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## New development: Mitigating disvalue through a material understanding of public value co-creation

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### IMPACT

This article introduces a strategy that can be used by managers to (co)design, (co)analyse and (co)assess processes of public value co-creation. Actions for implementation by public managers are also recommended, such as keeping a register of co-creation processes; describing the settings and the material relations among the actors taking part in co-creation; and accounting over time for the material effects of co-creation processes. Watchdogs and civil society organizations should be monitoring the effects of public value co-creation processes from a material perspective.

### ABSTRACT

Public management scholars have recently recognized that there is a romantic bias towards public value co-creation, with cases of public value destruction, loss and/or appropriation often being neglected. To correct this fundamental issue, this article focuses on the opportunity for a material understanding of public value co-creation processes. The authors discuss why this material understanding is critical to mitigate disvalue and to facilitate the transformation of the public sector into an arena for co-creation.

### KEYWORDS

Co-creation; democracy; local governance; public managers; public organization; public services; public value; social innovation

Co-creation, and more widely the engagement of citizens and stakeholders with their multiple roles (Thomas, 2013) in different public administration processes (Nabatchi et al., 2017), is a hot topic in public policy and public services management (for example Ferlie, 2021; Ongaro et al., 2021; Osborne, Nasi, et al., 2021). In this context, the assumption is often an implicit consideration of co-creation as a positive form of social innovation (Voorberg et al., 2015) which is public value generating in itself (Bryson et al., 2017; Moore, 1995).

However, more recently, there have been calls for a more critical understanding of co-creation (for example Cluley et al., 2020; Dudau et al., 2019; Sancino et al., 2018). In this article, we argue that a materialist approach to public value can help identifying its practical effects, including disvalue (value appropriation and destruction) and/or no material effects of those processes (loss of value). Moreover, we show how a materialist understanding of co-creation is needed for a better management of co-creation at its meso and macro levels. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), materialism is a philosophical position and 'a necessary methodological postulate of natural-scientific inquiry' that understands facts as causally dependent upon physical processes and the material and technological conditions of a given historical period.

Drawing from Osborne, Powell, et al. (2021), by 'meso' we mean the service ecosystems level (led by a pivot organization responsible for co-creation processes), while by 'macro' we mean the institutional level which concerns societal norms, beliefs and paradigms of public administration. We do not focus here on the micro level, which is about the inherent interactions and processes of co-creation involved in any process of public service

delivery (for example teacher/student interactions), and where the ethos and training of front-line public services professionals have been identified as relevant for facilitating (or hampering) co-creation (Bovaird, 2007; Parker, 2016).

### Understanding co-creation with Burke: a dramatist framework

According to Torfing et al. (2019, p. 802), co-creation 'is a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the production of public value'. This is a wide definition, which we intentionally use, and which includes both citizens and stakeholders and different public administration processes.

There are several ways to approach and study co-creation. An illustration of co-creation through the heuristic developed by American philosopher Burke (1945) in *A Grammar of Motives* can be particularly useful in this respect (see Figure 1). The idea of using Burke's work in the field of public management was inspired by Barzelay (2019), who shed light on four professional practices of public management:

- Sense-making.
- Design.
- Argumentation.
- Dramatization.

While the first three practices are well used both in public management research and development/training, it is thanks to Barzelay (2019), and the conceptual link established with Burke, that the practice of dramatization is

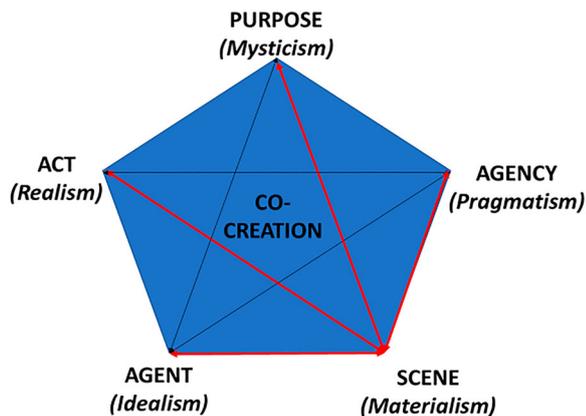


Figure 1. Burke's pentad. Source: Authors' elaboration from Burke (1945).

being considered. In this respect, because there is a discursive and romantic bias towards co-creation (Dudau et al., 2019), it is appropriate to put co-creation in a framework which acknowledges its rhetorical and theatrical nature.

Burke explained that any account of social action, such as, for example, co-creation, should include five perspectives: purpose, agency, scene, agent, and act. These perspectives are illuminated by and related to five different philosophies (mysticism, pragmatism, materialism, idealism and realism) and underpinned by five different questions, respectively: why (purpose), how (agency), where (scene), who (agent), and what (act). This heuristic is particularly useful to understand what is happening. In particular, the 'pentad', and the various relationships between its five dimensions, defines different interpretations of the social action. So, for example, it makes a lot of difference if the purpose (why) is explained by referring to the scene (where) or referring to the agent (who).

In this article, following on from Cluley et al. (2020), we argue that a material understanding of co-creation is needed to avoid three concrete traps: romanticizing co-creation as non-conflictual and value generating per se; making it a discursive and élite phenomenon rather than a real, everyday practice; layering co-creation into the already

existing bureaucratic and managerial structures of modern public administration (Hartley, 2005).

