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Conflicts over public value within public service ecosystems: a strategic action field approach

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, strategic action field theory and public value theory are utilized to develop knowledge about conflicts over public value in public service ecosystems (PSEs), with disabled people's striving for independent living serving as an illustration. Five propositions are developed to show how conflicts in PSEs i) are centred around public value, ii) occur between incumbents and challengers, iii) implicate social skills, iv) are triggered by exogenous shocks, and v) eventually settle. This paper also responds to calls for research on theory building about PSEs by integrating public value with public service logic (PSL) and conceptualizing power in PSL.

Introduction

In a Norwegian TV documentary on disabled people's pursuit of independent living, which was aired by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (4 September 2019), the focus is on Bergljot, a psychologist who fell down a staircase, became paralysed, and is now wheelchair bound. Bergljot struggles with several public service organizations to receive personal assistance and adequate housing facilities. She is forced to live in a nursing home and is unable to work. Bergljot is supported by the independent living advocacy organization Uloba and eventually receives personal assistance. Uloba is a user organization and service provider that is active in national and international arenas as an enabler of disabled people to live free, independent lives. Accordingly, as a result of its approach, Uloba is often in sharp conflict with other actors who embrace a medical view of disability that highlights impairment and rehabilitation.

The struggles of Bergljot and Uloba to accomplish service provision that facilitates independent living represent a complex societal challenge that can be understood from the vantage point of public service ecosystems (PSEs). A PSE consists of different types

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of linked actors, such as citizens, public service organizations, interest organizations, advocacy groups, and private firms, that integrate resources with the goal of co-creating value for users (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022). The PSE concept has recently been developed within the research stream on public service logic (PSL), which places public service users, rather than public service organizations, at the centre of public service provision and value creation (Strokosch and Osborne 2020; Osborne 2021; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021).

Addressing complex societal challenges, such as accomplishing service provision that facilitates independent living for disabled people, also entails attention to public value. Public value is the value created for society as a whole and is commonly differentiated from private value, which benefits and is consumed by single individuals (Alford 2016; Ansell and Torfing 2021; Benington and Moore 2011). While prior research has suggested that attention to public value is essential for understanding actors' collective resource-integrating activities in PSEs (Eriksson et al. 2020; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022), the creation of public value remains opaque in prior research and thus requires further exploration (Osborne 2021).

Some of the literature on public value emphasizes conflict (e.g. Benington 2011, 2015; Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Bryson et al. 2017). In a key paper, Benington (2015) states that he elects to 'emphasise the potential conflicts of interest and ideology in the processes of public value creation' (31). A conflict arises when individual or collective actors have opposing values and interests that make them experience and understand a given situation or a phenomenon differently, thereby triggering them to engage in contradictory lines of action (Coser 1957; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). The idea that the creation of public value commonly implies conflicts is illustrated by our initial example, which is not a rare event but rather a representative one for disabled people striving for service provision that facilitates independent living (Bankel 2021; Evans 2003; Ratzka 2007). Accordingly, prior research suggests that conflicts over public value are significant features of PSEs (Eriksson et al. 2020; Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019). However, the few studies that have inquired deeply into conflicts within PSEs (e.g. Cui and Osborne 2022; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Trischler and Charles 2019) have not yet emphasized conflicts over public value, despite the call by Hartley et al. (2017) to study public value as a 'contested practice' among multiple stakeholders. *Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to develop a deeper understanding of conflicts over public value in PSEs.*

To achieve this aim, we review prior research on PSEs, with a focus on how conflicts and public value have been treated within the PSL literature. To sharpen the focus on public value in research on PSEs, we also engage with the literature that has assumed public value to be a 'contested democratic practice' (Benington 2011, 2015). We also draw on strategic action field (SAF) theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), which has been recommended by Bryson et al. (2017) as a method theory (Jaakkola 2020) for studying conflictual relationships among multiple intersecting public actors. Specifically, SAF theory foregrounds conflict as a significant feature of collective action and suggests that actors remain focused on intentional or strategic actions that aim to realize individual and collective interests by securing the cooperation of other actors.

We combine our reading of SAF theory, research on PSEs, and investigations into public value to develop knowledge about conflicts over public value within PSEs. To illustrate our course of conceptual knowledge development, we continue to refer to the

conflict between the actors who strive for service provision that facilitates independent living and those that adhere to a medical view of disability (Evans 2003; Ratzka 2007). We create a conceptualization of conflicts in PSEs in the form of five propositions, which emphasizes that such conflicts i) are centred around public value, ii) occur between incumbents and challengers, iii) implicate social skills, iv) are triggered by exogenous shocks, and v) eventually settle or turn covert. We also show how our paper responds to calls for research by Osborne (2021) and others (Petrescu 2019; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) concerning theory building about PSEs, the integration of notions of public value with PSL, and improvements in how power in PSL is understood. The findings also carry some practical implications that can assist in improving our understanding of conflicts in PSEs, why they emerge, and how public value can be created in their presence.

Literature review

In this section, we describe the core tenants of PSL and present prior research on PSEs and public value, with a particular focus on conflicts. We also explain why we chose the SAF theory as our method theory.

