An empirical assessment of the applicability of public values concept:
Arizona food assistance network

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Abstract

Ever since Moore’s (1995) initial formulation, the public values concept has emerged as an increasingly popular topic in public administration literature. On the one hand, scholars taking empirical stances are still confounded by the concept’s plasticity, multiplicity, and measurability. On the other hand, the role of non-governmental actors is more and more explicitly articulated with the collaborative network form of governance by public value researchers. When public authority’s roles become minimal, and a variety of civil society actors instead taking responsibilities for fulfilling public purposes, the development of collaborative network governance makes identifying public values even more challenging, letting alone evaluating outcomes. Current public values literature has not address the gaps. The development of food assistance networks in the US is just such an example. A food assistance network usually centers on a large, well-resourced food bank and its partner organizations, all of which work together to address the issue of food insecurity, supplementing the insufficiency of government social safety net and social welfare policies. Studying within the context, this study uses qualitative semi-structured interview data from a random sample of 60 partner organizations in an Arizona food assistance network to empirically identify public values, public values relationships, and public value convergence within the network. Our findings indicate that the network is constituted by pluralistic organizations across sector types. Six groups of public values are indentified in the network: subsistence, vulnerable population, quality of life, developmental opportunities, spiritual supports, and working together. Moreover, we identified three types of pubic values relationships within the network: identical, complimentary, and hierarchical relationships, which could explain why an organization participates in a network relation. Finally, we derived that the public values within the network converged toward three bounding values, which allow all the pluralistic organizations to co-exist in a collaborative network: human dignity, benevolence, and food resource utilization. Concerns about the issues of empirically identifying public values and a possible approach of domain set are discussed. Implications for public values and collaborative network are also discussed.
Introduction
Ever since Moore’s (1995) initial formulation, public values concept have emerged as an increasingly popular and important topic in public administration. Within the public values literature, diverse inquiries range from normative debates, to empirical examinations linking the concept to public policy applications as well as to public management and performance outcomes.

Although public value concept is attracting considerable interests in academia, scholars taking empirical stances are confounded by the concept’s plasticity, multiplicity, and measurability. Identifying and evaluating public values have become another endeavor in which some methodological progress is accumulating. For example, Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) conducted an extensive literature review of public values works, identified sets of values, and grouped the values into seven categories pertaining to different aspects of public administration.

Acknowledging that public value is not governmental but is rooted in society, culture, groups, and individuals, Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) left the questions of how to identify and set boundaries public values in this regard open. The role of non-governmental actors is more explicitly articulated with the collaborative network form of governance (Stoker, 2006). When public authority’s roles become minimal, and a variety of civil society actors instead take responsibilities, the development of collaborative network governance makes identifying public values even more challenging, let alone evaluating outcomes.

The development of food assistance networks in the US is just such an example. A food assistance network usually centers on a large, well-resourced food bank and its partner organizations, all of which work together to address the issue of food insecurity, supplementing the insufficiency of government social safety net and social welfare policies (Curtis & McClellan, 1995; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Riches, 2002).

Using qualitative semi-structured interview data from a random sample of 60 partner organizations in an Arizona food assistance network centered on a focal Food Bank, we ask the following questions: (1) What are the organizations which constitute the food assistance network? (2) What are these organizations’ public values? (3) What types of relationships and configurations exist among this network of organizations’ public values? (4) Can the relationships and configurations explain why these organizations come together to form a network? (5) Can a single public value indicator, food security, fully explain why the network forms? By answering these questions, we hope the findings of this study can further enhance our understanding of the role of public values in constituting a network, and offer some implications.
for identifying and evaluating public values in policy domains filled with collaborative networks.

In the following section, we first briefly discuss public values theory. Specific emphasis is put on the role of public values in a collaborative network and the identifying and evaluating of public values. Then, we illustrate the background of food assistance networks in the US. Next, we discuss our data source and data analysis methods. Following this, we report the major findings of our data analysis results. Finally, we conclude with discussing the implications and limitations of our findings and the directions for future research.

