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## Public value as care within and for practices

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### ABSTRACT


This article draws on practice theory and care theory to conceptualize public value as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled. In doing so, it contributes by theoretically integrating major strands of public value research. More specifically, it shows that strategic management of public value depends on the sustained care for practices; that contestation over public value centres on struggles over what should be cared for; that the cocreation and codestruction of public value depend on the extent to which practices are carefully sustained; and that public values are normatively grounded in care and become visible through enacted practices. The article also outlines practical implications for addressing pressing collective challenges through policy design and demonstrates how legitimacy, management, and accountability are reconfigured when public value is understood as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled.

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### Introduction

Public value has become a central concept in public administration and management (PAM) research (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Hartley et al. 2017; Lindgreen et al. 2019; O’Flynn 2021). Typically contrasted with private value for individuals, public value is taken to be the value created for society as a whole or for collectives within it (Alford 2016; Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins 2022; Moore 1995). Yet, public value lacks a consistent theoretical framing, which has significant consequences for PAM practice and for societal well-being more broadly (O’Flynn 2021). Contemporary societies face pressing collective challenges, such as climate change and political polarization, that cannot be addressed without a clearer understanding of public value.

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A common denominator across major strands of prior research is an emphasis on the practice of creating public value. Moore (1995) focuses on how practices of strategic management generate public value. Benington (2011, 2015) emphasizes public value as a contested democratic practice. Bozeman (2007) focuses on how public values are enacted in practice. Finally, Meynhardt (2009, 204) argues that public value is ‘... generated on the basis of experiences made in daily practices’. Yet, despite this shared orientation, a clear definition of public value explicitly grounded in practice and capable of integrating existing strands is lacking. This article argues that existing approaches can be integrated through a care-practice perspective that conceptualizes public value in terms of how practices are sustained, repaired, contested, and enacted over time.

To develop this integrative argument, the article builds on and extends the work of Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2015, 2017) and Skålén and Trischler (2025) who have addressed public value by drawing on practice theory. Practice theory is an influential contemporary social theory that offers a vocabulary for understanding the world in terms of practices (Nicolini 2011). Practices can be defined as collectively shared templates of organized activity that people enact to perform concrete actions and to make the world intelligible (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996, 2002, 2019; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Examples of practices include voting, communicating, and public speaking. While Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2015, 2017) mobilize practice theory to develop Moore’s (1995) strategic triangle, and Skålén and Trischler (2025) use it to explain how public services contribute to the cocreation and codestruction of public value, it remains unclear in these works what public value itself is when understood as a practice. This research points to the importance of practices, but it does not yet provide a clear account of how public value is constituted through them or how different strands of public value research can be integrated around a common conceptual and normative core. Practice theory can be used to develop the former by specifying how public value is accomplished through practices, but it leaves the latter undetermined.

To develop a common normative core, care theory is drawn on to specify what is at stake in practices and how they are sustained over time. This move resonates with Healey’s (2018) suggestion that public value concerns what collectivities come to care about. More fundamentally, the argument is compatible with practice theory’s emphasis on practical involvement in the world, an emphasis that can be traced back to Heidegger’s (1962) understanding of human beings as always already engaged in meaningful practical activity. The present argument is developed through contemporary care theory, especially the work of Tronto (1993, 2013) and Mol (2008), which specify Heidegger’s understanding in more concrete social and political terms. Within this

tradition, care is not merely a sentiment, nor is it confined to formal care institutions; rather, it concerns what people do to maintain, continue, and repair the world (Tronto 1993). Understood in this way, care practices both presuppose and promote democratic inclusion, voice, and responsibility (Tronto 2013). Care is consequently a political concept that, through concrete practices, can sustain and accomplish democratic life (Mol 2008; Tronto 2013). This makes care particularly important for clarifying public value. If prior research has shown that public value is strategically pursued (Moore 1995), democratically contested (Benington 2011), and normatively enacted in practice (Bozeman 2007), care helps explain how practices are oriented, what is at stake in them, and whose concerns are recognized through them. Yet, while this notion of care resonates strongly with how public value has been framed in prior research (Healey 2018), public value has not been articulated as a distinct concept grounded explicitly in care theory.

*The aim* of the article is to conceptualize public value by drawing on practice theory and care theory. It advances a *definition of public value* as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled, where care within practices concerns how actors attend to one another and care for practices concerns how the conditions for those practices are sustained over time. In doing so, it makes an overall contribution to public value research by integrating the field around a unifying theoretical foundation that clarifies what public value is. The article also contributes to research on the strategic management of public value (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2017; Moore 1995, 2013), conflicts over public value (Benington 2011, 2015), how public value is shaped (Skálén and Trischler 2025), and the enactment of public values (Bozeman 2007). It suggests that strategic public management depends on the sustained care for practices; that contestation over public value centres on struggles over what should be cared for; that the cocreation and codestruction of public value depend on the extent to which practices are carefully sustained; and that public values are normatively grounded in care and become visible as qualities when practices are enacted. It also offers practical implications for addressing pressing collective challenges through policy design, and for rethinking how legitimacy, management, and accountability are organized and enacted in practice.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section specifies the conceptual research design of the article, followed by a review of how the main strands of public value research have emphasized practice. The article then extends this line of research by developing a conceptualization of public value that integrates practice theory and care theory. The discussion concludes by outlining the theoretical and practical implications of this reframing as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Conceptual research design

The present work is designed as a conceptual theory adaptation article in Jaakkola's (2020) sense. Theory adaptation articles seek to revise or extend an existing concept or theoretical domain by introducing other theories as alternative frames of reference. The focal problem addressed here is that public value research, while rich and influential, remains conceptually fragmented and lacks clarity regarding what public value is from a practice perspective. The purpose of the article is therefore not to produce an exhaustive review of prior research, but to adapt and integrate existing theorizing to develop a clearer conceptualization of public value. In MacInnis's (2011) terms, the contribution is primarily one of integration, conceptual clarification, and reframing.

