THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Understanding Improvements
Value Creation in Public Service Systems

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The acknowledgements, dedications, and similar personal statements in this thesis reflect the author's own views.

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Abstract

Public service systems face increasing demands for improvements due to societal complexities and evolving needs. This thesis delves into the multifaceted realm of public administration and management (PAM), focusing on improvements in public service systems. Drawing from diverse literature within PAM, such as public service systems, value creation and destruction, and public value, as well as literature on improvements and change management, the study navigates the complexities of addressing contemporary societal challenges.

The thesis is set in the context of the Swedish tax-funded service of sick leave benefits – a service with staggering annual societal costs. Through five studies, the thesis addresses three research questions, primarily using a qualitative, action research-based approach with data collection methods including interviews, focus groups, group interviews, a survey, and observations. The purpose, "To increase the understanding of how to improve value creation for the beneficiaries in public service systems", guides the research.

The thesis addresses the characteristics of improvements in public service systems, including a typology for change management in public service organizations, the need for improvements to cross hierarchical, professional, and organizational borders, the necessity of performing improvements in sequence, the simultaneous creation and destruction of value for multiple beneficiaries, and influencing factors for value destruction stemming from the meso level.

Moreover, the thesis addresses the complex nature of value creation and destruction in public service systems, considering the different roles of beneficiaries. The notion of value is examined through the reasons for value destruction, proposing a nuanced understanding of value creation and destruction, and emphasizing the role of beneficiaries beyond the immediate service users. In this context, the 'customer' of public services is defined through the lens of PAM literature and the concept of co-production, drawing inspiration from quality management principles.

By infusing improvements and change management into the realm of public sector services, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how to improve value creation in public service systems, enabling practitioners and policy makers to improve their improvements.

Keywords: *Value creation, value destruction, public sector, public service systems, improvements, change management, public administration and management, customer, beneficiary, sick leave benefit*

Att förstå förbättringar

Värdeskapande i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor
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Sammanfattning

Tjänstesystemen inom offentlig sektor står inför ökande krav på förbättringar på grund av ökad komplexitet och ändrade samhällsbehov. Denna avhandling utforskar offentlig förvaltning och ledning (Public Administration and Management), med fokus på förbättringar i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor. Med utgångspunkt i litteratur om tjänstesystem, värdeförstöring och värdeskapande, och samhällsvärde, samt litteratur om förbättringar (improvements) och förändringsledning (change management), adresserar studien komplexiteten i samtidens samhällsutmaningar.

Avhandlingens kontext är den svenska sjukskrivningsprocessen, en tjänst som 2022 hade samhällskostnader som gick upp till 71 miljarder svenska kronor. Baserat på fem studier adresserar avhandlingen tre forskningsfrågor, huvudsakligen genom att använda en kvalitativ, aktionsforskningsbaserad metod med datainsamlingsmetoder som intervjuer, fokusgrupper, gruppintervjuer, en enkät, och observationer. Syftet med forskningen har varit, "att öka förståelsen för hur värdeskapande kan förbättras i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor utifrån nyttotagarnas perspektiv".

Avhandlingen diskuterar egenskaper hos förbättringar i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor och resonerar kring en typologi för tillvägagångssätt inom förändringsledning i offentliga tjänsteorganisationer. En viktig aspekt som måste beaktas för att förbättringar ska lyckas är att förbättringarna ofta behöver korsa hierarkiska, professionella och organisatoriska gränser. I många förbättringsprojekt krävs det även flera, sekventiella, förbättringar för att värde ska kunna skapas. På organisationsnivå kopplas även åtta faktorer ihop med misslyckandet av förbättringsprojekt i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor. Utöver detta så är ett viktigt perspektiv att värde simultant kan skapas och förstöras hos olika aktörer.

Avhandlingen behandlar även den inbyggda komplexiteten av värdeskapande och värdeförstöring i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor, där hänsyn tas till de olika rollerna som nyttotagare av offentliga tjänster kan inneha. Begreppet 'värde' undersöks även genom att adressera orsaker till att värde förstörs, och föreslår en nyanserad förståelse av värdeförstöring och värdeskapande, med betoning på nyttotagarnas roll bortom de initiala tjänsteanvändarna. I detta sammanhang definieras 'kunden' av offentliga tjänster med hjälp av litteratur om offentlig förvaltning och ledning och begreppet samproduktion, men är också inspirerat av kvalitetsledningsprinciper (Quality management principles).

Genom att applicera tankesätt som härstammar från kvalitetsutveckling och förändringsledning i offentliga sektor bidrar denna avhandling till en djupare förståelse för hur värdeskapande kan förbättras i tjänstesystem inom offentlig sektor, vilket möjliggör för praktiker och beslutsfattare att förbättra sina förbättringar.

List of appended Papers

Paper 1

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, E., & Eriksson, H. (2023). Theory and Practice of Customer-Related Improvements: A systematic literature review. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, *34*(1–2), 201–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2022.2038558

> In this paper, I had the role of leading the project. My co-authors (my supervisors) wrote some sections of the paper, but I was the main author and planned, analysed, and wrote the majority of the paper as well as took responsibility for the submission/revision process.

Paper 2

Gyllenhammar, D. and Hammersberg, P. (2023). How to Facilitate Improvements in Public Service Systems: Propositions for action, *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management,* 40(6), 1429–1448. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQRM-09-2021-0314

> In Paper 2, I was the main author and drafted the manuscript. However, data gathering and analysis were done jointly with the co-author, while the qualitative analysis was done mainly by me and the quantitative analysis by the co-author.

Paper 3

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, E., & Löfgren, M. (2023). Value Creation and Destruction Involving Multiple Public Service Organizations: A focus on frontline employees. *Public Management Review*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2023.2206398

> The planning of the research and the gathering and analysis of the data was made jointly by me and M. Löfgren; later, the interpretation and writing were divided equally between E. Eriksson and myself.

Paper 4

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, H., & Alexandersson, P. (working paper). Why Improvements fail in Public Service Systems: Value destruction from a meso level perspective

> The data were collected jointly and analysed by all three authors. The introduction and theory chapter were written by me, the method and result chapter were primarily written by me, but sections were written by the other authors. The discussion and conclusion were mainly written by me.

Paper 5

Gyllenhammar, D. (submitted). A Typology of Change Management in Public Administration and Management

Other Publications

Löfgren, M., Törnbom, K., Gyllenhammar, D., Nordeman, L., Rembeck, G., Björkelund, C., Svenningsson, I., & Hange, D. (2024). Professionals' experiences of what affects health outcomes in the sick leave and rehabilitation process – A qualitative study from primary care level. PLOS ONE, 19(7), e0306126. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306126

Acknowledgments

I recall my first job interview for the PhD student position. It felt strange walking into the building where I had spent so much time, but now had taken a brief paus of one year. I remember meeting Henrik and Erik. After we had talked for a while, Patrik arrived. This was my first encounter with the somewhat confusing organization of academia. Henrik is my supervisor, but not my boss, and he could be considered a project manager, but not exactly. Erik had a similar role, but with the prefix 'co' before 'supervisor'. Patrik was kind of my project manager, but not exactly, as I was essentially managing my own PhD journey. However, thanks to Henrik, who is an expert in navigating academic settings and fluent in academic shortcuts, as well as the 80/20 rule, this PhD journey is now coming to an end. Many thanks for your guidance in this somewhat fuzzy academic world. To my co-supervisor Erik, I always enjoyed our discussions, where you questioned my ideas or provided new perspectives. I must admit, I had mixed feelings when asking for your feedback because you always found "a relevant article" for me to read. And yet, every time, those articles were always good reading and highly relevant, and I believe they significantly influenced the field I ended up in. I want to thank both of you for believing in me, supporting my good ideas, and helping me realize when some of my ideas were (horribly) bad and instead steering me in the right direction. Your feedback has set me on the right path, helping me attend to details while ensuring I could actually complete my thesis. And Henrik, before you suggest it: No, I will not turn these acknowledgements into a four-field diagram.

I have certainly enjoyed the sarcastic banter and irony from some of my colleagues. Or have I? Patrik, it has always been fun working with you and participating in your courses and projects. Andreas, thank you for asking me during my master's thesis if I wanted to pursue a PhD. I believe that was a critical moment that set me on this path. Anyway, thanks to both of you for your sense of humor, I guess.

As an examiner, there are countless opportunities to be absent during a PhD journey (except for a few key moments). However, Ida, you have been the opposite. You consistently checked in, both personally and academically. You took the time to provide well-formulated feedback and I am certain this thesis would not have reached the same quality standard without your support.

To Stina and Anna, my first (and last?) PhD roommates, having someone to share everyday problems with, an extra pair of eyes when writing, and someone who understands you after a presentation, teaching session, or receiving a bad review on a submitted article is invaluable. It has been a pleasure sharing this PhD journey with you and I hope we can stay in touch even after we are all PhDs.

To Anna L and Irene, the initiators of my project and role models for demonstrating what fighting spirit within an organization means, thank you for allowing me to be part of your project. It literally would not have been possible without you.

There are too many PhD friends and colleagues at SML and IRDM to name individually, but I thank you for all the good talks, fikas, and lunches. It is people like you who make a PhD journey bearable.

Time will tell if I was right in encouraging people to return to Chalmers and pursue a PhD. Lisa and Sofie, having you not just as friends but also as colleagues has been a privilege. Although it certainly made it harder to separate my personal and professional life, it has also brought me joy to see close friends' professional journeys and development. Thank you for giving me that opportunity.

To my Andersson family, thank you for showing interest and listening to me talk about my research and PhD journey. A special thanks to my mother-in-law for catching those nitty-gritty errors before printing.

To my brother, Magnus, thank you for all the talks. As a friend, fellow PhD student, fellow father of two, and brother, you have given me valuable perspectives on both the PhD journey and life. I look forward to our future discussions. And let's see when we can write an article together so we can cite 'Gyllenhammar & Gyllenhammar,' shall we?

Mum and Dad, your support and interest have always been there, and you've assured me it always will be, even though I know parts of my research sometimes falls outside your "actual interest". When I started my PhD journey, I had no children of my own, but now I can truly understand the unconditional love from a parent to a child. Thank you for everything.

August and Ted, during my PhD journey, you entered the lives of Amelie and me, and nothing has been the same since. Life now has a new priority, a new raison d'être. Hopefully, you will read this in a few years and smile (and ask me why I suddenly wrote in French).

Amelie, no matter how many academic degrees I earn, you will always be the one who brings me clarity. Thank you for believing in me, trusting me, and supporting me. This journey would not have been possible without you. There is no higher love than the one I feel for you.

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Daniel Gyllenhammar,
Gothenburg, November 2024

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"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."
– Oscar Wilde

1   Introduction

"What determines the outcome of a sick leave case? Well, yes, when you are sick, you go to the lottery drum, you get a doctor, you get an administrator from the Social Insurance Agency, you get a rehabilitation coordinator, and you get an employer. Maybe they all play nicely, maybe not. And somewhere there, an outcome is generated." – Rehabilitation coordinator (Paper 3)

The above quote does not really signal trust towards the system. Don't you agree? And what is the cost for this non-trusted system? Seventy-one billion SEK. This is the annual societal cost of sick leave in Sweden (Skandia 2023), which is approximately equivalent to the annual pay of 11,000 nurses (Inera 2024). When it comes to the number of persons in the sick leave system, there are approximately 130,000 people[1] on sick leave each month in Sweden (Försäkringskassan 2024). This is not unique to Sweden but problems with the sick leave system exist in other countries as well. In Great Britain, a recent study estimated that annual productivity loss has increased by £25 billion (≈334,75 billion SEK) since 2018 due to people going to work when sick, due to a malfunctioning sick leave system forcing people to work while sick (O'Halloran & Thomas 2024). From a wider perspective, in 2019 the sickness and healthcare benefits were valued at €1.11 trillion (≈11.11 trillion SEK) for the whole of the European Union (eurostat 2022). In 2020, 2.9 per cent of the employed workforce were on sick leave at any given time in the European Union (Antczak & Miszczyńska 2021), implying that the equivalent of 13 million full-time years were not working in 2020. Hence, individuals' lives as well as societal costs would benefit from improving the sick leave system.

However, improving public services is not easy (Gravesteijn & Wilderom 2018), especially when multiple actors are involved (Bryson et al. 2017). It might even be difficult to understand what value in public sector is (Alford & O'flynn 2009; Prebble 2021). Moreover, as the public service system is fragmented and includes multiple actors, it requires a system perspective to enable improvements (Bryson et al. 2017; Haveri 2006; Rossi & Tuurnas 2021). Further complicating the issue of improving is the fact that the problems in public service systems range from simple to complicated, complex, and even 'wicked' (Geuijen et al. 2017; Prebble 2021; Snowden & Boone 2007). This is problematic since not all problems are solvable through a linear goods-manufacturing logic, a logic dominating current public service system (Haveri 2006; Osborne, Radnor, & Nasi 2013).

Over the years, there have been several 'best ways' of public administration and management (PAM). Usually, these 'best ways' are depicted in three chronological paradigms of traditional public administration, new public management (NPM), and a variety of post-NPM concepts (e.g., Ansell & Gash 2008; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; O'Flynn 2007; Osborne 2006; Stoker 2006). Where the first two of these paradigms have been criticized for their linear approach to solving problems (Alford & Hughes 2008; Osborne 2006).

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[1] Not counting the first 14 days which is paid by the employer and not the state.

Looking briefly at each paradigm, traditional public administration, founded on the idea of Weber's (1946) bureaucracy, has been criticized for being costly, inefficient, too monopolistic, and inflexible (Christensen & Lægreid 2017; O'Flynn 2007). This has led to the adoption of private-sector ideals such as marketization, increased financial focus and intra-organizational focus with increased measurements – called NPM (Bryson et al. 2014; Hood 1991; O'Flynn 2007; Osborne 2006). Moving forward, the characteristics of NPM have also faced criticism for, among other things, taking a too linear and manufacturing-oriented approach, having an intra-organizational focus that causes organizational silos, and having an unhealthy view of the 'customer' in public sector (Bryson et al. 2017; Osborne 2006; Osborne et al. 2013; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017). This criticism has evoked several post-NPM paradigms calling for increased pragmatism where there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, where a menu of alternatives for solving contemporary problems has been suggested (Alford & Hughes 2008; Bryson et al. 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Stoker 2006).

A central part of the current PAM discourse, especially when it comes to the post-NPM concept of public service logic (PSL), is dedicated to co-creation (Osborne 2018; Trischler et al. 2023). As a concept, co-creation has been used in service management research (Grönroos 2008; Vargo & Lusch 2004, 2008), but has more recently become a prominent aspect in the discourse of PAM – or as Ansell and Torfing (2021) put it – it is the "new kid on the block". Central in PSL and co-creation is the notion that it is not the service user that should be incorporated in the public service organization's service, but rather the other way around (Osborne 2018). However, the notion of the user as a contributor to value creation in public services is far from new (Ostrom 1978; Ostrom et al. 1978). Ostrom's (1978) seminal work introduced the notion of the citizen as a co-producer of public services, but the concept remained more or less dormant for a while in the area of PAM, before being resurrected during the 2010s (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012; Osborne et al. 2013; Osborne, Radnor, & Strokosch 2016; Radnor et al. 2014). This discourse has continued and evolved, with a multitude of co-concepts emerging, including co-design, co-innovation and co-destruction (Cluley, Parker, & Radnor 2021; Eriksson, Williams, & Hellström 2023).

The question of what *value* is to be created has been debated since Moore's (1994) work about public value and remains unresolved (Petrescu 2019). Here, an important contribution from Moore (1994) is the differentiation of public value and individual value, an aspect that has evolved and is still in need of development (Cui & Osborne 2023; Trischler et al. 2023), especially since there could be multiple beneficiaries, whose views of a successful service might not be aligned (Osborne 2018).

1.1 Purpose
Even though the now-extensive discourse about PAM has been going on for a while (Kinder & Stenvall 2023), it has not made it easy to improve the public sector (Gravesteijn & Wilderom 2018). This might not be unexpected given the multi-actor context, ambiguity of value, complex and wicked problems, as well as a steadily increasing demand of service quality (Bryson et al. 2017; Bryson et al. 2021; Elg, Wihlborg, & Örnerheim 2017; Geuijen et al. 2017; Moore 1994; Petrescu 2019; Prebble 2021). There is also the fact that there is a lack of empirically grounded change management theories within public sector (Kuipers et al. 2014).

Similar to the field of PAM, change management is not a new field either (Lewin 1947a, 1947b), nor small (Al-Haddad & Kotnour 2015). However, as the theories of change management predominantly come from the private sector, it is, arguably, not suitable to directly implement these theories and practices into public sector without adaptation (Kuipers et al. 2014; Osborne 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is:

> *To increase the understanding of how to improve value creation for the beneficiaries in public service systems.*

Here, the discourse of value in the public sector (Alford & O'Flynn 2009; Moore 1994; O'Flynn 2007; Petrescu 2019; Prebble 2021; Stoker 2006) and the 'co-concepts' (Ansell & Torfing 2021; Engen et al. 2021; Eriksson et al. 2023; Eriksson 2019; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2017; Ostrom 1978; Trischler et al. 2023) are seen as integral parts for meeting this purpose. The role of the beneficiary is also a central aspect of the purpose. The 'beneficiary' can in short be defined as the ones "feel[ing] better off than before" (Grönroos 2008, p. 303) where the beneficiaries receive value at an individual level as well as a consuming it at a collective level (Alford & Greve 2017). The notion of improvements in the purpose (and the rest of the thesis) denotes the aspect of something 'becoming better'. This in contrast to the term *change*, which can include improvements but does not have the explicit connotation of making something better, things might even get worse. Of course, in reality an improvement project can also fail and make things worse. This could be for a number of reasons, such as incorrect execution, conflicts within the project, poor planning, or insufficient knowledge of the system. Therefore, this thesis is interested in mitigating such aspects, ensuring that it actually becomes an improvement of, not a worsened state, of the public service system. With this said, the area of change management is deemed to be important to enable an understanding of how to improve, as improvements are seen as a subcategory of change. Hence, this thesis will address both improvements and change management, but with the mission of achieving the former and, consequently, filling the gap of empirically grounded theories in public sector regarding change (Kuipers et al. 2014) as well as reducing the scarceness of articles addressing change in public sector (van der Voet 2014). To be clear, this thesis contributes to the field of PAM, more specifically that of value creation and destruction, by addressing change management and improvements in public service systems.

1.2 My background and assumptions

So why am *I* interested in this topic? I have an academic background as a MSc in quality and operations management, as well as a BSc in industrial engineering and management. As such, I have at least been taught to be solution-oriented and fond of optimizations and improving different kinds of systems. However, this trait of optimization and improvements is not something that solely came to me during my education; I have, more or less, always been interested in this. For example, when I am at a buffet, I start to think how the restaurant could reorganize the order of the dishes and the flows for how people move to make it more efficient. Or, when I cook, I try to make dishes that are increasingly complex and then time it so that everything is perfectly cooked at the same time. Then, finding the perfect match for the meal with a high-quality beverage (like wine) is something that requires subject area knowledge, allowing for enhancement of the whole experience. This trait strives to make the things I see

better, whether it is efficiency, effectiveness, or quality. Being allowed to practice this on such a large scale as the sick leave system has certainly been a privilege for me. However, in the sick leave system, it is not just simple improvements, such as moving dishes at a buffet; as mentioned earlier, the problems in the sick leave system even approaches complex and wicked ones. So, what does this mean to me? If I was going to solve a problem for approximately five years, it would require a significant sort of challenge, right?