Public Values, Non-governmental Actors, and Collaborative Network

The concept of public values has become a growing research area in current public administration and management literature (Davis & West, 2009; Talbot, 2009; Van der Wal, Nabatchi, & de Graaf, 2015; Williams & Shearer, 2011). Scholars have identified main approaches of public values research (Bozeman & Johnson, 2015; Rutgers, 2015; West & Davis, 2011; Williams & Shearer, 2011), and there are two main approaches to public values studies. One is the public value approach (the singular form) that follows the direction of Moore’s seminal book *Creating Public Value* (Moore, 1995), which emphasizes the strategic management practices of creating publicly valuable outcomes (Alford & O’Flynn, 2009; Benington & Moore, 2011; Benington, 2009, 2011; Moore, 1995, 2013). The other main approach is focused on the identification of public values (the plural form) that represent norms, principles, and normative consensus of the society (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bozeman & Johnson, 2015; Bozeman, 2002, 2007). Public values studies have moved from the definition and normative claims of public values (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bozeman, 2002, 2007; Rutgers, 2008) toward public policy applications of the public values concept (e.g., Bozeman & Sarewitz, 2011; Feeney & Bozeman, 2007; Fisher, Slade, Anderson, & Bozeman, 2010), and empirical identification and evaluation of public values (Andersen, Jørgensen, Kjeldsen, Pedersen, & Vrangbæk, 2012; Witesman & Walters, 2014). Owing to the diverse nature, interests, and approaches of public values studies, a united public values theory might not be possible, but a public values perspective (PVP) surrounded with several central research questions and various theoretical and methodological approached would be one possible direction for public values research (Beck Jørgensen & Rutgers, 2015).

Given the popularity and potential of public values studies, we argue that current public values literature does not offer a satisfactory answer for the following questions: How can we
empirically measure various public values in the context of a collaborative network operated mainly by non-governmental actors? We argue that there are three main research gaps in existing public values research pertaining to this topic: the relative neglect of non-governmental actors, the lack of addressing public values in the context of collaborative network governance, and the difficulty of empirically identifying and evaluating public values.

First, current public values literature is predominantly focused on public managers and governmental organizations, overlooking the role of non-governmental actors (including private and nonprofit organizations as well as private citizens) in achieving public values of the society. Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) argue that “public values are not the exclusive province of government, nor is government the only set of institutions having public value obligations” (pp. 373-374). Nevertheless, the primary focus of public values research (theoretical or empirical) is still on the public sector and public managers (Hartley, Alford, Hughes, & Yates, 2015; Kernaghan, 2003; Moore, 2014; Overeem, 2015; Rogers, 2004; Rutgers, 2009; West & Davis, 2011; Witesman & Walters, 2014, 2015), albeit some attempts to compare the differences and commonality of values across different sectors (e.g., Miller-Stevens, Taylor, & Morris, 2015; Van der Wal, De Graaf, & Lasthuizen, 2008; Van der Wal, Huberts, Van den Heuvel, & Kolthoff, 2006; Van der Wal & Huberts, 2008). Only a few studies seek to examine public values with regard to the nonprofit context (Helmig, Hinz, & Ingerfurth, 2015; Moore, 2000; Moulton & Eckerd, 2012). Part of the reason why existing public values studies mainly focus on the public sector is that the recent growth of public values studies (including “public value” and “public values”) is in response to the possible threat to governments’ fundamental values resulted from the New Public Management discourses (Benington & Moore, 2011; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014; Stoker, 2006; Talbot, 2011), as well as associated neo-liberal, market-oriented, and economic individualism theories (Bozeman, 2002, 2007; Jos & Tompkins, 2009). However, as Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) claim, the basis of public values includes not only government but also the broader culture and society. Private citizens and organizations also have the potential and obligations to identify and enhance desirable public values of the society as a whole. Sometimes non-governmental actors, such as nonprofit organizations, perform better in providing certain public benefit goods than government and business sectors (for an overview of economic and noneconomic theories justifying the nonprofit and voluntary sector see Anheier, 2005 and LeRoux & Feeney, 2015). Thus, without taking into account the role of non-governmental actors, our understanding of public values remain partial and a more comprehensive public values research agenda would not be possible.

