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Public management and policing: a dialectical inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The study of policing offers rich opportunities to test and refine the boundaries of key concepts and theories of public management, yet it is neglected in public management discourse. In this essay, we strike up a conversation between public management and policing studies, arguing that, through this dialectical inquiry, concepts and theories in both fields can be reviewed and improved. We explore areas with particular potential for cross-fertilization: basic rationales used in public management; the saliency of state authority and legitimacy in policing; questions of public value creation (or destruction); and dilemmas of pursuing equity.

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Introduction

This essay is a dialectical enquiry to stimulate further theory-building, theory use and the sharing of insights from empirical research between the fields of policing and public management, as they have much to offer each other. Although policing can, in conceptual terms, be considered a public service like any other studied in public management, we observe that policing has been overlooked as a topic of systematic public management research, such that policing and public management studies have co-existed alongside each other without fully exploiting the potential for mutual learning and gaining insights from each other's experience. In this essay, we aim to remedy that by striking up a conversation between scholarship in the two fields of public management and policing. We demonstrate that, through this dialectical inquiry, key theoretical and conceptual approaches in each field can be tested, reviewed and improved.

While policing has been relatively neglected by public management, it has, almost by stealth, informed the development of several of public management's key concepts. Coproduction (Ostrom, et al., 1978); organizational socialization (van Maanen and Schein, 1979); public value (Moore, 1995); representative bureaucracy (Meier and Nicholson-Crotty, 2006); and public service legitimacy through social media (Meijer

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and Thaens, 2013) either had their origins or were substantially developed through studies of policing. However, the expansion of the extended welfare state after the Second World War has drawn more students of public management into the analysis of such services as social services, local government, education, housing, health and the environment, while policing has not been seen as part of the same family of ‘service’ functions. Policing has been mostly unrecognized as an object of public management study, so that the index of many public management textbooks will include various services but not ‘police’ or ‘policing’.

However, interest in the intersection of public management and policing concepts is now growing, gaining attention from policymakers, practitioners and scholars (Morrell and Bradford, 2018, Williams, et al., 2021). In part, this new interest reflects changes in policing and how it is perceived in public discourse (Quick, 2022). Policing is increasingly visible – and contested – as a core function of government. Maintaining public safety and security is a fundamental constitutive element of modern statehood, whether in a liberal democracy or an authoritarian state. Through political processes of ‘securitization’, concerns for public order and safety have made inroads into many national and international fields of public policy such as migration, public health, social services, environmental protection, energy supply and infrastructure safety. On top of that, domestic security threats emerging from transnational terrorism, violent radicalization and cybercrime have placed policing issues high on the political agenda. At the same time, policing practices as well as police organizations and their workforces have come under pressure from austerity measures, political opposition and social conflicts, particularly in increasingly fragmented and polarized societies.

Like policing, public management is a heterogeneous field and not easy to delineate (Ricucci, 2010). Policing and public management share some foundations in their mutual origins in the social sciences and continuing connection as fields of professional practice – yet they tend to be housed in separate academic departments and degree programmes, journals, research funding streams and professional societies (Manning, 2005), with distinctively different research questions and preferred theories. By adopting a dialectical inquiry approach to the intersections of public management and policing studies, we aim to indicate paths to generate fresh insights for improving and advancing both public management and policing theories and practices. The Platonic notion of dialectical inquiry is an intentional effort to connect two unrelated fields of inquiry, by recognizing their respective structures – their foundational premises, theoretical frameworks, concepts, tools and spaces of inquiry – and exploring how, if at all, they may be reconciled (Gill, 2020, Larsen, et al., 2022) in such a way as to generate novel, and potentially superior, syntheses (Ongaro, 2020). One approach to dialectical inquiry is to apply theories from one field to the typical empirical settings of interest to the other and to assess whether the concepts or assumptions align with, enrich, are inadequate or are misfitted to the other. Ideally, such exercises illuminate opportunities to advance theories within each respective field.

When reflecting about the relationship and dialogue between public management and policing, we also realize that these fields of inquiry can be traced back to common roots. The common stem of the words *politics*, *policy*, *polity* and *police* points to how essential the policing service is to the very constitution of a political community. All these terms stem from ‘polis’, an ancient Greek term for ‘city’ that later took on the meaning of the body of citizens under a city’s jurisdiction. What is more, the essential proximity of the ‘police’ to ‘polis’ and subsequently to ‘polity’ and ‘politics’ serves as

a strong reminder to every scholar in this interdisciplinary research field of how tightly ‘policing’ (and the administration and management thereof) is enmeshed with the characteristics of the institutional, social and political contexts, i.e. the type of ‘polis’, political systems and power relations in which policing and public management operate. In fact, the management, instruments and outcomes of policing appear to be highly sensitive to country-specific cultural and political environments, given their proximity to the nature of state authority. We are aware of the immense potential of and need for genuinely comparative research perspectives across different contexts. Given the equally immense challenges, however, to do justice to specific contexts of policing across geographies, scales and time, we confine our dialectical inquiry, unless otherwise noted, to fundamental theoretical and empirical observations that appear to be relevant to policing and public management in a range of social and political habitats. Our analysis, of course, reflects the discourse on public management and policing as shaped by scholarship moulded in the tradition of Western, liberal democracies.