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, I outline the frame of reference, which ends by presenting research gaps and the research questions. This is followed by the method chapter, including the studies of the thesis, and then summaries and insights for the appended papers. Afterwards, additional empirical data is presented to vivify and create a deeper problem understanding, subsequently comes the discussion that answers the research questions. Towards the end is the conclusion of the thesis, including theoretical contributions, suggestions for further research and practical implications. Lastly, I offer some reflections on my PhD journey.

2 Frame of reference

This chapter starts by describing *public administration and management paradigms* to set a contextual understanding of governance mechanisms and how public service organizations (PSOs) are managed. Secondly, *improvements and change management* will be reviewed to enable an understanding of the mechanisms for change and how public service system can approach improvements. Thirdly, *PSL* and Public Value – including value destruction – are addressed, followed by a section concerning *co-production and co-creation* rounding up with a brief subsection on Street-level bureaucrats. The theoretical part concludes with a section regarding public service systems. Lastly, the chapter is summarized through the presentation of three research questions linked to research gaps.

2.1 Public administration and management paradigms

In an attempt to make more sense of the public service systems and PSOs, researchers have described several public administration and management paradigms (cf. Bryson et al. 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Osborne 2006; Stoker 2006). The next section looks into this segment of the literature to make the view of the sick leave system less complex – or at least more understandable.

Throughout the PAM literature, three paradigms are usually used to portray the evolution of the governance structures in public sector: traditional public administration (sometimes called just 'public administration' or with the prefix 'old'), new public management (NPM), and some sort of post-NPM[2] paradigm (cf. Bryson et al. 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Osborne 2006; Stoker 2006). This concept of three PAM paradigms is used in this thesis as well and the paradigms are described below. However, discussing these paradigms is somewhat tricky since the 'paradigm' outcomes depend on the context (for example, the nation or culture) in which it is implemented (Osborne 2006). Another factor is that, in practice, these are seldom 'pure' variants of the paradigms; rather, they are hybrids, where the different paradigms coexist (Fossestøl et al. 2015). However, there are commonalities between different contexts, and to be able to have a discourse on the topic, the generalization of the paradigms is seen to be useful.

2.1.1 Traditional Public Administration

One of the fundamental aspects of the traditional public management is its roots in the Weberian Bureaucracy (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Stoker 2006), which is an organizational form based on a formal hierarchy, where equally hierarchical programmes are administrated to achieve politically provided goals (Bryson et al. 2014; Stoker 2006). This PAM paradigm is directed towards the policy system, where managers are concerned with ensuring that rules and procedures are followed (Osborne 2006; Stoker 2006). This focus on the policy system implies that government agencies are supposed to design and implement the policies defined by

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[2] This third, post-NPM paradigm is even more scattered than the previous paradigms, where there is a large variation between countries what is the "next step" after NPM. Especially since it is still under development. Hence, has no unified name, but has been given names such as 'public value management' (Stoker 2006), 'New Public Governance' (Osborne 2006), 'New Public Service' (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000), Collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash 2008), or even the vague 'Emerging approach to Public Administration' (Bryson et al. 2014).

political objectives (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Osborne 2006). Furthermore, in this hierarchical organizational form, knowledge as a resource is seen as scarce (Adler 2001), implying that everyone competes in climbing the hierarchical ladder (Hamel & Zanini 2020).

The traditional public administration came as a response to contemporary challenges around the beginning of the 1900s (Bryson et al. 2014). By meeting societal issues such as urbanization, the rise of modern companies, and the birth of the welfare state, arguments for this paradigm are that it is stable and predictable and capable of meeting an increasing demand of health and welfare from the citizens, back in the beginning of the 1900s at least (Adler & Borys 1996; Bryson et al. 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Osborne 2006; Stoker 2006). Furthermore, proponents of the bureaucratic system argued that the rule-based approach enabled equality before the law and the mitigation of corruption, as everyone had to follow the rules in the neutrally designed bureaucratic system (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Wriston 1980). Another aspect is that, through formalization and division of labour based on specialization and technical competence, an efficient organization focusing on rationality could be created (Adler & Borys 1996; Wriston 1980). Moreover, the bureaucratic system is said to enhance democratic principles and protect against misuse of power (Wriston 1980). More recent proponents have argued that "a realistic answer to the chorus of employee complaints about bureaucracy might not be to eliminate bureaucracy altogether but to link bureaucratic tasks more closely to upsides that workers can agree are worth the trouble" (Chung & Bechky 2018, p. 1).

However, traditional public administration and its bureaucratic organization have been criticized for being costly and inefficient (Christensen & Lægreid 2017), given that power is dependent on budget and head-count, which implies that no manager will volentarily cut his or her own workforce (Hamel & Zanini 2020). It is also said to be inflexible; one reason for this inflexibility is the inherent way that staff groups justify themselves, which is by issuing rules and regulations that do not have an expiration date, which leads to a never-ending discussion about dos and don'ts (Christensen & Lægreid 2017; Hamel & Zanini 2020; O'Flynn 2007). It also discourages novel ideas and risk-taking, making it less prone to development, and is said to be too monopolistic (Christensen & Lægreid 2017; Hamel & Zanini 2020). Therefore, as a response to criticism that the bureaucracy of traditional public administration "… is dispiriting and debilitating" (Hamel & Zanini 2020, p. 41), public administrations started to adopt private-sector ideals labelled new public management, also known as NPM (Hood 1991).

2.1.2   New Public Management

NPM is not one single paradigm and idea; rather, it is a cluster of ideas (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Hood 1991). However, in Hood's (1991) seminal article about NPM, the following seven doctrines are described to portray what are the commonalities of these different NPM-models: "*'hands-on professional management'* in the public sector", "*explicit standards and measurements of performance*", "great emphasis on *output controls*", "shift to *disaggregation* of units in public sector", "shift to greater *competition* in public sector", "*stress on private sector styles of management practice*", and "stress on greater *discipline* and *parsimony* in resource use" (pp. 4–5, italics in original). These doctrines are manifested in characteristics such as contractualization and market reliance (Osborne 2006), where an aspect of NPM is that

"government should be run as a business" (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000, p. 550), while it also seeks "… to dismantle the bureaucratic pillar of the Weberian model of traditional public administration" (Stoker 2006, p. 46). Proponents of NPM have argued that the public sector needs to be more result-oriented, focusing on the inputs and outputs (Bryson et al. 2014). Moreover, the slow monopolistic Weberian state, of the previous paradigm, should be fragmented, allowing for smaller, more flexible and manageable units, which could be controlled from a central headquarter (Hood 1991; Lord 2019; Stoker 2006). Also, the competition and marketization, both inside and outside of the public sector, was seen as a factor increasing efficiency (Hood 1991; Stoker 2006).

Critiques towards NPM over the years include it being too linear, based on Porter's (1985) value chain, not adhering to the context of contemporary public services, which do not follow a manufacturing logic (Osborne et al. 2013). A second critique is the intraorganizational perspective, which is ill-suited for the multi-actor context of today's society (Bryson et al. 2017; Osborne 2006). A third criticism is the unfit customer notion with an overly individual focus where the citizen as a customer is seen as a passive receiver of value (Alford 2016; Osborne 2020; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017). Consequently, a 'Post-NPM' paradigm started to emerge around the 2000s (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000).

2.1.3 Post-NPM
The Post-NPM era, which has its roots in the response towards NPM, includes notions such as recognizing the active participation of the user (Cooper, Bryer, & Meek 2014), taking an inter-organizational perspective (Osborne 2006), and acknowledging that there is no "one-size fits all" solution, but rather a menu of alternatives to serve society's interests (O'Flynn 2007; Stoker 2006). Another reoccurring theme is the notion of multiple accountability systems, moving away from the previously unified accountability systems of hierarchy (traditional public administration) and markets (NPM) (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; O'Flynn 2007). Two of the many concepts that address the shortcomings of NPM are public service logic (PSL), which will be described in Section 2.3.1, and public value, which will be described in Section 2.3.2.

As this PAM paradigm is still in the making, it is even more diffuse than the two previously presented paradigms. However, one aspect that seems to appear in most descriptions of the post-NPM era is trust and relationships (Denhardt & Denhardt 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; O'Flynn 2007; Osborne 2006). Going into trust in more detail Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) presented a thorough display of the concept of organizational trust. Two central actors in their model of trust are the trustor (the one who trusts) and the trustee (the one who is trusted). Furthermore, the authors presented three "Factors of Perceived Trustworthiness" (p. 715): (1) the (perceived) *ability* of the trustee to perform certain task, (2) the (perceived) *benevolence* of the trustee towards the trustor, and (3) the (perceived) *integrity* of the trustee. It is worth noting that all factors are based on the *perception* of the trustor towards the trustee. What is central in this model is that it is not only applicable between individuals but also from group and organizational perspectives (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis 2007).

Similarly, as with the other PAM paradigms, there have been critiques of the post-NPM paradigm(s). One criticism is that the post-NPM paradigms have too much focus on the individual, jeopardizing the main purpose, which is to create value in the public sphere (Kinder

& Stenvall 2023; Sønderskov & Rønning 2021), which urges inclusion of the wider service system of the public sector (Trischler et al. 2023). Furthermore, an overly focus on the individual user and its participation in value creation diminishes the contribution of public servants, which can be interpreted as a reason for diminishing the power of public service staff and justifying cutbacks (Kinder & Stenvall 2023; Sønderskov & Rønning 2021). Currently, there are adaptations of this yet unfinished paradigm, were the emergence of public service systems, which will be addressed more in section 2.5, is one of the venues attempting to address some of the ongoing critique. As seen above, the area of PAM is still in needed of development, and not just in theory but there is also a need to improve public sector in practice as well (Elg et al. 2017). Hence following section will elaborate on improvements and change management.

2.2 Improvements and Change Management

In this thesis, there is a difference between change and improvement. An improvement implies that an entity is better off after the improvement. Meanwhile, change has no defined direction – the status of the entity can either be better or worse after the change. Following, this section presents one sub-section regarding improvements and one that regards change management.

2.2.1 Improvements

From an organizational perspective, it is essential to continuously improve because of the constantly changing organizational environment and user needs (Eriksson 2020). Therefore, several concepts have utilized a cyclic and iterative idea to improve, such as PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) and DMAICL (define-measure-analyse-improve-control-learn) (Deming 2018; Schroeder et al. 2008). The basic idea is to systematically evaluate the context where small changes are tested and further evaluated to continuously improve (Bhuiyan & Baghel 2005). Furthermore, this iterative approach enables both course correction as knowledge increases, as well as adaptation to new aspects in the surrounding environment (Reed & Card 2016), something that is increasingly important in a public sector context, where problems are complex and 'wicked' (Geuijen et al. 2017; Prebble 2021); for which iterative testing is required (Geuijen et al. 2017; Snowden & Boone 2007). However, improvement tools and process improvement tools might not be suitable for solving complex and wicked problems (Rosvall & Gremyr 2024), but there are aspects of these concepts that are beneficial when addressing complex and wicked problems, such as the iterative approach, where knowledge is consolidated and accumulated (Bhuiyan & Baghel 2005; Snowden & Boone 2007).

Moreover, when driving improvements, especially in professional organizations such as healthcare, two types of knowledge are required (Batalden & Stoltz 1993, 1995). The first is knowledge about the context and the professional area, and the second is knowledge about improvements (Batalden & Stoltz 1995). Regarding professional organizations, these organizations can be described through the three distinct characteristics of high knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and professional workforce (Von Nordenflycht 2010).

The notion of improvements is a central part of quality management and initially sprung from the manufacturing industry (Dean & Bowen 1994). Matthews and Marzec (2017) distinguished between continuous improvements and quality improvements, defining the former as "proactive identification and elimination of problems and waste" (p. 306), while the latter concerns the responses to customer complaints and requirement changes. Linking this to the

definition of quality by Bergman and Klefsjö (2010, p. 23, italics added) where quality is defined as the "*...ability to satisfy, and preferably exceed, the needs and expectations of the customers*", it could be argued that both types of improvements are requirements to uphold quality.

However, the concept of improvements is not unique to the manufacturing industry. Similar approaches have emerged in other industries and sectors. In healthcare, an entire research stream is dedicated to 'improvement science' (Bergman et al. 2015), and concepts like PDCA are now common tools (Reed & Card 2016). Within the broader context of strategy management research, it is accepted that companies must continually improve in order to stay ahead of their competition (Teece & Pisano 1994; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen 1997). Furthermore, organizations that are willing to experiment are more likely to successfully improve and remain ahead of their competition (Davenport 2009; Eriksson 2020; Thomke 2020). Yet another aspect of improvements is the learning organization (Boyce 2003). Here, the notion of single- and double-loop learning is important since it considers whether it is only a correction of a found error according to the system (single-loop) or if the learning *actually* questions the system itself (double-loop) (Argyris 1977, 2002).

2.2.2 Change management

To some extent, the area of change management could be said to include that of improvements (Al-Haddad & Kotnour 2015). However, as elaborated in the beginning of this section, change has no defined direction, while improvements do. Therefore, in the area of change management there are models that does not explicitly seek to improve; rather they aim to change directions or strategy (e.g., Beer & Eisenstat 2000; Kotter 2007). A common rhetorical tool used in the change management literature is that of dichotomies. Some dichotomies stem from action research such as emancipation or workability (Johansson & Lindhult 2008), others from the innovation point of view such as radical or continuous (Davenport 1993) and disruptive or sustainable (Christensen 2013), or from an organizational point of view, such as Beer and Nohria's (2000) plan and establish programmes vs. experiment and evolve. Another characteristic defining the change is whether it is linear and project-based or cyclical (Al-Haddad & Kotnour 2015). The linear approach is usually depicted though Kotter's (2007) eight-step model (the cyclical approach was described in Sub-section 2.2.1). However, these linear change models have mainly been criticized for three aspects. Firstly, they are said to be too straight forward, which is not the case in the real world. Secondly, they place too much emphasis on a 'heroic leader', (often) from management or a leadership position. Thirdly, connected to the second criticism, they display employees as unwilling and resistant to change, which is a misconception (Hughes 2011, 2016, 2022).

2.3 Two knowledge streams: Public value and PSL

In the PAM literature and practice, two streams of knowledge have evolved in parallel (Cui & Osborne 2023). One is the notion of public value, with its starting point in the article by Moore (1994), mainly focusing on value at the societal level, in contrast to private sector's focus on individual value (Bryson et al. 2017; Cui & Osborne 2023; Moore 1994). The other is PSL, or, as it was called originally, public service dominant logic (Osborne et al. 2013), which were initially focused on private level and individual users (Cui & Osborne 2023). In the following

sub-sections, these two knowledge streams will be presented, as well as the aspect of value destruction. Afterwards, in Section 2.4, connected to these two knowledge streams, and especially linked to PSL, the 'co-concepts' of co-creation and co-production will be displayed, finishing with a brief section about Street-level bureaucrats.

2.3.1   Public service logic

PSL as a concept has its origin based in service management, emphasizing the service aspect of public sector as a response to NPM's production-oriented and linear approach (Osborne et al. 2013). Here, service dominant logic and service logic has been adopted into the public sector, which led to the creation of PSL (Osborne 2018). In PSL, "PSOs do not create value for citizens – they can only make a public service offering. It is how the citizen uses this offering and how it interacts with his/her own life experiences that creates value" (Osborne 2018, p. 228). This places the locus of value creation at the service user (Dudau, Glennon, & Verschuere 2019). Hence, in contrast to the linear, goods-dominant logic, where the user is a passive receiver of value, PSL attributes an active role to the service user in the creation of value (Eriksson 2019; Osborne 2018). This active role in the value creation is further discussed in Section 2.4 about co-production and co-creation.

2.3.2   Public value

Even though the discussion about public value has been alive since Moore's (1994) seminal article, the puzzle is still not solved (Petrescu 2019). But a loose definition of value from the service management area is that "[Customers] are or feel better off than before" (Grönroos 2008, p. 303). However, as public services create value not only at the locus of an individual, but also for collective consumption (Alford & Greve 2017), as well as at multiple levels of the system, including the micro, meso, and macro levels (Petrescu 2019), there is a clear distinction from the value of private sector which is often easier to define (Moore 1994). Even though it is not directly applicable in public sector, the notion that the 'customer' is better off than before is still valid if the term 'customer' is replaced with a the more suitable term in public sector: 'beneficiary'. Another aspect defining public value is that it could be seen as "…the ratio between benefits and sacrifice of a public service to its beneficiaries" (Ojasalo & Kauppinen 2024, p. 186), indicating that value can also diminish for a beneficiary if the sacrifice exceeds the benefit.

Public services differ from private services in more aspects than just the one of beneficiary/customer (Osborne 2018). Here, a central aspect of public services is the notion that a 'returning customer' should, in many instances, be seen as a service failure (for example, sick leave, healthcare, prison), whereas in the private sector it is the opposite (Petrescu 2019). A second aspect is the notion of value, where PSOs produce value consumed by citizens at a collective and individual level (Alford & Greve 2017). Thirdly, in contrast to the private sector, where revenue serves as a rapid feedback indicator for success, the public sector must find other methods for receiving feedback (Moore 1994), which results in the monitoring of input and output, or other proxies, for value (Moore 1994; Osborne 2006). Ultimately, the public sector has the democratic process as an indicator of creating value for citizens; however, compared to revenue, which is more or less direct, an election every third or fourth year is a poor substitute (Moore 1994). Fourthly, there are services in the public sector that are cohesive,

such as prisons and schools (Moore 1994). This cohesiveness, combined with the aspect that value can also be destroyed (Echeverri & Skålén 2011; Järvi, Kähkönen, & Torvinen 2018; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010), implies that there are services where, for some actors, individual value is bound to be destroyed, while public value is created for collective consumption (Moore 1994). Here, the aspect mentioned above in the definition of value becomes problematic, as, for example, prisoners cannot be seen as customers of the prison. To add to this discourse, public services can have multiple end-users (Bryson et al. 2017), where the goal of a service might diverge between different end-users (Osborne 2018), which problematizes the concept of 'the customer' even more in terms of public services. Even though there are discrepancies between customers' roles in private sector, such as the five roles of customers[3] when contributing to quality, described by Lengnick-Hall (1996), the nature of the customer in public services is more ambiguous (Moore 1994; Osborne 2018).

In literature, public value has been a basis for developing responses to the shortcomings of NPM (Alford & O'Flynn 2009). These responses incorporate aspects such as the balance between democratic principles and efficiency (Stoker 2006), pragmatic approaches to accountability and methods for achieving value creation (Alford & Hughes 2008; O'Flynn 2007), where the fact that there are multiple goals should be acknowledged (O'Flynn 2007; Stoker 2006). This pragmatic approach to public value and its creation can be described as adapting the actions towards the specific circumstances for each task (Alford & Hughes 2008).

2.3.3 Value destruction

Addressing the 'dark side of value', Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) opposed the overly optimistic approach of value creation and service dominant logic, calling for the acknowledgment of value destruction in service ecosystems. Accordingly, Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) presented a definition of value destruction as "an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the systems' well-being (which, given the nature of a service system, can be individual or organizational)" (p. 431, brackets in original). Even though the initial discourse of value destruction was focused on private sector (with a few exceptions such as, Echeverri & Skålén 2011), it has gained increased attention in the public sector literature over time (Järvi et al. 2018).