In this design, public value research constitutes the domain theory, since it is the substantive field whose central concept is being reconsidered. Practice theory and care theory function as method theories (Jaakkola 2020), because they provide the analytical resources through which the fragmentation of public value research is addressed and its conceptual integration accomplished. More specifically, the article proceeds by first identifying how major strands of public value research already point towards practice, though in theoretically incomplete and insufficiently integrated ways. To address this issue, it then uses practice theory to specify how public value is accomplished through practices and care theory to clarify the normative orientation of those practices. Analytically, the article develops its argument by making explicit the contribution and limitation of each major strand of public value research and by showing how a care-practice perspective provides a conceptual tool for understanding public value as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled.

## Review of research on public value as accomplished in practice

The major strands of public value research reviewed in this section can be read as identifying complementary but incomplete dimensions of how public value is accomplished in practice. Strategic management framings highlight how public value is pursued and organized (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015, 2017; Moore 1995); contested democratic accounts highlight how public value is negotiated through conflicts (Benington 2011, 2015); and public values research highlights the normative ends public action should realize (Bozeman 2007). Yet these strands remain insufficiently integrated around a common conceptual and normative core, leaving the field with limited clarity about what public value is from a practice perspective.

### **Public value as a strategic management practice**

The most influential formulation of public value is found in Moore's work (Moore 1995, 2013, 2019; Moore and Benington 2011). For Moore, public value is essentially 'what the public wants', expressed through representative democracy. Value '... is rooted in the desires and perceptions of individuals ...' (Moore 1995, 52) but aggregated through political processes. He approaches the concept of public value from a strategic management perspective, asking how public managers can create and sustain value for society. His framework centres on the *strategic triangle*, which outlines three imperatives for public managers: (1) to define the public mission and what should be accomplished for society, (2) to secure legitimacy and support from stakeholders, and (3) to build operational capacity to achieve the mission.

Importantly, Moore's (1995) strategic triangle foregrounds strategy as an ongoing, situated activity that unfolds through engagement with different stakeholders. Subsequent elaborations (Moore 2013, 2019; Moore and Benington 2011) further emphasize learning, deliberation, and adaptation as central to public value creation. From this perspective, Moore's contribution lies in showing how public value depends on what managers do, how they mobilize support, interpret mandates, and organize action in practice. This is in alignment with the strategy-as-practice approach within strategy research, which understands strategy not as a formal plan but as a stream of situated doings. From this perspective, strategy consists of the shared, organized, and recurring everyday activities through which managers and other actors accomplish strategizing (Jarzabkowski, Seidl, and Balogun 2022). Read in this way, Moore's framework suggests that public value is not produced by a sovereign public manager alone, but through distributed practical accomplishment.

Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2015, 2017) make this practice-oriented reading of Moore (1995, 2013) explicit by integrating practice theory directly into the analysis of public value. Specifically, Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2017) generalize the strategic triangle into the public value governance triangle, which places practices at the centre. In doing so, they identify six broad categories of practices that are essential to the creation of public value, including policy analysis, design and evaluation; leadership; dialogue and deliberation; institutional and organizational design; formal and informal democratic processes; and strategic management. Their rationale '... for placing practices at the centre of the triangle ...' is that it '... de-centres the public manager and highlights other actors and ways of creating public value ...' and because '... practices are a fundamental building block of the social world ...' (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2017, 643). In this way,

Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2017) demonstrates how a practice-oriented framing of public value can respond to critiques that Moore's framework places too much emphasis on public managers (e.g. O'Flynn 2021; Rhodes and Wanna 2007). At the same time, how public value itself can be conceptualized from a practice approach remains less clear.

In sum, while the strategic management stream of research clarifies how public value is strategically pursued in practice, it does not draw on practice theory systematically enough to conceptualize how public value is constituted through practices and says less about what makes such practices sustainable and normatively valuable over time. The caring work through which practices are maintained, repaired, and aligned therefore remains under-specified.

### ***Public value as a contested democratic practice***

Benington (2011, 2015) builds explicitly on Moore's insights but reorients them by placing the public and the collective at the centre of analysis rather than public managers. At the heart of Benington's framework lies a dual understanding of what public value means. On the one hand, public value refers to what citizens consider valuable: 'what the public values'. This perspective emphasizes the importance of dialogue and cocreation with citizens. On the other hand, Benington highlights that public value is also about 'what adds value to the public sphere'. This second dimension expands attention beyond the current desires of the public to include the pursuit of long-term societal goals. A central feature is that conflicts exist between what the public values and the public sphere, making public value a 'contested democratic practice' (Benington 2015, 29). By stressing contestation, Benington draws attention to power, conflict, and plurality as defining features of public value (Jacobs 2014; Nabatchi 2012), which is an important facet of care (Tronto 1993).

