwillingness to participate (Palumbo and Manesh 2023), shaped by relational dynamics within service encounters (Chwialkowska et al. 2023). Micro-level value co-creation is therefore prone to conflict, as it inevitably varies according to individual values and characteristics (Rossi 2026; Soares et al. 2025), as well as professionals' responsibilities towards service users (Damali et al. 2016). Notably, conflicts also emerge when responsibilities and risks are shifted onto service users or family members, creating misalignments between expectations, capabilities, and interests (Skarli 2023). Such responsabilization dynamics may generate unintended value co-destruction (ibid.).

Strong professional identities deriving from, for example, institutional standards reinforce professionalized interpretations of what is considered relevant (Palumbo 2016; Rossi, Tuurnas, and Stenvall 2025). Consequently, opportunities for service user participation may be overlooked (Damali et al. 2016; Palumbo 2016), underscoring the need for professional advocacy when working with vulnerable service users (Maijala et al. 2024). This may lead professionals to interpret administrative regulations as illegitimate, if they are perceived to misalign with the complex problems encountered at the service frontline (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). However, professionals can influence conflicts threatening value creation across multiple PSE levels (ibid.). For instance, when meso-level operations fail in communication to secure seamless service provision (cf. "intraorganizational co-destruction", Magnussen and Rønning 2021, 3), micro-level

professional actions become decisive in determining whether service user value is ultimately destroyed or preserved (Maijala et al. 2024).

### ***Organizational-level view to value destruction in public service encounters***

For services to be effective, public service organizations and institution must cooperate (Magnussen and Rønning 2021). Conflicts in strategic communication complicate service production and management at the meso-level of PSE (Palumbo 2016; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), with implications on micro-level value co-creation (Maijala, Rantamäki, and Kurkela 2025). For example, dominant organizational patterns and routines may hinder the adaptation of established practices (Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022). Unclear boundaries and information deficits can lead to responsibility avoidance (Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), impairing service development and potentially resulting in value destruction (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023).

At the meso-level, organizational processes increasingly divert professionals' time and attention from frontline work towards what Westrup and Danielsson (2019, 9) term "appeasing the system," referring to growing demands for reporting, documentation, and form-filling (see also Rossi, Tuurnas, and Stenvall 2025). The expansion of normative work risks constraining the discretion required for value co-creation by narrowing professional agency and shifting greater responsibility onto service users (Kurkela et al. 2025). Accordingly, Palumbo (2016) argues that organizational willingness to grant professionals autonomy and resources enhances service effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Conversely, organizations may hinder value co-creation through rigid protocols, managerial disinterest (Tuurnas et al. 2015), or by distancing service users from key stages of service process (Westrup and Danielsson 2019). Service production may therefore be perceived as a closed system resistant to critique, excluding other actors and positioning professionals as implementers of predefined solutions rather than co-creators with service users (Westrup and Danielsson 2019). Nevertheless, the negative consequences of unsuccessful value co-creation can be mitigated through organizational self-reflexivity, involving critical examination of practices and underlying assumptions (Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016).

### ***Institutional-level view to value destruction in public service encounters***

The complexity of creating value in dynamic and overlapping service systems (Trischler and Scott 2016) means that co-creation efforts do not necessarily lead to desirable outcomes. Prior research shows that value created for one actor may inadvertently undermine value for another, highlighting the uneven and conflict-prone nature of co-creation processes (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Such

conflicts reflect how differing policy principles, fragment institutional logics, and professional perspectives (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010) can result in inefficient and disjointed service processes (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Organization-centric and sector-oriented approaches may further exacerbate these challenges by hindering service user value creation through communication breakdowns and conflicts over responsibility allocation (Engen et al. 2021; Magnussen and Rønning 2021). Responsibilization of service users (Skarli 2023) reveals how systemic and interpersonal conflicts shape the distribution, recognition, and enactment of value within PSEs.

Accordingly, embedding co-creational elements into public service strategies requires sustained efforts to improve information flow and coordination between professionals (Maijala et al. 2024), across organizational boundaries within the PSE (Beirão, Patrício, and Fisk 2017), and between organizational representatives and service users (Maijala, Rantamäki, and Kurkela 2025; Palumbo 2016). Initiatives aimed at reducing cultural and knowledge gaps between service users and institutional actors are essential for fostering equitable and effective engagement (Palumbo 2016). From a PSE perspective, such institutional efforts are necessary not only to promote value co-creation but also to navigate and mitigate conflicts intrinsic to multi-actor service environments. Addressing these conflicts proactively enhances systemic understanding and supports more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable co-creation practices (Skarli 2023).