In this essay, we explore five potential areas in which policing as an object of study can contribute to advancing public management theories and where public management theorizing can be beneficial to the field of policing. First, policing helps us to problematize certain rationales we frequently use in public management. Second, the practices of policing foreground broader issues relating to establishing, reinforcing or undermining the authority of government(s). Third, insofar as policing is one area where the use of force by government is explicit and contested, policing brings to the fore fundamental issues of legitimacy of public institutions and helps to foreground questions about the use of coercive power in other facets of government where the use of force is subtler yet still salient. Fourth, debates about whether, why and how policing should be implemented exemplify how ‘public value’ is contested across different points of view. Finally, policing illustrates fine points within the conflicts of pursuing equity and justice through government actions. In the following pages, we explore each of these tensions in turn, demonstrating how problematizing policing serves as a magnifying glass to render visible comparable dynamics in other governance domains. We also indicate some limitations and opportunities for improving public management theories through considering the implications of how they do – or do not – apply to policing.

Problematizing rationales of public management

Taking policing as an object of theorizing about public management stimulates an evaluation of the adequacy or inadequacy of rationales that implicitly or explicitly underpin much scholarly effort to explain and evaluate government activities. Examining the applicability of these rationales to the study and practice of policing has an eye-opening effect on the study of public management across other areas of government action, thus highlighting different aspects of public service delivery.

We refer to three fundamental forms of social coordination – hierarchies, markets and communities – as navigating tools (Ouchi, 1980, Peters, 2001, Schröter, 2007) for this exploration. Borrowing from cultural theory approaches in anthropology (Douglas, 1982) and their application to public management, we distinguish three rationales aligned with Hood’s (1998) delineation of ‘hierarchist’, ‘individualist’ and ‘egalitarianist’ approaches to public management. These rationales are neither mutually exclusive nor prescriptive: in public management and policing practice, we

find mixed approaches containing elements from different rationales, reflecting contextual factors including cultural settings, power relations or the specific task at hand.

Hierarchist, etatist-bureaucratic rationale

This rationale of public management, in its purest form, expresses hierarchical state–society relations based on state authority and the responsibility of public bureaucracies to serve as guardians of the common weal. For policing, this means focusing attention on the role of public bureaucracies, embedded in the rule of law, as principal providers of public safety and security, representing the authority of the state and enjoying (other than in countries with civil war or the existence of militias) a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force, thereby signalling the coercive power of state authority. This ideal-typical description may remind readers of traditional rule-based and hierarchical forms of public management in the mould of Weberian bureaucracies. Linking policing to legal-rational rule, policing places strong emphasis on equal treatment before the law, due process and procedural justice governed by a complex set of rules and regulations. This sets public service provision in the frame of state–citizen (rather than state–customer) interactions. In liberal democracies, this corresponds with institutions of representative democracy which provide ‘input legitimacy’ to the politico-administrative system of policymaking, through upholding citizens’ rights and constitutionally enshrined political voice (Hirschman, 1970) as voters, interest group members or protesters. Given its reliance on government bureaucracies, this rationale for policing runs inherent risks of government failure, overload and ungovernability.

Viewing policing through the etatist-bureaucratic rationale of public management brings purchase to theorizing government action in other areas along similar lines. Policing’s proximity to the coercive and obligatory elements of the state illuminates that recipients or targets of government action are primarily ‘citizens’, ‘obligates’ or even ‘subjects’, and such obligatory elements do impact other fields of government – in education, through requirements that children attend school; in environmental management or urban planning, through constraints on permitted land uses; in public health, through mandated vaccination – but typically the ‘obligate’ or ‘subject’ dimension is subtler and considered exceptional rather than constitutive to that area of government service. The study of policing thus serves as an exposé for the study of government service delivery across policy domains by reminding us of the iron fist that is sometimes covered up by the velvet glove of ‘serving’ the public.

In the other direction, the effort to overlay a public management rationale onto policing also provides potential insights for policing studies, namely that etatist-bureaucratic logics do not capture all police functions. Policing functions can include services that are essentially marketable, so they could belong to the realm of welfare services or the market (such as educating people in road safety, social media use, safe homes, etc.), while other services are community-oriented (like neighbourhood watch, etc.), thereby illuminating the variety of functions encompassed within policing.

Individualist, market-driven rationale

This rationale of public management reflects an individual-centred perspective emphasizing market-type transactions to valorize managerial efficiency, a ‘customer’ orientation to the public, and strong elements of free choice by the individual.