To further understand the concept of value destruction, Järvi et al. (2018) described eight reasons for value co-destruction: absence of information, insufficient level of trust, mistakes, inability to serve, inability to change, absence of clear expectations, customer behaviour, and blaming. In later research, two more categories were added: lack of transparency and lack of bureaucratic competence (Engen et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the destruction of value can occur at the individual, group and society levels, as well as at different stages of the interactional process, such as during co-production (i.e., value creation in interaction; see more in Section 2.4), co-design (i.e., (re-)designing of existing service), and co-innovation (i.e., the creation of new services) (Eriksson et al. 2023). On this notion, Cui and Osborne (2023) related value destruction to the two broad categories of value in public sector, namely private and public value, which are sometimes in conflict. The

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[3] Customer as resource, customer as co-producer, customer as buyer, customer as product, and customer as user.

presented framework by Cui and Osborne (2023) shows that these conflicts can result in a no-win situation or a situation where one part receives value but not the other. Furthermore, in both these situations, value can either decline or a promised/expected value can be obstructed, denoted as value failure.

One perspective on value destruction is the notion of the service system, which "is not as self-contained as it is thought of in the literature" (Echeverri 2021, p. 113), implying that the subsystems are not always in harmony, which paves the way for value destruction (Echeverri 2021) and highlights the importance of a holistic view in multi-actor systems, such as the public sector (Rossi & Tuurnas 2021). Moreover, the risk of value destruction would reasonably increase the larger the system, since the more actors there are, the more complex and messier things would be (Acar, Steen, & Verschuere 2023).

2.4 Co-production and co-creation

The term co-production was introduced to public sector in the seminal article by Ostrom (1978). However, academic interest in the co-production faded away during the 1990s but returned into scholarly and practitioner debates in the 21st century (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017). Here, co-production among other 'co-concepts' offers a promising venue to solve some of the current problems in the public sector (Dudau et al. 2019). It offers an alternative to the conflict between the market, where citizens are 'simple customers', and the public administration, where the PSO delivers to a 'passive' citizen (Ostrom 1996; Pestoff 2006). On the other hand, co-creation comes from the private sector context and is relatively new in the public sector context, at least compared co-production with its rather long history (Brandsen & Honingh 2018). In many cases throughout the literature, co-creation and co-production has though been used interchangeably (Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers 2015). However, as these 'co' concepts have their own history and their own origins, the following sections will delineate both concepts, separately, regarding the public sector.

2.4.1 Co-production

There have been numerous attempts to clarify and define co-production as a concept; in fact, Nabatchi et al. (2017) presented 13 different definitions, not counting their own. Decomposing the co-production concept, there is the 'co', which denotes the collaborative and, at a minimum, the dyadic nature of the involved actors (Alford 2014). Then there is the 'production', which denotes the action. Within this action of 'production' are the aspects of what and when it is done (Nabatchi et al. 2017). Lastly, the joining of the terms 'co' and 'production' asks for the outcome and what has been co-produced (Bovaird & Loeffler 2012).

When it comes to the actors that are involved, Nabatchi et al. (2017) delineated this neatly by separating the public actors – "who are (direct or indirect) agents of government serving in a professional capacity" (p. 769) – and the lay actors – "who are members of the public serving voluntarily as citizens, clients, and/or customers" (p. 769). Alford (2014) presented four roles of co-production: suppliers (provides inputs), PSO(s) (converts inputs into outputs), partners (shares processes with PSO(s)), and consumers (receives outputs). When combining these frameworks, it becomes apparent that there could be other actors involved that are not just public or lay actors, but also commercial businesses or nonprofit actors. However, as Nabatchi

et al. (2017) pointed out, these can be involved but the public and the lay actors *must* be involved to make it co-production.

Regarding the notion of what action is considered to belong to co-production and when these are performed, there are a plethora of options. Here, some authors (e.g., Brandsen & Honingh 2018; Voorberg et al. 2015) have limited the use of co-production to, or at least close to, the original definition by Ostrom and colleagues by only including the delivery of a service (Ostrom et al. 1978). Meanwhile, others' definitions are broader, not defining specific tasks (e.g., Loeffler & Bovaird 2016, p. 1006) or explicitly stating that it includes "any phase of the service cycle" (Nabatchi et al. 2017, p. 769). However, for the sake of this thesis, I take a broad approach to the activities and timing included in co-production, recognizing that the concept serve as an umbrella term (Nabatchi et al. 2017).

Therefore, I adopt Nabatchi et al.'s (2017) definition of co-production "as an umbrella concept that captures a wide variety of activities that can occur in any phase of the public service cycle and in which public actors and lay actors work together to produce benefits" (p. 769). However, there are two more aspects that are not covered in this definition, but which should be clarified. Worth mentioning is that I will use government actor and public actor interchangeably. Firstly, for an activity to be co-produced it requires *active* participation; for example, a patient is not co-producing during surgery. Secondly, Nabatchi et al. (2017) argued that the participation must be voluntary, not coerced, in order for a service to be considered co-production. In contrast, Osborne et al. (2016, p. 640) defined co-production as "the voluntary *or involuntary* involvement of public service users in any of the design, management, delivery and/or evaluation of public services" (italics added). However, voluntarism is not clear-cut; the boundaries are fuzzy. As an example, if a student is forced to go to school and participates in the activities reluctantly, is it then voluntary? This leads to the question of whether it is just the mindset or the actions of the lay actor that matter? So, does the discussion of voluntarism belong in the definition of co-production, even if it does not matter? Or is there a better way to put it? Therefore, I propose that co-production requires 'voluntary or coerced participation', this to not display a dichotomy, but allowing the balancing act where the positive benefit for participating outweighs the negative in the definition, whether it is by coercion or simply voluntary.

From a research perspective, this allows us to observe the actions, instead of trying to pierce the minds of the lay actors, which would be required if taking the stance of Nabatchi et al. (2017), which is especially problematic when it comes to larger groups of lay actors that are partaking in the co-production (would it even be possible to 'get into the minds' of so many?). At a group level, this might be even more relevant as some participants might follow the group due to peer pressure, rather than having their own 'voluntary' participation; they might be *willing* to co-produce, given that there are coercive factors that make the participation worthwhile.

2.4.2   *Co-creation as opposed to co-production*
As the 'new kid on the block' in the public sector (Ansell & Torfing 2021), stemming from the private sector and, more specifically, the service marketing management (SMM) area (Brandsen & Honingh 2018; Cui & Osborne 2023), co-creation of value has an intrinsic

customer focus (Zeithaml et al. 2020). This is not a negative aspect in public sector per se, but since it is not the sole reason for public services to create individual value, the collective aspect of value must be considered as well (Cui & Osborne 2023). In this thesis, I adopt the definition of co-creation as a "…benefit realized from integration of resources through activities and interactions with collaborators in the customer's service network" (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012, p. 375), which implies a broad focus on the user's surrounding ecosystem (Eriksson & Hellström 2021). A slight adaptation to public sector is that the 'customer' in the above definition should be changed to 'service user' to denote that it is the one using the service, not a customer relationship or any citizen that benefits.

Therefore, in contrast to Brandsen and Honingh (2018), who limited co-creation to the lay actors to co-initiators and co-planners, the above definition demarks that co-creation should be seen as the overarching concept encompassing co-production (Acar et al. 2023). Consequently, if comparing the presented definitions of co-creation and co-production, co-production focuses on the interface between the PSO and the service user and can therefore be seen as a sub-category within co-creation, which focuses on the service users and its surrounding ecosystem (Eriksson & Hellström 2021; Hardyman, Daunt, & Kitchener 2015).

More recently, there has been critique towards the overly positive view of both co-creation and co-production (e.g., Acar et al. 2023; Dudau et al. 2019; Engen et al. 2021; Eriksson 2023; Steen, Brandsen, & Verschuere 2018). Steen et al. (2018) presented 'seven evils' of co-creation and co-production. The first is *deliberate rejection of responsibility*, which implies that public officials/PSOs engage in co-creation as a tool to escape responsibility and costs. Second is *failing accountability*; despite good intentions, co-creation risks decreasing accountability and responsibility, and in extension also continuity of the 'outsourced' service. The third 'evil' is *rising transaction costs* – where hidden costs exist due to information asymmetries, and even though more participants make the same amount of work easier, it also becomes more complex (Acar et al. 2023). The fourth is *loss of democracy*; if any of the democratic ideals, such as representativeness, inclusiveness, and transparency, fail, there is a risk of diminished trust. Fifth is *reinforced inequalities;* due to the reinforcement of power asymmetries, for example, it has been seen that people with higher socio-economic status are more prone to participating in co-creation, hence enabling them to further strengthen their position in society. The sixth 'evil' is *implicit demands*, which occur when participants require payback that is not part of the co-creation activity. The final one is *co-destruction of public value,* which was described in Section 2.3.3. However, an aspect pointed out by Steen et al. (2018) is the notion that since problems in the public sector can be difficult to solve, a 'simple' solution through co-creation or co-production would most likely also fail, risking diminishing trust towards the system.

In terms of what makes the lay actor to co-produce and co-create, all actions to improve the likeliness are "something the public organization must do" (Voorberg et al. 2015, p. 1348). Among these factors, the PSO needs compatibility with the lay actor(s), the right attitude among the administrators and politicians regarding the co-activity, and the notion of how risk-averse the PSOs are, since involvement has traditionally been seen as being associated with risk (Voorberg et al. 2015). From the citizen side, those who have higher socio-economic status are more likely to participate (Steen et al. 2018), as well as the type of family constellation and

personal characteristics (Voorberg et al. 2015). Implying that the PSOs need to adapt their strategy towards those groups that are not prone to participation.

In short, co-production regards the actions and their interface between active lay actor(s) and the professional actor(s)/PSO(s) (Nabatchi et al. 2017). Meanwhile, co-creation has a broader notion, addressing the service system (Ansell & Torfing 2021; Eriksson & Hellström 2021), including, but not limited to, co-production (Hardyman et al. 2015).

2.4.3 Street-level bureaucrats

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play a vital role in creating (or destroying) both public and private value in the public sector (Sønderskov & Rønning 2021). Even though the concept of SLBs were coined by Lipsky in 1980, the SLBs are still as relevant in today's research (Chang & Brewer 2023). Here, as the frontline workers of PSOs, located at the interface between PSOs and citizens, SLBs shape the service delivery in their everyday work. Following, SLBs have the possibility to tailor the outcome towards the specific citizen in the citizen-specific context (Lipsky 1980). However, SLBs are affected by managers and by organizational structures and cultures (Eriksson & Andersson 2023; Jacobsson, Wallinder, & Seing 2020; May & Winter 2007; Zhang et al. 2022). The more autonomy the SLBs are given, both in terms of control from their managers, but also in terms of prescriptiveness of the task, the more the SLBs can tailor the outcome towards the specific context/citizen (Jacobsson et al. 2020; May & Winter 2007). However, the divergence of outcomes can be both a threat to equal treatment as well as ensuring equal treatment based on different circumstances (Jacobsson et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2022), but the divergence and adaptations by SLBs can also serve as a feedback instrument, fuelling policy changes (Gofen 2013). There is also the notion that even though there is a 'service turn' in public sector where there is a demand on SLBs to follow a service ideal, SLBs are forced into a structure of manufacturing-logic, which makes the service ideal unobtainable (Eriksson & Andersson 2023). Arguably, understanding the link between policies, SLBs, and value creation is critical for managers and policy makers (Chang & Brewer 2023; Lipsky 1980; May & Winter 2007; Sønderskov & Rønning 2021).

2.5 Public service system

More recently, especially compared to the concepts of co-production and SLBs, public service systems[4] have entered the academic debate regarding public services (Skålén, Engen, & Jenhaug 2024). This is an important aspect, given that co-production requires multiple actors and that public services seldom can be delivered by a simple dyadic set-up (Alford 2014; Bryson et al. 2017; Radnor et al. 2014). In short, a public service system can be described as a system where resources are integrated between a multitude of linked actors with the purpose of co-creating value with a (service) user (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Skålén et al. 2024). Highlighting the notion that even though PSOs can be the main provider of resources for value co-creation with its services' users, there is often a need to integrate resources from other actors that are a part of the service users' life world to provide their intended service (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012).

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[4] Within this thesis, public service system and public service *eco*system are considered to be interchangeable.

Thus, the integration of resources is an essential aspect of public service systems (Chandler & Vargo 2011; Eriksson & Hellström 2021). Resource integration can be described as occurring when actors – including users, providers, and other stakeholders – combine tangible and/or intangible resources to create value (Vargo & Lusch 2016). Divided into micro, meso and macro levels Beirão, Patrício and Fisk (2017) presented five value co-creation factors that facilitate resource integration between actors: resource access, resource sharing, resource recombination, and governance/institutions generation. It is also important to note that resources can come not only from established actors, such as PSOs or government agencies, but also from the integration of non-traditional collaborators in the value creation process (Eriksson et al. 2023).

Furthermore, in public service systems, value can be created at different levels of the service system, as well as judged, by its beneficiaries, at different levels of the system (Ojasalo & Kauppinen 2024; Petrescu 2019). Ojasalo and Kauppinen (2024, p. 190) proposed that "The proportion of collective component of public value increases and individual component decreases when moving from lower to higher levels of a public ecosystem. This is because the number of ultimate beneficiaries (citizens) of public value increases at higher levels." This further emphasizes that the property of value is not homogeneous, which highlights the importance of considering the multi-layer and multi-actor system of public services when co-creating individual as well as collective value (Petrescu 2019). Looking at the levels of public service system, Beirão et al. (2017) defined three levels: the micro, meso and macro. Here, the micro is defined as individual actors interacting, such as frontline employees, patients and family, for value co-creation/destruction in a dyadic manner. The meso level comprises PSOs and other organizations, such as private and third sector organizations, which directly or indirectly partake in the value co-creation/destruction. The macro level consists of governmental agencies and ministries, addressing system-wide policies and national programmes.

2.6 Research Questions and Research Gaps

From an empirical perspective, this thesis is based in the Swedish public service of sick leave insurance. The public service needs improvements, not just by looking at the societal costs (Skandia 2023) but also at conflicts between professions in the system (Ávila 2019; Larsson 2019; Sanandaji 2018; Thorwaldsson, Nordmark, & Arrius 2019; TT 2019; Wehlou et al. 2019), as well as the individual public service user (Altermark 2020). Therefore, the core of this thesis is the infusion of quality management and change management theories and practices into the realm of PAM, seeking to address research gaps that have the potential to contribute to contemporary society.

With the above sections in this chapter as a basis, as well as the research gaps presented in Table 1, three research questions (RQs) were developed. Firstly, as the context of public services is increasingly complex and wicked (Geuijen et al. 2017; Prebble 2021), with multiple actors having to be considered (Bryson et al. 2017), there is a need to understand how multi-actor contexts of public service systems can be improved (Bryson et al. 2017; Dudau et al. 2019; Eriksson & Hellström 2021). Also, as the public sector differs significantly from the private sector, change and improvements cannot be directly transferred (Osborne 2018).

Furthermore, the scarceness of change management in PAM literature, as well as the lack of empirically grounded change management theories in public sector, calls for further research (Kuipers et al. 2014; Van der Voet 2014). The first RQ is formulated as follows:

RQ1: What characterizes improvements in public service systems?

Secondly, the concept of value needs further research on the users' and the providers' perspectives (Hardyman, Kitchener, & Daunt 2019), especially the co-creation of value in public service systems (Petrescu 2019). More research is also needed regarding all levels of value creation/destruction (individual, group, and public), not just the individual (Engen et al. 2021; Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala 2024). When it comes to value creation/destruction, future research is also needed regarding the interdependencies of value creation/destruction at the different levels of the service ecosystem (Trischler et al. 2023). Thirdly, tied to the aspect of value creation and destruction, there is a need to explore the nature of the beneficiary in the public service context (Trischler et al. 2023), which stresses the need to understand value creation and destruction for the beneficiary in public service systems. By answering the two linked RQs below, this thesis adheres to this need.

RQ2a: How can value creation and destruction be understood in public service systems?

RQ2b: How can value for the beneficiary be understood in public service systems?

Table 1 provides an overview of the research gaps, the connection to the appended papers and the research questions.

Table 1: Overview of Research gap

Gap/research opportunity	The unclarity of the beneficiary/ies in the public service system	Scarce integration of change management and PAM literature.	Knowledge of *how* to improve PAM.	Develop an increased understanding of value creation and destruction when a multiplicity of actors are involved.	Empirical studies needed regarding value creation and destruction, and PSL.
Motivation	The unclarity of public value, combined with the many faces of the beneficiaries in the public sector, calls for further research, facilitating the discussion regarding for whom a public service is made.	Apart from the scarcity, there is also a lack of empirically grounded theories concerning change and PAM.	Improving PAM is difficult. Even though it is clear *why* improvements are needed and research for *what* should be done about current PAM has been extensive, it is still not clear *how* to reach a new, desired, state of PAM, especially when multiple actors are a part of creating a service.	There is a need to acknowledge a multitude of destruction in value creation and destruction in public service, not limiting the perspective to a dyadic interaction.	Value creation and destruction, as well as PSL, have been explored from a theoretical perspective but there is a lack of empirical research
References	Hardyman et al. 2019; Osborne 2018; Petrescu 2019; Trischler et al. 2023	Kuipers et al. 2014; Van der Voet 2014	Bryson et al. 2017; Gravesteijn & Wilderom 2018; Petrescu 2019; Prebble 2021; Sønderskov & Rønning 2021; Trischler et al. 2023; Kuipers et al. 2014	Beirão, Patrício, & Fisk 2017; Bryson et al. 2017; Hardyman et al. 2015; Petrescu 2019; Zeithaml et al. 2020	Dudau et al. 2019; Eriksson et al. 2021; Eriksson 2019; Hardyman et al. 2015
Addressed in	Paper 1, Paper 3, Chapter 6	Paper 5	Paper 1, Paper 2, Paper 4, Paper 5	Paper 2, Paper 3, Paper 4	Paper 3
Linked to RQ	RQ2b	RQ1	RQ1	RQ2a	RQ2a, RQ2b

2.7 Concluding remarks on frame of reference

This chapter has presented three research questions based on the theoretical areas. The first section described the context of public sector through the description of PAM paradigms. In the second, improvements and change management were described and contrasted towards each other. Thirdly, public value and PSL is presented, as well as value destruction. Fourthly, co-production and co-creation. And lastly, public service systems are discussed. In Table 2, an overview of the frame of reference and each section's intention is depicted.

Table 2: Overview of frame of reference

Theoretical area	Purpose of the section
2.1 Public administration and management paradigms	Background to understand the complexity of public service systems supplying a more generalized description
2.2 Improvements and change management	Background for understanding discussions of improvements and change
2.3 Two knowledge streams: Public value and PSL	Used to theorize the findings (and add more contextual understanding through problematization)
2.4 Co-production and co-creation	Used to theorize the findings
2.5 Public service systems	Used to theorize the findings (and add more contextual understanding through problematization)

"The only thing that is constant is change"
– Heraclitus

3   Method

This chapter starts by describing the research context and how this thesis approaches different problem categories, subsequently describing the research approach and design, followed by the presentation of the five studies conducted in this thesis. Lastly, research quality and ethics are discussed.