Second, another research gap is the relative lack of addressing the dynamics of public values in
the context of collaborative network governance, especially that of a private organization network with nonprofit organizations as major actors. As mentioned above, existing public values literature mainly locates themselves in the domain of governments. There are indeed several discussions about public values in collaboration networks involving multiple stakeholders and organizations (Casey, 2015; Hui & Hayllar, 2010; Nabatchi, 2012; Reynaers & De Graaf, 2014; Reynaers, 2013; Rogers, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Wallis & Gregory, 2009). However, most of their concerns are still centered at the government side in the collaboration process, including public policies, public managers, and public organizations. For example, as Stoker (2006) argues, public value management refers to the notion which asks public managers to steer the networks and ensure the full deliberation among stakeholders in the service delivery process. Another example is Casey's article (2015) that focuses on how administrative centrality (the use of policy tools in guiding governance networks) works in the public values process of local community development. With governments as central or at last major actors in the network, it might be easier to identify specific prime (or intrinsic) values (they are ends in themselves) and instrumental values (valuable when related to the achievement of an intrinsic value) in that context (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bozeman, 2007). Nevertheless, these scholarly efforts explain less about the private, voluntary network developed mainly by nonprofit organizations, with the partnership of other public and private organizations. In the field of nonprofit studies, scholars have developed a Collaborative Value Creation (CVC) conceptual framework to comprehend the nonprofit-business partnership and collaboration process in creating societal values (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b). However, their focus on nonprofit and business interaction is limited in understanding the dynamics of public values in a broader network including citizens and multiple public and private organizations.

The third research gap, related to above two, is the lack of in-depth empirical assessment of identifying and evaluating public values. Early public values studies are mainly normative and prescriptive in nature, but recent efforts have been put in empirically identifying public values sets, dimensions, and hierarchies (e.g., Andersen et al., 2012; Berman & West, 2011; Witesman & Walters, 2014, 2015). However, given the nature of using quantitative surveys, it is insufficient for those studies to offer an in-depth understanding of how public values are identified and evaluated. Qualitative and mix-method public values studies are mainly focused on specific public values issues, such as value conflicts (De Graaf, Huberts, & Smulders, 2014; Oldenhof, Postma, & Putters, 2013) or political astuteness (Hartley et al., 2015). Only a few qualitative attempts have been made to identify and evaluate public values in a specific context (Molina & McKeown, 2012; Reynaers, 2013). We argue that, to identify and further evaluate context-specific public values, it is not enough by merely asking respondents to pick up a set of
most important public values from the survey questionnaire. Rather, more valuable data could be gathered if researchers are able to conduct in-depth interviews. Especially, when it comes to identifying and evaluating public values in a collaborative network, collaboration experiences with network partners serve as the linchpin of understanding why and how those actors define and assess certain public values. This kind of research remains scare in current public values research. Therefore, to better understand the dynamics, hierarchies, and multiplicity of public values in the network operated mainly by non-governmental actors, a qualitative methodological approach would be needed.

**US Food Assistance Networks**

*Food Security and Public Sector’s Response to Food Insecurity*

Food security means having “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2015, p. 2). It is the indicator used by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to understand food access and adequacy for the US households and is one of the indicators reflecting poverty, health, and well being levels of the general population. According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) Food Security Supplement, 14% of U.S. households (17.4 million households) were food insecure in 2014.

USDA responds to food insecurity through a number of food and nutrition assistance programs, all of which can be categorized into four types (Table 1). Among these programs, the largest program is the largest are Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In 2014, SNAP provided monthly benefits ($125 per person per month) for eligible low-income households (about 15.5 million households, 13.22% of the US households,) to purchase approved food items. (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2015). However, food-insecure households seem not to fully participate in the assistance programs. According to 2014 CPS Food Security Supplement survey, only about 44.0% of the food-insecure households reported receiving assistance from SNAP (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2015).

*The Rise of Food Assistance Networks*

Discussions on the development of food assistance networks are still limited. At most, this development is usually believed to be related to the failure of public social safety net and social welfare reforms. Guided by neo-liberalism, market economic interests, and the privatization of state functions, public social welfare reforms usually signified reduced supports and stricter eligibility requirements which usually bring to insufficient supports and stricter eligibility
requirements (Curtis & McClellan, 1995; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Riches, 2002).

For instance, some scholars believe that since the Food Stamp Act of 1977, the program reform unintentionally resulted in the needy people’s reliance on private food assistance (Daponte & Bade, 2006; Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008). Another rationale insists that even when needy people have participated, Food Stamps are not able to provide sufficient food and thus these people usually have to turn to private food assistance to get supplemental food (Berner & O’Brien, 2004; Berner & Paynter, 2008; Daponte, 2000; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Paynter, Berner, & Anderson, 2011). The need for private food assistance increased, leading to the growth of the networks since the 1980s (Curtis & McClellan, 1995; Feeding America, 2015).