According to this rationale, policing is seen as a service that could and should be provided through efficiently managed service organizations in accordance with established principles of private industries – including publicly owned entities which are encouraged to act like private sector organizations – driven by market-type incentives, customer-orientation and results-based performance management. This rationale is in line with tenets popularized under the rubric of the New Public Management. Seen from this angle, policing is ‘for sale’ in market or quasi-market environments which are believed to match supply and demand, allocate resources efficiently and unleash market forces to set financial incentive structures. The purchasing power of private homeowners, business districts or corporations to pay for more police officers, advanced surveillance technology or private security guards gives customers a position of influence. The market-driven rationale draws our attention to the significant role played by private, for-profit policing (e.g. Rowe, 2020), the position of influence of ‘customers’, the need for the efficient management of resources in police authorities and the merits of extending and deepening performance management. These can have value in some policing settings, such as care of victims and survivors or family liaison work, though other considerations will also apply. However, the emphasis on market-type transactions is the Achilles heel of this paradigm, which carries the risk of both market failure and the undermining of democratic principles of legitimacy through market exchange rather than voting power.

Insights from policing viewed through the market-driven rationale advance public management theory by illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of adopting concepts and practices from the private sector with its focus on market-driven approaches, through for example New Public Management (Hood, 1991) and/or service-dominant logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006, Grönroos, 2019). Osborne and colleagues have critiqued, developed and refined service dominant logic into public service logic to address public services (e.g. Osborne et al., 2016; Osborne et al., 2022), which represents a considerable step forward in recognizing that services are different from products. Service-dominant logic is not generalizable to the full range of government and public service activities because a key problem lies in the concept of ‘customers’. As Osborne and colleagues (2022, 637) note, ‘not all public service users are willing. They can be coerced (prison inmates), mandated (schoolchildren) and/or unaware (adults with dementia/schizophrenia)’.

The study of policing helps develop this analysis further. While the assumption of voluntary agency in co-production and co-creation applies to some police services – protecting threatened individuals from harm, supporting survivors, investigating a crime on behalf of the victim or taking distressed people to a place of safety – it does not resonate well with the entirety of policing practices. Targets of many police actions – individuals under investigation or stopped at border crossings – do not want the ‘service’ and contradict the concept of voluntary co-production. Contrary to the market-driven ideal type of customers possessing full information and making choices accordingly, targets of surveillance or counter-terrorism activities may be unaware they are ‘customers’. As policing is implemented towards multiple, less defined ‘publics’, the ‘service’ recipients bring diverse expectations, interests and values (Williams, et al., 2016a), yet cannot choose among the types of customer-responsive policing they would prefer. Policing is not a market condition in which recipients can replace or return the product/service, and in some egregious cases they may suffer irreparable harm.

Alford (2016) notes a crucial issue for public services, in contrast to private, market services, which is that demand comes not from willingness to pay but from unwillingness to co-produce. Police officers and staff are intimately familiar with this dilemma, which could fuel interesting research avenues in public services for the future. Furthermore, there is a need to develop the public service logic to view public services not only in terms of benefits (or losses) to the individual receiver of a service (who gains private value), but also to the different interest groups within wider society (the assessment of public value) and in terms of the conflicts and tensions which can arise over public value appropriation by different groups. Alford (2016) and Sønderskov and Rønning (2021) have analysed these issues using police as a case. These insights from policing can be applied to other public services.

Egalitarian, community-oriented rationale

The foundation of this rationale is that individuals have some shared identity, sense of belonging and meaningful social bonds as mutual members of a community and are motivated by a sense of loyalty and interest in what benefits the community. In this context, egalitarian refers to a participatory approach without much hierarchical role differentiation. Empowerment strategies and highly discursive styles are manifestations of this rationale in public management. Communitarian notions of policing evoke images of socially cohesive (self-help) groups, voluntary staff members, neighbourhood associations or community residents who work together to self-police and promote safety in service to their own values, norms or interests (Correia, 2000). This rationale undergirds notions of ‘community-oriented policing’ that encourage police officers to build relationships with and to be responsive to community values (Brogden and Nijhar, 2013); initiatives to improve the demographic profile of police organizations to be reflective of the communities they serve (Wright and Headley, 2020); and cross-sector, coproductive models of public safety involving collaboration among police and other public, business or non-profit partners to intervene in poverty, misogyny, inter-group conflict and other stressors correlated with safety issues (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2020).

The weakness of this rationale for policing is that the focus on group rights and (at least partially) autonomous communities may create inherent tensions between individuals and collectives, as well as between different communities that claim jurisdiction over a certain territory or social group (Sklansky, 2022). Policing therefore throws into relief the existence of different stakeholders with different interests in a pluralist society, which reminds us of the importance of politics in public management. This contrasts with the sometimes technocratic and unitarist approach to solving societal problems that has been evidenced in some (but not all) of the public management literature.