Public and private value co-creation

Osborne and colleagues (Strokosch and Osborne 2020; Osborne 2021; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi 2013) developed PSL to challenge the view held by adherents of Public Administration and New Public Management that public services and their value are produced within public sector organizations for users. By drawing on service marketing and management research (e.g. Grönroos and Voima 2013; Vargo and Lush 2016), PSL introduces public service users and citizens into the loci of service provision and value creation. According to PSL, it is not the public service organization but the service user who determines the value of service in use. Furthermore, value is perceived as co-created by resource-integrating actors and the service user is always included (Osborne 2021; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021). Recently, researchers have also shown how public service users may have conflicting perceptions of what constitutes value (Osborne 2021; Skarli 2021). These sources of conflict imply that value co-creation and value co-destruction (i.e. the diminishment of value) can coexist as outcomes of public service provision (Cui and Osborne 2022; Engen et al. 2021).

Service marketing and management researchers have primarily focused on the private sector and the individual or private value of actors. However, PSL, at least in its more recent development, has been specifically designed as a framework for *public* value creation and service provision through the incorporation of the notion of public value (Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021). Private value is consumed by and benefits single individuals, according to a market logic of rational calculation, self-interest, and purchasing power (Benington 2011; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007). Public value, by contrast, is consumed collectively by the citizenry and benefits society as a whole (Alford 2016; Ansell and Torfing 2021; Benington 2011, 2015; Moore 1995). While public value 'is partly analogous to public goods in the sense that it is usually available to all if to any . . . it is about more than goods, and can refer to a range of publicly beneficial outcomes' (Alford 2016, 680). Public value can and often

does facilitate value creation for single individuals, but it is not a stable entity. Rather, public value creation is commonly debated and created by multiple actors and groups who embrace opposing interests and values (Benington 2011; Hartley et al. 2017).

To address conflicts over public value, we draw in particular on the work of Benington (2011, 2015; see also Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Bryson et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2017), who views the creation of public value as marked by conflicts fuelled by tensions and debates over values, ideologies, and interests that are ongoing in a democratic society. According to Benington (2011), public value concerns both 'what the public values' and 'what adds value to the public sphere' (42). 'What the public values' denotes the value created by public service organizations and citizens via their direct interactions (Moore and Benington 2011). In contrast, 'what adds value to the public sphere' focuses ' . . . attention not just on individual interests but also on the wider public interest, and not just on the needs of current users but also on the long-term public good, including generations to come' (Benington 2011, 43). The concept of the 'public sphere' refers to a democratic space that is not the same as the state in which citizens address their collective concerns. As such, the public sphere is a source of public value conflict ' . . . because the public space is a contested territory, and there are many competing interests and ideologies' (Benington 2011, 43).

In addition, Benington (2011, 2015) argues that conflicts over public value emerge due to the tensions between 'what the public values' and 'what adds value to the public sphere'. For instance, in the example that opens this article, the initial refusals from the case workers of the public service organizations to grant Bergljot personal assistance to live an independent life were motivated by the argument that rehabilitation in a nursing home is more affordable. This indicates a conflict between the service provision facilitating the independent living that Bergljot, supported by the user organization and service provider Uloba, desires and the case workers' medical stance towards disability and their prioritization of long-term economic sustainability. Hence, tension arises as an effect of contradictory ideas about 'what the public values' and 'what adds value to the public sphere'. When Bergljot was eventually granted personal assistance, public and private value was co-created on the basis of the idea of independent living. Conceptualizations of conflicts over public value provide, according to Hartley et al. (2017), a fruitful avenue through which the tensions that arise between multiple interacting stakeholders can be understood. As a result, they can contribute to inform our understanding of PSEs, as addressed in the next section.

Public service ecosystems

Service marketing and management scholars have coined the term service ecosystems (Mustak and Plé 2020) to capture the fact that multiple types of actors are commonly involved in service provision and value creation. In this vein, Vargo and Lush (2016) have defined a service ecosystem as 'a relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange' (10–11). This definition draws on institutional theory (Scott 2013), which has also informed research on service ecosystems broadly defined (Mustak and Plé 2020) and suggests that value creation is enabled and constrained by macro-level institutions made up of values, norms, and rules.

Inspired by the discussion of service ecosystems, a body of research on PSEs has recently emerged within PSL. Our review of this emerging literature is summarized in

Table 1. Research on public service ecosystems.

