# Pragmatism-based Co-inquiry in Public Service Innovation

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we introduce pragmatism-based co-inquiry as a new public sector service innovation approach for finding and defining problems in the service implementation process. Based on pragmatism, the notion of co-inquiry, and the semiotic theory of habit, our paper presents an experimental study of the Estonian sheltered employment service (the labor market service for activating people with special needs). Co-inquiry brings together the perspectives of various parties related to the service, and helps to reveal otherwise hidden and simplified or one-sided understandings that influence the provision of service and the design of the service process. Our paper illustrates that the New Public Management logic for designing and providing public services has large drawbacks, erroneous presumptions, and a lack of feedback mechanisms. We suggest that pragmatism and co-inquiry provide a framework for detecting and potentially solving many of these problems. As a resourceful methodological and a theoretical grounding for human-centeredness and service design, these approaches help to maintain and support the nuances and complexities which are essential for overcoming (implicit) cultural fallacies and simplifications that tend to ignore the perspectives of the less-powerful. Co-inquiry as a method should thus be introduced into public sector innovation.

*Key words:* pragmatism, theory of habit, public service innovation, co-creation, public services

## Introduction

Innovation, service design, and client-centeredness are crucial and strategic components which have become increasingly attractive buzzwords for an efficient public sector. It has been pointed out that innovation in the public sector is fundamental to improving productivity and efficiency gains, boosting the creation of public value, better responding to societal challenges, and promoting transparency and accountability (Powering..., 2013); public sector innovation is also seen as necessary both in policymaking as well as in providing services (Alves, 2013; Bason, 2010; Bovaird, 2007; Davies and Simon, 2013; Tummers, 2011; Tummers et al., 2015). Windrum (2008: 8-11) describes the following domains of public sector innovations: innovation could focus on service, service delivery, or administrative and organizational matters; there could be conceptual; policy; and systematic innovations. It has been argued that public sector innovation should become increasingly inter-organizational and require the involvement of different parties who collaborate in defining and solving problems (Hansen ja Funglsang 2020, Sørensen ja Torfing 2016). The co-inquiry approach that we present in this article is a collaborative, cross-sectoral innovation process that helps to broaden the scope of involvement in innovation.

A number of authors have suggested that the design and delivery of public services should be based on the principles of co-creation (Alford, 2009; Alford and O'Flynn, 2012; Bason, 2010; Junginger, 2017) because co-creation enables public sector innovation and

increases the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the design and delivery of services (Bason, 2010; Junginger, 2017). Ansell and Torfing (2021) emphasize the importance of co-creation as a catalyst for public sector innovation. Co-creation is seen as a remedy for several structural problems: for example, limited budget; silos of public sector institutions; social turbulence; increasing distrust and polarization (Torfing et al., 2021). Therefore, it is increasingly promoted by EU, OECD or World Bank; UN recommends co-creation as a governing tool:

> to understand and meet unfulfilled social needs, mobilise societal resources, expand the reach of public organisations to social domains where they have no leverage, facilitate integrated service delivery and coordinated governance, stimulate public innovation, build joint ownership over public policy solutions, and increase democratic legitimacy (Ansell and Torfing, 2021).

In this paper, we explore the method of co-inquiry and its experimental implementation which is aimed at creating a novel social practice. This practice facilitates the involvement of stakeholders in the co-creation of public services and helps to develop necessary prerequisites for public sector innovation. Despite the growing amount of literature, no coherent theories for service co-creation have emerged. Based on our analysis of the relevant principles and assumptions of co-creation approaches and classical American pragmatism, we also propose that classical pragmatism may well serve as a theoretical foundation for co-creation. The influence of American pragmatism on the practices of co-creation and human-centered design have already been highlighted in the literature (e.g. Buchanan, 2001; Junginger, 2017).

First, we examine classical pragmatism in more detail and outline a theoretical foundation for co-creation based on it. A meta-analysis of the co-inquiry experiment explores how these concepts were put into practice to find inconsistencies in the existing forms of service delivery and identify innovation possibilities to achieve the greatest social and personal impact.