Furthermore, along with the passage of the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983 (TEFAP), which aims at distributing surplus farming commodities to the poor, as well as the later constant government appropriation for food distribution programs and administrative funding support, food assistance networks have gradually become an institutionalized integral part of the food assistance system in the US (Curtis & McClellan, 1995; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Riches, 2002). Nowadays, a number of the food assistance programs administered by USDA (as listed in Table 1) are operated locally through food assistance networks. A collaborative network form of governance seems to be taking place with non-governmental actors play significant role in fulfilling public purposes.

**Food Banks and Partner Organizations in Food Assistance Networks**

So far, Feeding America is the largest nationwide food assistance network with 200 food banks associated with it across the US (Feeding America, 2015). In general, Feed America helps with coming up with agreements over service areas among food banks in order to improve food distribution efficiency and to avoid service overlapping (Feeding America, 2015). In a geographic area, a focal food bank thus plays central roles in the local food assistance network in that particular geographic area (McEntee & Naumova, 2012; Remley, Kaiser, & Osso, 2013; Tarasuk, Dachner, Hamelin, Ostry, Williams, Bosckeii, Poland, & Raine, 2014)

Food banks are “nonprofit organizations that solicit donations of surplus or salvage foods which they distribute to food pantries, soup kitchens, and other feeding programs” (Curtis & McClellan, 1995, p.99). The idea of food banking was first developed by John van Hengel in the US, when the first food bank, St. Mary’s Food Bank, was setting up in Phoenix Arizona in 1967. The original idea was to marry the interests of food industry to cope with surplus and unsaleable food
in a wasteful modern society with the needs of the poor and hunger population (Feeding America, 2015; Riches, 2002).

By themselves large warehouses with primary functions of food storage and distribution, food banks receive food donation from food and agricultural industries, retailers, government food assistance programs, Feeding America, and sometimes other food banks. Most of the time, food banks do not serve the public directly. Rather, they distribute food to their local partner organizations, which otherwise serve needy clients directly through food box or on-site meals (Curtis & McClellan, 1995; González-Torre & Coque, 2015; McEntee & Naumova, 2012).

Therefore, for food assistance networks to successfully serve the needy people in every community, food banks’ local partner organizations are imperative. Being deeply rooted in neighborhoods and having direct contacts with the clients, these organizations usually better know communities and people’s needs (Daponte, 2000; Paynter, Berner, & Anderson, 2011; Paynter & Berner, 2014; Tarasuk et al, 2014). On the other hand, having a lack of partner organizations to serve in a community may result in the needy people’s lack of access to food assistance in that community.

**Public Values and Food Assistance Networks: Just for Food Insecurity?**

When nonprofit-led networks emerge to take responsibilities for fulfilling public purposes, can the public value(s) that sustain a public policy domain be sufficient to explain the formation, existence, and operation of the networks? Do all of the public, private, and nonprofit organizations joining a nonprofit-led network because of the same public values that they intend to pursue? Studies on nonprofit collaborative networks usually recognize that each organization’s participating in a network is driven by different reasons and motivations (Guo & Acar, 2005; Snavely & Tracy, 2002; Sowa, 2009). However, we can hardly connect organizations’ reasons for participating in a network to the public purposes that these individual organizations and the network as a whole intend to pursue.

In light of this gap, this current study would like to know whether food insecurity alone is the sufficient public value to bring partner organizations together in a food assistance network. Are there other public values being pursued in the network? Are there any configurations and relationships of public values so as to foster network formation and maintenance? This current study intends to take the first step to not only empirically identify public values of a food assistance network, but also advance our understanding of nonprofit-led collaborative network
formation through the lens of public values.

**Research Method**

**Data source**
Reported here are data from interviews with 60 partner organizations of a focal food bank in Arizona. As of the date the data collection began (January 2015), the food bank had a total of 463 partner organizations. We conducted a four-dimensional stratified sampling with a combination of random and purposive quota selection process to select partner organization interviewees. The four dimensions are partner organizations’ locations (counties), food assistance program types, length of relationship with the food bank in years, and pounds of food received from the food bank in 13/14 fiscal year. This sampling method is to ensure that partner organizations are adequately represented in the sample, meaningfully corresponding to the special characteristics of the population frame (Babbie, 2012; Sekaran, 2006).

The sampling process resulted in a total of 73 partner organizations in our interview sample. We then send an email invitation to each of the sampled partner organizations to request their voluntary participation in the interviews. Upon having their consent, we made follow up contacts to schedule specific time and date for the interviews. To identify what types of public values brought the partner organizations to the focal food bank’s food assistance network and the configurations and relationships of public values within the network, the interviewees were asked to describe their perceptions on the focal food bank’s mission, the strength of being associated with the focal food bank, and their organizations’ missions. Each interview was transcribed immediately upon interview finished.