Author(s) year	Focus of investigation	Theoretical foundation(s)	Context	Method(s)	Conceptualization of public value (PV) and conflicts over PV in PSEs
Eriksson (2019)	Representative co-production to support users' value cocreation	PSL and SDL	Healthcare	Interviews, observations, and statistical data	Suggests that conflicts over PV are a significant feature of PSEs. Does not focus on developing knowledge about conflicts over PV in PSEs.
Petrescu (2019)	Develop the concept of PSE in PSL	SDL and institutional theory	Theory (with illustrations)	Conceptual	Argues for studying PV from a systemic perspective. Does not focus on conflicts.
Trischler and Charles (2019)	Apply a service ecosystem lens to public policy	SDL and institutional theory	Theory	Conceptual	Argues for a system perspective to policy design. Conflicts are mentioned, but not emphasized, and PV is peripheral in the study.
Eriksson et al. (2020)	Coordinated value propositions and users' value creation	PSL and collaborative public management	Healthcare	Interviews, observations, and documents	Acknowledges how conflicting PVs between PSOs influence collaboration. The study does not contribute to a nuanced understanding of conflicts over PV in PSEs.
Engen et al. (2021)	Value codestruction in service ecosystems	PSL and value codestruction	Social insurance agency and the tax agency	Interviews	Contribute to the understanding of private value in the public context. Conflicts over PV are not emphasized.
Eriksson and Hellström (2021)	Resource integration in public systems	PSL and resource integration across sectors	Healthcare	Interviews, observations, diaries, and emotion maps	Contribute to the understanding of resource integrating activities in PSEs. Conflicts and PV are not emphasized.
Osborne et al. (2021)	Processes of value creation in public services	PSL and public administration and management	Theory	Conceptual	Contribute knowledge about how public and private value is created in PSEs. Do not focus on developing knowledge about conflicts over PV in PSEs.
Rossi and Tuurnas (2021)	Conflicts of value cocreation from a system perspective	PSL, SDL, complexity-informed approach, and conflict theory	Social welfare service	Interviews and case study	Contribute to knowledge on conflicts in PSEs. Do not focus on PV or how conflicts over PV occur in PSEs.
Trischler and Westman Trischler (2022)	Designing for users' experience at multiple levels	PSL, SDL, institutional theory, and service design	Theory	Conceptual	Develop a multi-level and systemic perspective on value cocreation and public service design. Conflicts over PV in PSEs are not emphasized.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author(s) year	Focus of investigation	Theoretical foundation(s)	Context	Method(s)	Conceptualization of public value (PV) and conflicts over PV in PSEs
Osborne et al. (2022)	Value creation in public service ecosystems	PSL, PV, behavioural public administration, and collaborative governance	Theory	Conceptual	Develop a four-level framework of PSEs, placing PV at the macro level. Integrate PV theory with PSE research, but do not focus on developing knowledge about conflicts over PV in PSEs.
Cui and Osborne (2022)	Value destruction	Public administration and management, PSL, and service marketing and management theory	Multiple cases	Interviews, documents, and observations	Contribute to understanding value destruction in PSEs and how private and PV can be harmed. Focus on tensions between private and PV but less on conflicts over PV in PSEs.
This article	*Conceptualizing conflicts over PV in PSEs*	*PSL and strategic action field theory*	*Theory (with illustrations)*	*Conceptual*	*Draws on SAF theory as a method theory to develop knowledge about conflicts over PV in PSEs.*

Table 1, which describes the contributions of prior works in relation to our own aim of developing knowledge about conflicts over public value in PSEs.

Following research on service ecosystems, studies on PSEs suggest that institutions enable and constrain collective resource-integrating activities in PSEs. More specifically, Osborne (2021) argues that service provision in PSEs is informed by 'values, beliefs, and norms' that are 'made extent through the creation of public policy' (118). According to PSL, public policy has no value in itself but needs to be seen as a value creation promise that provides input for the creation and co-creation of value in use within PSEs (Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022). In a key study, Petrescu (2019) developed a PSE framework that allows for the analysis of private and public value as co-created by resource-integrating actors – including citizens, public service organizations, private firms, advocacy organizations, and politicians – and framed by institutions and policies on the micro, meso, and macro levels. The idea that PSEs consist of these three levels has been underscored by Trischler and Westman Trischler (2022), as well as by Osborne et al. (2022). However, Trischler and Westman Trischler (2022) focus on how value creation at these different levels is designed for individual users and thus pay very little attention to public value. In addition to the aforementioned three levels, Osborne et al. (2022) have introduced a sub-micro level that refers to the ' . . . individual and/or professional beliefs upon value creation' (5). They also attend to macro-level institutions and, accordingly, to how societal values, rules, and norms, which are made extant through public policy, influence the actions and processes of value creation on 'lower' levels. Public value is discussed at the macro level in terms of representing value-in-society, which consists of a cluster of three elements: ' . . . the provision of public goods, the fulfilment of societal values, and the direct/indirect creation of value-added to society through a public service' (Osborne et al. 2022, 6). In contrast, Eriksson et al. (2020) have directed their attention to the development of coordinated value propositions between multiple actors in PSEs, finding that these value propositions benefit service users' private value creation, public service organizations' value co-creation, and the public value of the broader citizenry. Furthermore, Engen et al. (2021) and Cui and Osborne (2022) have suggested that public and private value is not only created in PSEs but also destructed or diminished within them, which our initial example of Bergljot showcases.

Hence, several studies have emphasized the importance of considering public value in PSEs (see Table 1). Some of these studies also point to conflicts between actors involved in service provision as a distinct attribute of PSEs, but only in passing (Cui and Osborne 2022; Eriksson et al. 2020; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019). By contrast, Rossi and Tuurnas (2021) have focused directly on conflicts and argued that they can be a key driver for the transformation of PSEs, mirroring the argument of Coser (1957) with respect to general social systems. In particular, Rossi and Tuurnas's (2021) work unravels the different categories of conflicts between public service actors in PSEs and shows how conflicts affect actors' shared value co-creation processes in PSEs. However, their discussion of conflicts does not account for public value. In a similar vein, Trischler and Charles (2019) discuss conflicts over public policy from a PSE perspective, but only briefly allude to public value. The work of Cui and Osborne (2022) is another case in point; while they also attend to conflicts, their study focuses on developing a conceptual framework of value destruction that emphasizes conflicts between private value (in the user sphere) and public value (in the provider sphere). Hence, while a few studies of PSEs do acknowledge conflicts over

public value and those between private value and public value, how and why such conflicts occur in PSEs has not been examined in depth.

Based on our review, we understand a PSE as consisting of multiple types of actors who integrate resources with the goal of creating both public and private value guided by institutions and public policy although value may be both created and destroyed in practice (see, e.g. Engen et al. 2021; Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019). Our review of the literature also points to the prevalence of conflicts over public value within PSEs. *However,* Table 1 *shows that there is a lack of studies that contribute to the deeper theorization of conflicts and how they occur over public value within PSEs.* Addressing this research gap is of crucial importance for understanding complex societal challenges, such as disability, as we argued in the introduction, and for responding to calls for PSL research on theory building about PSEs, conflicts, power, and public value (Osborne 2021; Petrescu 2019; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). We now turn to explaining the rationale behind our selection of SAF theory as a relevant method theory (Jaakkola 2020) for addressing this particular research gap.