## Co-creation and co-production of public services

Today, systems of public services comprise different service providers from the public, private, and the third sector, which may either cooperate or compete with one another in providing services. However, even in delegating a service, the state or the local government should establish the minimum requirements – e.g., who, when, how often and how long should be able to get the service – as well as service quality standards, quantitative and qualitative goals. Public authorities should also maintain the control and responsibility over the provision of the service.

Although one of the initial purposes for delegating services was to provide services more cheaply and/or effectively, it has also been argued that the application of the principles of New Public Management has made service provision more complex, rather than more effective or cheaper (Rhodes and MacKechnie, 2003).

Co-creation as a collective problem-solving method is one option for gathering feedback on the application of ever more complex service systems and processes from different participants. Involving all the participants in the services provided is of strategic

importance for acquiring feedback and making decisions in providing the services. All parties should be involved in all the stages of the service throughout its entire life cycle (Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi, 2013; Eriksson, 2019; Bason, 2010; Junginger, 2017).

The concepts of co-creation and co-production are topical in public sector management (Radnor et al., 2014), debates for shaping policy (Bason, 2010; Bason, 2017; Junginger, 2017), and design (Sanders and Stappers, 2014; Jung-Joo Lee et al., 2018). In practice, the two terms are often used as synonyms referring to a range of different practices. In public administration literature both terms refer to 1) active input of citizens in shaping the services, 2) direct input of citizens during the production phase; and 3) collaboration between professionalized service providers in public agencies and citizens. The meaning of co-creation varies in the context of the public sector and public service theories. In design studies co-creation is primarily treated as a method for designing together with relevant participants, which in the public sector theory is called co-design. Co-creation presumes an interactive and dynamic relationship, in which value is created at the points of interaction of the service (Osborne, 2018).

Brandsen and Honingh (2016), however, suggest reapplying the term "co-creation" to situations where citizens, individually or collectively, are involved as co-initiators and co-designers of public services at a strategic level. The term co-production, meanwhile, is used more often in public administration literature, and is already employed to refer more specifically to the direct input from citizens in the implementation phase of the production cycle. Still, co-production activities are broad and there is also some disagreement about which activities should be included in co-production (Alford 2009). However, co-production indicates a clear difference compared to the traditional model of public service production. In the traditional model public officials are exclusively charged with the responsibility for designing and providing services to citizens, who in turn only demand, consume and evaluate them (Pestoff 2006). However, co-production still implies a process where the public service provider is in the dominant position, the process of service delivery is seen as linear and is based on the concept of (industrial) production and the users are involved in the phase of delivery and implementation but not in the strategic phase of problem definition and design.

There is also a growing tendency to involve users in assessing public services jointly with providers. Although co-evaluation could be seen as part of co-production or co-creation, it involves different kinds of skills and activities and thus it may be considered as a separate form of involvement aside from co-creation and co-production (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). Bovaird and colleagues (2016) apply the term co-assessment only to situations where users providing input and/or feedback are truly able to be part of decision-making. Furthermore, co-inquiry assumes even deeper involvement; it is not only about collecting feedback, but also about bringing together all relevant stakeholders to understand what happens during the service providing *in situ* to detect problems and opportunities for service innovation. Contrary to co-assessment, the aim of co-inquiry is not evaluation according to pre-existing criteria but open search and learning to identify yet unknown factors.

Therefore, our focus is more specifically on the co-creation of knowledge by various stakeholders in an innovation project. Co-inquiry comes into an innovation process in the stage of collecting ideas for innovation opportunities: co-inquiry is a stage of co-creation and does not necessarily assume finding solutions, although new ideas for solutions could come up during the process. Co-inquiry has been used as a fruitful method for collaborative exploration in educational settings (Glasswell, Singh, and McNaughton, 2016) and in the context of public resources like water governance in England (Foster et al., 2019). However,

compared to previous studies, co-inquiry as a method in our project was more comprehensive and complex, involving several workshops, substantial qualitative research, and theoretical grounding based on pragmatism. In addition, we applied co-inquiry to explore the functionality of a specific public service which could offer the opportunity for innovation.