All the interviews were conducted during February and March 2015. Finally, a total of 60 valid partner organizations interviews were completed (82.19% valid response rate). For each partner organization, there was a main contact person being interviewed in a half-hour semi-structured phone interview (only one organization was interviewed twice with different interviewees, and we consolidated these two interviews). On average, the interviewees were employed in their organization for 8.75 years. The majority of them (55.0%) had mid-level positions such as program manager within their organizations, 33.3% of them had high level positions such as director and CEO, and only 11.7% of them were low-level employees.

**Data analysis**
The analysis of the interview data includes three stages. First, drawing from the grounded theory
approach (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser and Straus 1967), this current study started by being open to what can be learned from the interview data. An initial descriptive data coding led to the findings that over half of the interviewees mentioned partner organizational missions that were unrelated to food assistance. Moreover, the sampled food assistance network was comprised by a number of very different types of organizations, which were found to be associated with the differences in the partner organizations’ missions. Thus, a categorization of these organizations was therefore conducted, resulting in a total of fourteen types of organizations (Table 1). In light of the fact the social service organizations comprised those with quite different services and target clients, this categorization broke them down into different types in order to show the nuance differences in missions.

The second stage involved the identifying and coding of public values. Based on the organizational type categorization, the research questions, and relevant public values literature, the researcher returned to the interview data, identified, and coded public values based on two major themes. The first theme is what are the focal food bank’s public value(s) which made the partner organizations to be part of the food bank’s food assistance network (focal organization public values)? The coding of data based on this theme led to a further breaking down of two sets of focal organization’s public values: (a) focal organization’s contribution to society, and (b) focal organization’s intra-organizational values. The second theme is what are partner organization's public value(s) (partner organization public values)?

Two predominant public values were identified in both of the two themes: subsistence and vulnerable population. At this point, the researcher faced the issue of reporting categories that were high in abstraction or categories that show nuance. Although providing food and feeding the hunger and the poor were the predominant categories, the researcher found that a number of other categories such as a place to live when facing emergency and difficult situations, providing cloths and primary care, etc, also constantly emerged in the interview data. A higher level of abstraction would bring all these into one category termed subsistence, as all the offerings were related to the most basic things that human beings need for surviving.

Similarly, in addition to the hunger and the poor, the interviewees mentioned about a number of other groups that their organizations assisted, such as people with mental development issues, disabled people, homebound seniors, victims of domestic violence, people who just came out from jail, homeless, HIV patients, minority groups, people living in remote area, youth and children from poor families, etc. In this regard, it seems oversimplified to conceive the food assistance network as solely serving those who are poor and hunger. Rather, it is all these
different groups of people facing different types of vulnerable situations that these organizations are trying to help. Thus, a higher level of abstraction led to the refinement of the category named *vulnerable population*. These abstractions would allow the two public values to be further related to other values and would be useful for value convergence, which was subsequently conducted through further grouping of all the public values identified and through correlating the public values with the food assistance network’s broader context.

The third stage of the data analysis involved the identifying and coding of relationships and configurations exist among the partner organizations and focal organizations’ public values. Having the public value sets coded in the second stage, the researcher identified the public values relationships by (1) using tabulating techniques to systematically comparing the partner organizations’ perceptions on the focal food bank’s public values with the partner organizations’ public values, as well as (2) capturing the relationships from interviewees’ direct accounts. These approaches are usually used in qualitative data analysis to infer configurations and conjunctures (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser and Straus 1967; Ragin, 1987; Yin, 1994).

**Results**

Working under the purposes of identifying and understanding the roles of public values within a food assistance network, we report the following results to inform our research questions.