## **Methodology**

### ***Context of the study***

This empirical study is situated in the Finnish welfare services context. In 2023, the Finnish public sector underwent a reform establishing a new administrative level in the public service system: 21 wellbeing services counties (WSCs) now independently organize and provide social care, health care, and rescue services within their regions. The steering of WSCs is divided among three ministries: matters concerning health and social care fall under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM), while rescue services are governed by the Ministry of the Interior. The activities and finances of WSCs are monitored by the Ministry of Finance. (Laki hyvinvointialueesta 11 § 611/2021.)

Kela, by contrast, is an autonomous public institution supervised directly by the Finnish Parliament. Its statutory status and duties are defined in the Act on the Social Insurance Institution (Laki Kansaneläkelaitoksesta 731/2001), and its operations are guided internally by rules of procedure and overseen externally by parliamentary trustees. (Kela 2026.) This governance model positions Kela outside the traditional ministerial hierarchy: although operationally independent, it remains embedded in the broader political-administrative system through statutory mandates and

parliamentary accountability. While Kela is not hierarchically subordinate to a ministry, STM exercises system-level steering functions. As the body responsible for the planning, guiding, and implementing Finnish health and social policy, STM sets the framework within which Kela's statutory responsibilities are interpreted and operationalized (STM 2026). The steering of Kela thus reflects a hybrid governance arrangement combining formal autonomy and parliamentary oversight with ministerial policy guidance. This multilayered steering environment highlights the interdependence between an independent institution and government-led strategic direction.

Finland's welfare and social security system is characterized by multiple parallel and partly overlapping service providers, which causes service processes to fall within the remit of several organizations simultaneously. Alongside WSCs and Kela, over 300 municipalities add another layer to this complex and interdependent system, being responsible for producing public services for their residents. Some of these services intersect with the responsibilities of WSCs and Kela, complicating both institutional steering and service user transactions. A service user may, for example, be unemployed and receive employment services from the municipality, apply for basic social assistance from Kela, and require supplementary or preventive social assistance from a WSC. This interdependence requires service users to navigate multiple administrative systems, submit similar documentation repeatedly, and understand the institutional logic underlying fragmented responsibilities.

### ***Data***

This empirical study draws on two qualitative data sets collected from public service professionals and managers working in WSCs or Kela. The data consist of semi-structured thematic interviews and eDelphi panel material. Using inductive content analysis, the combined analysis captures informants' interpretations and meaning-making processes (Lindekilde 2014, 197; Scauso 2020), foregrounding professionals' subjective experiences and contextual knowledge concerning conditions that may lead to value destruction in public service encounters. Differences in professional roles and organizational positions are recognized by treating perceived realities as context-dependent and socially constructed through interaction and shared meanings (Berger and Luckmann 2016).

The first data set comprises semi-structured thematic interviews with 19 informants from three WSCs (WSC1: 8; WSC2: 9; WSC3: 2), including seven frontline professionals and twelve managers. All participants provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams between June 2023 and February 2024 and lasted between 44 and 90 minutes. Approximately 18 hours of recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized, producing 255 pages of data.

The second data set consists of eDelphi panel data collected between March and May 2024 from professionals working in the same three WSCs and in Kela. Data were collected in Finnish using an anonymous electronic platform, accessible only to invited participants. Following the Delphi method (Linstone and Turoff 1975), 21 public service experts participated in a two-round panel. The eDelphi aimed to facilitate interaction between WSC and Kela actors by exploring desirable futures for inter-organizational public service co-development and identifying pathways to achieve them through joint discussion (Rantamäki 2023).

### *Analysis*

In the data analysis, conflicts were used as an analytical tool to understand public service professionals' perceptions of conditions potentially leading to value co-creation or destruction in service encounters (Rossi and Skarli 2025). Following the inductive content analysis process illustrated in Figure 1, the combined written data set was first read in depth. During this phase, quotations indicating conflicting dynamics—defined as conditions perceived by professionals as potentially producing either value creation or destruction—were identified.