Our approach to co-inquiry is based on the pragmatist notions of inquiry, collective problem solving, and collective intelligence developed by John Dewey. Our interest in classical pragmatism in general and John Dewey, in particular, is twofold. First, in our application, pragmatist theory serves as the foundation for co-inquiry as a practice of collective problem solving. We argue that this should be integrated into the public service system to allow for the co-creation of value with the intended end-users and create prerequisites for social and public sector innovation. Second, we propose that American classical pragmatism, with its emphasis on collective problem solving, collective intelligence, instrumentalism, and the importance of experimental and experiential knowledge, may serve as a theory of co-inquiry.

A "pragmatist turn" is evident in the organization science where it is most often applied to the study of organizational learning, reflective practices and sensemaking (Visser, 2017). There is also a growing interest in pragmatism in the design community (e.g. Bason, 2010; Junginger, 2017). Melles (2008) argues that pragmatism is eminently suitable as a meta-theory for design studies. Kimbell (2011) and Dalsgaard (2014) point out the strong relations between pragmatism and design thinking. It can thus be argued that design thinking is also undergoing a kind of pragmatist turn. The most thorough overview of what pragmatism has to offer to design researchers has been provided by Rylander (2012). Somewhat surprisingly however, she has not substantially expounded on the concept of habit, which is regarded as one of the most relevant concepts in pragmatism (Kilpinen, 2009; Gronow, 2011; MacMullan, 2013), and moreover, is important for conceptualizing social innovation (authors).

## Application of classical pragmatism

Pragmatists argue that people are problem solvers by nature, and "the function of thought is to guide action in the service of solving practical problems that arise in the course of life" (Gross, 2009: 366). Even though classical pragmatism was not uniform, its main contributors, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, shared a common concern with the human behavior and the mechanisms of meaning-making, seeing these as dynamic interactive processes embedded in specific historical contexts and evolving over time. What holds as true either in philosophy, science or everyday life is distilled through inquiry and experimentation and is always contextual, temporal and never final because the world that we experience and interact with is constantly changing.

The principle of pragmatism was introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce in two papers, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878). Peirce pointed out that our thoughts and beliefs are in fact dispositions for action. To be clear in our concepts, beliefs and propositions, we need to consider the practical bearings of the effects we conceive the object of our belief or conception to have: "Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (CP 5.402)

For Peirce, just as for William James, pragmatism was a method for settling metaphysical disputes. However, while Peirce is most concerned with scientific thinking, James considers that the exploration of philosophical questions should be part of our everyday life as well. James also suggested that the practical value of any idea is judged by an individual agent rather than determined objectively by a scientific community: "Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally" (James, 2012 (1907): 23).

John Dewey widened pragmatism over the entire field of human experience. For him, the experience included living and being in the world in all its diverse aspects. Throughout his life, he was engaged in elaborating his concept of experience, defining it first as an interaction (based on the principle of causal interaction between the subject and the environment) and later as a promoting transaction (based on the principle of mutual relations between organism and environment). Experience refers not only to living and to the constant reactions and feedbacks between the subject and the world, but also the result of this process. Dewey applied the concept of experience to the relations between organism and environment, and also to conceptualizing acting and thinking, human existence, and becoming aware of oneself and the world. The importance of the notion of experience is highlighted in Dewey's introduction to *Experience and Nature:* "If what is written in these pages has no other result than creating and promoting respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities, I shall be content" (Dewey, 1958: 39).

## Co-inquiry as a practice for transforming habits

Central to the coordination of experience is the notion of *habit*. Habit in pragmatism is rather different from how we use this term in everyday life. According to Dewey, habit is:

> That kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that
> sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization
> of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for
> over manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form
> even when not obviously dominating activity (Dewey, 1922: 41).