Skålén and Trischler (2025) integrates Benington's work with practice theory to develop a framework that focuses on how public services cocreate and codestroy both public and private value. Although Benington does not himself mobilize practice theory, Skålén and Trischler (2025) adopt his emphasis on activity, cocreation, and practice to understand public services. In doing so, they combine practice theory – particularly the work of Schatzki (1996, 2002, 2019) – with research that conceptualizes services from a practice theory perspective (e.g. McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012; Skålén and Gummerus 2023). However, their analysis does not engage with more recent developments in service research that further specify value from a practice-theoretical perspective (Skålén 2026), nor does it address care as

a defining feature of public value. As a result, their work stops short of specifying what public value itself is from a practice-theoretical standpoint.

In sum, while the stream of research initiated by Benington (2011, 2015) clarifies that public value is negotiated and contested in practice, it says less about what this contestation is about in practical terms. A care-practice perspective suggests that such struggles concern what should be cared for, whose needs and concerns count, and how responsibilities for sustaining shared practices are organized and distributed.

### ***Realizing public values in action***

Bozeman's public values perspective (Bozeman 2007) shifts attention to the normative foundations of public action. Like Moore (1995, 2013), he defines public value through the polity – what citizens collectively determine to be valuable through democratic processes. Rather than focusing on how managers create public value, however, Bozeman emphasizes that public value emerges from the realization of collectively held public values that guide and justify public action. Crucially, he acknowledges that public value failures often arise not because values are absent, but because actors struggle to realize them in practice (Bozeman 2002; Bozeman and Sarewitz 2011). This insight implicitly brings practices into view: values matter only insofar as they are enacted, sustained, and sometimes contested through concrete activities.

Together with Jørgensen, Bozeman (2007) compiled a comprehensive 'inventory' of public values. Several of these, such as equity, altruism, human dignity, sustainability, responsiveness, ethical consciousness, and fairness, resonate closely with a conception of care as the activities through which people maintain, continue, and repair the social world (Tronto 1993, 2013). In this sense, Bozeman's inventory helps to specify what care may entail in a public value context, even though he does not explicitly frame his argument in these terms. At the same time, this stream of research says less about how public values are enacted, sustained, embedded in, given meaning, and interpreted within practices, which would be key to a practice-theoretical account (Nicolini 2011; Schatzki 1996; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). As a result, the relationship between public values and the practices through which they are enacted, and through which public value is realized, remains under-specified. A care-practice perspective helps explain how public values become visible in the competent, responsive, and responsible performance of practices.

## Summary

Taken together, the major strands of public value research reveal a sustained concern with how public value is accomplished in practice. They identify complementary but incomplete dimensions of this accomplishment: the strategic pursuit and organization of public value, its democratic negotiation and contestation, and the normative values that public action seeks to realize. Importantly, some contributions (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015, 2017; Skålén and Trischler 2025) also demonstrate the analytical potential of an explicit practice-theoretical framing for understanding public value. In this sense, public value scholarship has increasingly treated practices as central to public value creation.

However, across these approaches there remains limited conceptual clarity about what public value is from a practice perspective, which means that they remain insufficiently integrated around a common conceptual and normative core. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how public value itself can be specified as a phenomenon constituted through practices, and to how such practices are sustained, aligned, and normatively oriented over time. This gap motivates the turn in the next section to a more explicit and systematic articulation of public value through practice theory and care theory, grounding it in care within and for practices. This framing helps integrate the major strands of public value research more systematically.

## Conceptualizing public value as care within and for practices

This section grounds public value at the intersection of practice theory and care theory through three analytical moves: outlining the core constructs of practice theory; mobilizing recent developments in service research to conceptualize value from a practice-theoretical perspective; and explaining how care manifests public value within and for practices.

### *Practice theory: how care and value become socially organized*

Practice theory provides a theoretical vocabulary for understanding how the social world – including expressions of care and value – is organized (Nicolini 2011). The core concept through which this organization is accomplished is *practices*, understood as the collective patterns or templates for action that frame both actors' performances of concrete activities and human intelligibility (Nicolini 2011; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Templates of practices, such as voting, demonstrating, and applying for social benefits, simultaneously guide performances of

concrete activities and frame intelligibility, but they do not determine them. Actors can enact practices in different ways, and they are also informed by multiple practices simultaneously, that can be in contradiction. It is also possible for actors to act and think outside established practices, although such action and thought is more difficult for others to understand, since intelligibility depends on established practices. Therefore, a core argument of practice theory, is that action and intelligibility stem from collective practices that are enacted by both individual (a person) and collective actors (e.g. an organization).

Practices are organized by interconnected *elements*. While terminology varies across authors, recent syntheses (Skålén and Gummerus 2023) identify four key elements:

- (1) Understandings: skills, know-how, and shared knowledge;
- (2) Procedures: explicit and implicit rules, including norms and conventions;
- (3) Engagements: emotionally charged goals and ends;
- (4) Materials: artefacts, natural resources, and technologies.

Taken together, these elements organize both the *templates* and the *performances* of practices and frame intelligibility. Moreover, elements often span across and link practices, which create interdependencies between them. For instance, computers (a material element) and know-how of operating them (an understanding element) are core elements in many contemporary practices. The implication is that practices commonly are embedded in larger *bundles*—such as commuting and governing – and people commonly enact these rather than single practices to act and make the world intelligible. Constellations constitute even larger constellations of practices that together constitute the world and organize care (Dreyfus 1991; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996, 2002).