3.1   The sick leave system and defining problems

This research is set in the Swedish, tax-financed public service system of sick leave. The system consists of multiple actors, ranging from individuals seeking support and reimbursement to larger institutions and organizations such as healthcare. The purpose of the sick leave system is to facilitate the return to work for citizens who have fallen ill, and to provide financial support during the rehabilitation. However, the sick leave system is currently associated with high costs for society (Sanandaji 2018; Skandia 2023) and debates in media, showing conflict on political as well as professional levels (e.g., Altermark 2020; Ávila 2019; Carlbom 2019; Larsson 2019; Thorwaldsson et al. 2019; Wehlou et al. 2019), and has been criticized for being a malfunctioning system (Altermark 2020). Therefore, the sick leave system has been subject to investigations by the government of Sweden (e.g., Försäkringskassan 2022; RiR 2010:9; SOU 2020). Moreover, it is worth noting that the sick leave system is just one of many public services found in the Swedish welfare system aimed to provide a safety net for its citizens.

3.1.1   Actors in the sick leave system

The sick leave system has three main actors: healthcare, the Social Insurance Agency, and the patient/citizen/insured service user. To receive sick leave benefits a medical certificate issued by a healthcare provider is required, a certificate which the Social Insurance Agency assesses before granting reimbursement to the insured service user (Ekberg, Eklund, & Hensing 2015). Here, the process of sick leave can, in terms of the citizen, be described by the steps seen in Figure I. From this process perspective, this dissertation is limited to the initial contact with healthcare and ends when the individual has received a 'sustained work capacity'.
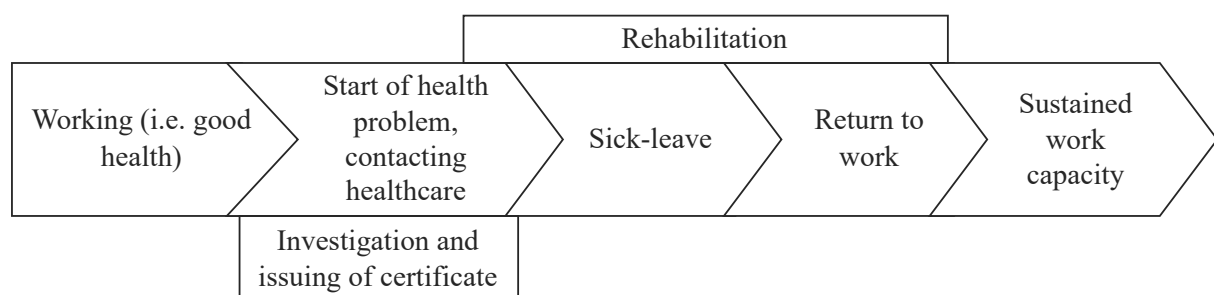
Figure I: Sick leave and rehabilitation process (adapted from Ekberg et al., 2015)

Looking further into the different actors of the system, it is not just the three main actors that contribute to the process. The other actors are not always involved but could, depending on the case, play a vital role for the success of the process. Table 3 provides an overview of these actors. Examples of common actors include the Public Employment Service, Social Services, National Board of Health and Welfare, community, family and friends, and employers.

Table 3: Overview of actors in the sick leave system

Actor	Description	Jurisdiction
Insured service user	A citizen who has fallen ill and seeks to take part of the sick leave benefit.	N/A
Healthcare	Issues medical certificates to verify the need of sick leave benefit. Takes part in both the curing of illnesses and the rehabilitation phase.	Regional
Social insurance agency	Granting (or not granting) sick leave benefit. Based on medical certificate related to specific employments and the labour market as a whole (depending on the duration for which the individual has been on sick leave benefits).	National
Employer	If the insured is employed, the employer has a responsibility to facilitate the rehabilitation and, to some extent, make adjustments to the workplace and the work tasks of the employee so that the insured can start working as early as possible.	N/A
Public Employment Service	Acts as 'the employer' when the insured is unemployed. Intended to be a support function when looking for new employment opportunities.	National
Social Services	In charge of another social insurance; in some cases it is unclear which is the right one. Takes part in rehabilitation and work integration if needed, such as when there is drug addiction, homelessness or other social service matters to account for.	Municipality
National Board of Health and Welfare	Issuing policies and rules tied to the sick leave system. A national knowledge management organization for healthcare and welfare.	National
Family, friends, and community	Those around the insured service user, which indirectly affect and are affected by the insured's involvement in the sick leave system	N/A

3.1.2   A brief note on customer, service user, and beneficiary

Throughout this thesis, the terms 'customer,' 'service user,' and 'beneficiary' are used. While these terms are similar, they are not identical. The term 'customer' will be avoided in the context of public services unless it is specifically relevant to illustrate a marketized or private sector perspective. 'Service user' refers to the intended recipient of the service, such as an insured person seeking healthcare or potentially receiving sick leave benefits. 'Beneficiary' is used in a broader sense, encompassing all individuals who benefit from the service, such as a child benefiting from a parent's sick leave benefits.

3.1.3   Actor coordination

Healthcare is a context that inherently involves a multitude of logics, logics which sometimes are contradictory and can makes it difficult to coordinate involved actors (Glouberman & Mintzberg 2001). These logics can be described through cure, care, control, and community and are described briefly in one by one below.[5]

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[5] This description is largely based on the equivalent text in the licentiate thesis.

Cure represents the medical sphere and, to a large extent, the physicians, focusing on changing the condition of patients through (mostly medical) cures. *Care* can be symbolized by the nurse, who guides the patient through his/her journey through the healthcare system, often also regarding aspects outside the medical sphere, such as the patient's life situation. *Control* is the management and financial part of healthcare, but also the administrative perspective, which often formally controls a hospital and healthcare setting. *Community* is the broader society, but also the hospital board, which serves as representatives of the people in the community. Even though this is an example from healthcare, the same way of thinking, where multiple thought worlds must be considered, can be applied in other contexts as well, such as for the sick leave system and its actors. Given that the sick leave system includes healthcare *and* other PSOs and actors, one could expect even more complexity than in healthcare alone (Acar et al. 2023). Figure II shows the interactions between the various actors of the sick leave system.
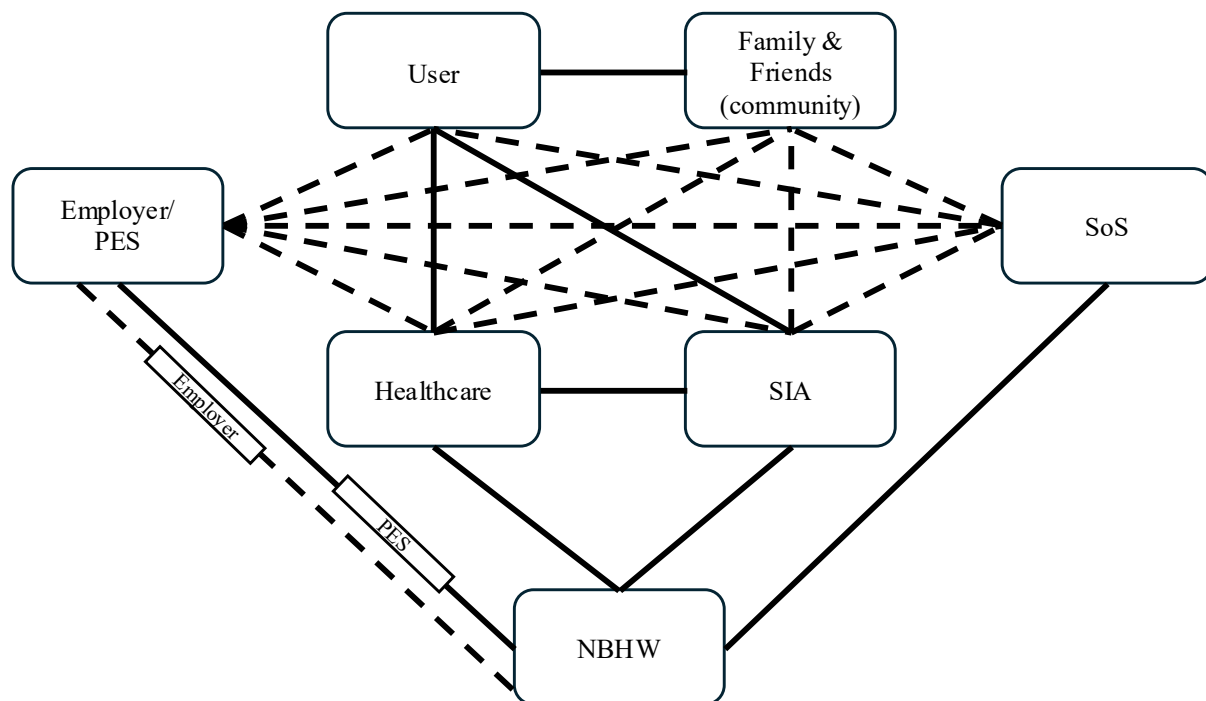
Figure II: Sick leave system main actors and their interactions; solid lines always exist; dashed lines exist in some cases but not all. In the figure, the employer has a similar role as PES, except for weaker connection to NBHW. (PES=Public employment service; SIA=Social Insurance Agency; SoS=Social Services; NBHW=National Board of Health and Welfare.)

3.1.4 *Categorizing problems*

This section starts by presenting the Cynefin framework, which is used to categorize problems and guide decision making (Snowden & Boone 2007). Secondly, a description for how this thesis approaches problems is displayed.

The Cynefin framework, presented by Snowden and Boone (2007), aims to facilitate decision making when it comes to the overarching approach towards the problem. The framework has five categories of problems. The first is *simple problems,* where the cause and effect for solving the problem is known, when assessed properly. Simple problems are solved through sense (identifying the problem), categorizing (choosing the solution), and responding (executing the

appropriate solution). Secondly, there are *complicated problems,* which may contain several correct solutions, and even though there is a clear cause-and-effect relationship here as well, it is not clear for everybody. An example could be a malfunctioning computer; IT support may find it obvious (sometimes painfully so) how to solve the issue, but the solution is unknown for people without right expertise. The approach to complicated problems is to sense, *analyse* (that is, diagnose the problem and look beneath the surface to find the right solution (s)), then respond with the chosen solution.

Thirdly, there are *complex problems*. The main difference from the previously presented problems is that the solution cannot be found beforehand, but must be tried out and tested, since it is only after something is done that the cause and effect can be understood. This is when there is a large number of parameters used to solve the problem, which affect each other in an unknown or nonlinear manner. Hence, complex problems require *probing* of the problem – that is, starting to test and evaluate – followed by sense and respond. Fourthly, there is *chaotic problems*, which is when there seems to be no relationship between cause and effect, as there is a constant change of parameters, solutions, and interactions. The only way to manage chaotic problems is to act and try to impose stability into the system, as a way of bringing the chaotic problem into a complex problem. Lastly, there is *disorder*. This problem type is signified by the notion that it is unknown which of the other four categories of problem are prevalent. The proposed solution to disorder is to break down the problem into smaller parts, and in this way, hopefully, be able to assign the problems into other categories.

Chaotic problems border 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber 1973). These problems lack ownership from an actor and have an inherent political conflict (Geuijen et al. 2017). Also, wicked problems are unsolvable, or at least only re-solvable over and over again, as there is no end to the problem (Camillus 2008; Geuijen et al. 2017). These problems are also notoriously difficult to define, are largely based on moral judgment of good and bad, and, similar to complex problems, the parameters for solving the problem have unclear cause-and-effect relationships (Camillus 2008). Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the notion of wicked problems in their article in 1973, where they presented a list of properties signifying wicked problems. Table 4 provides an overview of the properties of wicked problems based on Rittel and Webber (1973) and complementing authors.

Table 4: Properties of wicked problems, adapted from Camillus (2008), Geuijen et al. (2017), Rittel and Webber (1973)

No.	Property
1	Notoriously difficult or impossible to define
2	Unsolvable, or re-solvable, as it is impossible to know when it is solved for good
3	Cannot be solved beforehand, and even if a solution has been implemented and seems to work, the outcome can create unexpected effects over time
4	Largely based on moral judgment of good and bad
5	Similar to complex problems, the parameters for solving the problem have unclear cause-and-effect relationships
6	Unique and typically have no learning-by-doing nature, as each test might have severe consequences
7	Nested in other problems
8	Situated in multi-actor systems where the different stakeholders hold different views on the root case and how to solve it
9	Due to the large impact, the problem solvers are held accountable for their actions
10	No one 'owns' the problem
11	Ridden by political conflicts

3.1.5   Thesis approach to problems

This thesis does not display a complete list of problems in the sick leave system; rather, the aim is to display different types of problems and exemplify them. As argued by Rosvall and Gremyr (2024) some problems are not solvable through classical improvement tools (in their case, business process management). The present thesis does not aim to solve all the problems through improvement tools either. However, there is a difference between improvement *tools* and improving, noting that the former is a specific way of solving a problem, while the latter signifies the direction of a change to be towards the better. As such, this thesis tries to improve the context for all problems, but not through classic improvement tools in all cases. The main task of the thesis is to address those problems that cannot be solved in the wink of an eye, to probe and try to delineate the more severe problems. This may be done by moving them to a more comprehensible domain or perhaps just by putting forward a possible way to probe further.

3.2   Research approach

The foundation of my approach to this PhD journey is set in a quote attributed to Kurt Lewin: "The best way to understand something is to try to change it" (c.f., Greenwood & Levin 2007, p. 18). I have taken an action research-based approach seeking to improve in the context while simultaneously acquiring a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Coghlan & Brannick 2009; Coughlan & Coghlan 2002). Hence, this thesis builds on a qualitative approach to understand "…social relations, due to the fact of the pluralization of life worlds" (Flick 2014, p. 12). As a basis, there has been a constant oscillation between *action* and *research* to enable the whole spectrum of utilizing knowledge in practice and acquiring new knowledge (Coghlan & Brannick 2009), zooming in and zooming out of the empirical context, allowing for critical reflection but also in-depth understanding of the context (Jeanes & Huzzard 2014).

Furthermore, as knowledge has been combined between different fields and iterated towards empirics, the overarching approach is categorized as abductive reasoning and systematic combining, where theory is matched towards the data, directing and redirecting the study (Dubois & Gadde 2002).

Moreover, there are multiple models describing how knowledge is generated, where the areas of action research and quality management can supply several similar models. These include PDCA (Reed & Card 2016), DMAIC (Bergman & Klefsjö 2010, p. 570), double-loop learning (Argyris 2002), and the action research learning cycle (Coghlan & Brannick 2009). All these models are, in some way, based upon a cyclical idea where reflection is a central component of learning, which has been incorporated in the research process. In the context of the research, an interesting notion is that some of these concepts of learning are tangential to what is presented in the theoretical framework in the thesis. This feature is often found in action research, where method and theory are more tightly intertwined than in traditional research (Herr & Anderson 2015).

3.3 Research design

When it comes to research design, it is important to align the objectives, purpose, method, theoretical framework and validity – or, in the present case, trustworthiness (Maxwell 2013). Figure III provides an overview of the research design of this thesis, depicting the components proposed by Maxwell (2013). Central in Figure III is the research questions, which have been adapted over the project to continuously guide the research; this is also the case of the purpose. For example, one of the first written purposes of the research process was to "Increase the knowledge of improvements in multi-actor systems from a customer perspective". Compared to the purpose of the licentiate, which was to "Increase the understanding for improvements of value creation in public services", a development can be seen in that the 'customer' has been replaced by 'value creation'. This was done based on the difficulties of defining the 'customer' in public services, and it might be more important to consider where value is created instead of focusing on a single entity. Hence, acknowledging the collective aspect of value (Moore 1994). Secondly, the term 'multi-actor system' is replaced by 'public services', as this had been identified as the specific context being studied. Moving forward, looking at the purpose of this thesis (seen in Figure III) compared to the licentiate, 'public services' has evolved into 'public service systems', indicating that it is not the service per se that is of interest, but rather the system supporting (or not supporting) the service. Interestingly, the customers have returned, but in terms of 'the beneficiaries' shifting the connotation as well as recognizing the multitude of entities benefitting (or not benefitting) from the created value. As the foundation of the thesis has not change since the licentiate, several sections are heavily influenced by the licentiate thesis, especially the parts which considers Paper 1, Paper 2, and Paper 3.
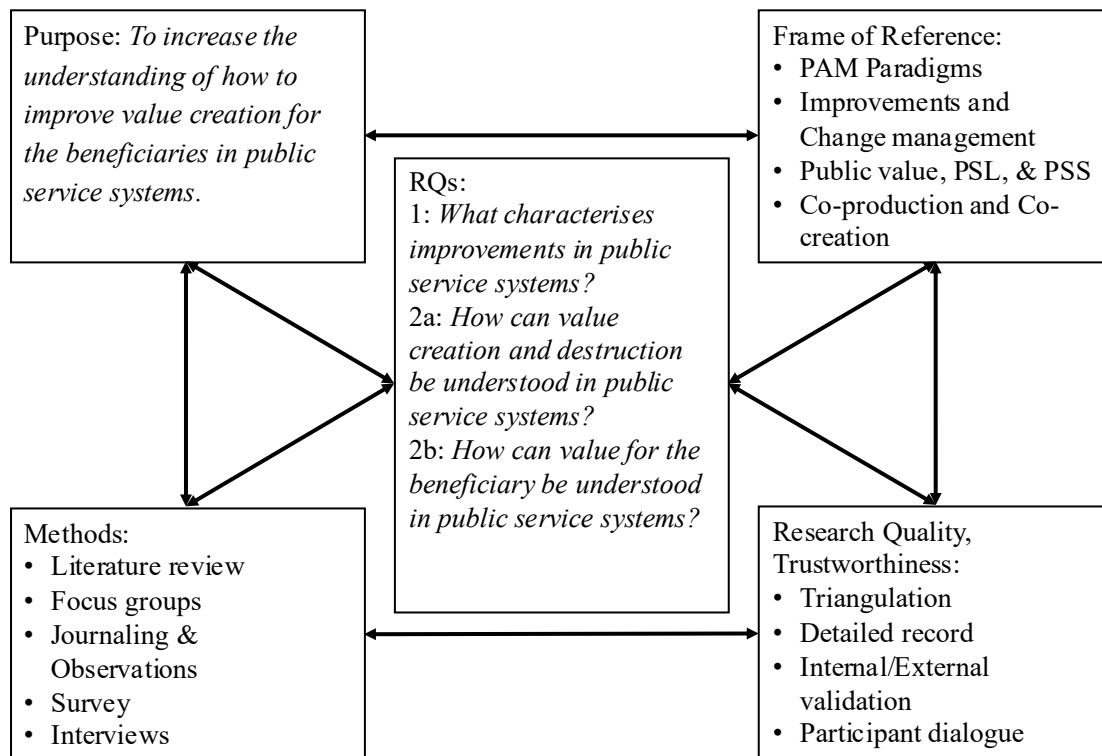

Figure III: Research design framework; adapted from Maxwell (2013); PSS=Public Service System

3.4 Studies and their methods

During the PhD journey, five studies were conducted, resulting in five articles, each of which is more or less directly connected to one study. This section briefly presents the research process and methodological considerations, including an overview in Table 5.