In other words, habits are dispositions that coordinate the relationship between the human organism and his/ her environment. Habits are social and cultural by origin; i.e. even individually enacted habits characterize the dynamics of a social group rather than a single individual. Dewey's approach is thus ecological in the sense that it is not possible to draw a clear line between an organism and its environment. A person always has the disposition to act habitually if the conditions in the environment allow this. Contemporary psychology has reached a similar position; the idea of humans as individuals who function independently of physical and social environment has been replaced by the idea that a person and their environment are operationally inseparable systems (Fischer and Bidell, 2006).

According to the pragmatist perspective, every habit has risen as a solution to a specific problem. If an existing habit cannot solve a problem, this problem will rise into

consciousness and the person will consider a variety of ways to solve the problem, and s/he will start with an *inquiry*.

In Dewey's social theory, the inquiry begins with an incomprehensible situation (dissatisfaction, doubt), either with a sense of description, a feeling that something is wrong, or that the situation cannot continue the same way any longer. This situation is a state where an established habit has ceased to work, or where the relationship between the organism and the environment is out of balance. This situation can also be called a problem:

> Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation [or problem] into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole (Dewey, 1938: 104–105).

The inquiry thus ends with a new state, understanding, and a feeling of satisfaction or balance.

The process of inquiry, for Dewey, has thus two main objectives: to obtain knowledge and to develop new habits that are harmonious and useful to us, and which help us to successfully cope with the environment, either by adapting or changing the environment. Dewey also stressed the importance of recognizing the significance and integrity of all aspects of human experience as fundamental for the process of inquiry. The inquiry thus involves not just thought, but also the physical body, feelings, environment and tools. It also has profound consequences in how we can conceptualize interaction with social and political institutions, including public services. Max Visser highlights how pragmatist inquiry is even conducive of democracy and social change:

> Inquiry primarily takes place in a social context, since human individuals are subject to shared problems and dependent upon each other for survival. Inquiry as a social process includes a community of inquirers who reach agreement upon consequences, and thus jointly confirm or correct results and outcomes of inquiry. Conducive to this process is democracy, and Dewey favored extending the reach of democracy from the political arena to other parts of society, such as education and industrial organizations. In this way, individuals would be enabled to use inquiry to critique and redevelop these organizations in social and intelligent ways. (Visser, 2017: 47)

In a sense, Dewey's inquiry *is* co-inquiry because, as a rule, it is a social process that already involves a "community of inquirers" and the process of (co-)inquiry for redeveloping the institutions, organizations or social practices "in social and intelligent ways" is fundamental for co-creation.

With its focus on concrete human experience, experimental approach and emphasis on the problem solving as an ongoing collective, social and contextual activity, classical pragmatism, especially in the form developed by John Dewey, thus provides a valuable theoretical framework to enhance the research of co-creation as well as deepen the practice. The relationship between co-creation and democracy highlighted by Max Visser (2017) also provides a further rationale for the implementation of co-creation in public sector innovation. Although classical pragmatism is certainly not the only theory that can be employed in the

development of co-creation and co-inquiry, the commonalities between classical pragmatism, human-centered design and the co-creation are difficult to miss.

Dewey's pragmatism is also the theoretical foundation for the 'strong' interpretation of human-centered design (HCD) proposed by Sabine Junginger (2017). She provides a reconceptualization of human-centred design that refers to human rights and human dignity, sustainability and social aspects rather than specific interactions with products, services or systems. According to Junginger, in the traditional 'wide' interpretation of HCD (including interaction design, user-centered design and experience design) the subject is first and foremost a consumer or a user fulfilling a different role in specific transactional exchange models. Her interpretation of human-centred design highlights the need to design interventions that can transform full human experience situated in a social, political, economic or ecological context, and considering relationships. To achieve this, a design inquiry is needed to identify:

> …how people interact with how they can access current products and services. This includes when, where and why people struggle, and when and why they succeed. The method ranges from ethnographic observation to diary studies and system analysis. A design inquiry is contextualized and participatory, requiring the involvement of people inside and outside of the organization. A design inquiry reveals hitherto unknown patterns, bottlenecks and contradictions in procedures as well as information; developing new ideas and concepts through strategic conversations and participatory design practices – these are the characteristics of comprehensive, human-centered design approach. (Junginger, 2017: 20)