Using the community-driven rationale to interpret policing alerts us to aspects of government action that are often blind spots when viewed through etatist-bureaucratic or market-driven rationales. Movements embracing informal policing through social control, volunteers or amateurs challenge the belief – asserted by both etatist-bureaucratic and market-driven approaches – that ‘professionals always know best’. The communitarian view elevates the recognition of social groups and ties between community members aside from and beyond legal definitions of formal citizenship and civic responsibility. At the same time, a community-driven rationale applied to

policing highlights a number of challenging issues. The diversity and plurality of communities (or multiple publics; Asen 2003) underline the complexities of pursuing equity in the creation and protection of public order and safety, an issue discussed further below: how is public order to be reconciled with the diversity of community-based values and norms in increasingly fragmented societies? Also, co-productive approaches, including engaging private actors in security, can lead to negative, ‘co-contaminating’ effects of perpetuating undesirable biases across multiple sectors (Williams, et al., 2016b). A communitarian, participatory rationale for policing seems premised on an inappropriate or at least outdated assumption of serving relatively homogenous and socially cohesive communities. Upholding community values among a plurality of publics is unlikely to be fully compatible with democratic principles of equal treatment before the law for everyone.

State authority and public management

The study of policing is an entry point to investigate fundamental questions in public management relating to authority, power and legitimacy. Each of these three concepts is central to public management, yet often overlooked if not outright expunged from core discussions. Policing can provide an advantageous lens from which to revisit the significance for public management theory and practice of these three concepts.

As regards authority, the police, in principle, possess state authority to use coercive (including lethal at times) physical force against its own citizens and residents. Weber ([1919] 1946) argued that a well-functioning government should be unique in its claim on coercive power, providing the state with a monopoly on the justified use of physical force. The relinquishing of the sanctioned use of force by citizens to confer it on the state is a ‘price’ paid by citizens to ensure the protection of one’s own life and property, which, the political philosophical argument goes, only the state monopoly of the use of force can ensure, although oppressive states may use the monopoly of force to stymie even the least dissent and even dominate the ‘body’ of citizens – which leads us into biopolitics (Foucault, [1976] 1998). This political-philosophical principle requires major qualifications empirically. Across the world very different forms of such monopoly of the use of force can be detected, as witnessed by the gulf existing between those countries which strictly limit the diffusion and use of weapons by residents and those countries where weapons are widespread among the population. The right to self-defence by the individual, notably by use of weapons, has very different legal and practical applications for policing in individual jurisdictions internationally and is perhaps insufficiently studied in either policing or in public management. Different jurisdictions also regulate very differently the use of private police (for the safeguarding of banks, private property and the like), thereby introducing another degree of differentiation internationally. However, a distinctive trait of all functioning states (that is, which are not ‘failed states’) lies in the authority to hold the ultimate monopoly to implement or permit the use of force.

Policing is quintessentially about power because it can include the use of force and coercion as well as the persuasive and negotiating aspects of protection of safety and law enforcement. Policing may exercise the direct and/or physical use of power (Dahl, 1957, Weber, 1978) to compel a driver to stop or to arrest someone, but power can also be exercised through influence on cognitive patterns and behaviours, including through the governmentality dimensions (Lukes, 1973, Foucault, 1980, 1991, 2007)

of citizens' self-policing of their thoughts and actions or vigilantism towards the acceptability of others' behaviours. These additional dimensions of power are further reminders of the significance of considering politics and power, and their inextricable entanglement, in public management.

The state's unique authority to utilize sanctioned coercive power is the logic for the creation and arming of national militaries for international conflict or defence, but in democratic polities the use of force internally against one's own residents is usually treated as an undesirable, exceptional case, legally allowed only under certain exigencies. Policing allows us to interrogate whether such within-state use of force is truly exceptional, illuminating the functioning and dynamics of other government activities which also use coercive elements (e.g. a psychiatrist committing a patient to some period of involuntary institutionalization, courts jailing convicted offenders, immigration authorities expelling certain non-citizens). Like Goffman's (1961) observation that the characteristics of asylums are present in a broad array of 'total institutions', theorizations of the use of coercive power in policing may draw into relief dynamics in other areas of government activity where power is less physical, yet also salient. The study of policing's intimate connection with state authority and the use of force might illuminate the types and extents of uses of coercive power embedded into practices occurring in other fields of public services management, such as truancy officers' compelling participation in primary education, environmental regulators' prohibiting manufacturers from using certain chemicals, social workers' monitoring parents treatment of children or public health authorities' imposing lockdowns during pandemics.