As shown above, major contributions to public value research can be reinterpreted as implicitly concerned with practices: Moore (1995, 2013) emphasis on strategic management; Benington (2011, 2015) attention to democratic contestation, and Bozeman's (2007) concern with realizing public values, all revolve around how public value is accomplished through concrete practice. Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2015, 2017) explicitly acknowledge practice theory as a promising lens for understanding public value and identify practices that are essential to its creation. As demonstrated by Skålén and Trischler (2025), what practice theory adds – and what remains underdeveloped in existing research – is a common vocabulary for specifying what these practices consist of and how they relate to one another. The core constructs of practice theory – practices, elements, templates,

performances, and bundles – provide such a vocabulary that can be used to accomplish a more explicit practice-theoretical articulation of public value.

At the same time, practice theory has devoted limited attention to the concept of value itself (Sayer 2013). To address this limitation, the next section follows the lead of Skålén and Trischler (2025), who draw on practice theory informed service research to frame how public services shape public value. It introduces the latest development of this service research within the services-as-practices (SaP) framework (Skålén 2026). This provides the conceptual bridge needed to explain how value is generated through practices before turning to the role of care in grounding public value as care within and for practices more fully.

### ***Value according to the services-as-practices framework***

Drawing on practice theory, a core claim of the SaP framework is that services are bundles of practices ‘... which consist of templates intended to cocreate value for at least some actors but which may be performed in such a way that value is both cocreated and codestroyed’ (Skålén 2026, 67). The ‘co’ prefix of the definition underscores that practices are shaped through interaction between multiple actors. This interactional understanding resonates with contemporary adaptations of the labour theory of value within classical economics. The original labour theory of value informed Benington’s (2011, 2015) understanding of public value and holds that value stems from the socially necessary labour time required to produce things, primarily goods in factories (see e.g. Marx [1867] 1990). Contemporary adaptations broaden this insight by emphasizing that value is tied to the ongoing enactment of practices that actors invest themselves in over time (Hägglund 2019; Hardt and Negri 2017).

Based on this understanding, the SaP framework suggests that the essence of services’ value lies in the performances of practices. However, value is not a simple function of the outcomes of individual performances. Rather, value emerges through the ongoing enactment of shared practices by multiple actors and becomes sedimented in the templates that constitute services. Performances shape the templates of practices, while templates in turn frame future performances in a co-constitutive fashion (Skålén 2026). By extending this understanding beyond services, value can be understood as crystallized in the socially shared templates and performances through which practices are enacted and sustained over time. For example, voting in elections is a practice whose value is not reducible to the outcome of a single vote, but emerges through the socially shared templates and repeated performances that make the practice intelligible, meaningful, and sustainable over time.

The focus of SaP is on the private value created for customers within markets. Value is understood in terms of use value, which focuses on

subjective utility, and exchange value, expressed in the form of market price (Skålén 2026). However, as Skålén and Trischler (2025) have shown that it can also inform understandings of public value. Prior research further teaches us that public value is the value that the members of the public have the right to as citizens by deliberation through the democratic political process (Alford 2016; Bozeman 2007; Moore 1995). A practice-theoretical view of society offers a specific way of understanding this deliberation by suggesting that it takes place through a multitude of democratic practices. As Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2017) have demonstrated such practices can range from formal democratic processes, such as elections, to practices more distanced from it, such as strategic management. Even market practices, as Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins (2022) have shown, can inform democratic deliberation. For example, innovation of new products and services by firms may affect the production of public services.

Hence, public value can arise within the public sector, a market, or a civic context or a combination of them. The core principle here is that the elements that organize these practices (e.g. the understandings, engagements, procedures, and materials), as well as the bundles and constellations that link them and constitute the social world, are democratic in nature and represents the public or the citizenry (Alford 2016; Bozeman 2007; Moore 1995). For example, understandings must enable free knowledge creation; procedures, including norms and laws, must secure the free formation of opinion; engagements should be oriented towards shared goals of inclusivity and human dignity; and materials and technologies ought to be designed to enhance collective well-being. Practices grounded in other types of rule, such as authoritarianism, are unlikely to be able to genuinely represent the public and generate public value because they curtail the inclusion, voice, and open contestation required for citizens to shape common practices. In non-democratic contexts, civil society organizations, local communities, and other collectives may still sustain practices that foster public value for particular collectives, but such practices lack formal democratic authorization and therefore cannot be assumed to represent the public in the same way as practices within democratic societies.

In practice-theoretical terms, complex democratic processes help define which practices citizens are entitled to and which groups are recognized as entitled to participate in and shape them. Here, entitlement does not refer simply to an individual possession or fixed right, but to the publicly authorized claims, access, and standing that citizens have in relation to shared practices. In this sense, democratic processes do not merely respond to a pre-given public; they also help constitute the citizenry as a political collective by organizing inclusion, entitlement, and participation. At the same time, entitlement seen from a practice theory perspective is itself contestable (Nicolini 2011):

struggles over who is included, which practices should count as publicly valuable, and what citizens may legitimately expect from them are part of democratic life rather than external to it. This understanding of the public, combined with the SaP framework's account of value, makes it possible to *frame public value as arising through the enactment and ongoing organization of the practices to which citizens are entitled*.