**Food Assistance Network: A Network of Pluralistic Organizations**

Contrary to our initial assumption, the findings indicated that the food assistance network is constituted by pluralistic organizations across sector boundaries rather than just nonprofit food bank, food pantries, soup kitchens, and churches (Table 1). Although nonprofits are the majority, public organizations such as public health departments and elementary schools also account for a significant amount of these organizations. We also noted the involvement of a few for-profit organizations such as the affordable housing. We also observed a community association with purely citizen initiative in food assistance program in our data. Even within nonprofit organizations, organizations solely serving as food pantry were minimal. The types of services that these nonprofits involved were diverse, ranging from senior, to youth, to disabled, to shelters, to transitional and facilitative services, and to primary care services, etc. These findings implied that an understanding of the food assistance network can no longer be confined to food offering itself.
**Focal Food Bank’s Contribution to Society: Subsistence for Vulnerable Population**

The identification of the focal food bank’s public values with regard to its contribution to society led to seven public values, among them subsistence and vulnerable population being predominant (Table 2). Specifically, most of the partner organizations interviewees recognized the focal food bank’s contribution as food sources and food supply, the subsistence necessary for life. Many of them also mentioned about the recipients of the food source assistance, the vulnerable population. “Feed those in need” and “feed the hunger” were the most often motioned missions. Some of the interviewees also explicitly associated vulnerable population to specific client groups. For example, an interviewee mentioned:

“To provide food for people in need...Also to provide nourishment, help people who are struggling or have lost their job or are in a difficult situation. They also provide training for youth and people trying to get back in work...maybe who have been in prison...Helping to establish people again and help those in need. Also help children with food...”

Besides, “health, the development of future generation, community, benevolence, as well as food source fully utilization” were also among the identified public values related to the focal food bank’s contribution to society. With regard to health, the values were no longer limited to food offering per se but to nutritional needs. The development of future generation is about helping children. Community is related to a sense of being together, involving and helping each others. Benevolence here was the explicit mentioning of “helping”, although we do believe this value is pervasive in the network despite not being explicit mentioned. Similarly, food source fully utilization here only refers to the explicit mentioning of the concept by interviewees. Considering the how food banks and food assistance networks operate, we also believe this public value should be filled in the network. We will further elaborate this later.

**Focal Food Bank’s Intra-Organizational Values: Not Just Food Source, but Relational and Organizational Strengths**

A number of the focal food bank’s intra-organizational public values were also identified (Table 3). These were regarded by the partner organizations as the strengths of being associated with the food assistance network. Not surprisingly at all, the focal food bank’s capacity of being a food
source provider dominated. We labeled this value as “material resource value”. Moreover, a number of values related to the focal food bank’s strengths of handling relationships with the partner organizations were grouped as “relational strength values”. The most notable one is responsiveness to partner organizations’ needs. Moreover, the focal food bank also played an important supportive role from some of the interviewees’ perspectives. For instance, an interviewee indicated, “We collaborate for many years... whenever we need help they are there and we work together as a team to help our children”. Being approachable and timely are also important values identified in this group.

“We opened up a new housing community and we asked them to take it on and within a short time they said yes and we know they are stretched ...We know that we can go to them and ask and it can happen quickly.”

We also grouped the values related to the focal food bank’s organizational strengths as “organizational strength values”. Within this group of values, in addition to the values related to a good organization and management, humanity treatment refers to the focal bank’s being able to show empathy, personable, and unbiased treatment. An interviewee reiterated this point:

“They are very personable... They don’t look down on me... they are always happy to see me...I see (the focal food bank) staff has always been helpful and don’t look down on people...There is an empathy ...when I am down at (the focal food bank), I see this in the (the focal food bank) staff.”

It is noteworthy to see the value of humanity treatment as an important intra-organizational value in a network dedicating to assist vulnerable population.

**Partner Organizations’ Contribution to Society: Moving beyond Subsistence for Vulnerable Population**

The predominant public values of the partner organizations in terms of their contribution to society also are about subsistence for vulnerable population (Table 4). Although about two-third of the interviewees organizations explicitly indicated that providing food was the mission of their organizations, a number of other necessities for life were also mentioned as primary missions of over half of these organizations. These include providing shelters, housing, multiple basic services for living, and primary cares, despite the vulnerable population they served varied:
homeless, disabled, HIV patients, DV victims, people in rehab, senior, youth and children, working poor, poor families, and people living in remote areas, etc.

Nevertheless, the public values of these partner organizations are far beyond simply providing subsistence for vulnerable population. About two-third of these organizations had missions involving public values related to quality of life, developmental opportunities, spiritual support, and working together (Table 4). Moreover, when considering the different types of organizations, we found that these organizations moved beyond the values of subsistence and vulnerable population for different public values. Government public health agencies and senior centers concerned more about quality of life (health and well being). Housing, schools, and social service organizations sought to contribute to developmental opportunities. Faith-based organizations valued their contribution of bring spiritual supports to people. And, the other food bank organizations valued more about being able to work together in the network (Table 4).

