The Quest for Public Value

Sonia M. Ospina and Rogan Kersh, Editors
Angel Saz-Carranza
Institute of Public Governance and Management, ESADE


Sixteen years after Mark H. Moore published his renowned book Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Governments (1995) comes Public Value: Theory and Practice, edited by Moore and John Benington. After its publication, Moore’s first book quickly became one of the centerpieces of public management executive education programs. It offered a long-awaited conceptualization of the public manager’s role with respect to those of the politician and the civil servant and described the core public management strategic functions as part of the so-called strategic triangle. The latter included three specific tasks—public value definition, operative capacity and execution, and legitimacy building—and provided a solid conceptual map to help rethink public management.

As the excellent introduction to the edited volume reviewed here synthesizes, Moore’s Creating Public Value made the strategic triangle the focus of public management. It thus recognized and validated the key role that public managers play in defining strategic public value goals and creating the necessary support to achieve them. It consequently rejected the tidy theoretical distinction between policy making and implementation, and thus between politicians and public servants. It also brought to the fore the need for public programs to gain social legitimacy. In so doing, the strategic triangle concept denied neither the legitimacy of elected officials nor the crucial role they play in defining public value; rather, it emphasized the necessary but insufficient support that elected politicians give to public programs and the fact that public managers can contribute to the process of public value definition.

All of that notwithstanding, Moore’s work has not been referenced much in public administration and management research. With some exceptions (e.g., O’Toole, Meier, and Nicholson-Crotty 2005), little research has attempted to develop or test Moore’s work. This is surprising. It may be attributable to Moore’s own absence from public management research forums and the fact that his work was eminently produced for practitioners and executive education programs.

The new work, Public Value: Theory and Practice, is academic in nature and aims to critically analyze public value theory, testing it in key public service areas. Although the book perhaps falls short of its ambitious aims, it makes significant theoretical contributions, in particular regarding the public value concept, and it illustrates how the strategic triangle can be applied in practice. I personally welcome this new book given that the strategic triangle has been, since 1998, at the core of the teaching programs of the institute I belong to, where two professors translated Moore’s book into Spanish (Moore 1998).

Public Value: Theory and Practice brings together a diverse and heterogeneous set of essays, tied together by an excellent introduction and conclusion (notwithstanding some minor but annoying editing errors: headings, bullet formats, etc.). The introduction does a fine job of presenting Moore’s framework but pitches his original work too squarely as a reaction against the New Public Management (NPM) movement. Moore’s Creating Public Value recognized and defended the specificity of public value as opposed to private business value, contradicting NPM’s reductionist advocacy of private management practices. But the book does not read as if it is meant to be yet another challenge to NPM. This ex post attribution seems more a retrospective interpretation than an original objective of Creating Public Value.

At the time of publication, Moore’s work was a frontal challenge to traditional public administration, supporting the public manager’s crucial role in public strategy definition and legitimacy building. These new roles that Moore attributed to the public manager contrasted with the stark divide between politics and administration that traditional public administration scholars took for granted.

The present book includes 16 chapters, comprising an introduction, 14 diverse essays, and a conclusion. The contributions most interesting to me are those dealing with measurement. Chapter 6 reflects on the link between public value measurement and legitimacy building, chapter 12 discusses the difficulties of consistently relating outputs to outcomes, and chapter 13 cautions the reader on the limits of measuring public value. Also of interest is the focus in chapter 10 on innovation in the public sector and, in chapter 7, the careful translation of marketing techniques to public value management. Chapters that are empirical in nature are also...
particularly insightful (chapters 8, 11, and 15), as they illustrate how public value theory has been applied in practice and describe some of its operational challenges. These empirically based chapters deal with such issues as client coproduction in public services, microfinance initiatives, and education. On the other hand, the book contains perhaps too many reconceptualizations of the meaning of public value (chapters 2 and 3) or in relation to other concepts such as the theory of convention (chapter 4), ecological economy (chapter 5), and learning and inequality (chapter 14). These chapters push the book closer to other fields such as political philosophy and away from the public management discipline.

Additionally, the work as a whole clearly reveals a predominantly Anglo-Saxon perspective, excluding others, in particular those from emergent economies and Continental Europe. For example, in Southern Europe, the public manager figure is contested. In these contexts, the public manager who synthesizes politics and administration seldom exists because of two forces: (1) elected officials use appointee positions to place their political fellows, and (2) career civil servants, formally organized into different functional civil service corpses, are highly corporatist and strongly oppose the appointment of an external nonmember public manager. Therefore, elected officials and civil servants commonly squeezed out the public manager. However, there may be experiences of public managers in these alternative contexts that might serve to complement Public Value: Theory and Practice’s contributions.

In the final chapter, the editors conclude by justifying public value theory’s relevance and identifying its challenges and limits. Nowadays, public value theory is even more relevant than when it first was presented because, the authors argue, societies have rehabilitated the idea of government as a prime governance institution, and there is increased recognition of existing interdependencies and acknowledgment that government is just one institution involved in the governance of societies.

That government as a central institution has been rehabilitated is only partly true given the hasty unfolding of global economic and political events in 2011. Following the near collapse of the global financial sector in 2008, markets and self-regulatory initiatives lost most of their legitimacy and credibility as optimal governance mechanisms. However, the social consequences of the current crisis and the morphing of the financial crisis into, first, a general economic crisis and, now, a sovereign debt crisis, have pitted many citizens against their governments.

Nevertheless, the authors make a strong case that public value theory is relevant in a world of interdependence at the interpersonal and interinstitutional levels (i.e., public–private and public–public). They argue that public value theory helps public officials deal with the political–administrative divide and build legitimacy for public programs, make the public strategy measurable and operational, keep an innovative attitude toward public problems, and reintroduce the larger public into their analyses and policies. The authors delve into some details about each of these points in the conclusion. Of particular interest is their discussion on how public officials can engage citizens. The authors recognize that this concept does not naturally exist in society and that engaging positively with the public may be the main challenge confronted by democracies in the developed world. They conclude that if governments can “engage individuals in ways that cause them to think and act as citizens[,]” they stand to gain both the guidance necessary to define public value and a vital partner in creating it.” I couldn’t agree more.

References