A clear advantage of this understanding is that it allows different types of public value to be distinguished according to the practices and bundles of practices through which it is realized. Public value in healthcare, education, democratic participation, or environmental governance, for example, arises through different entitled practices and depends on how these are enacted, sustained, and aligned over time. This does not make public value easy to measure in any simple or uniform way. However, it does make it possible to analyse more precisely which practices are generating, undermining, or transforming public value in particular settings.

However, public value is not automatically cocreated when the practices to which citizens are entitled are performed. Public value is itself a contested practice (Benington 2011; Jacobs 2014) and can be both cocreated and codestroyed through performances (Skálén and Trischler 2025). While the templates of the practices to which citizens are entitled are intended to generate public value, actors may – intentionally or unintentionally – deviate from these templates, thereby codestroying public value. Conversely, when templates and performances align, public value is realized because the enacted practices correspond to the collectively authorized practices to which citizens are entitled. This may still leave particular individuals unsatisfied in specific instances, but public value is not reducible to immediate individual preference satisfaction. Rather, it depends on whether the enacted practices sustain the rights, conditions, and collective goods that citizens are entitled to. This marks a core distinction between private and public value: while private value is more closely tied to what particular individuals desire, public value is grounded in the practices and bundles that citizens are collectively entitled to.

In sum, practice theory offers a conceptual core that, when combined with the SaP framework's understanding of value, makes it possible to articulate an understanding of public value that has been missing in prior research. From this perspective, public value arises through the enactment and ongoing organization of the practices to which citizens are entitled. However, this account remains incomplete unless it also explains how such practices are normatively oriented and sustained over time. To address this limitation, the next section develops a more explicit account of care and argues that public value can be understood as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled.

### Care within and for practices

Contemporary care research emerged through feminist critiques of scholarship that modelled the moral subject as autonomous, rational, and detached from relations of dependency. Against this image, early care theorists argued that moral and political life is fundamentally relational and grounded in concrete practices of attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness to others' needs (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). While initially developed as an ethical intervention, this insight laid the groundwork for later understandings of care as a socially organized practice concerned with sustaining life and collective societal arrangements more broadly defined (Mol 2008; Tronto 1993, 2013). This understanding is central to conceptualizing public value as care within and for practices in this article.

More specifically, Tronto's influential formulation of care is drawn on. Tronto defines care as an '... activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment ...' (Tronto 1993, 102). This definition is pivotal for theorizing public value because it frames care as a societal phenomenon and include a range of collective arrangements that maintain, continue, and repair the social world. This aligns both with general understandings of public value as value created for society as a whole (Alford 2016; Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins 2022; Moore 1995) and with Healey's (2018) more specific suggestion that public value concerns what collectivities come to care about and seek to sustain. For example, maintaining a functioning public transport system, adapting teaching to students with different needs, or preserving trust in electoral procedures can all be understood as forms of care in Tronto's broad societal sense.

Tronto (1993, 108) further claims that: 'Care is perhaps best thought of as a practice ... To call care a practice implies that it involves both thought and action, that thought and action are interrelated, and that they are directed toward some end'. Mol (2008) further deepens this understanding by conceptualizing *care practices* through a distinction between practices informed by the logic of care and the logic of choice. In contrast to practices informed by the logic of choice, which positions actors as autonomous decision-makers selecting among alternatives in market settings, practices informed by the logic of care emphasize ongoing adjustment, coordination, the situated nature of action, collaboration, and shared responsibility. This understanding resonates with Lejano's (2021) framing of care in terms of relationality, which foregrounds empathy, connectedness, and mutual responsiveness while challenging individualistic and utility-maximizing assumptions. For instance, in healthcare the logic of choice places the selection of providers or treatments with the patient, whereas the logic of care emphasizes the continuous coordination and adjustment among multiple

actors required to support a patient whose condition, needs, and circumstances change over time.

For public value, the emphasis on care practices is decisive. Public value is rarely produced through discrete choices or one-off decisions (Alford 2016; Moore and; Benington 2011). Instead, it emerges through sustained care practices of maintenance, repair, and adaptation – whether in healthcare, education, environmental governance, or democratic institutions – and involves continuously working with evolving needs, conflicting concerns, and material constraints. What counts as ‘good’ care is not fixed in advance but emerges through practice. For example, a school does not create public value simply by formally offering education; it does so through the ongoing work of adapting teaching, maintaining inclusion, and supporting students’ ability to participate and develop over time.

Read through practice theory, Tronto’s (1993) and Mol’s (2008) understanding of care specifies the normative quality of the elements that organize templates and performances of practices, shape intelligibility of actors, and organize society through bundles and constellations. Caring is not something added onto practices; it is enacted through them and ingrained within them. Practices specify what kinds of needs are recognized, which responsibilities are assumed, how responses are organized, and how outcomes are evaluated. In this sense, care becomes visible as the practical work through which practices are maintained, repaired, adapted, or transformed. For example, care is expressed when a welfare officer adjusts an interaction so that a vulnerable citizen can understand and participate in the process, or when a municipality revises procedures to keep a social service functioning in a fair and responsive way.