Method theory

As we have shown above, service marketing and management researchers and PSL scholars have drawn on institutional theory as a method theory (Jaakkola 2020) to conceptualize service ecosystems and PSEs. However, institutional theory is not, in the first instance, designed for the study of conflicts. Rather, its concentration is directed towards harmony, as the focus is on institutionalization, which refers to the process through which shared institutions become accepted as legitimate by actors (Scott 2013). While service marketing and management researchers have demonstrated that conflicts may emerge from contradictions between institutions that enable and constrain collective action in service ecosystems (see, e.g. Vink et al. 2021), Mele et al. (2018) suggest that this may be '. . . a limited scope . . . ' and demonstrate that collective resource-integrating actions in service ecosystems are performed in ' . . . ambiguous and opportunistic situations driven by self-interested motives' (523). Hence, Mele et al. (2018) argue, in line with a critical discussion of institutional theory in organization studies (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos 2017; Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Munir 2015), that the agency of the actors themselves also needs to be taken into account, in addition to institutions. In particular, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, Fligstein and McAdam 2012; see also Coser 1957; Munir 2015) have argued that actors' use of power needs to be accounted for to understand conflictual collective action and have developed SAF theory with this purpose in mind. Consistent with the work of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), we understand power as the ability of one actor to make another actor do things that are against his or her interests, which often involves conflicts (Lukes 2005). While SAF theory suggests that actors' collective actions are, to a certain extent, enabled and constrained by institutions, it is *centred on conflicts between agentic actors' strategic actions when seeking to understand collective action.*

SAFs are similar to PSEs in the sense that both point to the specific context in which linked actors integrate resources. However, with its focus on conflict, strategic action, and agentic actors, SAF theory can improve our understanding of how tensions and debates over values and interests shape the creation of public value and vice versa. Therefore, we draw on the SAF theory to illuminate our aim of

developing knowledge about conflicts over public value in PSEs. We are also inspired by the scarce works within service marketing and management research that have been influenced by SAF theory in their explorations of the significance of conflicts within service ecosystems, but which have not included public value in their analyses (Laamanen and Skålén 2015; Skålén, Abdul Aal, and Edvardsson 2015).

Strategic action field theory

In this section, we use the illustrative example of independent living to discuss how SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) can inform research on PSEs. Our discussion thus highlights various conflicts between actors who prefer service provision that facilitates independent living for disabled people and those who adhere to a medical view of disability that remains focused on impairments and rehabilitation (Haegele and Hodge 2016). In particular, we use examples from the Norwegian context, in which the Independent Living Movement has influenced a broad range of PSEs (Askheim, Andersen, and Guldvik 2017; Christensen and Pilling 2014).

Strategic action fields

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) defined an SAF or a field (we use the terms interchangeably in the remainder of the article) as

> a meso-level social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (9)

Hence, SAF theory focuses on linked actors who integrate resources in a specific context, in a similar vein as the PSE literature (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019), which makes it relevant for developing knowledge about PSEs (Laamanen and Skålén 2015; Skålén, Abdul Aal, and Edvardsson 2015). The fact that the primary focus of SAF theory is on the meso level does not imply that the macro and micro levels, which research on PSEs has highlighted (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022), are unimportant or unaccounted for. Rather, SAFs are linked to and embedded in other fields in a similar way to PSEs. When fields ' . . . interact in a larger political, social, or economic field, that field also becomes an SAF . . . ' (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 3), which constitutes a higher macro level comparable to the societal or institutional context in Osborne et al.'s (2022) understanding of PSEs. Thus, we argue that SAF theory may account for conflicts over public value at the overlapping meso and macro levels. However, conflicts also exist at the micro level of service provision, as showcased by Bergljot's struggles for independent living in the initial example of this article. We argue that SAF theory may also account for how higher-level conflicts over public value are reflected at the micro level as a struggle for private value. This is not to suggest that micro-level activities are determined by meso- and macro-level struggles. Rather, the different levels of SAFs mutually constitute each other. As the opening example also shows, Uloba works to promote independent living for disabled people at the national and international levels. Hence, the resource-integrating activities of actors at the micro-

level within a field contribute to its production, reproduction, and conflicts, while actors' shared understandings of the field's purposes and rules enable and constrain their collective actions (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Laamanen and Skålén 2015). This implies that SAFs and PSEs have similar constitutions.

However, shared understandings of the purposes and rules of an SAF do not imply that there is a consensus regarding power structures or how the relevant actors want the SAF to be designed in the future. Rather, a core argument of Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) is that actors commonly disagree, which means that conflict and contention between actors about the constitution and development of SAFs are what characterize SAFs. Hence, SAF theory has been developed with the key aim of analysing how conflicts between actors emerge and become settled. We will draw upon this idea to theorize the contestation of public value and how tensions and conflicts of interest (Hartley et al. 2017) can challenge the prevailing constitution of a PSE and transform how it creates public value.