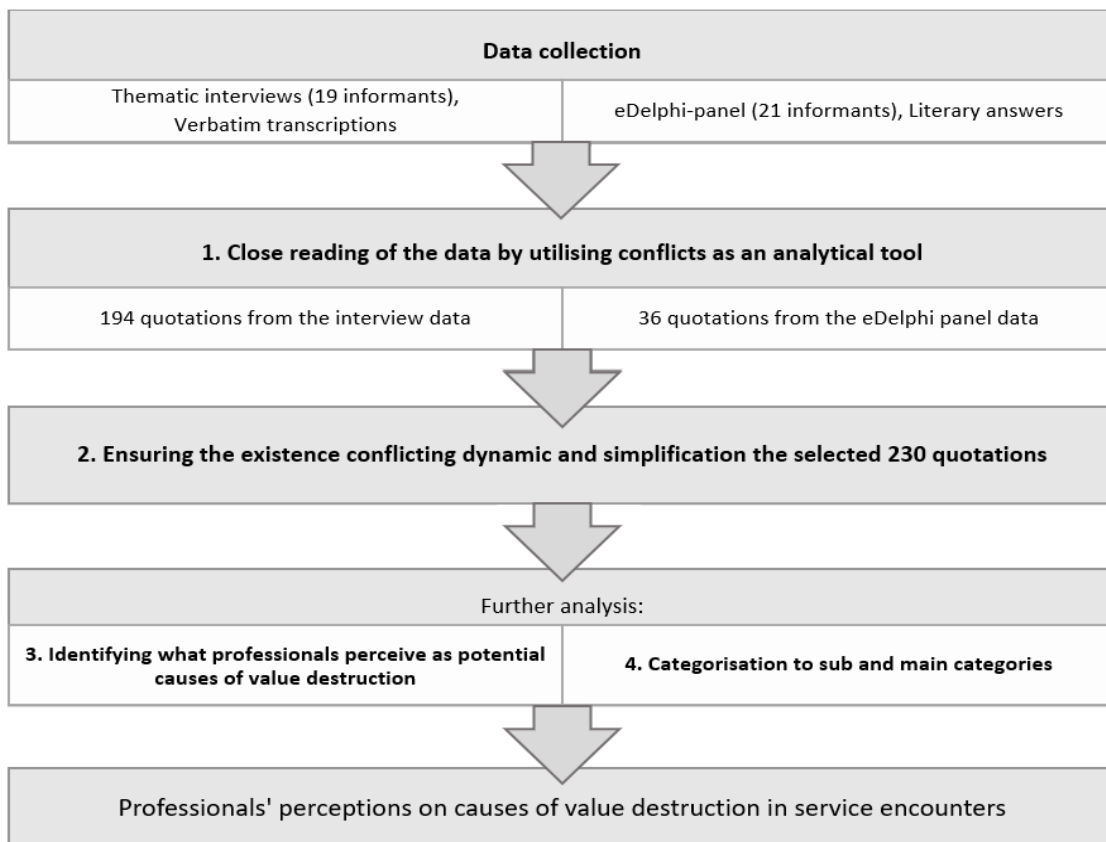


Figure 1. Inductive content analysis process.

The screening resulted in 208 quotations from the interview data and 45 from the eDelphi panel. Through researcher triangulation, 14 interview quotations and 9 eDelphi quotations were excluded due to insufficient clarity in conflict indication. The remaining 230 quotations were simplified and retained for further analysis. In the third stage of the analysis, what professionals perceived as potential causes of value destruction were identified, proceeding to the formulation of sub- and main categories in the fourth stage. As a result of the inductive content analysis, 23 subcategories and 9 main categories were formed (Table 1).

Table 1. Sub- and main categories.

<b>Individual/ micro level (n=50)</b>	<b>Competences and capabilities of professionals</b>	<b>28</b>
	Insufficient competences of identifying service user needs (n=8)	
	Failing to gain experience and competence in everyday work (n=5)	
	Lack of social skills, capabilities, and competences related to trust (n=15)	
	<b>Ability to act according to professionals' own belief systems</b>	<b>9</b>
	Professional identity, norms, and ethics (n=5)	
	Lack of interprofessional collaboration (n=4)	
	<b>Individual circumstances of service users</b>	<b>13</b>
	Linguistic challenges (n=3)	
	Distrust toward representatives of public services (n=4)	
	Limited knowledge of the service system and available benefits (n=6)	
<b>Organizational/ meso level (n=98)</b>	<b>Organizational structures and practices</b>	<b>41</b>
	Spatial arrangements of services (n=3)	
	Inadequate allocation of professionals' work (n=8)	
	Insufficient practices of service co-development (n=19)	
	Inadequacies in utilizing service user information (n=11)	
	<b>Managerial practices</b>	<b>31</b>
	Insufficient evaluation of service effectiveness (n=8)	
	Inadequate interorganizational collaboration (n=22)	
	<b>Discretion in decision-making</b>	<b>27</b>
	Ability to exercise discretion in decision-making (n=11)	
Organizationally embedded attitudes of professionals (n=16)		
<b>Institutional/ macro level</b>	<b>Effectiveness of the service system</b>	<b>20</b>
	Evaluating the effectiveness of the service system (n=10)	

<b>(n=80)</b>	Service system's ability to support vulnerable service user groups (n=10)	
	<b>Usage of digital solutions</b>	<b>21</b>
	Insufficient attention to interorganizational information sharing (n=12)	
	Reduction of in-person encounters (n=4)	
	Problematic usage of digital tools in decision-making (n=5)	
	<b>Governance of the service system</b>	<b>39</b>
	Fragmentation of the service system (n=18)	
	Bureaucratic structures and regulatory frameworks (n=21)	

By zooming in to public service encounters, the results enhance understanding of the relational dynamics underlying value co-creation and destruction. These dynamics unfold between service users and professionals, among professionals, across service system organizations, and through the interplay of institutional, organizational, and individual conditions shaping value outcomes.