Legitimacy of public institutions and public management

Dealing with issues of authority and power begets questions about the legitimacy of public governance: what makes the political system be perceived as 'just' so that its members are willing to cede control over the use of force and resources to the state and entrust it with their own lives, sometimes literally? As Manning (2005, 23) asserted, 'The police are legitimate, bureaucratically articulated organizations that stand ready to use force to sustain political order'. Policing's agency in maintaining that order – for example, the balance they strike of protecting government property and/or of protecting residents' right to assemble and protest on that property – is a double-edged sword, illuminating the contest and conflict found in all governance.

Legitimacy can be seen as a foundation of authority. Legitimacy concerns the political philosophical question of what justifies a political order and makes it just, thereby 'giving reasons' to its members to value it (Bird, 2006). Legitimacy is therefore concerned with gaining the consent of the members to the very foundation of the polity under consideration and, relatedly, with being able to command loyalty to the political system from its participants (Ongaro, 2020), thus also enabling state institutions to exercise authority and ideally to be seen as legitimately authoritative by their citizens. However, legitimacy should not be seen only in a static way, as if it were given, or withdrawn, permanently. Rather, it is a process and, when conceived of dynamically, can be spoken of as 'legitimation', as a continual process. Policing is crucial in the dynamics of this legitimation of public institutions. There is an expression in policing, based on Locard's exchange principle that 'every contact leaves a trace', originally referring to fingerprints, hair or soil (Horswell and Fowler, 2004). In a parallel fashion, we argue that 'every contact' by citizens and residents of a jurisdiction with the police

leaves a trace also on the (de-)legitimation processes of public institutions. While this applies in a quite specific way for policing, we would further argue that this may happen for many, if not all, public services through the ways in which they are managed. Intellectual inquiries in the field of public management may have focussed the attention much more on the problem of how public services help citizens (to address a certain need or sets of needs) than on how contact with the service shapes perception and beliefs about fairness and legitimacy of public institutions. Bringing the study of policing into public management may therefore enable us to develop frames and theories about the interlink between the management of public services and processes of legitimation.

A significant question is whether legitimacy applies only to the political system as an indivisible whole (e.g. when claiming a liberal-democratic regime is legitimate *per se*, when a dictatorship is not), or whether we may consider that specific public governance and administrative arrangements within the political system can be analytically distinguished such that it is possible to consider the legitimacy of certain institutions. In other words, is it possible to apply the notion of legitimacy to policing specifically by 'bracketing' the issue of whether the broader political system is legitimate or not?

To address this question, we provide a qualified answer. On one hand, we would argue that the legitimacy of specific institutions and administrative systems (like those of policing) ultimately are not disconnected from the legitimacy of a political system. On the other hand, we complement the previous statement by arguing that it is possible *analytically*, for purposes of knowledge generation, to distinguish and focus the legitimacy of specific institutions, governance arrangements and practices. Thus, two police forces operating within two jurisdictions which are both authoritarian regimes may perform differently in terms of both extent of respect of human rights and efficacy in tackling crime and enjoy as a result different degrees of legitimacy, even if both police forces are subservient to an ultimately non-liberal democratic regime. Analogously, two police forces within a liberal democracy may perform very differently in terms of respect of civil rights and effectiveness in addressing crime issues, and therefore enjoy different degrees of legitimacy, even if both operate in a political system which in principle upholds human rights and enables the people to have a say in how they are governed. The field of policing is, among public services, especially amenable to being singled out for focusing issues of legitimation as a dynamically unfolding process in pluralist societies. Research in this area may bring to the surface important questions of values for society about diversity, equity and inclusion which compound the notion of legitimacy. It is to these questions that we now turn.

Policing, contested public value and the plurality of publics

Public value is a concept which has gained increasing traction in public management over the last two decades and is a topic of lively debate currently in the field (O'Flynn, 2021, Bryson et al., 2014, Benington 2011). We explore here, in both theoretical and empirical terms, how policing has influenced and can further contribute to understanding public value, in ways which provide insights for public management more widely.

We begin by clarifying the concept of public value. There are varied definitions and conceptualizations of public value, summarized by Bryson and colleagues (2014) and Hartley and colleagues (2019a). Here, we focus on the increasingly dominant

approaches of Moore (1995), the seminal writer on public value, and Benington (2011, 2015). Both of their approaches are concerned with seeking ways of identifying the value created for society by the efforts of public organizations, their partners and other actors in business or non-profit sectors and in civil society. Moore (1995) focused on the value created by government and other public organizations through strategic management of purpose, legitimacy and operational resources (the strategic triangle), and subsequently expanded to include other actors (e.g. Geuijen, et al., 2017). Benington (2011) extended the conceptualization of public value by identifying two interlinked dimensions: one focused on inputs from different publics ('what does the public most value in this particular context?') and one focused on outcomes for society ('what adds most value to the public sphere?').