Strategic action

SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) focuses on collective strategic action, which implies that actors strive to create social worlds that are in line with their own respective interests and values. Strategic action further implies the existence of active agentic actors who are engaged in creating political coalitions with others to gain support for their own visions of the world and to enhance their respective positions within them (Laamanen and Skålén 2015). Independent living advocacy organizations can be described as political coalitions focusing on the promotion of independent living through, for example, demonstrations; media and social media engagement; lobbying of local, national, and international politicians; the counselling and training of individuals across PSEs; and by working to institutionalize practices, such as personal assistance, that facilitate independent living. These actions often involve conflicts and struggles over power, as they entail that actors be convinced to change their ways of behaving and thinking (Lukes 2005).

Several decades ago, DeJong (1979, 435) described the Independent Living Movement ' ... as a social movement and as an "analytic paradigm" that is redirecting the course of disability policy, practice, and research ... ' away from a medicalized rehabilitation paradigm. The first Centre for Independent Living was established in 1972 by students with severe physical disabilities at the University of Illinois. Eventually, Independent Living rolled out as a worldwide social movement criticizing the predominating medical view of disability for its underestimation of the social responsibility, inclusion, and empowerment of people with disabilities. In contrast, the Independent Living Movement aims to foster antidiscrimination, inclusion, and sovereignty (DeJong 1979; Ratzka 1994; White et al. 2010). Hence, this movement promotes a set of values that conflict with the dominant medical policies in the public sphere, with the aim of facilitating the creation of public value for disabled people. A broad range of advocacy organizations all over the world promote independent living, including Independent Living Councils, international and local institutes, and local centres. The Independent Living Movement is also supported by a wide variety of individuals, various user organizations for special diagnoses, and family caregiver associations. These advocacy and user

organizations work to increase understanding of disability in a broad range of PSEs within health care, education, and social services and often do so in conflict with other actors. Hence, the independent living case is in line with previous research on PSEs, which has argued that conflicts over public value are significant features of PSEs (Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019), but which have not offered a thorough explanation of such conflicts. We thus delve deeper into the case of independent living to show how SAF theory can be used to understand the occurrence of public value conflicts in PSEs.

Conflicts between incumbent and challenger actors in strategic action fields

Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) envisioned that conflicts in SAFs take place between two types of actors: incumbents and challengers. In their view (2012), 'incumbents are those actors who wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the strategic action field' (13). In other words, at any given point in time, the organization of a particular SAF reflects the values and interests of the incumbents. In addition, most of the resources of the field and how these are integrated favour incumbents, which grants them positions of power. Challengers, in contrast,

> occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operations. While they recognise the nature of the field and the dominant logic of incumbent actors, they can usually articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position in it (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 6).

Transferring this general reasoning of collective action to the research on PSEs implies that incumbents and challengers embrace opposing interests and values in the creation of public value that are manifested at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Our introductory example of Bergljot and her experiences illuminates how conflicts can take place on the micro level. In this case, the service providers are incumbents in power positions that operate according to a medical perspective on disability, thus rejecting Bergljot's applications for personal assistance. Bergljot and the user organization Uloba, which supports her, can be conceived as challengers who, by applying for personal assistance, strive for and promote independent living at the everyday practice level of service provision (Bankel 2021). It is also obvious that advocacy organizations acting on the macro level have challenged how disability is managed by incumbents in a broad range of PSEs. Such actions include fighting for the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) at the national level and campaigning for the incorporation of the CRPD into national legislation, policy, and practice in several countries (Brennan et al. 2018; Mladenov 2022), with the ultimate aim of changing the rules of PSEs by strengthening the position of power held by disabled people. Thus, organized advocates of independent living can be perceived as challengers who use their agency to change perceptions and experiences of 'what adds value to the public sphere' (Benington 2011, 2015). By doing so, they also strive to make independent living a reference point for creating public and private value at the micro level by framing the actions of Bergljot and other disabled people. On the meso level of PSEs, incumbents, such as politicians, and leaders of public service

organizations who adhere to a medical view of disability are challenged by independent living advocators.

Social skills

According to SAF theory, to build political coalitions that support their interests and values, actors need to have social skills, which include the ability to 'read' the environment and offer a collective definition of a situation that can mobilize actors. More precisely, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) have defined these social skills as ' ... the capacity for intersubjective thought and action that shapes the provision of meaning, interests, and identity in the service of collective ends' (4). Using social skills also implies that the process of integrating resources is intertwined with power – an important element missing from prior PSL and PSE research, according to Osborne (2021) – as the use of power emphasizes an actor's ability to control other actors by mobilizing the latter's resources (Lukes 2005). As SAFs are never completely stable, incumbents and challengers are always using social skills as part of their strategic action to promote the interests and values they embrace (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). In particular, incumbents, who commonly occupy leadership positions, use their capacity for social construction and strategic agency to downplay conflicts with challengers, with the ultimate goal of preserving the status quo of the SAF and keeping their positions of power. This resonates with Grint's (2005) work, which suggests that the context or situation is actively socially constructed by leaders.

The notion of social skills is closely related to creating public value through political astuteness. This concept refers to the set of skills, knowledge, judgements, and behaviours that guide actors' actions with respect to handling diversity among stakeholders and actors' formations of coalitions (Hartley et al. 2015, 2019). Thus, the notions of social skills and political astuteness can be drawn on to explain how actors within PSEs leverage support for their interests and values and engage in dialogue and action to transform the prevailing views of what contributes to public value in the public sphere. In turn, these interactions and debates may lead to a change in policies and laws, as well as a shift in service provision practice with respect to how public service organizations and other actors co-create public and private value with service users, such as a revised set of practices regarding how disabled people qualify for personal assistance.