## Results

### *Causes of Value Destruction at the Micro-level of PSE*

#### *Competences and capabilities of professionals*

At the micro-level of a PSE, first, the conflicts foreground issues related to professional competence and social capacity as potential causes of value destruction in service encounters. This main category is divided into three subcategories, namely *insufficient competences of identifying service user needs* (n=8), *failing to gain experience and competence in everyday work* (n=5), and *lack of social skills, capabilities, and competences related to trust* (n=15).

First, with regard to the identification of service user needs, value is likely to be destroyed if professionals fail to gather essential information about individual needs or to engage in dialogical processes in service encounters. Such shortcomings influence, for example, the effectiveness of guidance and decision-making. These competences are highly person-dependent, linked to professional's background and their ability to empathize with particular service user groups. However, value co-creation does not require that services fully meet service users' preferences: professionals may sometimes hold a more accurate understanding of situational requirements, enabling value to be preserved even if individually desired outcomes cannot be realized. However,

fostering service users' understandings of longer-term objectives requires professionals to engage, guide, and respond in ways that contribute meaningfully to service users' perceptions of value.

Second, developing professional competences requires experiential learning and reflectivity in engagements. Professional's inexperience or incompetence in interactions or responses to individual needs may lead to value destruction. Failing to develop these dimensions shape the value experienced by service users more profoundly than the volume of resources utilized. To avoid value destruction, episodes of uncertainty should be approached as opportunities for shared learning rather than as professional inadequacies.

Third, a key micro-level 'hot spot' in the findings concerns professionals' social skills and trust-building capabilities—central to preventing value destruction. Difficulties in establishing mutual trust may reduce service users' willingness to engage in services. Trust is particularly shaped by service users' experiences of being acknowledged, supported, and treated with dignity throughout interactions. Trust, however, is a complex phenomenon. Service users ability to trust is influenced not only by professionals' conduct but also by prior negative experiences with public authorities, which may reduce openness, hinder engagement, and weaken perceptions of legitimacy. When service users doubt professionals' intentions to support rather than complicate their situations, they may withhold relevant information. Moreover, perceived indifference or disrespect in encounters can further erode trust. Consequently, professionals' ability to cultivate trust is fundamental to enabling service users' meaningful participation and articulation of their circumstances, thereby mitigating potential sources of value destruction.

*'If a professional does not know how to encounter, guide or take the client's needs into account, the value is lesser, even though time and services would be available. In that sense the professional is, so to speak, sitting on top of the client value. Value can be produced even with fewer resources if competence, attitude and trust are in place.'*

– expert in eDelphi

#### *Ability to act according to professionals' own belief systems*

In this main category, conditions that may cause value destruction in service encounters relate to professionals' *opportunities to act in accordance with their professional identities, norms, and values* (n=5), and *lack of interprofessional collaboration* (n=4).

According to the findings, if professionals are able to act according to belief systems deriving from professional identity, norms, and values in service encounters, it enhances their job satisfaction and motivation. Conversely, when organizational constraints prevent professionals from

acting in line with these individual—yet socially constructed—belief systems, the sense of efficacy and fulfilment declines. Conflicts between organizational demands and professionals' identities therefore threaten the capacity to co-create value for service users in service encounters.

In addition, interprofessional cooperation contribute to professionals' ability to act according to their belief systems, for example, by ensuring that service users' needs and circumstances are considered from all relevant perspectives. Such cooperation between professionals is particularly valuable when service users initially approach a service provider that is not best placed to address their needs. If professionals have positive previous experiences of successful interprofessional cooperation, it reduces the threshold for utilizing networks in ways that benefit service users. Consequently, lack of interprofessional cooperation to support the service users may lead to value destruction.

#### *Individual circumstances of service users*

In this main category, the findings illustrate service users' individual circumstances as causes of value destruction, divided to sub-categories of *linguistic challenges* (n=3), *service users' distrust toward representatives of public services* (n=4), and *limited knowledge of the service system and available benefits* (n=6). In service encounters, professionals need to recognize these individual circumstances that potentially result in value destruction for service users.