To clarify the argument, it is useful to explicitly distinguish between *care within practices* and *care for practices*. Care within practices refers to how actors attend and respond to one another in the situated performance of practices. It concerns, for example, whether participation is supported, whether needs are recognized, whether dignity is respected, and whether action is carried out in an attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive manner. For example, care within a classroom practice may involve a teacher modifying instruction so that a struggling student can participate with dignity, care within an electoral practice may involve poll workers ensuring that elderly or disabled citizens can vote without exclusion or humiliation, and care within a welfare administration practice may involve a caseworker adapting communication so that a vulnerable citizen can understand the process and participate on fair terms. Care for practices, by contrast, refers to the work of sustaining, repairing, and adapting the conditions that make practices viable over time. It concerns maintaining the elements – understandings, engagements, procedures, and materials – that organize practices. For example, care for educational practices may involve sustaining teacher

training and curricular norms, care for democratic practices may involve protecting electoral procedures and fostering citizens' democratic engagement, and care for climate adaptation practices may involve maintaining coordination mechanisms that enable communities to respond to environmental change over time.

Care within practices and care for practices are analytically distinct but closely related: the former concerns how actors attend and respond to one another in situated performances, while the latter concerns sustaining and adapting the conditions that make those performances viable over time. Care within practices therefore depends on care for practices, while care for practices is expressed and renewed through how practices are performed in concrete situations. For example, a teacher can only care well within classroom practice if there are viable educational arrangements to care for, just as fair voting in a polling station depends on broader care for democratic procedures, engagements, and infrastructures. At the same time, care within practices and care for practices may pull in different directions. In concrete situations, acting attentively and responsively towards particular situational demands may conflict with the rules, infrastructures, or resource constraints that help sustain a practice over time. For example, a teacher may wish to devote additional time and flexibility to a struggling student, while curricular demands and classroom routines require standardization and a fixed instructional pace. Public value therefore depends not on eliminating such tensions once and for all, but on how they are recognized, negotiated, and handled within and across practices.

This understanding of care also aligns closely with the SaP framework's (Skålén 2026) emphasis on value as emerging from the collective performance of practices over time. However, especially Mol's (2008) logic of care adds an essential normative dimension by clarifying that public value depends not only on how practices are performed, but also on how the conditions sustaining those practices are maintained and adapted. In these terms, care within practices concerns whether performances are attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive to others in situated action, whereas care for practices concerns whether the elements that make such performances possible are sustained over time. Public value is therefore not only cocreated or codestroyed through alignment or misalignment of practices and their organizing elements (Skålén and Trischler 2025), but also through the relation between caring performances within practices and the ongoing care for the practices that support them. For instance, a healthcare system may continue to function formally, but public value is undermined if patients are processed in inattentive, exclusionary, or poorly coordinated ways, or if the competences, procedures, and infrastructures supporting care are allowed to deteriorate. Conversely, public value is strengthened when practices are enacted in ways that are responsive to concrete needs and when the

conditions enabling such responsiveness are maintained and adapted over time.

Moreover, care is inherently a political practice: questions of what is cared for, how care is organized, and whose needs count are shaped by power, conflict, and democratic contestation (de la Bellacasa and Maria 2017; Tronto 1993, 2013). This understanding resonates with the view that public value itself is a contested and conflictual practice (Benington 2011, 2015; Jacobs 2014; Nabatchi 2012). Importantly, Tronto (1993, 2013) notion of *caring with* anchors care explicitly in democracy by linking good care to solidarity, plurality, trust, and the equal participation of citizens in determining how care is organized. It implies that the public value emerging through practices must be aligned with democratic principles that ensure inclusion, voice, and fairness.

More specifically, Tronto (2013) argues that democratic life depends on recognizing human interdependence and on organizing care in ways that make needs visible, distribute responsibilities justly, and enable those affected by care arrangements to have voice in shaping them. Care is therefore not merely a private or ethical matter, but a political and collective practice bound up with equality, justice, and inclusion. From this perspective, the public value emerging through practices must be aligned with democratic principles that ensure voice, fairness, and the possibility for citizens to influence how shared practices are sustained and transformed. This not only resonates directly with prior public value research emphasizing contestation, legitimacy, and collective authorization (Benington 2011; Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015, 2017), but also provides a clearer account of what these concerns involve in practice: struggles over whose needs and concerns count, how responsibilities are distributed, and how shared practices are maintained in ways compatible with democratic life. For example, controversies over whether rural schools should be closed, how eldercare should be organized, or who should bear the burdens of climate adaptation are not only policy disputes; they are also contests over what and whom collective arrangements should care for.

In sum, building on the preceding discussion of practice theory and care theory, public value is defined here as *care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled*. This framing emphasizes that public value depends on how such practices are enacted and on how the conditions that sustain them are maintained over time. Care within practices concerns how actors attend to one another in the situated performance of practices, for example by supporting participation, dignity, and capability in democratic or public service settings. Care for practices concerns sustaining and repairing the organizing elements that make these practices viable over time. The next section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of this definition of public value.

## Discussion

### *Theoretical contributions*

The central theoretical contribution of this article is that it integrates public value research around a clear conceptual core that has been missing in prior research. By drawing on practice theory and care theory it defines public value as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled. Although a shared emphasis on concrete practices runs across major strands of public value research (Benington 2011, 2015; Bozeman 2007; Moore 1995, 2013), the field has remained theoretically fragmented, with limited clarity about how practices relate to public value. Practice theory (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996, 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) provides a coherent conceptual vocabulary of practices, templates, performances, elements, intelligibility, and bundles that enables the integration of these strands and clarifies how the social world and care are organized.