By using social skills, advocates of independent living challenge the medical notion of disability and its implications for creating and co-creating public and private value within PSEs pertaining to disability. In this vein, Jenhaug and Askheim (2018) have shown how parents at the everyday micro level use their social skills with the intention of realizing independent living services for their disabled children. For example, parents can occasionally act more harshly towards caseworkers than the parents are comfortable with or rein themselves in to secure access to the personal assistance that their children need. However, these strategies are not always successful, as caseworkers also have certain social skills as well a incumbent positions due to the power associated with their professional roles. For example, caseworkers commonly convince parents that service based on a medical view of disability, such as institutional relief, are as good as personal assistance for their children. Hence, in the context of disability, actors use their social skills to battle and argue for the public and private value associated with independent living, on the one hand, and the public and private value associated with the medical view of disability on the other.

One particularly important way of using social skills to move people and other types of actors to support specific interests and values is to offer people identities (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). For example, independent living advocacy organizations simultaneously challenge the medical view of disability held by certain incumbents and offer the empowered and able individual an attractive alternative identity to disabled person. A specific example of how this works in practice is independent living training centres, which provide disabled people and their families with skills, knowledge, and information that help them to form political coalitions and thus to realize independent living on all levels of PSEs pertaining to disability (White et al. 2010). For example, the TV documentary about Bergljot showcases how she eventually joined the political coalition of the Independent Living Movement by taking part in their public demonstrations aimed at strengthening the rights of disabled persons. In contrast, caseworkers and supervisors at public service organizations, in their interactions with disabled people and their next of kin, sometimes appeal to disabled people's impairments and their need to adapt to the circumstances. Such an approach may promote identities as 'incomplete', which is in line with the medical view of disability as an individual problem, thus relieving the society of responsibility. Hence, by appealing to different identities, incumbents and challengers promote different views of public value that inform service provision in PSEs.

Exogenous shock and episodes of contention

Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) have argued that conflicts that may lead to changes seldom emerge from within SAFs, but instead arise from a linked SAF in the form of an exogenous shock. Such a shock can inspire challengers to form political coalitions and convince other actors that they have a fair chance of changing the SAF in such a way that it reflects their own interests and values. Exogenous shocks may, for example, come in the form of a new technology, a pandemic, a crisis in the economy, or a military conflict. In the case of independent living, the struggles for freedom and empowerment in the civil rights movement, the consumer movement, the demedicalization movement, and the deinstitutionalization movement mobilized and inspired advocates to change PSEs pertaining to disability towards the promotion of inclusion and empowerment for disabled people. In particular, independent living advocates used the same human rights arguments in their fight for the right for personal assistance as the civil rights movement did to demand equal rights regardless of skin colour, thus putting the creation of public value through personal assistance services at the forefront of the political agenda (DeJong 1979; FRA 2015).

Exogenous shocks may create an episode of contention, meaning that covert conflicts between incumbents and challengers and the political coalitions they have constructed become overt. An episode of contention is a period of sustained conflict between incumbents and challengers, characterized by mobilization and a shared sense of crisis and uncertainty regarding an SAF's rules and power structures (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). Hence, during an episode of contention, the conflict can no longer be avoided or constructed away by leaders (cf. Grint 2005). Rather, the conflict is acknowledged by both incumbents and challengers, who act in new ways towards each other in violation of field rules to actively and saliently promote the values and interests they embrace. Hence, the concept of an episode of contention is helpful for understanding intense conflicts over public value in PSEs.

An example of an episode of contention at the macro level is when the government of Norway launched a committee to investigate and compile an official Norwegian report on personal assistance arrangements inspired by the United Nations and their critique of Norway (United Nations 2019). One of the leaders of the Independent Living Movement in Norway was a member of this committee. Conflicts were made overt within the committee over legal affiliation and the content of the law. Due to the excessive conflict within the group, the challengers (the independent living advocates) formulated their own proposal for a new separate law extricating the arrangement from healthcare legislation (NOU 2021:11) in an attempt to form a political coalition and push for strategic action to serve their preferred position. Several demonstrations and contestations over the law's affiliation have contributed to changing it over the years, resulting in more people receiving personal assistance. Nevertheless, repetitive overt conflicts confirm the persistence of an enduring conflict over how public value is argued for and constructed in the public sphere. For example, legislative changes that facilitate revisions in public value creation commonly create conflicts over public value at the micro level of service provision by still allowing for the exercise of discretion, which entail that caseworkers sometimes deny people services enabling independent living. In this case, conflicts revolve around the medicalized rehabilitation view of incumbent caseworkers on the one hand and the fight for tools for independent living by the challenging service users on the other.

Settlement

Eventually, a settlement of rules and cultural norms ensues, which makes overt conflicts covert. Hence, during periods of settlement, conflicts do not disappear, and new episodes of contention can always flare up, thereby implying that an SAF is consistently oscillating between intense and less intense conflicts. Settlement is most likely to come in the form of the status quo being reinstated, as incumbents occupy positions of power and generally have access to more resources compared to challengers (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). In addition, incumbents can mobilize external actors who hold power positions, such as the state, to a greater extent than challengers. If the status quo is reinstated, resources are integrated, and public value is created in a manner similar to before the episode of contention. However, the SAF may be genuinely transformed as an effect of episodes of contention, with new actors entering the SAF, other actors disappearing, and the structures of power between remaining actors changing. In such cases, conflicts over public value will genuinely transform PSEs, including how public value is created within them.