According to the findings, the individual circumstances of service users include, first, a reduced linguistic capability. Service users require linguistic skills to be able to navigate the service system. However, among younger service users, the bureaucratic language used in official forms may obscure their conceptions on what is at stake. For public professionals, overcoming linguistic challenges in service encounters would mean translating "official jargon" into plain language, or translating the service into other languages when needed. Furthermore, service users' distrust towards public authorities or limited awareness of the service system and benefits available for them impede access to adequate support, thus potentially leading to value destruction. In severe situations, this may cause significant declines in wellbeing or even result in homelessness.

### ***Causes of Value Destruction at the Meso-level of PSE***

#### *Organizational structures and practices*

This meso-level category foregrounds how value destruction might occur in service encounters due to *spatial arrangements of services* (n=3), *inadequate allocation of professionals' work* (n=8),

*insufficient practices of service co-development* (n=19), and *inadequacies in utilizing service user information* (n=11).

Especially in multi-actor settings, first, the locations of service points shape both the coherence and the operational efficiency of public services. Sensible coordination of service locations may seem efficient from the organizational perspective yet inadvertently influence service user behaviour, for instance, by encouraging service users to seek “the shortest queue” rather than the most suitable service. Nonetheless, value may still materialize for the service users through the very act of initiating contact with the service system. Spatial arrangements of services thus affect opportunities for value co-creation, and inadequate possibilities for service users to physically access the relevant services may result in value destruction.

Second, organizational practices and processes related to allocating professional work sufficiently between service providers can enhance the effectiveness of multi-actor public service delivery. If, however, the allocation of work is impeded, it may cause value destruction for service users. As an example, the 2021 welfare service reform in Finland intensified these types of challenges: Although Kela is now responsible for administering basic social benefits, social care professionals still spend considerable time assisting people with applications, reducing the capacity to address other essential needs of the service users.

According to the findings, insufficient organizational processes and practices in service co-development bring out essential causes of value destruction. For example, service user dissatisfaction and repeated re-engagement with services contribute to increased organizations’ fiscal costs, as well as reduce the potential for value co-creation. Value may also be destroyed if administrative procedures related to the services are not comprehensible to service users, or if professionals in service encounters fail to appreciate the lived realities of those they support. Thus, sufficient service co-development practices facilitate shared understandings between service users and professionals, contributing to value creation in service encounters:

*’ ...what the clients would get from it, that it could be rehabilitative for them in a way, that they would learn to understand how an authority operates. But on the other hand, the client’s experience of how different decisions and their effect in their life [...] could also in a way open the worker’s eyes perhaps in that, what is the reality of these people in which they live.’ – manager, WSC*

Conversely, when service development is undertaken detached from operational practice, the experiential knowledge of professionals might be incorporated inadequately. In Finland,

increasing organizational scale has further limited the inclusion of service user standpoints in service development processes. However, failing to incorporate service user perspectives to practices and processes of co-development may lead to value being destroyed in unexpected ways:

*'But what has been challenging is that [...] the service user has perhaps had difficulties getting service at Kela's service points. [...] appointment times just simply cannot be gotten when those Kela offices serve from nine to twelve. And, for example, substitution-treatment patients no longer seem to manage to get there, because there is no other time; It is always in the mornings, the substitution treatment.'*

– professional, WSC

Finally, professionals highlight deficiencies in structures and processes related to utilizing service user information, especially in multi-organizational settings. This is further exacerbated by a decline in face-to-face encounters, potentially leading to value destruction for service users. Challenges in information transfer between officials create knowledge gaps that hinder informed decision-making. For example, social workers cannot currently contact individual decision-makers at Kela even in cases that appear unreasonable for service users. Thus, when organizational practices related to service user information are not sufficiently coordinated to support service continuity, uncertainty regarding service effectiveness, fragmented service delivery, and even value destruction may occur.

#### *Managerial practices*

The findings of this main category foreground managerial practices that potentially lead to value destruction in service encounters. Our findings show how, first, that when managerial practices prioritise short-term cost control, the *insufficient evaluation of operational effectiveness* (n=8) in terms of service effectiveness and long-term outcomes becomes constrained. Managerial practices which aim to increase throughput—argued as operational effectiveness—reduce professionals' opportunities to interact with service users. This, in turn, raises the risk of routine case handling, leaving individual service user circumstances unacknowledged, thereby threatening value co-creation. Professionals also note that quantitative performance metrics inadequately capture qualitative dimensions of service effectiveness. Addressing cases holistically may initially require more resources but prevent greater service demand in the future, a nuance often missed in evaluations.