Public Values Configurations in the Network: Three Types of Relationships Driven by Food

We further identified the relationships exist among this network of organizations’ public values. Namely, we tried to answer the question: what types of public value relationships brought these organizations together in this network? Based on the findings of the predominant importance of material resource (food source) of the focal food bank, we identified three types of relationships driven by food.

First, given the fact that about two-third of the partner organizations’ primary mission is to provide food, the first type of public value relationship that brought the partner organizations and the focal food bank together in the network is identical relationship. This relationship implies that food service is the identical prime value (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007) for both the focal food bank and for the partner organizations. Offering food as a type of subsistence to the needy people is the values that they all want to attain.

The second type of relationship we identified is complementary relationship. This relationship is derived from the variety of services that constituted the subsistence public value discussed in previous section. In this type of relationship, food service complements other services (other sources of subsistence). For instance, when the organizations’ primary mission is to provide a shelter for DV victims, food service complements this primary mission rather than the primary mission itself. In this regard, we imply that when organizations being able to complement each other’s prime values, they are more likely to form networks.
The third type of public values relationship identified is **hierarchical relationship**, in which food (and other sources of subsistence value) is simply instrumental value for the attainment of other prime values. This relationship is derived from the findings that two-third of the partner organizations had values beyond simply providing substance but sought values that can only be pursued after the vulnerable population’s basic needs for subsistence are fulfilled. For example, an interviewee said:

“(Our mission is) to enable all young people especially those who need us most to reach their full potential as productive caring responsible citizens. We are a youth development agency and we want them to come to our program but they are often hungry and we want to feed them so they will be more receptive...”

Similarly, another interviewee’s description also demonstrates this hierarchical relationship:

“All of our kids are under the poverty level ...the kids need food before we can mentor them...they need food first.”

In addition to the three types of public values relationships, we also noted that the **embedded economic values of food** was sometimes explicitly mentioned by the interviewees. For example:

“We provide breakfast and lunch to our members at no cost to them. With (the focal food bank)’s help we are able to obtain healthy food choices that our chefs prepare daily into nutritious and well-balanced meals at a low cost that our organization is able to absorb.”

While normative public values theory has important discussion on the relationships between public values and the embedded economy and economic individualism (Bozeman, 2002; Bozeman &Johnson, 2015), the empirical findings of this study indicated the need to situate economic values of material resource in the framework of public values.

**Public Values Converge: Bonding Values Bring the Pluralistic Organizations into a Network**

The identification of the focal food bank’s and the partner organizations’ public values leads to the possibility of value convergence in this network. This convergence enables us to further
identify **bounding values**, which are the public values that make the pluralistic organizations with certain extent of differences in their own values to collectively form the network to pursue the common bounding values. The six major groups of public values we identified: vulnerable population (social equality), subsistence, quality of life, developmental opportunities, spiritual support, as well as a sense of being together, can be converged toward the value of **human dignity**, the first type of bounding values in this network. This convergence occurs because however vulnerable an individual is, the basic needs for life, and the improvement of life through higher levels of endeavors, and the needs for being part of a social group all demonstrate the needs to live with greater dignity, as a human being. Despite their missions varied, the ultimate pursue of human dignity should be unchanged.

Moreover, as mentioned before, **benevolence** was not predominantly mentioned by the interviewees in explicit terms, but the food assistance network actually was filled with this public value. One of the common characteristics of these pluralistic organizations was to help those underprivileged and those in need, a context manifestation of the public value of benevolence. Thus, we regard benevolence as the second type of bounding value in this network.

Finally, when we connect the identification of public values through the interview data to the broader context and nature of the food assistance network, **food resource utilization** can be viewed as the third type of bounding values. Food source is not only the predominant value that brings together the food assistance network, according to the interview data. More important is that the system itself brings unsalable and surplus food products in the wealth part of the society to the underprivileged part of the society, utilizing the food products which would have been dumped. Therefore, food resource utilization could be the third type of bounding value in this network.