Table 5: Overview of research approaches for the studies

Study (Paper)	RQ	Nature of study	Study characteristic	Main Data collection	Data analysis and tools
1 (1)	1	What do we know?	Literature review	Academic records/database	Systematic literature review and coding template (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2011; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003): Excel; JMP Pro; Rayyan
2 (2)	1, 2a, 2b	What do we have? How do we move forward?	Interactive research, (mixed method)	Practitioner conference, observations (workshops), survey	Coding: direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); latent sematic analysis; JMP Pro
3 (3)	1, 2a, 2b	Where should we look deeper and improve?	Qualitative, interviews	Focus groups	Coding: systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012); NVivo
4 (4)	1, 2a	Why are we failing?	Qualitative, action research	Observations, journalling, consolidation of data from multiple studies	Coding: direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); NVivo
5 (5)	1, 2b	How does improvements and change manifest in public sector?	Qualitative, interviews	Semi-structured interviews, focus groups	Coding: Direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); NVivo

The literature review in Study 1 set a foundation for the research, followed by a more submerged part in Study 2, which allowed me to understand the context in greater detail. Study 2 mainly focuses on the organizational level. Study 3 goes closer to the service encounter with its focus groups with frontline employees, focusing on the micro level, but taking a system perspective in the analysis. Study 4 is a longitudinal project where all other studies, to some extent, have some sort of connection. Focusing on the meso level, study 4 has the strongest connections to action research, which was utilized to not just produce research but to reflect on the research itself. Study 5 takes a wider perspective and is placed in the border between organization and system, interviewing roles from different PSOs with several administrative layers between the interviewee and the service encounter. Table 5 provides an overview of the studies and their connections to the RQs, whereas Table 6 summarizes the data sources and participants. Furthermore, as a part of the overarching thesis project, I had three introductory

interviews with one physician at a primary care unit, one process leader within sick leave from a hospital, and one organizational developer from the Social Insurance Agency. Also, three group interviews/session were held to support an improvement project aimed to facilitate the cooperation between Region Västragötaland (healthcare) and the Social Insurance Agency. These group and introductory interviews were not directly included in any study or article but have contributed to the understanding of the studied system.

Table 6: Data sources and number of participants in the thesis

Interviews/focus groups	No.	Observations	No.
Focus groups	31	Conference observation	220
Interviews	15	Improvement project supervisions	40
Group interviews	36	**Total**	260
Total	82		

3.4.1 Study 1 – Literature review

The first study was a systematic literature review that contributed to answering RQ1 and RQ2b. Furthermore, the study served as a starting point to gain an overview of the field of improvements in relation the customer (and the beneficiary), setting a foundation for the upcoming studies.

Systematic literature reviews have their origin in the field of medicine (e.g., Cook et al. 1997) and have been increasingly adopted to management research in recent decades (e.g., Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa 2015; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart 2003). However, transferring methodologies from natural sciences to social sciences is not as a matter of course. Within the management field, critiques have been raised about mimicking positivistic ideals for producing, analysing and writing research (Alvesson 2010). It has been argued that the reliance on procedures, coding, rules, bias-reduction, and large amounts of data diminishes the importance of critique and reflection (Alvesson 2010; Czarniawska 2016). In fact, the long-argued inappropriateness of traditional quality criteria in social science (Lincoln & Guba 1985) may not be easily combined with the claimed benefits of systematic reviews to reduce subjective bias and offer generalisability of findings (Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa 2015).

While it is important to note this scepticism, literature reviews also have the potential to consolidate existing knowledge within the fields of both management research and practice (Weinfurtner & Seidl 2019). Finding and evaluating evidence of (more or less) all articles within a specific topic related to the research question and chosen delimitations (Eriksson 2014) may reveal new openings for further research (Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa 2015). Moreover, methodological rigor and thoroughness may be provided, which is sometimes claimed to be lacking in management studies (Grey 2004, 2007). Furthermore, by systemizing collective insights from relatively large amounts of research, the operational needs of practitioners and policymakers may be guided (Tranfield et al. 2003).

The systematic literature review in Study 1 was inspired by the procedure presented by Tranfield et al. (2003) and the PRISMA model (Liberati et al. 2009; Moher et al. 2009). The research process started by defining the topic and the research questions, followed by the

development of the search criteria leading to the search string[6]. Afterwards, three databases – Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed – were searched using the search string. Notably, PubMed had only duplicates from the other two databases. When all duplicates were removed, a pilot screening was conducted on 30 articles to ensure that the researchers had a unified understanding of the inclusion criteria. This was followed by the first screening, where titles and abstracts (and, if deemed necessary, other sections as well) were judged to fit the literature review. The first screening was done in two pairs á two researchers, where the inclusion/exclusion were blinded to the other researcher. If the researchers did not reach the same conclusion regarding an article, it was discussed among the whole group. After the first screening, 666 articles remained; these then underwent a full text analysis and, similar to Barratt, Choi and Li (2011), the articles were categorized based on background data. During this second screening, 18 themes were used to code the articles, although only nine themes were used in the final analysis. The last screening resulted in 99 articles, which were recorded in Excel and then analysed in JMP Pro.

3.4.2 *Study 2 – Interactive research and mixed method*

The second study was based upon an interactive research approach, which allowed for a close interaction with the studied system. This study aimed to support RQ1 by investigating the characteristics of improvements between and within organizations, primarily taking a meso-level perspective. In contrast to Study 1, the area of improvements was specified and focused upon the context of multi-actors and public services.

The study can be said to have used a mixed method approach as it combines qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman & Bell 2015). However, the emphasis was on the qualitative methods, and data gathering was done primarily in terms of text, even though some numerical data were gathered through a survey. However, in terms of analysis, the first part was done by quantitative analysis in JMP Pro, which was then refined through qualitative methods, where emphasis was placed on the qualitative aspects.

Action research is seen as a broad concept where practitioners and researchers (which could be the same person(s)) participate in a collaborative, iterative cycle of planning, taking action, evaluating, and re-planning, to solve an empirically grounded problem and contributing to research (Coughlan & Coghlan 2002). Interactive research is under the umbrella of the approaches categorized as action research (Herr & Anderson 2015). This method emphasizes the iterative approach between action and research, where the researchers and practitioners solve the problem iteratively by working closely in some instances and more distantly in others. The process can be described as intertwined learning cycles, where joint problem solving is facilitated by researchers' more distant reflections and theorizing, in combination with local theories and problem definitions from practitioners (Svensson, Brulin, & Ellström 2015). At its core, the oscillation of the researcher between closeness and distance allows for a more critical analysis, without losing touch with reality (Jeanes & Huzzard 2014).

The research process of Study 2 involved the following steps: identify themes, collect data, analyse data, clarify improvement areas and root causes, clarify interrelationships, generate

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[6] For details see Paper 1.

potential benefits, verify results, grade benefits, and create improvement suggestions. The study used a variety of data collection methods but was mainly based on observations (and outcomes) of workshops, a practitioner's conference and a survey.

3.4.3 Study 3 – Focus groups

The third study[7] was based on six focus groups, with a duration of two hours each (an interview guide can be found in Appendix A). The study involved multiple PSOs while taking an explicit micro system level and frontline employee perspective, which allowed Study 3 to contribute to RQ1 from a different angle than Study 2. Furthermore, the approach of the study allowed the inclusion of value creation/destruction as well as the notion of the beneficiary to be studied, contributing to RQ2a and 2b. This study was partly a collaborative project[8] that aimed to generate articles to the management field and medical field of research.

The empirical material was gathered through focus groups, focusing on the interaction of the group members and the joint construction of meaning (Morgan 1996). Focus groups are said to be a good way to understand the feelings of people towards certain issues, and can be used to jointly develop solutions and define problems (Bryman & Bell 2015). However, there is a risk that power structures are being reproduced in the interview context, which can mask the true feelings of the participants (Alvesson 2003). Another use of focus groups is the possibility to mix perspectives that are not usually combined, allowing for new insights and also the aspect that a participant's views can be challenged by another participant (Bryman & Bell 2015; Morgan 1996). However, there are some limitations and negative aspects to focus groups. For example, the amount of data generated is usually huge, resulting in difficulties when analysing; it can be hard to organize the focus groups, which takes significant time from the researchers; there is generally less control over the interview process than conventional interviewing; and there can be potential problems with group dynamics, such as reluctant speakers or power dynamics (Bryman & Bell 2015).

In Study 3, participants for the focus groups were gathered through purposive sampling and consisted of frontline employees from the sick leave system. In total, there were 31 participants from healthcare, the Social Insurance Agency, the Public Employment Service and Social Services. As the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, four focus groups were conducted via a video conference application and two were conducted physically. The gathered material from the focus groups was then transcribed and analysed through systematic text condensation (Malterud 2012), resulting in four main themes and 10 sub-themes.

3.4.4 Study 4 – Action research and observations

Study 4 can be seen as the context from which the rest of the studies have sprung. This study aimed to contribute to RQ1 and 2a by studying improvement projects through the lens of PAM. The study has its basis in a collaborative improvement programme between Chalmers University of Technology and Region Västra Götaland. The setup of the programme was that the researchers from Chalmers University of Technology were to educate practitioners within

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[7] Based on the licentiate thesis.
[8] The collaboration was set up between the author of this thesis and another PhD student, namely one of the co-authors of Paper 3.

the sick leave system regarding how to drive improvements, and in parallel guide them in improvement projects at their home organization. The programme started in 2019, with the first of two batches of practitioner students. In total, 40 practitioners from healthcare participated in the course alongside two programme leaders from the Region Västra Götaland. After four years and two rounds of practitioner students, the programme ended due to funding being withdrawn. Data from the practitioner conference mentioned in Study 2 were also included, as this was a sub-project to the improvement programme. Over these four years of the improvement programme, several sub-projects were created, such as those of the practitioners in their own organizations. This plethora of contexts and sub-contexts resulted in a variety of data sources, which had to be consolidated to enable an analysis. Hence, the consolidation was the first step of the data analysis (or the last step of data collection, depending on perspective). Some data were in the form of reports from the practitioners' improvement projects, others were observations and journaling notes during supervision (of practitioner improvement projects) and programme sessions.

A core aspect of this study is the reflective cycle of action research (Coghlan & Brannick 2009). Here, the practice of journaling served as an important tool to support the reflection. The journaling enabled a recording of the *experience* when in the moment, as well as enabling a more distanced *understanding* and also *judging* whether the experience had been correctly deduced, facilitating for upcoming *decisions and actions* (Coghlan 2010). This tool helped during the programme and also afterwards when consolidating the data. Another action-research-related aspect is the learning loops of the project, where the whole four-year programme can be seen as one large reflective cycle, and within this large learning cycle, two smaller cycles followed each other in terms of the practitioner student batches. At an even more granular level, each programme session ended with feedback allowing for a learning loop for each session.

3.4.5   Study 5 – Interviews and a deductive approach
This study takes a more distanced approach to the context and could be seen more as 'traditional' research, in contrast with the action research approach described earlier. To investigate the system and organizations behind the frontline employees, semi-structured interviews were held with roles working with improvements of the sick leave system, but not directly involved in the service encounter. This study aimed to contribute to RQ1 and 2a by integrating change management theories into the field of PAM.

Following a deductive approach, a theoretical framework was firstly synthesized through PAM and change management literature. Afterwards, the interviews were coded, inspired by direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). This resulted in a matrix with the codes derived from the theoretical framework versus the organizations represented by the interviewees. The results of the first analysis of this matrix were then verified through the (now) secondary data of the focus groups conducted in Study 3. From this perspective, the semi-structured interviews could be seen as a probing activity later verified by the focus groups.

The semi-structured interviews made it possible to direct the interviewee towards the research topic while maintaining flexibility (Bryman & Bell 2015). As the interviews were held with people from different locations in the public service system, different organizational contexts

had to be accounted for, as did individual political agendas. This heterogeneity required different approaches and careful consideration when later analysing the data (Alvesson 2003).

3.4.6 Thematic analysis and coding

During each study, some version of thematic analysis and coding was used. Thematic analysis can be seen as a process for analysing qualitative data where data are matched towards 'codes' and thereby enable patterns to arise from the data (Boyatzis 1998). There are multiple ways of coding (e.g., Brooks et al. 2015; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton 2012; Graneheim & Lundman 2004; Hsieh & Shannon 2005; Malterud 2012), where some of the coding approaches are based upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and have an inductive approach, such as the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al. 2012) or systematic text combining by Malterud (2012). Other methods have a more deductive approach, such as the directed content analysis presented by Hsieh and Shannon (2005).

In the inductive approach, which was used in Study 3, the researcher is expected to start with a 'blank sheet of paper' and not have any themes a priori, instead developing the themes from scratch based on the material (Gioia et al. 2012; Malterud 2012). In contrast, purely deductive approaches involve coding the material according to predefined themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), as done in Study 2, 4, and 5. However, the decision regarding whether to take an inductive or deductive approach is not black or white; rather, it is a scale where there are also versions that are more loosely defined and allow the researchers to adapt the process with regard to what is found during the research process (Brooks et al. 2015; Hsieh & Shannon 2005). In Study 1, for example, a blended approach was used, acknowledging that no one enters a context with a blank mind. This fact is embraced and utilized as a strength, where the researcher is allowed to have some themes a priori, such as knowledge of quality management principles, which can later be adapted or even discarded (Brooks et al. 2015).

Another aspect that differentiates the coding methods is the level of codes that are allowed. In systematic text condensation (Malterud 2012), between three and six main themes are allowed, with two to three optional sub-themes attached. Meanwhile, template analysis, as described by Brooks (2015), does not specify an exact number of thematic levels, but encourages the researcher to develop more themes where there is richness in the data.

3.5 Research quality and ethics

The concept of *trustworthiness*, as developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and widely used in business research, is used in this section to describe the research quality (Bryman & Bell 2015). Trustworthiness is evaluated based on four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In upcoming section, each criterion is contextualized within this research, followed by a brief discussion of ethical considerations.[9]

3.5.1 *Trustworthiness*

To ensure *credibility,* the research process must be rigorous and must be anchored in the social reality of the research (Bryman & Bell 2015). This was done by triangulation and respondent validation, such as continuously checking the results with practitioners during the research process, validating towards previous research within the field, and discussing with academic colleagues. The close interaction with practitioners also contributed to the aspect of credibility.

Transferability was ensured by a rich description of the research process and context. In all studies, stepwise models were used to envision the process. Meanwhile, contextual circumstances were depicted to the extent necessary to understand the findings. Here, the close proximity to the research subject contributed to the in-depth understanding of the context (Reason & Bradbury 2013), thus creating transferability of the research (Bryman & Bell 2015). This closeness was achieved by actively discussing problems and participation of workshops with practitioners, trying to solve and understand their perceived problems.

To address the aspect of *dependability,* records of the data were stored throughout the research process. Focus group recordings from Study 3 were stored on a hard drive, as were their transcriptions, which was also done for the interviews in Study 5. The sampled articles from Study 1 were stored for each step of the literature review, and the generated data in Study 2 were similarly stored. To further ensure dependability, research notes were written continuously, reflecting on the processes, data, and context.

The last criterion, *confirmability*, involves assessing the research from external and internal parties to clarify and ensuring that nothing is misunderstood. Even though complete objectivity cannot be ensured, the confirmation from others provides confirmability. As mentioned earlier, participant validation and triangulation were used in the studies, and these methods also support the confirmability of the studies. For example, included in the presented research process of Study 2 (see Section 4.2 and appended Paper 2), there was continuous dialogue with participants of the system to confirm the results from several steps of the process. Table 7 provides an overview of what actions are taken in each study to heighten the trustworthiness of the research.

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[9] Section 3.5 is based on the licentiate thesis.

Table 7: Studies and Trustworthiness

Study No.	*Credibility*	*Transferability*	*Dependability*	*Confirmability*
1	Previous research, blinded screening, expert consultation (of bibliometrics)	Detailed research process, usage of the PRISMA model, and coding methodology and descriptions	Samples from the literature review have been stored, as well as details of the search string	Expert consultation (of bibliometrics), pilot screening and coding to unsure unity
2	Triangulation of multiple data sources, previous research, respondent validation, researcher interpretations cross-checked with practitioners	Detailed research process, context descriptions, close proximity enabling in-depth understanding	Records from data sources are stored, researcher reflections were written continuously	Respondent validation, expert validation, and internal discussions between researchers and involved practitioner
3	Cross-check between focus groups, researcher (supervisor) consultation (both management and healthcare), follow-up questions and interviews; respondent validation	Detailed research process, coding model and code descriptions	Saved data records	Respondent validation, internal discussion between researchers, external discussions with researchers
4	Triangulation of multiple data sources, previous research, respondent validation	Detailed research process, close proximity to the research subject, context descriptions	Saved data records, journaling	Respondent validation, internal and external researcher discussions
5	Triangulation of interviews and focus groups; previous research	Detailed research process, context descriptions	Saved data records	Respondent validation, external researcher discussions, practitioner discussions

3.5.2 *Ethical considerations*

Looking at the aspect of ethics, the research has considered the four aspects put forward by Diener and Crandall (1978): *harm to participants, lack of informed consent*, *invasion of privacy*, and *deception.* This was especially prominent in Study 3,[10] as the close interaction with healthcare required approval from the ethics committee but was considered in all five studies. Below, further elaboration on how these aspects were considered and how the risks were mitigated is provided.

Firstly, transparency of research purpose and process, as well as how the gathered material would be used, support the aspects of ethics mentioned above. Secondly, participants were informed that they could quit the study at any time. Thirdly, when interviews were conducted with several participants, the groups were informed that they had an obligation to keep what was said during the interviews confidential. Fourthly, as respondent validation has been used throughout the research, respondents have had the possibility to review results before publication. Lastly, all data were anonymized before submitting the articles for further review.

As the topic of sick leave has been debated in media and in politics, it was considered how the findings would affect the individuals participating in the study and service users. As the main purpose of the research is to improve value creation, and not promote destruction, it would be counterproductive to not consider implications for actors in the system.

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[10] Accepted by Ethics Committee with reference number 2021-01481.

4 Summaries of and Insights from Appended Papers

In this chapter the five appended papers are presented. Each paper is divided into sub-sections that outline its purpose, method, and contributions. Following this, the story of the paper is presented, supplying additional insights.

4.1 Paper 1

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, E., & Eriksson, H. (2023). Theory and practice of customer-related improvements: a systematic literature review. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, *34*(1–2), 201–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2022.2038558

4.1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to illuminate how research literature describes the context, content, process, and outcome of improvements related to customers, and from the generated description develop propositions for research and practice.

4.1.2 Method

This was accomplished by a systematic literature review where 666 articles acquired from scientific databases were screened at the first stage; of these, 99 articles were later included in the final sample, which were then coded and used for analysis.

4.1.3 Contribution

The reviewed papers firstly showed that the ways in which customers are involved in improvements vary greatly, but it is often not well defined *how* the customer is involved. Secondly, the statement that 70 percent of all improvement projects fail can be falsified within the sub-sample of improvements where the customer is involved; that is, when the customer is directly involved in the improvement, the chances of success increase. Thirdly, there is a lack of improvements that concern the system level and involve multiple actors, both in terms of how to perform and what impact improvements have. This creates an opening for further research within this niche. Fourthly, a closer proximity to the research object would allow for a greater understanding of what is needed with regard to *how* to conduct improvements. Lastly, there is a need for more conceptual studies and longitudinal studies regarding customer related improvements. The study consolidates knowledge spread over multiple research stream and sectors, clarifying the field of customer-related improvements, guiding both practitioners and researchers.

4.1.4 Story of the paper

In the beginning of the PhD journey, we (my supervisors and I) had a rough plan that included a systematic literature sometime during my PhD studies. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the beginning of 2020, all other data collection methods, that were supposed to be done for the other papers, were temporarily made impossible. Hence, the systematic literature review was moved forward. As a newly started PhD student, I did not find it an easy task to find the right search string for a desirable result. Eventually, we ended up with 666 articles to review. This was a starting point for me to use different research tools, such as Rayyan for reviewing titles and/or abstracts quickly and keeping track of who has done what, or JMP Pro to visualize the findings. In hindsight, I would have done things differently, but

from a learning perspective, it was a good way of learning by doing and it gave me a good overview of the field of improvements.