In Table 1, we highlight how combining each perspective of Burke's pentad with the materialist one allows a more critical understanding of co-creation. We use the word 'critical' by referring to four key tenets of critical management studies identified by Coule et al. (2020), namely: challenging structures of domination; questioning taken-for-granted assumptions; going beyond instrumentalism; and paying attention to power and knowledge.

### Discussion: co-creation from a material perspective

As we have shown in Table 1, by combining materialism with different philosophies and by focusing on the material scene (i.e. the material relations and settings of co-creation), we could understand public value co-creation from a different, and more critical perspective. Specifically, by having a material focus on who participates in co-creation and by questioning the effects of co-creation processes, we may uncover power and knowledge dynamics, such as whether politicians and public managers are really willing to surrender some of their political status, decision-making and control (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012) and/or if external stakeholders have a vested interest in the effects of co-creation (Källström et al., 2020). For example, in the case of data generated through digitally mediated co-creation processes, the issue of who owns that data is important (see, for example, Liang et al., 2018; Meijer, 2018), because the exploitation of data made open for public value co-creation could generate disvalue from a public and democratic perspective.

Importantly, we can also see through a material focus on who is not there to co-create—maybe because they simply do not have the time and/or the resources, they are not interested and/or they are not engaged or are invisible. From a democratic point of view, these situations could result in disvalue rather than added value. In this regard, we believe that a real commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion can only come from an understanding of the material diversity of society. The taken for granted

Table 1. Mitigating disvalue by applying Burke's pentad to public value co-creation.

Perspectives for understanding co-creation	Focus	Critical questions
<i>Purpose-scene</i> ( <i>mysticism + materialism</i> )	Analysing <i>why</i> co-creation is enacted by looking at the scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why co-creation processes were held during the day, i.e. can workers take part if co-creation is held during the day?</li> <li>Why were co-creation processes promoted through a social media campaign, i.e. was co-creation promoted to obtain a reputational advantage and publicity?</li> </ul>
<i>Agency-scene</i> ( <i>pragmatism + materialism</i> )	Analysing <i>how</i> co-creation is enacted by looking at the scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How long did the scene last, i.e. are co-creation processes ad hoc single events?</li> <li>How did public managers follow up after engaging citizens and stakeholders?</li> <li>How were co-creation processes organized? For example, if they were digital, was the digital divide considered? If they were physical, were poorer neighbours considered?</li> </ul>
<i>Agent-scene</i> ( <i>idealism + materialism</i> )	Analysing <i>who</i> is enacting co-creation by looking at the scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who were the co-creators? What were the relationships during the co-creation meetings between public managers, politicians, stakeholders and simple citizens, i.e. were they lay citizens or representatives of civil society organizations or private companies?</li> <li>What type of public organization initiated the process of co-creation, i.e. did only the best-performing public organizations enact co-creation?</li> </ul>
<i>Act-scene</i> ( <i>realism + materialism</i> )	Understanding <i>what</i> is enacted through co-creation by looking at the scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What constituted the act of co-creation, i.e. did co-creation occur in two-way phone call or in a formal assembly meeting?</li> <li>What was the result of co-creation?</li> <li>What knowledge, resources, capabilities, and ideas were generated, i.e. if we are speaking about intangible assets and social/relational capital, is it really possible to measure performance of co-creation in the short term?</li> </ul>

assumption in co-creation is often that of a homogenous 'public' ready to innovate, while the material reality is of multiple publics: for example what is the role of minorities and/or of the poorer in co-creation processes? In this respect, identifying, designing and visualizing publics (Sancino et al., 2021) through a material perspective could contribute to a better grasp of who, where and in what circumstances co-creation is enacted and its effects, both in terms of surplus value or disvalue.

Finally, it is important to remember that co-creation introduces fundamental organizational changes that need to be managed (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006) and high democratic stakes which deal with 'a more intricate notion of citizenship' (Alford, 1998, p. 135), with co-creation and co-production as part of modern 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship. As Ansell and Torfing (2021) argued, co-creation can be a new paradigm of public administration and rejuvenate democracy. However, we believe the devil is in the details (Pestoff, 2018): for example, romanticizing and making co-creation a discourse out of the ordinary operations, rather than a material transformation of everyday public administration, may undermine its transformative potential. If we really want to make co-creation as a new paradigm of public administration, we need to go critically at the roots of this contemporary public management practice, even questioning its suitability as a tokenistic, symbolic, fashionable, discursive and a merely reputational process.

To avoid a romantic and rhetorical take on co-creation, there are several material actions that can be implemented. For example, each public organization could keep a register of all the co-creation processes activated and accurately describe for each process the material relations and settings of the scene. Furthermore, every public manager, policy-maker and professional involved in designing, managing, monitoring and assessing co-creation processes could use a material perspective to critically analyse and reflect on dynamics of 'Appreciate–Engage–Facilitate' for value creation in public service ecosystems (see on this Osborne, Powell, et al., 2021). Citizens, watchdogs and civil society organizations, too, can monitor and co-assess from a material perspective the features and the effects of public value co-creation processes. More than idealism and mysticism, we need a material understanding to take seriously and institutionalize co-creation into the mission of public organizations and into the everyday work of public managers.

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