Policing has been notably prominent in the evolution of the concept of public value. Moore had researched police in the USA in several publications well before he turned to consider public managers more generally, and his books about public value contain case studies of policing (Moore, 1995, 2013, Moore and Braga, 2003). Benington's (2011, 2015) subsequent development of the concept was based in part on his detailed analysis of public value creation in the policing of the often-violent demonstrations in Drumcree, Northern Ireland (Benington and Turbitt, 2007). Hartley and colleagues (2019b) analysed the policing of rural crime from a public value perspective, while Meijer and Thaens (2021) use policing to illustrate public value loss.

Given that policing research and theorizing has had such a large impact on public value, what further insights can be gleaned? Some police work illustrates how Benington's (2011) dimensions of public value inputs and outcomes can be in tension with each other, in that different publics may express different interests and perspectives on what is valuable (e.g. criminals versus victims or taxpayers) or disagree over what actions most add value to the public sphere through the protection of minority and future generations' interests. Divergent valuations of the policing of societal matters – relating to keeping public order, tackling crime, protecting vulnerable people from harm or tackling domestic abuse – bring into sharp focus the fact that there rarely is a single public, but rather many publics distinguished by different values and interests. Policing is one of the most palpable reminders that there is unlikely to be a single answer to the question of how value is to be created or sustained on any given issue, demonstrating the utility of the pluralist conceptualization of public value in contrast to more singular views of 'the public interest' or 'the common good'.

Due to these multiple publics and their diverse interests, Benington (2015) conceptualized public value as a 'contested democratic practice', arguing that decisions about actions to create public value need to be set within democratic processes if such varied views are to be heard, recognized, 'held', explored and to some extent resolved or at least addressed for the benefit of society. Viewing public value as a contested practice sets both policing and public management choices in the context of politics and power rather than assuming bureaucratic rationality alone. Public management studies have tended to assume the separation of politics from management so that managers could manage without political 'interference'; as mentioned, the 'New Public Management' framework asserted management could be rational and technocratic and often assumed a unitarist conception of society with a singular 'public interest'. However, policing studies often raise questions about whose interests are being served, in what ways and with what degree of legality, legitimacy, proportionality and fairness as the police interact with various publics. Again, such studies foreground more clearly

that all public management is entangled to a degree with politics and power. Bowling et al., (2019, 15) note that ‘policing is inherently and inescapably a political activity’, but studies of policing beg the question of whether this might be said of all government activities. This is not often noted explicitly in the public management field, though Gray and Jenkins (1995, 76) remind us that ‘it is important to recognize that neither the study nor practice of public administration or public management can be divorced from politics’. A public value perspective on policing serves as a reminder of the pluralist nature of many societies and a broader undercurrent of dynamic tensions and contestation in other areas of governance.

Benington’s (2011) emphasis on the second dimension of public value – contribution to the public sphere – takes the concept away from its original focus on public managers and allows for other actors who may contribute to the creation or loss of public value (Alford et al. 2017). The public sphere is not co-terminus with the state, and ability to distinguish between the two is perhaps part of the reason why some police activities are seen to be too aligned with the state rather than society in some jurisdictions. On the other hand, the spread of policing and security services outside of the public sector – the increasing visibility of private security guards and surveillance technologies in private and public spaces (Davis, 2006) as well the practice of private entities hiring police officers to police their spaces (sports venues, grocery stores or hospitals) – has been met by some concern (Loyens, 2009, Diphooorn, 2015, van Steden, et al., 2015). Those concerns in part reflect an anxiety that these private actors are strongly implicated in public value creation or loss yet are not subject to the same public oversight as traditional police forces. Policing thus highlights the significance of a public value framework for considering the public impacts and accountabilities of actors across multiple sectors.

The public value perspective places emphasis not only on activities but also on outcomes for society and contributions to the public sphere in terms of the preventative as well as ameliorative or distributive work of government. An example is the shifting stance in policing in the UK from reactive crime fighting to proactively addressing threat, risk and harm, for example from terrorism, international human trafficking and cyber fraud. Measuring and assessing preventive work is a challenge, and methodological and conceptual frameworks for doing so in policing could provide insights for preventive government activity in other policy areas, from climate change to pandemic prevention.

While public value initially focussed on what was created by way of public value, more recently attention has turned to considering the loss, waste or displacement of public value (Esposito and Ricci, 2015, Meijer and Thaens, 2021). Policing can illustrate and analyse many of these processes. If police activity is not legal, fair or proportionate it can easily lead to a loss of confidence by citizens and residents in the police. Some coercive action by police can harm citizens if not carried out correctly (e.g. deaths in custody, inadequate protection for women and girls against sexual violence). Some police activity may create public value in one geographical area but displace it to other areas (e.g. cracking down on drug gangs which then re-emerge elsewhere). There is much for other public services to learn about public value creation and loss through the analysis of policing, given its role as ‘the thin blue line’ between order and disorder in society.

Finally, the public value framework also encourages public managers to listen to minority voices where they aim or claim to act on behalf of the benefit of society.