Related to managerial practices, importantly, *inadequate inter-organizational collaboration* (n=22) has substantial implications for service user value creation. Inadequately

managed collaboration forces service users, for example, to repeat the same information for multiple organizations, increasing frustration and potentially eroding value. Organizing joint receptions and shared consultations as ways of interorganizational collaboration can help professionals to gain understanding of service users' overall situations, thus helping to overcome the potentiality for value destruction:

*'...we have held a joint reception together, wellbeing services county and Kela. We talk with service users about so many of the same things, even though we do not do overlapping work, that the similarity of discussions gives us keys for our own work. The service user avoids having to talk about the same things many times. In addition, Kela has such a comprehensive amount of, for example, health-related information, that it is often new information for the WSC representative but necessary for advancing the service user's situation. There would, I believe, be much less mere directing into the wellbeing services county's services if the cooperation was functional.'*

– expert in eDelphi

However, interorganizational collaboration is often dependent on professionals' individual initiatives rather than structured managerial arrangements. Inadequate collaboration practices restrict, for example, sharing information on service users with substance abuse and mental health conditions, which affect all wellbeing related services. Therefore, more formalized managerial practices supporting interorganizational collaboration are required to prevent value destruction.

#### *Discretion in decision-making*

According to our findings, professional discretion enables resolving service user problems humanely yet balanced with organizational constraints. When professionals' *ability to exercise discretion in decision-making* (n=11) is curtailed, value destruction may follow. For instance, WSC professionals report that they used to grant rent deposits for service users when necessary, whereas Kela now responsible for the same income support, does not have the possibility to exercise discretion. As a result, social service professionals at WSCs often have to compensate for this shortcoming, increasing systemic burdens and requiring service users to seek help across several services. Indeed, in crisis situations, the possibilities for professionals to use discretion become particularly crucial:

*'When the client arrives, they may have no money for food and the electricity has been cut off, and they need supplementary support for dealing with these matters. However,*

*these are expenses for which the support should be applied for from Kela as basic social assistance and a decision about that should have been made so that supplementary support can be applied for. [...] Kela does not consider reconnection fees, in which case the matter is resolved with supplementary support from social welfare. In that respect, the advancement of issues with Kela often begins as urgent.'*

– professional, WSC

Professionals' possibilities to exercise discretion in decision-making are closely intertwined with their attitudes especially in assessing the service users' needs. At the micro-level, professionals note that service encounters fail in value creation when professionals distrust service users rather than empathize and engage with them. At the meso-level, the findings related to *organizationally embedded attitudes of professionals* (n=16) suggest that, for example, distrust towards service users can be also organizationally embedded, providing grounds for treating service user needs and requests secondary to administrative procedures. Service users' requests often reflect very personal wishes and needs, such as a requesting financial assistance after organizing a child's birthday celebration despite financial hardship. Thus, possibilities for professionals to navigate between the service user requests, complex situations, and formal administrative procedures in decision-making becomes crucial in overcoming the causes of value destruction.

### ***Causes of Value Destruction at the Macro-level of PSE***

#### *Effectiveness of the service system*

For professionals, first, the fundamental rationale behind the service system is to safeguard societal welfare and ensure equitable access to essential services. From this perspective, when *assessing the effectiveness of the service system* (n=10), the benefit of service users indicates system success. However, one potential source of value destruction could arise when providing timely support to individuals is not supported by the service system structures. Professionals noted that 'timeliness of support' is not captured in the metrics used to evaluate service system performance, and suboptimal targeting is perceived to undermine effectiveness, paradoxically driven by managerial pressures to accelerate processes.

Second, the findings illustrate how service systems' effectiveness is related to its *ability to support vulnerable service user groups* (n=10). Professionals emphasize that their responsibility as representatives of welfare service system is to provide sufficient support for vulnerable service users, thus failures in this are regarded as direct causes of value destruction. For example, young

adults may require encouragement and robust support networks to navigate life instability. Mental health challenges combined with the COVID-19 left some young people particularly vulnerable, generating societal risks as they *'got accustomed to the society taking care of them'* (professional, WSC). Consequently, individuals may struggle to recognize their own agency in improving their circumstances. A service system that assumes professionals to advocate for individuals may leave, for example, socially excluded individuals disproportionately exposed.

#### *Usage of digital solutions*

Digital technologies are increasingly embedded in public service delivery, shaping access, communication, and data management. Professionals describe digital platforms as essential for facilitating workflows, supporting decision-making, and improving service coordination. However, persistent systemic challenges related to the usage of digital solutions are hindering the possibilities for value co-creation in service encounters. First, *insufficient attention to interorganizational information sharing* (n=12) concerns persistent challenges related to digital solutions in sharing service user information within the service system, resulting to value destruction for the service user. According to our findings, although essential information often exists within the system, it cannot be exchanged across organizational boundaries:

*'If you call Kela service line while the customer is present, the waiting time can be remarkably long. And since we also have schedules, we cannot just keep waiting indefinitely. [...] And then, via the chat, it is difficult because you cannot share any personal data there, as the connection is not secure, so you cannot really get quick help for the situation. This means that we almost have to, if they do not answer within a certain time window, leave a call request, and then the call goes to the service user, which is complicated at times. So, the matters may end up in a stall.'*

– professional, WSC

To overcome challenges in information sharing, professionals propose establishing legislative bases for interorganizational communication using digital solutions and the possibility to request broad data permissions directly from service users. Professionals argue that the responsibility for managing information-sharing processes cannot fall on service users themselves; rather, solutions, especially the digital ones, must be institutionalized at the system level.