In the case of rehabilitating social services, including the work integration service at the focus of our experiment, we aim to create new habits in the sense it is understood by Dewey. For the desired change of achieving the goals of the service and enabling the transformation of experience to happen, all the people involved must undergo a process of inquiry and transformation of habits. For that to happen designed interventions must be able to address real problems and real needs and include the "incomprehensible situation" of dissatisfaction or doubt of the people involved. Practices empowering people to become a "community of inquirers" and the process of (co-)inquiry for redeveloping the institutions or social practices "in social and intelligent ways" are fundamental to service design in all such cases.

Pragmatism has had a rich and lively intellectual heritage that continues to inform many disciplines, including design studies and public sector research. However, we took a deliberate step back to classical pragmatist thinkers to have a fresh look at the notions of inquiry and habit. Our exploration was driven not only by historical interest but also by the fact that these theoretical concepts resonate well with the open, emergent, highly contextual, and highly embodied practices of service design and design thinking. Secondly, the classical pragmatist approach also provides a way to reflect on the formation of individual and structural habits that each innovation somehow needs to disrupt or at least reform.

Adopting the principles of pragmatist inquiry in co-creation means a need to study what happens when services are provided in situ because this is where the value-in-use is co-created.

# Co-inquiry in public service design: a meta-analysis of the study of sheltered employment

In this section, we provide a meta-analysis of the experimental co-inquiry process of the implementation of a work integration service for disabled people. This helps to explore how the principles of classical pragmatism, co-creation and human-centered design were put into practice, find inconsistencies in the existing forms of service delivery and identify innovation possibilities for the greatest social and personal impact. We aim to show that the method of co-inquiry, which facilitates the involvement of stakeholders in the co-creation of public services, enables the development of necessary prerequisites for public sector innovation.

In 2016–2017 we conducted an experimental inquiry of the implementation of a work integration service for disabled people. We brought end-users, service providers and different public sector organizations together in the process of co-inquiry. This was set up based on the notions of inquiry, collective problem solving and collective intelligence in classical pragmatism, especially in the works of John Dewey, and that employed the tools and principles of co-creation and human-centered design.

Our goal was (1) to explore the applicability of classical pragmatism to inform public service management and (2) demonstrate the usefulness of co-inquiry and co-creation in the evaluation and planning phase of the public services to identify the possibilities for innovation. In our meta-analysis we will present the evidence we were able to collect during the co-inquiry process based on the human-centered design principles. We involved different stakeholders in the co-inquiry, collected their views and observed service provision *in situ*. We aim to show why co-inquiry as a practice of ongoing collective problem solving should be introduced in all phases of the delivery of public service and at all levels of management.

Data used for analysis in this paper are based on a joint project by the Estonian Social Innovation Laboratory and the Estonian Social Enterprise Network, aiming to find and test new methods for the co-assessment of public services. We studied the implementation of the sheltered employment and work integration services in Estonia (both intended for disabled people) and specifically considered what happens when users experience the service. Assessment of the experience of service is indispensable for acquiring feedback to improve and better manage the service.

*Background to the study*

The 1980s brought about an arguably experimental change in the social and employment policies in European countries: the social model based on solidarity was changed to an investment model based on activation policies. With that switch, one of the most interesting European creations, the welfare state, was put to the test. The results of this change vary, and to an extent, every country traverses its unique path, yet there exist certain general tendencies (Serrano Pascual, 2007).

According to Amparo Serrano Pascual (2007), activation policies are characterized by three main factors. First, an individual approach: the purpose is to change people's attitudes, motivation and behavior, rather than creating favorable conditions for the redistribution of wealth. Individual intervention is promoted (e.g. through labor market services) and more

participation and responsibility is expected from the beneficiaries. Second, an emphasis on employment rates: the goal of the policies is to increase employment rates and to empower people to cope on their own. Labor market conduct needs to be changed (by stimuli, persuasion of individuals, motivation, etc.), meaning that people are expected to be active themselves. Third, contractualization will become the underlying principle: to acquire state support or services people are obliged to contribute on their part as well. In essence, this means that access to one's rights depends on one's attitude towards employment and behavior related to it.