Policing studies analyse civil protestors as well as service recipients and those at the margins of society as well as those central to it as police try to balance safety and human rights of expression (Lipp, 2015). Studies of policing also show how a public value framework raises important questions about the dynamics of publics with unequal capacities to press their values, aims and interests on behalf of society. These differences draw attention to normative values embedded in a society such as sustainability, transparency, fairness and equity, the subject of our next section.

Policing as a focal lens on equity in public management

The literature we have described documents divergent desires and experiences of police encounters, desires for protection and definitions of safety. These differences make visible the gendered, racialized and heteronormative nature of the public sphere, as manifested not only by a plurality of publics but also by inequity in experiences of government and inclusion in the body politic. For example, a case study of rural crime in the United Kingdom found that police could not address the crime purely through implementation of the law and instead had to work at creating a public out of disparate different stakeholders, some of whom had wanted to take the law into their own hands (Hartley, et al., 2019b). That study resonates with political philosophers' scholarship on the democratic ideal of open discourse and constructive debate among individuals or groups with equally strong but different views (Dewey 1927, Habermas 1962). But the disruptive energy and tone of some current street mobilizations against policing bias make clear that, within formal government decision-making structures, equal voice, freedom from intimidation and access to all to participate are difficult to realize, conditions Young (2000) proposes as the best opportunity for a group to define justice and create just policies.

The premise of policing is that it is a force for justice or at the very least that it upholds the natural justice principles of fair treatment, absence of bias and due process. But interest around the world in procedural justice as a way to improve police legitimacy and trust (e.g. Hinds and Murphy, 2007, Woo, et al., 2018, Kutnjak Ivković, et al., 2020) reflects anxieties about whether police can be trusted to be fair. In the recent past, Gooden (2014) pointed out that race is a 'nervous area of government', at least in countries such as the United States, while Myers (2014: x) decried the 'relative absence of discourse on race and racism within the scholarly public administration field'. That is changing quite rapidly, and we posit that rising attention to policing specifically is disproportionately responsible for turning the tide of public management scholarship more broadly. Race and racism are topics that public management practitioners and scholars may no longer continue to skirt around (Blessett, et al., 2019, Berry-James et al., 2021, McCandless, et al., 2022, Pandey et al., 2022), uncomfortable though it may be to admit that public management is 'culpable in creating and maintaining racist, white supremacist policies and institutions' (McCandless and Blessett, 2022, 91).

The globalization of the Black Lives Matter movement beyond the United States (de Genova, 2018, Vicera, 2022, Daozhi, 2022) is not just a matter of citizens around the world being emboldened to protest police and security violence in their own countries, but also of being led by the attention to racialized police brutality to look to other manifestations of inequity in public management in their environments. Interrogating policing is a kind of focal lens

for appraising government as a dynamic force with potential to promote equality and/or oppression. This focal lens is also being applied to the treatment of violence against women and girls. Equity – fairness in the distribution of goods and burdens – is an ‘enduring value of community life’, yet the paradox of defining what is fair is a similarly enduring problem in political decision-making (Stone, 2012, 14).

We observe that police wear many hats and face tremendous challenges in addressing a complex and growing multitude of safety needs, including the provision of basic welfare services or protecting citizens in danger. At the same time, we also observe that police are sometimes implicated in instances of what we would normatively judge to be bad public management. For example, police who violently oppress residents protesting the injustice of governments that are corrupt, tyrannical or exacerbating inequality (Muñoz and Pappier, 2020) can be considered agents of ‘administrative evil’ through their illegitimate use of force or their failure to uphold principles of social equity (McCandless et al., 2022).

Unease over such police behaviour foregrounds questions about what public managers – police and others involved in other aspects of security and stability – are protecting, in reflection or pursuit of whose interests, and at whose costs. Public debates over whether policing practices improve safety or instead make some people and places less safe illuminate the inequalities that underline divisions into multiple, sometimes competing, publics. Even as ‘safety’ is taken as a universal public good, there is no singular definition or shared desire for safety. For some it may mean an absence of violent crime in public spaces, for others the protection of the right to express political views non-violently without retaliation, or for others an absence of a hostile gaze of a state that profiles whole categories of people as unsafe. Intense struggle between those in the privileged position to assume that what is good for them is good for everyone versus those asserting that the status quo of state security subjects them to multiple forms of violence seems to not only reflect but also exacerbate social cleavages and political polarization over ownership and governance of the public sphere. Those unhappy with the status quo of policing practice may want hasty, radical change and are unhappy with efforts to ‘reform’ policing, which they deride as too little, too late and too slow. It is a contemporary example of continuing tensions between the incrementalist approach of bureaucracy and other forces for change (Lindblom, 1959).