A second persistent problem within public value research has concerned the status of value itself. While research has repeatedly treated public value as something that emerges in and through practice (Benington 2011, 2015; Bozeman 2007; Moore 1995, 2013), it has remained unclear what value consists of from a practice perspective. Integrating the SaP framework (Skålén 2026) helps address this issue by grounding value in actors' performance of practices and in the templates constituting them. However, the SaP framework leaves open the normative grounding of public value.

This final gap is addressed by anchoring practices in care, thereby foregrounding ongoing adjustment, coordination, collaboration, connectedness, shared responsibility, and mutual responsiveness. This move enables the articulation of public value in terms of the maintenance, repair, continuation, transformation, and adaptation of practices over time (Lejano 2021; Mol 2008; Tronto 1993, 2013). In this sense, the article advances public value theory by framing it as an ongoing practical accomplishment that depends on how entitled practices are sustained, aligned, and normatively oriented by actors over time. More specifically, public value depends both on how actors care within practices through situated and responsive performances and on how they care for practices by sustaining the conditions that make those performances viable over time.

Reframing public value as care within and for the practices citizens are entitled to does not displace established approaches. Rather, it develops their shared practice orientation in a more explicit and systematic way. It builds directly on the practice orientation already present in Moore's (1995) strategic triangle and on its later, explicit practice-theoretical framing in the work of Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2015, 2017). The perspective developed in this article re-specifies the components of the strategic triangle in care-theoretical terms. In this framing, missions

articulate which practices ought to be cared for and developed; legitimacy stabilizes democratic entitlement to, and collective responsibility for, these practices; and operational capacity refers to the ability to sustain, repair, and reproduce their organizing elements over time. This extends the strategic management approach to public value by clarifying that what is at stake is not only the pursuit of public purposes, but the ongoing caring work through which the practices constituting those purposes are kept viable, aligned, and responsive. In this respect, the argument also guards against romanticizing strategic public management: care is not treated as benevolence or managerial goodwill, but as distributed, contested, and materially grounded work of sustaining practices across actors and settings.

Conceptualizing public value as care within and for practices thus shifts attention from identifying types of practices that are essential to the creation of public value to explaining how public value depends on the ongoing care within and for practices, bundles, and their organizing elements. In this way, the care framing elaborates on Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2017) response to critiques that Moore's framework places excessive emphasis on public managers (e.g. O'Flynn 2021; Rhodes and Wanna 2007). While Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2017) reposition practices at the centre of public value governance, they do not explicitly ground these practices in care. By doing so, the perspective developed here further shifts the analytical centre of gravity towards the distributed and relational processes through which public value is sustained over time. It also suggests a broader paradigmatic implication for PAM research: if public value is understood as care within and for practices, then the analysis must move beyond managerial decision-making alone towards the care practices through which collective life is produced and reproduced.

Benington (2011, 2015) conceptualization of public value as a contested democratic practice foregrounds plurality, conflict, and power in defining what the public values and what strengthens the public sphere. Conceptualizing public value as care within and for practices complements this view by clarifying what contestation concerns in practice. Contestation centres on struggles over what should be cared for, how care should be organized, and whose needs and concerns are recognized in shaping shared futures (de la Bellacasa and Maria 2017; Tronto 1993, 2013). Care is therefore not external to democratic conflict but its medium. Because care is selective, distributed, and embedded in practices, it necessarily involves tensions and exclusions that must be negotiated rather than resolved once and for all (Nicolini 2011). This deepens the stream of research on public value as a contested practice (Benington 2011, 2015; Jacobs 2014; Nabatchi 2012) by showing that democratic conflict is not only about preferences, interests, or authorization, but also about the practical organization of care: whose

vulnerabilities are recognized, whose responsibilities are prioritized, and which practices are sustained or neglected.

Skålén and Trischler (2025) provide an important bridge by integrating public value research with practice theory to analyse cocreation and codestruction in public services. This line of argument also resonates with public service logic works on public service ecosystems, which emphasize that public value is cocreated across multiple actors and sectors rather than produced by public organizations alone (Osborne et al. 2022). The contribution of the present article is to extend this insight by specifying, through practice theory and care theory, how such multi-actor public value accomplishment depends on care within practices and care for the practices that sustain collective life. The framing of public value in this article builds on Skålén and Trischler's (2025) insights but extends it in two ways. First, it grounds public value in the performance of practices by actors and in the templates that constitute them. Second, by introducing care as the normative anchor of public value, it specifies that its cocreation and codestruction depends on the extent to which practices are carefully (i.e. attentively, responsibly, competently, and responsively) sustained so that collective life remains viable, inclusive, and meaningful. More specifically, the article shows that public value depends both on care within practices – whether situated performances are attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive to others – and on care for practices – whether the elements that make such performances possible are sustained and adapted over time. In this way, the article contributes to PAM theory by making more explicit how public value failures can be analysed not simply as failures of output or legitimacy, but as failures in the caring organization of practices and their sustaining conditions. This means that cocreation and codestruction are shaped not only by how actors perform practices in concrete situations, but also by how the broader conditions enabling those practices are maintained, repaired, or allowed to deteriorate.