In brief, the purpose of the reform was to reduce direct support and to redirect people currently absent from the labor market back to it. Sheltered employment and/or work integration services are provided to people who, due to health-related special needs, are incapable of working in an open labor market. The main target groups for the dedicated sheltered employment services in Estonia are people with a mental disability or mental disorders that have not allowed them to participate in the paid labor market. The clients of the service perform tasks according to their abilities, in a suitable working environment, and at a practical tempo. According to the description of the service, they are guaranteed necessary guidance, advice, and assistance.[1] Services akin to sheltered employment have not been previously provided in Estonia, and the performance of the service has not been measured.

Based on the pragmatist co-inquiry methodology, data collection was primarily based on qualitative methods: interviews, observations, workshops and discussion circles with representatives of the various parties. A qualitative study opens up the experience of the different participants by primarily answering the questions "how" and "why" (Patton, 1987). A qualitative, in-depth and empathic understanding also forms the basis for a successful service (and service design), from which questions needing attention arise and possibilities for improvement become clear. The long research period and the combination of observations and conversations allowed us to establish relatively good contact with the clients and the process of sheltered employment service for a fuller understanding of how the service functions.

In total, between November 2016 and November 2017, we interviewed 21 clients of the sheltered employment service who had acquired the service from different providers in different regions in Estonia. We also interviewed 20 client workers, 7 service managers as well as 4 experts. We carried out 6 workshops in the co-creation format (including with representatives from the public sector and other parties to the service). In four sheltered employment centers, we also conducted (participatory) observations where we engaged in work together with the clients. The studies focused on the experience of the client and the process of providing the service, in which the key points of intervention for the service design and co-creation became clear.

In the actual functioning of the service, in addition to the framework set up by the commissioner (procurement conditions, service models) many subjective factors are of critical importance: service provider's profile, the background of specific clients and their ability to participate in a given group, etc. Proceeding from pragmatism and human-centered design, our study was iterative and began with mapping the problems and exploring the client experience, aimed at pinpointing key insights as to how the service was functions (Polaine et

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[1] See the description in https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/kaitstud-too

al 2013). Iteration means that the working hypotheses and new questions and discoveries were checked both in co-inquiry workshops as well as in the next round of interviews with new interviewees. The yearlong research period was structured primarily through the themes of co-creation workshops. The ideas presented in the workshop by the different parties were tested with studies. Then, the results of the studies were, in turn, validated and improved in workshops where the representatives of the different parties shared their own experiences and perspectives and filled out worksheets (service design canvases). The methods used in the workshop were chosen according to the criteria of inclusion and equality. The aim for the facilitators was to keep multivocality and to help all the participants to feel safe and equal without differentiation between "expert" and "non-expert" ideas. For example, using post-it notes to write down the ideas first without the need to defend the idea or even label it as one's own helps to make the participants' positions equal (Rakova and Fedorenko 2021). The data analysis followed qualitative analysis standards with the aim to detect all the variety and not silence any voices. Analysis was conducted by different analysts to get a more balanced view. The emerging themes from the data analysis were presented at the workshops to be validated by diverse stakeholders.

### *Learning points from the process*

In the next section, we will describe the most important conclusions about the sheltered employment service that emerged and were validated during the applied research and co-inquiry process. These consider client experiences, the shortcomings of service provision and possibilities for improvement. With this (meta)-analysis we aim to showcase how the interpretation of these insights is informed by the pragmatist idea of co-inquiry, and explain how and why this information does not surface in the currently established process of service provision and feedback collection.

*1. Existing habit sets, daily routines and ways of engaging with the environment need to be detected and addressed in the service framework to create meaningful change for the client.*

For clients with complex special needs, it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a universal service that is suitable for everyone (Rothman 2018). Our research data on the clients of different service providers also indicates that the background and capabilities of many clients do not match with the presumed client profiles.