In this paper, I had the role of leading the project. My co-authors – that is, my supervisors – wrote some sections of the paper, but I was the main author and planned, analysed, and wrote the majority of the paper as well as took responsibility for the submission/revision process. Also, during the research process, two research assistants helped with parts of the screening.

4.2 Paper 2

Gyllenhammar, D. and Hammersberg, P. (2023). How to facilitate improvements in public service systems: propositions for action. *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management,* 40(6), 1429–1448. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQRM-09-2021-0314

4.2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the paper is to increase the understanding of how improvements can be facilitated in a multi-actor public service system by addressing how to identify, understand and align improvements.

4.2.2 Method

Utilizing an interactive research approach, data were collected during a conference, workshops, and a survey. The study was inspired by quality management methods when gathering data, while utilizing both qualitative analysis and computer-aided text mining supported by latent semantic analysis, hence combining both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

4.2.3 Contribution

We found that the identified improvement areas and benefits cross organizational levels and professional borders. Here, the complex reality of improvements in public services systems can be better understood if the actions for improvement and the benefits are classified into different organizational layers, where an interconnectedness and sequences for the improvements are recognized. The study fills part of the gap of understanding *how* to improve public services by presenting a methodological framework that, firstly, guides practitioners to identify, relieve hindrances for, and prioritize improvements; and secondly, guides research to enable the processing of a large data set without losing touch of the qualitative details. Also, the article acknowledges that improvements and benefits must recognize an interconnectedness between organizational layers and sequences of improvements to facilitate a system understanding and enable fruitful improvements. Lastly, it is recognized that mandates to initiate improvements and the benefit of the improvement are sometimes detached, which calls for increased understanding of the system and somewhat more decentralized decision making.

4.2.4 Story of the paper

This paper has its basis in the collaboration with Region Västra Götaland. Here, a group from the improvement programme started to work with data and visualization of data in the sick leave system. My co-author and I were a part of this group as university representatives. To be working close with practitioners was an interesting venue for acquiring in-depth knowledge of the context. However, it became very clear that the interest of practice is not always aligned with that of research. Wandering down several rabbit holes and reroutes the data generated by

the project was, to say the least, rather fuzzy when we started the analysis. However, thanks to a combination of researchers, practitioners, and some computer-aided analysis, we did manage to finalize the article.

In Paper 2, I was the main author and drafted the manuscript. However, data gathering and analysis were done jointly with the co-author, where the qualitative analysis was done mainly by me and the quantitative by the co-author. Also, the data gathering/generation was done jointly with the practitioners in the project group.

4.3 Paper 3

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, E., & Löfgren, M. (2023). Value creation and destruction involving multiple public service organizations: a focus on frontline employees. *Public Management Review*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2023.2206398

4.3.1 *Purpose*

This paper addresses the issue of how value is (co-)created/destroyed between frontline employees that represent multiple public service organizations.

4.3.2 *Method*

The empirical material for this paper was based on six focus groups conducted by two researchers; four focus groups were conducted via a video conference tool and two were conducted physically present. The interview material was then transcribed and coded according to systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012), resulting in 10 codes being used in the analysis.

4.3.3 *Contribution*

An overarching contribution is that the needs of the service users may be more complex than the structures of the service system allow, crossing professional and organizational boarders. The article contributes with empirical data to the field of PAM regarding the oft-neglected mid-level of the frontline employee and their value creation/destruction across the service system. Four levels of benefit are derived from the empirical material where value creation and destruction can occur. The four levels are based on number of steps from the service interaction and can be exemplified as (1) individual user, (2) family member, (3) organization, and (4) the public. An important insight is that value destruction can occur at one level, while value creation can occur in parallel at another. Implying that there is a need for services to consider multiple beneficiaries.

4.3.4 *Story of the paper*

This research was conducted in collaboration with a PhD student from the field of medicine, Märit Löfgren. As we both were researching the same context, but from different viewpoints, we saw it as beneficial to collaborate and leverage our different perspectives. For example, when analysing the focus group sessions, Märit's medical expertise could aid in contextual understanding and healthcare terminology, while my management perspective was useful for zooming out of the specific context and drawing broader conclusions.

The planning of the research, and the gathering and analysis of the data was made jointly by me and Märit Löfgren; later, the interpretation and writing was divided equally between me and Erik Eriksson.

4.4 Paper 4

Gyllenhammar, D., Eriksson, H., & Alexandersson., P. (working paper). Why Improvements fail in Public Service Systems: Value destruction from a meso level perspective

4.4.1 *Purpose*

The purpose of the article is to increase the understanding of value destruction from a meso perspective and to connect the meso level with the micro level value destruction.

4.4.2 *Method*

This paper draws on a four-year collaborative programme with a Swedish Region aiming to improve the sick leave system. The main actors in the programme were three researchers from Chalmers, two programme leaders from the region, and 40 process leaders within the sick leave system. Each process leader belonged to a primary care unit or a hospital in the region. The programme was structured around the teaching of the process leaders by the researchers, combined with the process leaders own improvement projects at their 'home' organization.

Furthermore, data from a practitioner conference with 220 practitioners from the sick leave system were gathered on the topic for how to improve the sick leave system. The data were further complemented with a survey for clarification and expansion of the data. Afterwards, the conference data was analysed by a group of six practitioners and two researchers through a series of workshops.

A central aspect of the article is the notion of action-research-based reflection (Coghlan & Brannick 2009) that had occurred throughout the whole research project. This allowed for back-and-forth movements between closeness to the data and distanced reflections.

4.4.3 *Contribution*

Through the longitudinal approach of the study, eight influencing factors were identified at the meso level that affected value destruction. The influencing factors were, Lack of purpose, Lack of Senior management support, Absence of measurements, Insufficient knowledge dissemination, Insufficient knowledge creation, Lack of adjacent management support, Lack of mandate to act, and Absence of ownership. These factors, at the meso level, were then tied to causes of value destruction at the micro level, that is between the frontline employee and the service user. The article also emphasizes the importance of connecting all levels of the public service system, including the micro, meso, and macro; Not just dissecting each level in isolation. For practitioners it is highlighted that the lack of ownership must be considered if improvements of the system are to be made. Especially since the lack of ownership creates 'gaps' in the public service system, increasing the risk of value destruction.

4.4.4 *Story of the Paper*

As this paper has data from more or less the beginning of the four years of my PhD journey until the end of data gathering, this article has lingered the longest in my mind. Much of the initial work for the article was about consolidation of data, as there had been multiple projects and subprojects. As in many action research projects, there is a messiness that comes with abundance of data from multiple sources. Hence, a primary challenge was to escape confusion and messiness by bringing clarity and structure to the data. This article also allowed us to reflect

upon our own role as researchers in the system and ask whether this programme actually improved the system. Another interesting notion of this paper is that it was initially written from the perspective of PAM contributing to the field of quality management, targeting a quality management journal. However, as time progressed it switched to be written as a PAM article with quality management as a contextual factor.

As this fourth paper had an action research approach, the data were collected jointly and analysed by all three authors. The introduction and theory chapter were mainly written by me, while the methods and results largely written by me but, all authors wrote some parts. I also wrote the majority of the discussion and conclusion.

4.5 Paper 5
Gyllenhammar, D. (submitted). A Typology of Change Management in Public Administration and Management.

4.5.1 Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to understand how change can be described in PSOs.

4.5.2 Method
This article starts with deductive approach, as a theoretical framework consisting of PAM literature and change management theories were developed which later were used to deductively code empirical data, similar to what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) called direct content analysis. After the development of the framework, a typology for change approaches in public service organizations were generated in an inductive manner, making the overall research closer to abductive. The empirical data came from two data sets. The first is 12 in-depth interviews with people who work with improvements within the sick leave system, on which the primary analysis was done. The second data set is six focus groups with frontline employees from different PSOs within the sick leave system, which served as verification of the results from the 12 interviews.

4.5.3 Contribution
Firstly, this article develops a framework to describe change in public sector. The framework consists of six parameters: *change objective, scope, focus, system of delivery, locus*, and *accountability.* Secondly, the framework was used to create four typologies of change organizations among PSOs. Even though the interviewed PSOs had one dominant typology, each PSO had several characteristics of others as well, similar to what Fossestøl et al. (2015) called hybridization. The four developed typologies were *the bureaucratic machine, new public bureaucracy, helicopter implementation,* and *decentralized improvement structure.* Note that these are not PAM paradigms but should rather be seen as descriptive models for how organizations *manage* change and improvements; that is, approaches to change management. The four typologies can be briefly described as follows. The main objective of the bureaucratic machine is set towards rules and policies, targeting the policy system; it works through hierarchy and is based on linear change management approaches. The new public bureaucracy is a blend of NPM and Bureaucracy, striving to meet aggregated 'customer' outcomes through larger structural and organizational changes. It has an intra-organizational focus and is driven by market and price logic. Helicopter implementation is process-oriented and focusses on the

policy system but is inter-organizational and steers through arm's-length public agencies, where they are initiators while another organization (usually a public agency) is executing the change. Lastly, the decentralized improvement structure is outcome-based, taking a bottom-up perspective on the change, usually driving smaller and continuous changes interacting with other organizations when needed, as well as taking a pragmatic problem-solving approach in general.

The article also reflects on the typologies in the context of the public service system, visualizing at what level the typologies primary value creation occurs. Thus, contributing to answering the call for increased understanding of change and improvements, and for empirically grounded theories in public sector.

4.5.4 *Story of the paper*
This paper started as a conference paper for the IRSPM conference in Budapest 2023, where it was presented and received valuable feedback. Even though it is single-authored, I received feedback from my supervisors as well as from my PhD community at Chalmers.[11] When designing the study, I had some parameters in mind regarding what I wanted to do. Firstly, I had not conducted a traditional interview study during my PhD journey, which I wanted to do. Secondly, I wanted to take a more deductive approach in my coding. Thirdly, I wanted to gain a more zoomed-out picture of the system than the other articles. Lastly, it was an integration of the two research streams – PAM and change management – as this was something I had missed in the literature.

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[11] It takes a research community to raise a PhD? (Playing with the saying "It takes a village to raise a child")

4.6   Comment on Appended Papers

As seen from the method in the appended papers, there is an overlap in the data. However, considering the different approaches, the focus on different levels of the system, and different theoretical angles, the overlapping data produce different results.

4.6.1   *Papers connection to improving the sick leave service system*

As a central part of this project revolves around improvements, Table 8 below briefly describes how the papers relate to improvements.

Table 8: Papers connection to improvements

Paper	Connection to improvements
Paper 1	As the title hints, the core of this paper is improvements. One of the main reasons for doing this literature review was to get a proper overview of the field of improvements, especially in relation to the customer.
Paper 2	This paper takes an organizational perspective on improvements, seeking to find aspects that should be considered to facilitate improvements.
Paper 3	Moving from the organization to the frontline employee level, this article addresses the notion of value creation and destruction. Here, the relation to improvements is understanding the system and what does and does not create (or destroy) value; that is, what should be done to improve the sick leave service system.
Paper 4	This paper addresses what to focus on at an meso level to minimize the risk of failing improvements.
Paper 5	Lastly, the fifth article takes a broader change management perspective on the system to understand what change approach should be used to achieve a certain type of improvement.

The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.
– Eleanor Roosevelt

5 Empirical data

To increase the empirical understanding, and to vivify the problem(s) in the context of the sick leave service system, this chapter presents empirical data that come from the sources mentioned in Chapter 3.

As mentioned earlier, the medial debate, empirical studies, and reports show conflicts on professional and political level (Altermark 2020; Ávila 2019; Carlbom 2019; Larsson 2019; RiR 2010:9; SOU 2020; Thorwaldsson et al. 2019; Wehlou et al. 2019), as well as criticism from individual citizens (Altermark 2020). Looking at the professional conflicts, and as shown in Paper 3, parts of the problem stem from different views on rules and regulations, or even different regulations. However, there is also the aspect that organizations do not view the *system* the same way.

> *"There is a fundamental difference, which is partly based on the profession [...], healthcare views sick leave as an instrument for rehabilitation for the patient. And the Social Insurance Agency views sick leave as legal process. That is, if you meet the requisites you should be on sick leave benefits and if you don't you should not be on sick leave benefits, regardless of whether it contributes to your rehabilitation." – Worker within the sick leave system.*

At the political level, the system is used for 'moving people around' between different social security system depending on what is more 'right' according to current political opinion.

> *"[...] there are a number of persons which always will be difficult to, um, be at the disposal for the labour market, and depending on which political will is the strongest that day, they will either end up at the Public Employment Agency or the Social Insurance Agency or Social Services, but politics can go between these [systems], and sometimes wants to minimize unemployment and then more people gets sick leave benefits, and sometimes they want to decrease the sickness number[12] then it increases at the social service office, and so on." – Worker within the sick leave system*

The fact that many of the frontline employees – who meet these people who have a hard time being at the disposal of the labour market – do not want to take care of 'hopeless' cases, and are hence trying to send them to another organization if possible, like a game of scabby queen[13] (Paper 3), does not make things better.

Another aspect of this is that the expectations on the sick leave system and the intention of the system is not always aligned (Paper 3). There are occasions when people request 'sick leave' and there seems to be broad misconception that you can get "sick leave benefit for everything that stops you from working". Here, things that do not belong to the sick leave system are pregnancy (since it is not a sickness to be pregnant), grief, or when someone close to you needs help. However, there should be other safety systems that take care of these aspects. Nonetheless, as people learns about the system and its rules, there are people who tries to get around it:

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[12] 'Sjuktal' in Swedish, which is a way to measure number of people on sick leave in Sweden.
[13] A card game where you want to get rid of the queen of spades, Swedish version is known as *Svarte Petter*.

"I have so many clients who enrol with the Public Employment Agency who claim that they are at the disposal of the labour market who are terribly active in their [drug] abuse, but does not want help. And does not want to go to healthcare. And then they have right to financial assistance since 'I am searching for jobs now'. [Then I say,] 'but you cannot work now. You are high as a kite.' But no one sees that at the Public Employment Agency since they do not meet anyone and they [the addict] can 'get their shit together' for a phone call." – Social Service worker

As mentioned earlier, there is a discrepancy between the view on the sick leave system from healthcare and that of the SIA. From the interviews conducted for Paper 5, this was also manifested in other organizations involved in the system as well. Here, it became obvious that there were (at least) two different levels where the organizations saw their main contribution to value: private value and public value. The SIA has been recorded as seeing itself as guardians of the welfare system, explicitly 'defending' public value. Meanwhile, healthcare focuses on helping the patient and (almost) only focuses on individual value. There are also some regions (which are responsible for the healthcare organizations), which does not do *"anything that does not help the inhabitants of the region" (regional developer)*, indicating a focus on group level. Even though this must not be a problem, there are sometimes occasions when these different foci of value are in conflict, and where one is bound to see value decline or value failure, to use the terminology offered by Cui and Osborne (2023).

When it comes to change and improvements, some aspects are seen as problematic. One is that, among some actors such as the SIA but also internally at some regions, there is a perception that healthcare has an overly strong focus on evidence and that there is no culture to give feedback among physicians, which implies that if a physician manages the sick leave instrument inappropriately it is difficult to give that feedback, especially since the experience of non-physicians is that physicians do not listen to non-physicians, at least not when it comes to treatments. Here, the aspect of hierarchy becomes evident since *"if the chief physician has said it, then it is that way" (regional employee)*. These two aspects, hierarchy and lack of feedback, are seen to hamper the willingness to test as *"nothing is allowed to go wrong" (regional employee)*.

For other organizations, the willingness to change is diametrically the opposite. The SIA themselves are criticizing their sometimes too rapid changes, especially the *"Squared, right-wrong, on-off, that type of change in our organization is fast as lightning [...], then it turns out that no, that was not the way [...] and we turn out to be at the wrong place" (employee, SIA)*. There is also the issue that organizations tend to focus on their own problems, neglecting the fact that they are a part of the system. For example, when the Public Employment Agency reorganized, it took away all established points of contact with healthcare, or when specialist healthcare units on psychiatry and addiction were shut down forcing other actors to fill the void, beyond healthcare.

What is making it even more problematic in the system is the fact that actors are having a hard time coping with temporary funding, mainly administrated from the government. Even though actors do appreciate monetary resources, the consequence of temporary funding and directives from the government is that, when they change, the organization is often forced to abandon

previous initiative in favour of the new one, which sometimes results in years of work being lost.

Lastly, as seen in Table 3 (Chapter 3), all three of the Swedish public jurisdiction layers are represented among the PSOs (municipality, regional, and national). This was also shown during interviews, as healthcare mainly talked about 'regional aspects' and when addressing line of decision, the regional headquarters were where decisions were made. However, SIA, for example, talked about the 'national level', while the SoS is anchored in the relatively local context of the municipality, which makes an already fragmented system even more fragmented through different decision levels.

"It's only because of their stupidity that they're able to be so sure of themselves."
– Franz Kafka, The Trial (Processen)

6   Discussion

To meet the purpose *"To increase the understanding of how to improve value creation for the beneficiaries in public service systems",* this chapter is based on the three research questions, each of which has a separate section.

> RQ1: What characterizes improvements in public service systems?

> RQ2a: How can value creation and destruction be understood in public service systems?

> RQ2b: How can value for the beneficiary be understood in public service systems?

6.1   Improving public service systems

This section elaborates on RQ1: "*What characterizes improvements in public service systems?"* The research question is answered through a synthesis of all five articles, but the most detailed contribution comes from Paper 5, as seen in the following subsection. Also, this section discusses change and improvements, since change is considered to encompass improvements, where the understanding of change is needed to comprehend improvements.

6.1.1   *Problematization of change types*

This subsection starts by discussing each of the four change typologies presented in Paper 5 – *bureaucratic machine*, *helicopter implementation*, *new public bureaucracy,* and *decentralized improvement structure* – followed by a discussion regarding multiple change typologies in parallel within the public service system. It is worth noting that these change types are *not* PAM paradigms, but rather different types or change management and improvement approaches projects *tied* to PAM paradigms.

As seen in Paper 5, the *bureaucratic machine* is designed to implement changes regarding the policy system. Furthermore, the set-up for this 'machinery' is favourable to solve complicated problems; that is, problems for which it is possible to find the solution before implementation (Snowden & Boone 2007). However, when addressing complex or wicked problems – two categories of problems for which a solution cannot be found before implementation – this typology will likely run into problems (Prebble 2021), similarly to how a quality improvement strategy might not be applicable regarding these problem types (Matthews & Marzec 2017; Rosvall & Gremyr 2024). Here, the top-down and hierarchical approach may distance the decisions from the actual problem and make it difficult to work iteratively, which complex and wicked problems require (Geuijen et al. 2017; Rittel & Webber 1973; Snowden & Boone 2007; Paper 2). Nevertheless, the bureaucratic machine is made for, and is efficient at, implementing pre-known components required for changing the organization.

Regarding *new public bureaucracy*, the blend of market logics and bureaucracy are not always convergent as the primary driver for the market logic is price (Adler 2001), while the bureaucracy is driven by rules and hierarchy (Bryson et al. 2014). Furthermore, the hierarchical accountability and line of decision, combined with the system of delivery through self-regulating professions or arm's length public agencies, do not support each other, especially as the system of delivery is based on some degree of autonomy, specifically for the self-regulating professions. Furthermore, as there is a discrepancy between the hierarchy and the self-

regulating professions, one can expect that this discrepancy separates the problem solvers (for example, the professionals) from the mandates (through hierarchy), which hampers improvements and can lead to value destruction (Paper 2). Another consequence of this separation is that the components of trust (i.e., ability, benevolence, integrity) are, to a large extent, dispersed upon different individuals and over the organizational system as well (Mayer et al. 1995), which increases the risk of diminished trust. Furthermore, as the hierarchical nature strives to limit the SLBs' discretion, there is a risk of hampering adaptation to local contexts (May & Winter 2007). Lastly, as there is an emphasis on structural and organizational changes, typically affecting hierarchy, changes are bound to meet resistance as power dynamics are changing (Herr & Anderson 2015).