The findings also illustrate how the digitally-driven *reduction of in-person encounters* (n=4) produces systemic challenges for value co-creation in service encounters. Consequently,

remote services limit professionals' ability to observe service users' overall wellbeing, particularly affecting youth, individuals with mental health challenges, and those experiencing substance abuse issues. In addition, the *problematic usage of digital tools in decision-making* (n=5) poses another systemic challenge for value co-creation. For example, the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) into decision-making generates dual perceptions: While AI may enhance equality in service provision, it raises ethical concerns particularly within social and healthcare services regarding the erosion of professional discretion. Importantly, our findings illustrate how professionals question whether digital solutions such as AI can capture contextual nuances and individually significant factors. To prevent value destruction in service encounters due to the usage of digital tools in decision-making, it is therefore essential to ensure that decisions are not compromised due to issues such as algorithmic misinterpretation, data ambiguities, or limitations arising in the application phase.

#### *Governance of the service system*

The Finnish public service system is characterized by distributed responsibilities across multiple administrative and organizational levels. This *fragmentation of the service system* (n=18) is perceived by the professionals as a core source of service user value destruction, due to the current system requiring service users to seek services and financial support from multiple service providers. Importantly, systemic fragmentation leaves vulnerable individuals particularly exposed to crisis situations. Moreover, the system places undue responsibility on service users to identify the correct provider from the service system, even though such distinctions hold little meaning from the user perspective:

*'...maybe from the service user's point of view, that do they now take this money-matter to Kela or to social services, well they do not necessarily perceive that. A one-door principle would probably be very service-user-oriented indeed.'* – manager, WSC

Second, our findings show how, related to governing the service system, *bureaucratic structures and regulatory frameworks* (n=21) shape the operational logic of public services and professional work, influencing system effectiveness, efficiency, and service user experiences. Due to the institutionalized structures and frameworks of the service system, professionals may lack time or opportunities to address service user needs or support them adequately in service encounters, again potentially resulting to value destruction. As one professional illustrates in the quotation below, service professionals consequently struggle to meet statutory deadlines, as assessments for supplementary assistance are comprehensive and time-intensive:

'...getting forward the matters of even one person is quite slow in the end. [...] If we now think about applying for benefits, which perhaps Kela then requires from us [...] we should also have some tools in my opinion here for that, something to offer those clients, other than tea and sympathy. I don't know. Sometimes it feels like one is then set for quite a task. Just for example, that if everyone's basic income support is threatened to be reduced, then a service assessment must be made [for them]. So, if 20 clients come in a day – go ahead and do this for all of them.' – professional, WSC

In addition, the bureaucratic structures and regulatory frameworks of the service system not only affect professionals but also pose requirements for service users, manifesting for example as a need to demonstrate active job-seeking even when a service user is not genuinely capable of working. Additionally, service processes often involve multiple mandatory forms and statements that might not substantively advance the case or that require information which the issuing professional cannot reasonably provide. Although crucial for governance of service system, the bureaucratic structures and regulatory frameworks also entail such procedural inefficiencies that create fertile ground for value destruction.

## Discussion

This study foregrounds professional perceptions on causes of value destruction in public service encounters, providing insights on why the encounters can result both in value co-creation as well as its destruction in PSEs. Specifically, we asked *what do conflicts reveal about professionals' perceptions of value destruction in public service encounters?* The question guided us through the analytical process revealing public service professionals' reasoning on individual, organizational, and institutional conditions that trigger contradictory lines of actions and, potentially, value destruction. In turn, value destruction can then result in deficient outcomes that reduce service user wellbeing or even undermine service system resilience (Hardyman, Daunt, and Kitchener 2015).