**Conclusion**

This study intends to enhance our understanding of the role of public values in a non-government led collaborative network, the food assistance network. Our findings indicated that a food assistance network is constituted by pluralistic organizations from different sectors and community associations. What is more is that these organizations usually have a variety of missions, among which addressing food insecurity is only partial of the broad picture. Thus, we argue that one single quantitative indicator, “food insecurity” alone, can not fully capture the public values of the network, nor can it be used to explain network formation.
Using a three-stage analysis of interview data from the 60 partner organizations of a focal food bank in Arizona, we identified six groups of public values in the network: subsistence, vulnerable population (social equality), quality of life, developmental opportunities, spiritual supports, and working together. Moreover, based on these identified public values, we also identified three types of public value relationships within the network. The existence of these different types of public relationships could explain why individual organizations participate in a food assistance network. Identical relationship implies that a focal organization and a partner organization share identical prime value. Complementary relationship means a focal organization’s prime value complements a partner organization’s prime value. Hierarchical relationship refers to the situation when the prime value of a focal organization is the instrumental value for the attainment of a partner organization’s prime value. Furthermore, our empirical data indicate the existence of embedded economic value within the network. We thus argue that the embedded economic value can not be ignored when examining public values, possible inseparability relationships should be carefully considered and examined.

We further derived public value convergence, proposing three bounding values that we believe can explain the formation and existence of the network as a whole: human dignity, benevolence, and food resource utilization. Bounding values allow all the pluralistic organizations with different missions to co-exist in a collaborative network. We believe that the identification and evaluation of public values in the collaborative network governance era should not be limited to public values attached to specific sector types or specific policy domains. Rather, identifying and evaluating through bounding values could be more relevant.

Another implication concerns about the issues of empirically identifying public values: multiplicity and levels of abstraction. As one public value could be converged with other public values toward another level of abstraction, what are the standards and criteria for deciding when the escalation stops? We propose that the use of domain set could be a practically doable approach for researchers to make sense of their data and to set boundaries. For example, the food assistance network is the domain set for current research that allows us to escalate the six different groups of public values toward a human dignity convergence. In another domain set such as the discussion of income distribution, the same values such as social equality might be the converged point itself. In yet another domain set such as political voice, the public value of social equality might be converged toward another value of democratic participation, and so on. As long as researchers make their category refinement processes clear and explicit, we believe the issues of multiplicity and levels of abstraction could be resolved to some extent.
There are some limitations. The findings of this current study are context specific, being limited in food assistance network in a focal food bank’s network in Arizona. Thus, the usage of our conclusion to other collaborative network context should be careful. Also, the network that we examined is a rather simple network. The focal food bank served as the only nodal point connecting all the partner organizations. Thus, the public value relationships that we derived are limited to this specific type of inter-organizational relationship. In networks involving complex interactions and connections, the usefulness and application of public values perspective to explain network formation still need more empirical examinations.

In sum, we propose that public values identification can be used not just for evaluating policy and management performance, outcomes, and the attainment of public values. It could be used to examine public purposes involving cross-sector and non-governmental actors led collaborative networks: explaining how and why a collaborative network occurs and possibly evaluating the robustness of the network.
References


Lambie-Mumford, H. (2013). ‘Every town should have one’: emergency food banking in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(01), 73-89.


### Table 1  Organizational Types in the Food Assistance Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Number of Organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food bank</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food pantry</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community housing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government public health agency</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior center</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American Organization</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service—developmental disability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service—facilitative and transitional living setting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service—DV shelter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service—Youth service</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service—Health care center</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social service—Animal shelter</td>
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### Table 2  Focal Food Bank’s Public Values: Contribution to Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public value set</th>
<th>Values identified frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subsistence</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable population</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of future generation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food source fully utilization</td>
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### Table 3  Focal Food Bank’s Intra-Organizational Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public value set</th>
<th>Values identified frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Material resource value</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food source</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 2: Relational strength values</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive role</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approachability</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indispensability</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative partner</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Group 3: Organizational strength values</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanity treatment</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good management</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Enthusiasm</td>
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<td>Reputation</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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Table 4  Partner Organization’s Public Values: Contribution to Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public value set</th>
<th>Values identified frequency</th>
<th>Main Organizational Types</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: Subsistence</td>
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<td>All</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subsistence</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2: Vulnerable Population</td>
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<td>All</td>
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<td>Vulnerable population</td>
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<td>Group 3: Quality of Life</td>
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<td>Government agency; Senior center</td>
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<td>Health</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well being</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 4: Developmental Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>Housing; School; Social service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of future generation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-development</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-sufficiency</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rehab and recovery</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 5: Spiritual Supports</td>
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<td>Faith-based</td>
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<td>Religious spirits</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
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<td><strong>Group 6: Working Together</strong></td>
<td><strong>Food bank</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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