A perspective on the *helicopter implementation* is that it is, by definition, separated from the actual implementation of the change. This implies that it is up to the receiving organization to implement these changes, and that the changes might not be locally anchored or even relevant for the local context (Paper 2; Paper 5). However, as there is a separation of the design and implementation of the change, this could lead to increased autonomy of SLBs implementing the change, if the implementing organization's logic allows (Eriksson & Andersson 2023; May & Winter 2007). There is a significant overlap with the bureaucratic machinery, but the separation of the initiator and implementer of the change is one of the factors that makes it two different typologies. Furthermore, the fact that these changes are linear and project-based implies that there is finite interest in the change by the governing agency – that is, the 'helicopter'. The consequence is that when the interest disappears, so does the allocation of resources, and the change initiatives have a high risk of losing the organizational commitment and the chance of learning (Paper 4; Paper 5). Hence, revert back to previous behaviour that existed before the change, leading to co-destruction of value (Boyce 2003; Engen et al. 2021; Paper 1; Paper 4).

When it comes to the *decentralized improvement structure*, this change typology might have difficulties when it comes to implementing larger projects commanded from the top or from external agencies due to the established autonomy of the change typology (Van Der Voet, Groeneveld, & Kuipers 2014). On the other hand, this change typology has a degree of responsiveness, as it is decentralized, chooses the system of delivery in pragmatic way, and has a set-up for meeting multiple objectives (Bryson et al. 2014; O'Flynn 2007). Components fuelling the autonomy and discretion of SLBs, where the decentralization facilitates locally anchored improvements, increase the likelihood of success (May & Winter 2007; Zhang et al. 2022; Paper 2). Possibly, such autonomy might be able to minimize the gaps in the service system occurring due to a lack of ownership (Paper 4).

6.1.2 Change typologies in the public service system
In the public service system, which contains multiple actors (Petrescu 2019) and delivers value at different loci of the ecosystem (Dudau et al. 2019; Paper 3), the multiple ways – and hybridization (Fossestøl et al. 2015) of – change typologies affect the public service system's potential to improve its capacity of value cocreation (Paper 5). Based on the change types in Paper 5, this subsection presents three propositions.

At first glance, the accountability systems of the changes typologies looks rather aligned, as three out of four have hierarchy as part of their accountability system. However, considering that there are several PSOs – and, in some cases, also private and third sector organization – involved, the hierarchies of which are not the same, a misaligned accountability system is created, especially regarding the sick leave service, where there are municipalities, regions and national hierarchies prevalent. This misalignment is an unfavourable feature in organizational systems (Nadler & Tushman 1980). As a consequence, the question for who to turn to for obtaining the mandate to act will be difficult, potentially leading to value destruction (Paper 4). Furthermore, if a decentralized improvement structure is involved, a hierarchical organization will encounter difficulties when it seeks a manager on corresponding level in leading a joint change initiative in the other PSO (Paper 2). This leads to Proposition 1:

> *P1: Misalignment of organizational accountabilities can create dysfunctional change systems.*

This proposition implies that the change initiative might not achieve any change at all, do it slowly, or simply not create an improvement but a negative change due to improper implementation or wrong solution. Leading to either value failure or decline (Cui & Osborne 2023).

Even though there are several occasions when multiple change types can be problematic, the combination of a bureaucratic machinery and helicopter implementation do fit. Here, the key takeaway is the objective of both ideal types: the bureaucratic machinery seeks to achieve politically defined objectives, and so does helicopter implementation. Also, as discussed earlier, helicopter implementation focuses on the initiation, while the bureaucratic machine focuses on implementation (Paper 5). However, these ideal types do not perform well on all occasions, but primarily when it regards legislative or policy implementations. This leads to Proposition 2:

> *P2: There are occasions when ideal typologies match and function together, especially when objectives are aligned.*

Looking at the parameter 'system of delivery', if two PSOs would collaborate – for example, if one of the PSOs are tilting towards either new public bureaucracy or decentralized improvement structure, and the other towards helicopter implementation or bureaucratic machinery – this could have one of two results. For the case of new public bureaucracy, it could result in self-regulating professions that are likely to oppose the hierarchical decisions; for a decentralized improvement structure, employees will feel threatened in their way of working. In any case, the outcome risks becoming a failure, especially in the cases of complex or wicked problems where hierarchy and linear thinking cannot be used successfully (Camillus 2008; Snowden & Boone 2007). This is an important notion given that wicked and complex problems are increasingly common in public service systems (Bryson et al. 2017; Geuijen et al. 2017; Prebble 2021). This leads to Proposition 3:

> *P3: When logics regarding the system of delivery clashes, intended solutions to complex and wicked problems are likely to fail.*

Contrasting the above problematization of typologies towards the other papers appended to the thesis, the notion of complex and wicked problems becomes even more vivid. Consider the clash of change types between organizations combined with the required sequence of improvement projects to achieve an improvement (Paper 2). Also consider that these intra- and inter-organizational complexities must take several layers of value creation and destruction into account (Paper 3). This is not an easy task, especially in public service systems such as the sick leave system, where the lack of ownership and other influencing factors at the meso level does not support the success of improvements (Paper 4).

Moving to the aspect of professional organizations and improvements, mentioned briefly in Section 2.2.1, where professional organizations could be described through high knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and professional workforce (Von Nordenflycht 2010), healthcare follows the characteristics in terms of knowledge intensity and a professional workforce, but has a high capital intensity – at least in the current system of hospitals. Meanwhile, the surrounding actors of the sick leave system does not meet the criteria for a professional organization. Therefore, the need for professional knowledge differs between the actors in the system (Batalden & Stoltz 1995), which potentially creates barriers if improvements need to cross organizational or professional borders (Paper 2).

6.1.3 Characteristics of improvements in public service systems
When the articles are placed beside each other, a picture emerges that allows us to see a multi-facetted story where improvements span over hierarchical, organizational, professional, and societal borders (Paper 2; Paper 3). Furthermore, a sequence of improvements might be required to achieve any benefit, especially if seeking to achieve continuous improvements (Paper 2). Meanwhile, the parties that in the end should make use of the improvement – that is, the beneficiaries – are not always clear; this is an interesting aspect given that their involvement increases the likeliness of success (Paper 1), and where improvement in one part of the system, can result in value creation as well as destruction in another part of the system (Paper 3). To complicate things further, the intra-organizational perspective at the system's meso level hinders a system perspective (Osborne 2006), increasing the difficulty to improve (Paper 4).

From a system perspective, there are discrepancies regarding how the different actors behave when it comes to improvements (Paper 5), discrepancies which adds complexity to the system when trying to improve, and may also increase the lack of ownership of the service (Paper 4). Also, as the different PSOs adhere to different levels of decision, there are no 'natural' points of either assessment or resolution of conflicts, especially between hierarchical organizations such as healthcare and SIA. Related to the findings of Paper 2, where improvements moved between different organizations, it certainly does not make things less complex if the decision makers are out of sync. Therefore, in the current system, it falls on the SLBs to make the best of the situation, where their bending of rules and adaptation towards reality will prove useful (Lipsky 1980), if the organizational structures and the SLBs' level of autonomy allows (Eriksson & Andersson 2023; May & Winter 2007; Zhang et al. 2022; Paper 4).

Hence, the characteristics for improvements in public service systems are (1) importance of involving those the service is made for (Paper 1); (2) PSOs can have different improvement

approaches (Paper 5); (3) a variety of boarders for each improvement might have to be crossed (Paper 2); (4) Influencing factors at the meso level which should be considered to avoid value destruction (Paper 4); (5) a multi-faceted context of value creation and destruction for beneficiaries going beyond the initial service user (Paper 3); (6) different decision levels creating difficulties to create agreement; and (7) systemic gaps hindering alignment and improvements that may lead to value destruction (Paper 3; Paper 4). To summarize the answer to RQ1, characteristics of improvements in public service systems are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Characteristics of improvements in public service systems

Tied to Paper	Characteristic
Paper 1	Importance of involving the beneficiaries.
Paper 5	PSOs can have different change types, where:
	• *P1: Misalignment of organizational accountabilities can create dysfunctional change systems.*
	• *P2: There are occasions when change typologies match and function together, especially when objectives are aligned.*
	• P3: *When logics regarding the system of delivery clashes, complex and wicked problems are likely to fail.*
Paper 2	Improvements might need to cross, hierarchical, organizational, and professional boarders.
Paper 4	Influencing factors at the meso level connected to value destruction.
Paper 3	Both value creation and destruction can occur for beneficiaries that are not restricted to the initial service users.
Thesis Discussion (Paper 2)	Different levels of decision create difficulties for PSOs to concur.
Paper 3 & 4	Systemic gaps leading to value destruction.

6.2   Value creation and destruction in public service systems

This section addresses RQ2a: *How can value creation and destruction be understood in public service systems?*

As seen in Paper 3, value creation and destruction can occur at several levels in parallel in the public service system of the sick leave service. However, given that there are extensive issues within the sick leave service (Altermark 2020; Paper 3), including influencing factors at the meso level (Paper 4), it is not strange that there are several instances of the system that can be tied to value destruction. Looking more closely at the reasons for value (co-)destruction (Engen et al. 2021; Järvi et al. 2018) and the issues depicted in Paper 3 and Paper 4, some conclusions can be drawn. Here, the discrepancy between purpose and the expectations of the service user of the sick leave service (Paper 3) can be seen as the 'absence of information'. This discrepancy is important since the definition of quality is the "...*ability to satisfy, and preferably exceed, the needs and expectations of the customers*" (Bergman & Klefsjö 2010, p. 23), which implies that as long as there is a discrepancy, the service user will never be satisfied. Arguably, there is a link between this discrepancy and several of the other reasons, such as the 'inability to serve' due to nonmatching intentions, 'mistakes' due to miscommunication as a consequence of the discrepancy, 'customer misbehaviour' since the service user does not follow the intended purpose, or 'blaming' due to the discrepancy (Järvi et al. 2018; Paper 3; Paper 4). Furthermore,

this discrepancy can be interpreted as a 'lack of bureaucratic competence', which may stem from insufficient information about the regulatory framework (Engen et al., 2021). However, even though Engen et al. (2021) argue that the 'lack of bureaucratic competence' is another previously undefined reason for value co-destruction, the above example shows that a 'lack of bureaucratic competence' could, in some instances, be seen as a subordinate category under 'absence of information' (Järvi et al. 2018). Furthermore, if there is a bad match between involved actors of the sick leave service, such as having different purposes or approaches to solve an issue, there is a high risk of value destruction (Paper 3), perhaps due ill-suited meso level which are not supporting improvements (Paper 4). Here, an insufficient level of trust (Järvi et al. 2018) is not a farfetched idea, as there is a poor continuity of involved actors between the PSOs (Paper 3), which hampers the shaping of relationships and thereby trust (Mayer et al. 1995). Which in the end affects the health outcomes of the patient (Löfgren et al. 2024).

Further addressing the research gap regarding value destruction (Engen et al. 2021), when seeking to improve there is a risk of suboptimization of the service system, due to several reasons (Paper 2). Firstly, optimizing for one area, such as for a frontline employee in one PSO, does not necessarily lead to improvements of the whole system (Paper 2; Paper 3). Secondly, as improvements sometimes requires sequences to achieve any benefit, an improvement project might not generate value if the other required improvement projects are not performed (Paper 2), implying misuse of resources since time has been spent in vain (Engen et al. 2021) leading to value failure (Cui & Osborne 2023). Thirdly, in service systems requiring several actors to collaborate, the reasons for value destruction – absence of clear expectations, absence of information, lack of transparency, and an insufficient level of trust (Engen et al. 2021; Järvi et al. 2018) – are likely to be more prevalent the more actors that are involved, which aligns with the aspect that increased number of actors increases the complexity (Acar et al. 2023). This as illustrated in Paper 3, where frontline employees commented that all involved actors had to match for a successful outcome. Fourthly, as it is not always clear, from a service user, frontline employee, or meso-level perspective, which actor is responsible for the service, it is unsurprising that there are unclear expectations (since it is unclear who these expectations should be directed to) and a lack of transparency regarding information of the service system (Engen et al. 2021; Järvi et al. 2018; Paper 3; Paper 4).

Concluding this discussion of reasons for value co-destruction, even though Paper 4 starts to connect influencing factors[14] at the meso level, there is still a need to investigate the antecedents of and the interconnectedness between the reasons for value co-destruction in public service systems, moving beyond the dyadic assumption, involving multiple actors. Especially acknowledging the interconnectedness between the micro, meso, and macro levels to eliminate the current 'gaps' of the public service system (Liljeroos-Cork & Luhtala 2024; Paper 3; Paper 4).

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[14] Lack of purpose, Lack of Senior management support, Absence of measurements, Insufficient knowledge dissemination, Insufficient knowledge creation, Lack of adjacent management support, Lack of mandate to act, and Absence of ownership

6.3 Value for the beneficiary

This section addresses RQ2b: *How can value for the beneficiary be understood in public service systems?* This is done, firstly, by addressing the loci of benefit in the service system in relation to the main PSOs, and secondly, through a discussion about the 'customer' of public services.

6.3.1 *Loci of Benefit and main PSOs*

As value in public sector can be created on several levels of the service system, the question regarding whom to serve is not always easy (Paper 3). The four loci of benefit[15] described in Paper 3 also show that value creation and destruction can occur simultaneously. Looking at the main PSOs of the sick leave system[16] and their relation to the loci of benefit, the Social Insurance Agency has a duty to 'guard' the democratic values of the public service system (Altermark 2020), as well as contributing to the individual level of the insured (Paper 3). However, these two loci of benefit do not necessarily match in terms of value creation (Paper 3). In some cases, value exploitation will occur, where value will be destroyed for one actor but created for another; for example, approving sickness benefit for an individual who was not entitled to it (according to law) will make value decline for the public but will create value for that individual (Cui & Osborne 2023). Meanwhile, if the sickness benefit is not approved, value failure or decline might occur regarding individual value for the insured but create (or sustain) value for the public (Cui & Osborne 2023; Paper 3). This implies that the Social Insurance Agency must balance these two loci of benefit where some cases are more difficult than others.

Moving towards healthcare, there is a clear focus on the first locus of benefit; that is, the insured *patient* (Glouberman & Mintzberg 2001; Paper 3). As such, there is a risk that healthcare will miss the overarching picture by not including the other loci of benefit, thus suboptimizing the system (Paper 2, Paper 3). Furthermore, as neither healthcare nor the Social insurance agency – the main PSOs – have the second and third loci of benefit in focus, but only the individual (that is, the first loci) and public (the fourth loci), there is a risk that these other two will be ignored. This is seen in Paper 3 where the needs of the service do not match its purpose (or any of the PSOs' purposes). Moreover, as the Social Insurance Agency and healthcare sometimes do not have the same intentions, this divergence is not just damaging the specific case, but also the trust towards the system (Altermark 2020; Paper 3).

On a service system level – and this is where the problem moves from complex and approaches wicked – the expected value from citizens is not homogenous (Ojasalo & Kauppinen 2024), similar to how each population's propensity to participate in co-production varies (Alford 2014). A heterogeneity that becomes apparent through the different political waves issue by different elected officials. Such heterogeneity differs over time and between cultures and nations. Therefore, policy makers cannot rest at ease, even if they are currently meeting the demands of the citizens, because there might be changes of opinions as time goes by, craving constant adaptations of public services. Moreover, using the strictness regarding when to accept

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[15] Based on steps from the service interaction, the first is the individual service user, the second could be a family member, the third could be an organization tied to a family member affected by the outcome of the service, and the fourth is the public.

[16] That is, the Social Insurance Agency and healthcare.

and when to decline sickness benefits as an example, and given that there are different political opinions and cultures within a country, there should be an interval between when too many are reimbursed and when too much is declined. If society is homogenous, or at least where different subgroups of the population are close to each other, the work of policy makers would be easier, as the 'sweet spot' for the sick leave insurance system would be quite easy to find. However, if the population is divided, with overly divergent opinions, the policy makers would have a hard time finding any sweet spot, it might not even exist any overlap were the different opinions overlap to the extent for a 'good enough', resulting in some groups always being dissatisfied. However, SLBs might be able to mitigate some parts of the problem through bending the rules, or sometimes, as mentioned in some of the conducted interviews, doing things that are not included in the role description or taking action without previous approval (Lipsky 1980; Paper 3; Paper 4).

6.3.2   The 'customer' of Public Services

As discussed in Papers 3 and 5, it is not always as clear who the 'customer' is in public services as it is in most of the private sector (Moore 1994; Osborne 2018). In the private sector there are different roles of the customer, as Lengnick-Hall (1996) explained regarding customer contribution to quality. By displaying five different roles of customers,[17] she set the stage for a deeper understanding of the customer concept. However, if this framework of roles is transferred into the public sector, some aspects become unclear.

For example, a 'buyer' in the original sense of the private sector has an *option* to buy a product or service that is primarily driven by the *expectations* of that particular good or service (Lengnick-Hall 1996). However, as some public services are coercive (e.g., Moore 1994), the *option* is non-existent in many cases. Nevertheless, there are *expectations* on public services, as well as a 'package deal' that is 'bought' in terms of a bundle of public services in return for tax payments. Of course, in some cases there is a choice of not using the service, or moving abroad, but this is not the ordinary circumstance and not an option for everybody. Also, some public services that have been marketized allow for private actors where there is at least a choice of service/product supplier. Moreover, the way that public services can be influenced is limited to democratic processes, which are usually significantly slower than the price/market mechanism (Moore 1994). Furthermore, the expectation on the service and the judgement of outcome (that is, the role of defining quality (Bergman & Klefsjö 2010)) is not limited to the primary recipient of the service but involves society as a whole and its citizens (Ojasalo & Kauppinen 2024). Therefore, what is proposed is that the framework by Lengnick-Hall (1996) requires modification of the role of buyer into that of a *citizen,* and also to further adapt the framework to public sector, changing the naming of 'customer roles' into that of 'citizen roles', which is more neutral and general than that of the marketized notion of the 'customer'.

Follwoing, the citizen can be defined by two components. The first is the judgement (including expectations) on the public service, and the second is the possibility of partaking of democratic procedures, such as voting.[18] If linking these citizen roles (previously customer roles) to the framework displayed in Paper 3 describing different levels and loci of benefit, it can be

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[17] Customer as resource, customer as co-producer, customer as buyer, customer as product, and customer as user.
[18] Including minors, who are citizens even though they do not have the right to vote.

concluded that the insured (that is, the first level) and the public (the fourth level) are clearly tied to the role of the citizen, as these levels are, by definition, citizens. Meanwhile, the second level (such as the employer of the insured) and the third level (such as an organization tied to a family member of the insured) do not always have to be tied to the citizen; for example, if an organization of a family member is not residing within the same country as the public service. However, most often organizations, such as employers, are residing within the same country, and since organizations can be seen as aggregated forms of individual citizens (and are taxpaying entities), they constitute some sort of citizenry as well.