Returning to the Norwegian context, conflicts pertaining to disability have been settled recurrently as an effect of independent living advocates' challenges, which in certain cases have transformed how public and private value are created in PSEs pertaining to disability. Important examples of changes leading to contemporary settlements include legislation of personal assistance as a municipal service offering from 2000 (Sosial- og helsedepartementet 2000) and as a compulsory right for disabled citizens pending the fulfilment of certain criteria (e.g. an upper age limit) from 2014 (Regjeringen 2014). These settlements have led to more people receiving personal assistance (Askheim, Andersen, and Guldvik 2017), which has facilitated the creation of public and

private value along the lines of independent living. However, these settlements are commonly temporary. In Norway, conflicts over personal assistance have oscillated between overt and covert, which has resulted in limited changes in PSEs pertaining to disability.

In sum, by referring to independent living as an illustrative example, this section has shown how SAF theory can be drawn on to develop an understanding of conflicts over public value within PSEs. With the goal of establishing a conceptual contribution, we formulate five research propositions based on these findings in the next section.

Conceptualization of conflicts over public value in PSEs

Proposition 1

In line with our findings, some prior research, albeit scarce (Laamanen and Skålén 2015; Skålén, Abdul Aal, and Edvardsson 2015), suggests that there is a fit between how service ecosystems have been conceptualized and SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). While this research has not accounted for the publicness of service ecosystems, public management researchers such as Bryson et al. (2017) have argued that SAFs can be seen 'as systems' (645). Drawing on SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) and our discussion of independent living, we have shown that PSEs can be understood as being marked by ongoing overt and covert conflicts over public value among actors. Our position is supported by Bennington's (2011, 2015; see also Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Bryson et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2017) work suggesting that actors' tensions and debates over values and interests drive constant conflicts over public value in PSEs. Consequently, we formulated the first proposition as follows:

Proposition 1: PSEs are centred on overt and covert conflicts over public value.

Proposition 2

Our discussion of SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) further suggests that conflicts over public value within PSEs take place between two types of actors: incumbents and challengers. As we have argued, societal challenges are likely to be tackled by different groups with opposing interests and values, which suggests that public value is continuously debated and recreated within PSEs, as Hartley et al. (2017) have argued. In line with prior research on PSEs (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022), our paper also suggests that PSEs consist of macro, meso, and micro levels, and we have shown, by referring to the example of independent living, that conflicts over public value between incumbents and challengers occur at all of these levels. Thus, we formulated the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Conflicts over public value in PSEs take place between incumbents and challengers at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Proposition 3

Our discussion of independent living also shows that an important facet for understanding conflicts over public value in PSEs is social skills. Hartley et al. (2015; 2019) have shown that social skills in a public setting are often acted out in the form of political astuteness. Indeed, in SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), social skills are considered the key driver of incumbents' and challengers' strategic actions. As we have emphasized, incumbents and challengers use their social skills, including their political astuteness, to form political coalitions to create public value within PSEs in line with their respective interests and values. Incumbents use their social skills to form political coalitions that aim at maintaining the status quo of PSEs – a medical stance towards disability, in our case – while challengers use their social skills to garner support for their alternative vision of the PSE – independent living in our case. Social skills thus form and influence actors' abilities to mobilize groups and their positions in PSEs. Hence, Proposition 3 was formulated as follows:

Proposition 3:   The social skills of incumbents and challengers play a crucial role in how public value is created in PSEs by allowing actors to frame strategic action and form political coalitions.

Proposition 4

As the independent living example further illustrates, for long periods of time, the conflict over public value in PSEs between incumbents and challengers can be covert, and during such periods, PSEs are relatively stable, which is in line with some intuitional theory-informed conceptualizations of PSEs (see, e.g. Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019). However, we emphasize that incumbents, even during relatively stable periods, actively use their social skills, political astuteness, and positions of power to act strategically and form political coalitions. These coalitions provide actors of PSEs with attractive identities that facilitate their creation of public value. In addition, by drawing on SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), we have also shown that exogenous shocks may result in episodes of contention within PSEs. During such episodes, covert conflicts between the political coalitions formed by incumbents and challengers over public value may become overt. Actors' make intensive use of their social skills and political astuteness in order to be able to read the political game and to build alliances with stakeholders, with the ultimate aim of manoeuvring through the conflict and shaping it in relation to their own interests. This led to the formulation of Proposition 4:

Proposition 4:   Exogenous shocks may trigger episodes of contention characterized by overt conflicts over public value in PSEs.

Proposition 5

While episodes of contention are marked by incumbents and challengers mobilizing resources and actors to either defend and stabilize PSEs (incumbents) or to try to advance their positions and initiate changes within them (challengers), the independent living case also showcases that overt conflicts over public value will eventually settle, thereby indicating that the status quo is reinstated or that the PSE is transformed. The latter commonly implies the change and innovation of services and how public value is created, as well as a shift in the positions of power and the locus of conflicts within PSEs. However, during periods of settlement, it is common for conflicts not to completely vanish. Instead, conflicts have turned covert and can flare up again if sparked by an external shock (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). Thus, Proposition 5 was formulated accordingly:

Proposition 5: Settlement is characterized by covert conflicts over public value in PSEs and leads to reinstatement of the status quo or results in transformation.

In the next section, we conclude the paper by presenting the implications for research and practice that the propositions we have developed may have.