Bozeman (2002, 2007; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007) shift attention to how a range of public values – such as equity, altruism, human dignity, sustainability, responsiveness, ethical consciousness, and fairness – normatively ground public value. The care- and practice-theoretical reframing developed here does not replace this inventory; rather, it provides a more fundamental normative grounding that helps explain why and how such values matter. Care functions as an overarching orientation that animates and organizes public values by directing attention to the maintenance, repair, and continuation of the practices to which citizens are entitled. This helps specify how public values move from abstract normative commitments to enacted qualities of practice. Values such as fairness, responsiveness, or human dignity become visible not only as ideals to be endorsed, but as qualities of how practices are performed, interpreted, and sustained. This,

in turn, makes the realization problem more analytically precise by locating values in the organization and performance of practices themselves. From this perspective, public value failure (Bozeman and Sarewitz 2011) can be understood as breakdowns in care practices – for example, irresponsible allocation of burdens, erosion of competences, or lack of responsiveness to feedback. Care thus provides a unifying normative orientation while preserving the insight that values are enacted, sustained, or eroded through concrete practices.

This perspective also resonates with Healey's (2018) suggestion that public value may be understood through what collectivities come to care about and seek to sustain. The contribution of the present article is to develop this affinity more systematically by grounding public value in practice theory and care theory. Doing so makes it possible to explain not only that public value concerns what publics care about, but also how such care is enacted within practices, how practices are cared for over time, and how public value becomes visible in the maintenance, repair, and democratic shaping of collective life.

By specifying where public values become visible in practice and where public value failure may be observed as breakdowns in care practices, the understanding of public value developed here also provides a clearer basis for empirical inquiry. Although this article is conceptual, it also suggests directions for empirical operationalization. Public value as care within and for practices could be studied by examining, first, how actors attend and respond to one another in situated performances of practices and, second, how the shared understandings, procedures, engagements, and materials sustaining those practices are maintained and adapted over time. Such an approach would not produce a single metric of public value, but it would make it possible to investigate how public value is generated, undermined, or transformed across different public domains.

### ***Practical contributions***

As noted in the introduction, contemporary societies face pressing collective challenges such as climate change, increasing inequality, political polarization, and declining democratic trust. Reframing public value as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled has implications for how such challenges are understood and addressed. From this perspective, collective challenges are not primarily failures of individual policies or isolated decisions, but failures to sustain, coordinate, and repair the practices through which collective life is organized. For example, climate adaptation may fail not simply because of a lack of policy instruments, but because planning, infrastructure, citizen participation, and interorganizational coordination are poorly aligned. Similarly, declining trust in welfare, schooling, or

elections may reflect breakdowns in the care practices through which citizens encounter public institutions and through which public value is enacted. Policy design should therefore move beyond introducing new instruments towards identifying and repairing the interdependent practices and bundles that organize collective life. Reform, in this sense, instead becomes an investment in the conditions of care: developing shared know-how, revising rules that distort practice performances, and maintaining material infrastructures that enable coordination, responsiveness, and inclusion.

This reframing also reshapes public management and accountability. Public managers should be evaluated not only on outputs, but also on whether they sustain practices in ways that enable attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive care over time. In healthcare, for example, this would mean assessing not only throughput or waiting times, but also whether practices allow patients' needs to be recognized, whether responsibilities are coordinated effectively, and whether feedback informs ongoing adjustment. Accountability thus becomes less a matter of compliance alone and more a question of whether institutions remain capable of caring well within practices and caring for the conditions that make those practices viable.

Finally, participation and legitimacy are reconfigured. Democratic engagement cannot be reduced to episodic consultation but must also be understood as ongoing participation in shaping how shared practices are sustained and adjusted, especially by those most affected by care failures. For example, legitimacy in schooling, eldercare, or local climate adaptation depends not only on formal authorization, but also on whether citizens can recognize themselves in the practices they are entitled to and influence how those practices evolve when they exclude, marginalize, or erode trust. From this perspective, legitimacy rests not on whether public institutions remain capable of organizing care in ways that are inclusive, just, and responsive over time.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

The framing of public value developed in this article provides conceptual clarity and a new theoretical anchor. However, several limitations remain that point towards future research possibilities.

First, the article is conceptual. Empirical studies are now needed to explore how public value as care within and for practices manifests across concrete domains. Although the article suggests possible directions for empirical operationalization, it does not yet specify in detail how such inquiry should be designed or how findings might be compared across contexts. Developing methodological approaches that can capture both care within practices and care for practices therefore remains an important

task for future research. Future research could, for example, operationalize this perspective by examining inattentiveness to needs, exclusion from participation, weak responsiveness to feedback, or the erosion of competences, rules, and infrastructures as empirical indicators of public value generation and failure in practice. Moreover, public value has been defined here in contrast to private value, but a fully developed practice-theoretical account of private value remains to be outlined. Advancing such an account would sharpen the distinction between public and private value and further strengthen the conceptual coherence of the definition of public value developed here. Finally, while the article highlights implications for policy design, management, accountability, and participation and legitimacy, empirical research is needed to explore how public organizations and democratic institutions can actively cultivate care practices without instrumentalizing care or undermining professional judgement.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that public value can be fruitfully understood as care within and for the practices to which citizens are entitled. By doing so, it contributes to clarify what public value is and integrates major strands of public value research around a common conceptual and normative core. From this perspective, public value is an ongoing practical accomplishment of caring within and for shared practices. Ultimately, public value arises when shared practices are sustained attentively, responsibly, and reflectively over time. This conceptualization has implications for how PAM scholars diagnose public value failure and how they understand legitimacy, accountability, and collective problem-solving in practice. Advancing public value research therefore requires continued engagement with care, practices, and the conditions that make collective life viable.

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