Furthermore, as displayed in Paper 3, there are users of the service of sick leave other than the primary recipient, and while these fall into the category of 'customer as user' defined by Lengnick-Hall (1996), I would argue that this role of 'user' of public service is too broad to be understood as one role. An employer does not use the sick leave system in the same way as an insured person on sick leave benefit (Paper 3). Here, the proposal is to introduce the concept of *beneficiary* and *client* into this framework. This is done by recognizing the different levels of beneficiaries (Paper 3) where the first level is a client and beneficiary, while the other levels (Levels 2, 3 or 4) are only beneficiaries. Therefore, the client is defined similarly as the 'customer as a user' where it is the "primary recipient" (Lengnick-Hall 1996, p. 809) and takes part of the 'moment of truth' (Normann 2001) with the service provider. Hence, it is here that the main possibility of co-production of the service is found at the interface between the citizen(s) and the PSO(s) (Brandsen & Honingh 2018; Nabatchi et al. 2017). Furthermore, a client primarily receives private value, which is individually consumed, as opposed to public value, which is consumed collectively (Alford 2002; Moore 1994). However, the beneficiary is anyone who benefits from a service, including individual and public value, which can be located at different steps away from the primary recipient – that is, the moment of truth –, through several levels of loci of benefit (Lengnick-Hall 1996; Paper 3; Normann 2001).

Regarding the citizen as product, Lengnick-Hall (1996) defines the customer as a product when the "customer both experiences transformation activities and becomes the *final stage* of the transformation process" (Lengnick-Hall 1996, p. 813, italics in original). However, this product-oriented nomenclature is precisely what the service paradigm is moving away from, especially in the public sector (Grönroos 1994; Osborne 2006; Pestoff 2006). But I argue that it can be useful to acknowledge that some public services can treat citizen(s) as product – such as, schools, prisons, and the sick leave system; As there are public services where the citizen is not a product, in terms of transformation of the citizen, but only a value co-creator; for example, garbage collection or power grids/energy services (at least in the Swedish context). Maybe not a 'product' treated as a as an impersonal object, but rather emphasising and acknowledging the transformational aspect of the citizen moving through the service system.

Regarding the 'citizen as a co-producer', I adopt the definition of co-production as "an umbrella concept that captures a wide variety of activities that can occur in any phase of the public service cycle and in which state actors and lay actors work together to produce benefits", as displayed by Nabatchi et al. (2017, p. 769). It is important to note that there can be various actors who are not beneficiaries but serve only as co-producers. These may include involved PSOs or lay actors who do not directly benefit from the service but partakes in the co-

production process (Alford, 2014). Here, it might be relevant to consider the different roles of co-producers in order to understand the contribution to co-production of the (sometimes) multiple actors (Alford 2014). Furthermore, if looking at the notion of coercive services, an inmate at a prison can co-produce public value, while individual value is co-*destroyed*. This is different from when value is co-produced in the service of sick leave where (hopefully) both public and individual value are co-created. Hence, co-production can be present in all public services and can involve different actors, which can co-create and co-destroy both individual and public value. Therefore, I want to add two aspects to the definition of co-production presented by Nabatchi et al. (2017, p. 769). Firstly, in the moment of co-producing a service, it is unsure whether value will be created or destroyed.[19] Secondly, as argued in the theory chapter, the lay actors can either participate voluntarily or be coerced into participation.

Moreover, a critical part of the 'citizen as a resource' is the notion of what the citizen brings to the table that enables value creation/destruction. This could be information or ideas but also themselves, as in the cases of healthcare and education (Lengnick-Hall 1996). However, the citizen as a resource differs from that of the citizen as a product. For example, in the case of a school, the citizen is both a resource and a product. Meanwhile, when designing a playground, there might be ideas and information that are used from the citizens, but the product is the playground, not the citizens. In both these examples, the citizen is a co-producer of value (if someone plays at the playground). In Table 10, the definitions of the roles of the citizen is displayed alongside examples based on the modified framework by Lengnick-Hall (1996).

6.3.3 Citizen co-production in the sick leave service

Contextualizing the above discussion for the service of sick leave, this section will relate the lay actors displayed in Table 3 to the different citizen roles in public service. I start with the logical point, which is also the easiest to describe – the service user, who can be all roles. Secondly, employers are not clients nor products, but could be seen as an accumulated source of citizenry, and depending on the case, be a resource, beneficiary, and co-producer, creating or destroying value in the individual and public sphere. When it comes to the community around the service user, these could both be the reason and the solution coming out of sick leave (Löfgren et al. 2024; Paper 3). In terms of being the 'solution' to return to work from sick leave, it could be done by managing the service user's contact with PSOs, supplying necessary information and ideas, as well as supporting the service user in everyday life, hence being both a resource and a co-producer. In terms of being the reason why the service user is on sick leave, it could be the care taking of a family member that causes the need for sick leave (Paper 3). Thus, the insured family member on sick leave could be seen as a 'product' that is refined by the sick leave system, were other family members aid in the "refinement" of the insured user (i.e., the sick family member) throughout the sick leave. Lastly, the family member (or friend/community) could be a beneficiary, both in terms of being the reason and the solution, as both cases can benefit (or not benefit) from (withhold) monetary support from the sick leave system as well as a faster recovery of the service user.

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[19] This makes the service outcome like Schrödinger's cat – both dead and alive at the same time until the box is opened; except that, in the service case, it is both creating and destroying value until the service is performed.

As a final comment on the public actors and co-production, the complexity of the sick leave system partially lies in the fact that the PSOs can take different roles in the co-production of the service depending on the case (Alford 2014). In some cases, the public employment service is a supplier or a resources, as in supplying work related rehabilitation activities; in other cases, they are the gate keeper requiring input for approval of reimbursement, or social services, who sometimes acts as a partner to healthcare during rehabilitation but could also be the instance where the service user goes to when the sick leave reimbursement is not approved. These dualities, showing a lack of ownership and transparency (Engen et al. 2021; Paper 4), where actors can act as 'gatekeepers' as well as enablers or partners of success, not only makes it tricky for service users (and potentially family members that might try to help them) but also for the other PSOs, especially in contexts where there are different cultures restraining the SLBs, or different hierarchies that not matching (Jacobsson et al. 2020; Paper 5).

Table 10: The different citizen roles in public services

Role	Definition	Examples and explanations
Client	The creation and/or destruction of value for the "primary recipient" (Lengnick-Hall 1996, p. 809) and partaker of the "moment of truth" (Normann 2001).	The insured service user is a client, but not the insured's family.
Citizen	Actors with expectations and judgements of outcomes of public services, and with ability of affecting services through democratic processes (Lengnick-Hall 1996; Moore 1994).	The insured service user is a citizen, as are other members of the public. Meanwhile, organizations and groups can be seen as aggregated types of citizen (if part of the country).
Product	When the citizen "…both experiences transformation activities and becomes the final stage of the transformation process" (Lengnick-Hall 1996, p. 813).	Enters the system in one condition and is 'refined' throughout the process. This is the case in healthcare, education and sick leave benefit, but not in garbage collection and road maintenance.
Co-producer	The voluntary or coerced involvement of an actor in any of the commissioning, design, delivery and/or evaluation of a public services.[20] Requires the participation of at least one lay actor and one public actor (Nabatchi et al.'s 2017).	A family member of an insured service user can be a co-producer of value in the service of sick leave together with Social Insurance Agency/healthcare. A student is a co-producer of both individual value and (hopefully) public value, together with the teacher/school.
Resource	What the citizen(s) brings to the table that enables value creation/destruction (Lengnick-Hall 1996).	In the case of sick leave, it can be information supplied by the insured citizen and surrounding social network and contacts that can facilitate value creation. This differs from co-production, where *what the citizen brings* to the table can include other co-producers.
Beneficiary	Benefitting (or not) from the outcome of the service.	Recognizing the different levels of beneficiaries, which in sick leave system can be the insured citizen, the family of the insured, organization tied to a family member, and the public (Paper 3).

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[20] Based on Nabatchi et al.'s (2017, p. 769) definition of co-production as "an umbrella concept that captures a wide variety of activities that can occur in any phase of the public service cycle and in which public actors and lay actors work together to produce benefits."

7 Conclusion and future research

When combining the thesis framework and its appended articles, a broad conclusion contributing to meeting the purpose of the thesis "*To increase the understanding of how to improve value creation for the beneficiaries in public service systems*", is that due to the inherent complexity of the public sector it is difficult to performe improvements, and the lack of knowledge in the area is not helping. However, together, the articles take a system approach to this issue and enhances the understanding on a micro, meso, and macro level. Furthermore, from a PAM perspective, the articles meet the need of empirical research within the field (Dudau et al. 2019; Eriksson et al. 2021; Eriksson 2019; Hardyman et al. 2015; Kuipers et al. 2014; Van der Voet 2014).

As seen in the discussion chapter about the 'customer' in public service, you cannot just copy a concept from private sector into the public sector. As with the discourse and critique of NPM, one should be careful when adopting concepts from other areas (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Osborne 2006). Considering that the field of improvements and quality management has its roots in scientific management and is heavily influenced by the automotive and manufacturing industry in particular (Bergman & Klefsjö 2010; Bhuiyan & Baghel 2005) one should be careful. Similarly, change management has often been criticized for being too linear and hierarchical/managed by top management (By 2005, 2020), which one could see as a rather strong warning for copying such methods when addressing contemporary problems. Especially as researchers are highlighting the need of recognizing the differences between change management in private versus public sector (Van der coet et al. 2014). Nevertheless, being influenced or inspired by other areas might be an offer that cannot be refused by the public service system due to its prevailing shortcomings.

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

This thesis has addressed several research gaps (seen in Table 1) by addressing three research questions. Firstly, the thesis has contributed to the need to increase the knowledge for how to improve PAM and its service system (Bryson et al. 2017; Gravesteijn & Wilderom 2018; Petrescu 2019; Prebble 2021; Sønderskov & Rønning 2021; Trischler et al. 2023) through the presentation of characteristics of improvements in public service systems. This is done by highlighting the importance of involving the service user (Paper 1); acknowledging that there are different improvement/change approaches (Paper 5); that improvements might need to cross professional, organizational, and hierarchical boarders (Paper 2); considering that value creation and destruction occurs at different levels of the service system (Paper 3); and noting several influencing factors at the meso level affecting value destruction (Paper 4).

Secondly, the thesis has highlighted the need to elaborate on value destruction and creation when a multiplicity of actors are involved (Beirão et al. 2017; Bryson et al. 2017; Hardyman et al. 2015; Petrescu 2019; Zeithaml et al. 2020) by showing that there is a risk of value destruction due to suboptimization when trying to improve (Paper 2; Paper 3); by showing a need to recognize sequences in improvement(s) (Paper 2), where the complexity increases with the number of involved actors (Acar et al. 2023), which in turn increases the risk of value destruction, especially since there are several influencing factors at the meso level that can

hinder improvements (Paper 4), and not to forget, that it can be unclear which actor is responsible for the service (Engen et al. 2021; Järvi et al. 2018; Paper 3; Paper 4).

Thirdly, the need to clarify who the beneficiary and/or the 'customer' is in public services (Hardyman et al. 2019; Osborne 2018; Petrescu 2019; Trischler et al. 2023) has been elaborated, transferring and developing the customer roles of Lengnick-Hall (1996) into that of citizen roles in public services. Lastly, these findings also contribute by providing empirical findings to the areas of PAM and change management (Dudau et al. 2019; Eriksson et al. 2021; Eriksson 2019; Hardyman et al. 2015; Kuipers et al. 2014; Van der Voet 2014).

7.2 Future research

As this thesis has not answered everything on the addressed topic, and to guide future research, the following avenues for future research are proposed. Firstly, the different roles of the beneficiaries of public service systems tied to value creation and destruction needs further theoretic elaboration, as well as empirical studies (Trischler et al. 2023). Secondly, the complexities of multi-actor contexts require a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind value creation and destruction (Petrescu 2019), in addition to the delineation of antecedents and interconnectedness of reasons from value destruction, moving beyond the dyadic assumption, and crossing the micro, meso, and macro levels. Thirdly, as several characteristics for improvements in public service systems are presented, these should be verified in other contexts together with a more in-depth understanding of each characteristic, their connections, sub- characteristics, and antecedents. There is also a need to further address improvements in public sector and how to merge different change typologies into successful improvement projects. Finally, more research is needed regarding the notion that different actors can have different views on value (Ojasalo & Kauppinen 2024) and if so, how to align the perspectives.

7.3 Practical implications

For readers who have reached this far (or have skipped to this section), the following list offers practical insights from this thesis:

- Improvements can be sequential, implying that several improvement projects must be done before value is realized. For example, overarching rules must comply with the sharing of data before interorganizational improvement projects are set up that intend to share data.
- Improvements can span professional, organizational and hierarchical borders, implying that different logics, cultures, and rules must be accounted for. For example, one organization might have its centre of power at a national level, while another organization's centre of power is regional, making collaboration tricky when the corresponding level does not have the same mandates.
- It is important to consider who the public services are made for. However, this is not always simple, as an improvement for one actor can have a negative impact on another given that there can be multiple actors affected. For instance, making it easier for parents to take care of kids with special needs might have a negative impact of the employer of the parent, and might have both higher or lower societal costs tied to it, depending on each case.

- Aligning the intentions and purpose(s) of joint services between actors is essential in order to avoid the risk of destroying value. For instance, if the social insurance agency and healthcare do not have the same intentions with a service, the risk of failure is greater compared to if they are aligned.
- There are different types of approaches to change management; some types match and others do not. When performing joint change management projects, this should be considered to minimize issues along the project. For example, a hierarchical organization can run into issues if it decides to collaborate with a decentralized and autonomous organization.
- On an organizational level, it is important to consider the following eight influencing factors when driving improvement projects to avoid value destruction: Lack of purpose, Lack of Senior management support, Absence of measurements, Insufficient knowledge dissemination, Insufficient knowledge creation, Lack of adjacent management support, Lack of mandate to act, and Absence of ownership.
- There are gaps in the current system when it comes to ownership, resulting in increased risk of value destruction, as both improvement initiatives and service users might fall through the cracks.
- The ambiguity of the citizen and the beneficiary of public services (as addressed in Table 10) allows managers of public services to understand the roles of citizens in public services to a greater depth, guiding when and how to involve different types of citizens.

"Champagne should be cold, dry and hopefully, free."
– Christian Pol Roger.

8 Reflection on the PhD journey

During my first year of the master's programme quality and operations management I also worked part-time at the Gothenburg concert hall as a customer host, checking tickets, working in the bar during intermissions, guarding coats, and so on. During one special event, in the beginning of June, many of the guests wore tailcoats and prom dresses. The event was the Chalmers doctoral degree conferment ceremony.[21] While I was pouring sparkling wine into glasses before the guests arrived, a colleague in her sixties said to me, "But Daniel, you are studying at Chalmers, won't you be a PhD soon as well?" At the time I had no plan to do a PhD, which I told her, and she responded, "Just you wait and see", like a fortune teller seeing something obvious that I could not. And now, here I am. I recall this anecdote because it was the first time I was asked about whether I would pursue a PhD. The second time it happened was when the examiner of my master's thesis, and now my colleague, Andreas Hellström, asked me and my thesis partner if we had any intentions of doing a PhD after our master's. We both answered that it might happen in the future, even though it was not in our immediate future, as planned. However, roughly one and a half years later, after finishing the master and working a year as a management consultant, I had my first day as a PhD student. For some, one and a half year might represent the 'immediate future'.

At the beginning, I remember the feeling of "coming home", at an intellectual level. I felt comfortable with pondering difficult words that I barely understood at the time. However, it is the feeling – or, perhaps more accurately – the *sensation* of grasping something that has been in front of your eyes all along, but you had not really understood or been able to see it clearly, that has kept me going.

It has not always been smooth sailing as a PhD student. The sensation of feeling lost is certainly one that I am acquainted with now. Not knowing where to look next, not knowing who to interview to get 'the right answers', or, for that matter, what to write to make my text make sense. Even though you have sort of a clear picture in your head of what to say, you seem to miss some pieces that make the picture whole. Another example regards data, as in most research projects with an action research approach, the sheer amount of data can be a problem (Herr & Anderson 2015). Even though I had read about it, it was a different experience in real life – sifting through journal entries, linking them to interview statements, or cross-referencing the entries towards codes from focus groups. And how do you make sense of the experience gathered through and from a conference? Or a workshop where you yourself were the facilitator, so you had to write a two-hour summary of the insights and experiences that occurred during the workshop process, directly after a four-hour workshop before you forgot it. What made sense when writing the summary might not turn out to be sound in a scientific context, resulting in severed self-esteem. But suddenly, you find 'that article' and everything makes sense; the empirics chapter is writing itself, the theory is a 'perfect match' with the data, by the way. Finaly submitted to a journal! Then comes the reviewers, with comments like "I fail to see how this contributes to research…". Well, that sucks. (That article was eventually published, but not in that journal.)

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[21] Doktorspromotion.

In terms of learning, my first article, Paper 1, involved the steepest learning curve, even though the knowledge achieved during the writing of that article did not show up until later. Paper 1 was my first real interaction with the global research community and gave me insights into what writing a research article was about and into submitting to a peer-reviewed research journal. It was seemingly basic research knowledge, but very important.

The second article, Paper 2, was different since I did not work with any of my supervisors, and not even a researcher from my department. This article came to be as a working group with the purpose of helping practitioners visualize data regarding the sick leave system. Key take-aways from this paper were the management of large sets of data and going between qualitative and quantitative data. It was a mixed-methods approach, to some extent, but with the emphasis on the qualitative side.

The third article, Paper 3, started out as a loose collaboration between myself and a PhD student at Gothenburg University (GU), who also studied the sick leave system. It had the same context but a different perspective, and I think this first-hand experience of what cross-functional collaboration could generate, knowledge-wise, enhanced the research quality of Paper 3. It also allowed me to gain insights into the medical field of research, so close yet so far from management studies. It was during this article that I found a more theoretical belonging, which was the area of public service management and PAM. Even though I do feel that I belong to quality management, as this was the starting point of my academic journey, it was when I got to theorize the findings in Paper 3 that I first felt truly at home. While PAM and Public service management might be the theoretical basis, my way of thinking and approaching problems are still rooted in quality management and improvements.

The fourth article (which is Paper 5, if counting the starting point) is my only single-authored paper. To be one's own project manager is interesting, and, at least for me, led to more internal dialogs, with me talking to myself – more than I usually do, at least. Going from an idea stage to designing the research, finding the right data sources, gathering the data, analysing, writing, etc. all by myself (except from invaluable discussions with my supervisors) was something I enjoyed. However, I did realize that this might be fun once in a while, but the majority of time I prefer to have some type of writing partner.

The fifth article (Paper 4) is as close as you get when it comes to longitudinal studies during a PhD (on nominal time in Sweden). While I have not quantitively assessed it, I estimate that the volume of the data for this article would be the largest of the five. Here, utilizing both the theoretical knowledge gain during these years as a PhD student as well as the contextual and empirical knowledge gain since I started. Resulting in a title approaching Hybris[22] level, claiming to know why improvements fail.

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[22] A term used in ancient Greek mythology to symbolize someone or someone's actions to achieve or even surpass those of the gods. Nowadays, it can also be called *hubris* and is used to denote some sort of overconfidence or arrogance.

However, everything comes to an end,[23] including this PhD journey. I have enjoyed the ride, with all the bumps, roadblocks, and hills (mountains?), but it would definitely not have been this fun without all the people I have met and friends I have made.

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[23] Except circles, since they do not have a start or an end.

"I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying."
– Oscar Wilde

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