Policy feedback theories trace the influence of individuals’ experiences of policy implementation on their sense of their position in society – whether they belong, their political enfranchisement, their rights and their responsibilities. Policies that provide expansive benefits, such as financial assistance to veterans to purchase homes (Mettler, 2002), make residents feel ‘deserving and entitled’ (Schneider and Ingram, 2005). In contrast, demeaning or disciplinary experiences, such as having to demonstrate repeatedly that one is seeking employment to continue accessing welfare benefits for low-income people, alienate individuals from their governments (Soss, 2005). Whereas we are accustomed to viewing policy feedback within the context of the target recipient of the ‘service’ – an individual seeking public education, for example, receives the message that they are or are not deserving of public education – the field of public safety forces the questions of entitlement, rights and privilege into a shared space. With or without consent and knowledge, all residents are dependent, yet unequally impacted, by policing choices made in any time in any place.

One need not be threatening public safety or looking for help from the police to be affected by the dynamics of police–constituent interactions. Non-violent members of some demographic groups are more likely, because of their appearance and identity to be stopped, questioned or treated aggressively by police, private security guards or border control agents. The unequalness of that material and subjective experience is being made patently clear by contemporary social movements and public policy debates. Policing makes visible how one’s experience of policy is often not a matter of proximate experience, but a function of being categorized as a member of a racial, religious, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability and/or age-based demographic group. The influence of policing behavior on whether individuals feel legitimate and safer as citizens of the state is an important counterpoint to our earlier discussion of how policing behaviors lead citizens to regard the state as legitimate, or not.

Concluding thoughts

The study of policing represents a field of inquiry that offers rich opportunities to test and refine the boundaries of key concepts and theories of public administration and management. In fact, policing as a public service provides us with a magnifying glass looking at core questions of modern statehood such as varied rationales of management, different sources of legitimacy, the creation or destruction of public value and the meaning of social equity.

Our dialectical inquiry has focused, after problematizing rationales of public management by applying them to policing, on four defining aspects of policing as a public service whose investigation may engender novel insights and knowledge for public management at large, on the other hand. Starting from the latter, defining aspects of policing of high significance for public management are, first, that policing is a prime example of a public service that subjects citizens to the authority of the state, in having state authority to use coercive (even lethal at times) physical force against its own citizens and residents. Second, this core feature of policing raises essential questions about power and legitimacy in public service provision, notably about the impact on legitimacy of public institutions in the eyes of citizens and residents as part and parcel of any analysis of public services. Third, policing is an inherently contested public service. Consequently, any police action and the results thereof will be judged and critically assessed differently by different segments of society; the degree to which public value might be created or diminished is likely to depend on the publics in question. Fourth, the study and practice of policing is intractably linked to value decisions about equity, justice and inclusion. Given the potential gravity of police interventions and their broad societal and political implications, which may go far beyond individual encounters between citizens and police officers, policing practices have a particularly strong impact on social equity and the inclusive or exclusive nature of modern societies.

The application of public management rationales to policing also sheds light for example, some core elements of rule-bound, hierarchical public management models embedded in the bureaucratic ideal-type may be useful for making sense of policing contexts: while often relegated to the dusty shelves of apparently outdated management principles, legal-rational authority and its corresponding organizational setting may just be an adequate rationale for studying the essence of police services in modern states. This finding is complemented by the consideration of the limitations that we

have found in rationales of public service delivery in contemporary public management: often embedded in market analogies of service delivery, approaches centred on the notion of ‘customer’ in ascendance under the rubric of the New Public Management appear to be less compatible with the field of policing, as they are mainly based on the assumption of voluntary agency on the part of customers or service users, an assumption which is mainly unfulfilled in policing.

Policing research can also be inspired and informed by the public management literature. While the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force lies with the executive apparatus of the state, policing, public order and public safety are neither solely the jurisdiction nor the product of government-authorized police. Market- and community- oriented notions of public management help us to identify a range of police services as well as police–society interactions that lie outside the realm of pure state authority and carry significant elements of user-orientation, customer relations and the involvement of non-profit and business entities. As we are reminded by participatory and solidarity-based approaches in public management, it is often specific communities and their members themselves who partake in establishing and maintaining a form of public order and safety in the first place. However, this group-based perspective of providing legitimacy to serve a particular public value is likely, particularly in increasingly fragmented or even polarized societies, to cause frictions with other communities or even society at large. This finding brings us back to the crucial role of state authority and legal-rational rule in maintaining public order and safety.

In sum, our dialectical inquiry has shown the extent to which analysing policing as a public service has an eye-opening effect on how several key concepts are used in public management. Serving as a prime example of a contested public service, policing also brings into the open how government action meant to create public value is almost bound to result in conflicting perceptions across different social groups, particularly when viewed through an equity lens. In more strongly articulating the discourses in policing and public management, we can utilize those insights for developing a research agenda which links concerns for managerial efficiency and effectiveness with broader questions about government authority, legitimacy, public value and social equity.

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