Previous research has identified multiple *micro-level conditions* resulting to value destruction such as insufficient transparency, limited bureaucratic competence, procedural errors, and an inability to respond adequately to service users' needs (Engen et al. 2021; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). According to our findings, the competences and capabilities of professionals, especially related to trust-building, are crucial for value creation in service encounters. Aligned with previous literature, insufficient trust potentially causes value destruction (Echeverri and

Skålén 2021; Lumivalo, Tuunanen, and Salo 2024). Indeed, as Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren (2023) note, even though trust can be built or recovered in service encounters, the changing combination of actors inflicts further conflicts in role and power allocation, misunderstandings, and, consequently, value destruction. In addition, professional identity, influencing and being influenced by the contextual institutional landscape, is recognized as one key micro-level condition for value co-creation in public service encounters (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch, 2016). Here, possibilities to act according to one's professional identity grounded to enhancing service user wellbeing in social and healthcare service settings, could mitigate the value destructive effects of meso- and macro-level conditions such as fragmented service systems, conflicting institutional standards, and insufficient information. In addition, importance of empathetic, dialogical, and transparent practices in micro-level interactions were foregrounded, pointing towards communicational and interpretational issues behind value destruction (Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018; Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010).

Professionals crucially influence how value is realized in practice through, for example, discretionary judgement (Maijala et al. 2024) and capacity for collaborative work (Maijala, Rantamäki, and Kurkela 2025). When zooming out to *meso-level organizational conditions*, our findings reveal various conditions related to organizational structures, managerial practices, and professionals' possibilities to use discretion in decision-making as potential causes for service user value destruction in service encounters. Evident in our findings, emphasis on efficiency—both as meso-level managerial practice and macro-level condition related to the evaluation of the service system effectiveness—may also lead to value destruction through, for example, intentional resource misuse (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023), particularly when short-term outputs are prioritized over long-term service quality. While such practices may produce immediate gains, they risk generating unsustainable frontline workloads and undermining service user wellbeing over time (Espersson and Westrup 2020; Nordgren and Loodin 2014).

Zooming out from service encounters to *institutional conditions*, the findings stress the crucial influence of the service systems to value destruction in service encounters through conditions related to evaluating the effectiveness of the service system, usage of digital solutions, and governance of the service system. As illustrated in previous research, these mismatches between administrative regulations and complex frontline problems (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023) contribute crucially to value destruction. According to our findings, service system fragmentation and bureaucratic structures provide grounds for value destruction when service users are unable to navigate the system and, consequently, end up in service encounters where their needs cannot be met. Fragmented service system spans value destruction to not only service users and professionals that spend time adapting to the root causes in service encounters, but also to spending

administrative resources on idle decision-making and re-application processes, in line with research related to resource misuse as source of value destruction (Engen et al. 2021; Laud et al. 2019; Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010).

## Conclusions

Based on the empirical findings of this study, it is possible to enhance the knowledge-base and complement previous public administration research by demonstrating how conflicts can be utilized to uncover conditions and dynamics influencing service encounters that stem from different levels of the PSE. On the basis of the study's findings, we draw three conclusions:

First, the results emphasize that *overcoming value destruction for service users requires individual, organizational and institutional solutions*, drawing attention to everyday service interactions (micro), organizational coordination mechanisms (meso), and system-level governance choices (macro). Without concurrent action across these PSE levels, responsibilities are allocated to the service users, who remain the primary coordinators of their own cases. Future research could deepen the understanding of hybrid governance by exploring how institutional ambiguity translates into everyday service experiences, particularly for individuals navigating complex needs.

Second, the findings illustrate how *fragmented governance architectures continue to shape service users' everyday interactions with welfare organizations*. At the micro-level, service users' difficulties in navigating services reflect the cognitive and emotional burdens produced by ambiguous responsibility allocations. At the meso-level, frontline collaboration emerges simultaneously as a compensatory mechanism and a structural constraint, but rely heavily on interpersonal relationships rather than institutionalized processes, leaving coordination vulnerable to resource pressures, organizational boundaries, and differing professional logics. At the macro-level, national reforms that aim to rationalize welfare delivery inadvertently produce new silos when responsibilities are revised more quickly than everyday practices can stabilize. The mismatch between policy design and organizational capacity underscores a familiar dilemma in public management: structural reforms alone seldom guarantee integrated service experiences unless frontline systems, digital infrastructures, and interorganizational routines are aligned. Future research could therefore advance public administration theory by linking street-level interactions with organizational design and system-level governance, connecting micro-, meso-, and macro-level analysis.

The study's third contribution is realized through insights into conflicts that increase micro-level value destruction irrespective of their origins. In the Finnish context, the complexity of the system, division of functions, and predominant focus on intraorganizational conditions impede

communication across organizational boundaries. These challenges cannot be resolved within micro-level service encounters by frontline professionals but rather illustrate the need for corrective administrative action within and across all levels of the PSE. The relational processes operating both within and between all PSE levels suggest that, although the empirical focus being on service encounters, *the underlying causes—and therefore the appropriate solutions—in preventing value destruction are distributed across the entire PSE.*

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