Conclusions and implications

The five propositions developed here offer a conceptualization and coherent terminology for understanding and developing knowledge about conflicts over public value in PSEs, which prior research has been lacking (Eriksson et al. 2020; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019). In formulating these propositions, we followed the advice of Bryson et al. (2017) and used SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) to understand public value creation. However, while Bryson et al. (2017) recommended that SAF theory be used to understand the research of conflicts over public value in a more generally defined multi-actor setting, we have used it with the specific goal of developing knowledge of conflicts over public value in *PSEs*.

Furthermore, we have confirmed the idea found in prior research that PSEs consist of macro, meso, and micro levels (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022). We have shown that conflicts over public value are present at all these levels. In line with research on public value in multi-actor settings (Bryson et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2017), we have emphasized that public value is created and transformed through different actors and stakeholders, such as individuals, groups, organizations, inter-organizational networks, communities, regions, the state, and supranational bodies. By focusing on service provision and value creation in PSEs and using the analytical lenses of SAF theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012) and public value theory (Benington 2011, 2015; Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Bryson et al. 2017), we have further contributed to highlighting the ongoing contests and debates between actors with different interests, values, and positions in PSEs. In particular, we have made a novel contribution by emphasizing the significance of conflicts between incumbents and challengers over public value at all levels of PSEs.

We have also shown that the settlement of conflicts over public value may result in the transformation of PSEs, including a change of public value creation, as well as shifts in the positions of power and the locus of conflicts. Hence, our paper elaborates on the

interpretation of PSE transformation offered by Rossi and Tuurnas (2021), which does not highlight conflicts *over public value*. Furthermore, we have illuminated the role of private value (Alford 2016; Benington and Moore 2011) in PSEs. In particular, we have shown that when actors strive to create private value, this can be both hindered and facilitated by incumbents' ways of creating public value.

While the primary contribution of the present paper is the development of specific knowledge about conflicts over public value in PSEs, we also answer several other calls for research. First, we have contributed to theory building about PSEs in more general terms, which has been called for by Osborne (2021), who recently argued that much of the work on PSEs ' . . . remains descriptive rather than analytic or theory building' (179). Theory building about PSEs has also been called for by Petrescu (2019). Our review of prior research suggests that PSL has, due to being inspired by the understanding of service ecosystems found in service marketing and management research (see, e.g. Mustak and Plé 2020), been drawing on institutional theory to theorize PSEs (see, e.g. Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019). However, institutional theory primarily focuses on institutions and institutionalization (Scott 2013) rather than actors' agency and their use of power, which implies that theorizing PSEs from the vantage point of institutional theory runs the risk of emphasizing harmony rather than conflict (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos 2017; Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012; Mele et al. 2018; Munir 2015). The five propositions we formulated counterbalance this risk by contributing to the theorization of PSEs on the basis of SAF and public value theory rather than institutional theory. However, this does not imply that the role of institutions in PSEs should be neglected. In fact, SAF theory is informed by institutional theory (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), and our paper shows that independent living advocates act within the boundaries of accepted democratic institutions, such as government-initiated committees. However, actors' actions in PSEs cannot only be understood by focusing solely on institutions. The agency of the actors themselves also needs to be acknowledged (Mele et al. 2018), which our SAF theory-based theorization allows for by emphasizing social skills, strategic action, and the formation of political coalitions. By drawing on our conceptualization of PSEs, researchers could shed further light on how conflicts over public value inform policy design (Trischler and Charles 2019), how coordinated value propositions are developed (Eriksson et al. 2020), and how complex systemic values are co-created (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), which prior research has emphasized as essential features of PSEs.

PSE is a core concept within PSL (Osborne 2021; Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022). Hence, by focusing on conflicts over public value in PSEs, our paper has also contributed to the more ambitious research endeavour of integrating the notion of public value with PSL research. By doing so, we have at least started to address Osborne's (2021) concern that the role of public value remains undetermined in PSL. This is an important contribution, as PSL provides a novel foundation for research and practice on service provision in the public administration and management fields (Osborne 2021). Finally, we have highlighted the role of power in PSL, about which Osborne (2021; see also Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) has also called for further research. From the vantage point of SAF and public value theory, we suggest that actors within PSEs act on the basis of different interests and values that translate into power struggles over the creation and co-creation of public

value. Specifically, we have pointed to struggles over power between incumbents (who occupy positions of power) and challengers (who strive for power to realize their visions of PSEs). We further illuminated the role of these power struggles by referring to conflicts between advocates of independent living and incumbents over disability.

For future research, we suggest empirical studies that test, elaborate on, critique, and challenge our conceptual research. In particular, we recommend studies that investigate and evaluate the five research propositions we developed in relation to other complex societal challenges that may differ from the independent living case discussed here.

Practical implications

To address societal challenges and accomplish public service provision, citizens, public service organizations, private firms, advocacy organizations, politicians, and other actors need to create public and private value in PSEs. It is important that they do so by placing public service users, rather than public service organizations, at the centre of their work, as PSL has suggested (Strokosch and Osborne 2020; Osborne 2021; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021). However, when creating public and private value in PSEs, actors need to be prepared for conflicts, because tensions among interests will inevitably come into play. Accordingly, we have developed a framework for understanding such conflicts, why they emerge, and how public value can be constructed in their presence. Such processes are important to recognize when seeking to understand how different actors at different levels create public and private value. To successfully pursue their preferred ways of creating public and private value, actors need to have social skills and mobilize other actors in their service by forming political coalitions. How PSEs are transformed as an effect of conflicts over public value is also discussed, which may trigger transformative initiatives and public service innovations among practitioners. Our paper also provides insights into how conflicts over public value will eventually settle, which could equip practitioners and organizations with an improved sense of perspective on how to choose the best strategies.

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