During the interviews and observations, the sheltered work clients' difficulties with managing even slightly non-standard situations became manifest: for example, if the familiar cleaning agent was in a slightly different bottle, the client may have not been capable of using it; instead of going to actively inquire about additional information, the person may just remain stuck around waiting.

Based on the pragmatist theory, we would like to highlight that the relationship of clients with the service and the environment where it is being provided depends on their prior experience and their already established habits (as well as different cognitive factors shaping their behavior). Once set, habits are relatively stable and determine one's performance and coping skills in work situations and communication. The importance of prior experience in the formation of existing habit sets should be fully recognized in order to understand the key challenge of all re-habilitation services. On the one hand, these challenges include when long-term unemployment has resulted in the formation of subconscious beliefs and emotional attitudes towards work, oneself and others. On the other hand, they are concerned with fixed

perceptions, bodily behavior, the ability to focus or even daily routines that need to be re-established to support regular participation in work or work-like activities. Since these are largely subconscious processes, people have difficulties in changing them, especially in cases where their agency has been diminished, and the capacity for making life-altering decisions is lower (these are influenced, for example, by unemployment, disability, or few prior accomplishments).

The aim of the sheltered work service is currently to teach a certain limited set of skills and to create the habit of regularly leaving the house. However, detecting and reshaping problematic habits or ways of engaging with the environment of different employees is not prescribed in the current framework, and is not even possible in a given timeframe. The complicated nature of the clients' backgrounds and their potential inertness and resistance to change are currently not sufficiently accounted for in creating changes for the client; yet, this is one of the main goals of the sheltered employment service.

*2. The goals of the service are not internalized and conditions of the service are not universally recognized by clients*

Applying for the sheltered employment service should be deliberated by the prospective clients themselves. In our interviews, we learned that most of the clients were characterized by so-called selective ignorance, which could even apply to highly vital topics (for example, a person may subconsciously refuse to think about his/her future). This manifests in low readiness to actively engage in planning one's own life, by seeking employment, for example. Situations are solved when they arise, according to the stimuli and perceived needs and opportunities that surround the person at this exact moment.

For example, during the interview in the Unemployment Insurance Fund, when the case manager is discussing the need for the service with these people, they should be able to reflect on their plans and the suitability of the service for them. However, the clients are generally accustomed to routine visits to the Unemployment Insurance Fund to report themselves and hear the what officials say they have to do to keep their benefits. Therefore, this interview is not a format that directs people to realistically think through their options and perspectives. Rather, the person behaves according to what s/he perceives is expected of him/her in this official situation and will not express their actual choices and wishes for the future. For this reason, the agreements or consensus reached about the necessity of this service may not be meaningful and/or binding for them, something which is a key presumption in the current functions of the service model, as the person should decide to attend the program him/herself. Thus, the goals of the sheltered employment service often remain uninternalized by clients, and do not become the personal goals of the clients themselves.

In interviews with both clients and client workers, we repeatedly heard that the clients have not acknowledged the necessity of reaching the open labor market at the end of the service, nor understood what being employed truly means. Upon arriving at the service provider, several clients have expressed surprise that the final goal of the service is to start working a paid job; the nature of working independently can also be unclear. Previous experience with other services may play an important role here. Sheltered employment workshops are not that different from other centers where people have been going, sometimes for years, to attend different educational and work-like activities without the commitment to start working on a paid job, and sometimes they are even physically in the same rooms.

A characteristic pattern emerged from the interviews with client workers: the clients may not express their reluctance directly, but rather will fail to show up at work or work exercises. In the current system, this means that the person is suspended from the service. Yet, in the interviews with those who had cancelled their service, we learned that they did not perceive the fact that they no longer attend the service-related activities as a final decision to end the service. Instead, they said that when the hindering circumstance (such as poor health) passes, they will certainly continue where they left off, which was often more than six months ago. This option was, in general, highly appreciated. Similar passive reactions to the environment could also be seen in other circumstances; for example, in the participatory observation, study subjects needed constant supervision and direction.

*3. The effects of the environment and network surrounding the client are not addressed in the service framework*

Long-term unemployed clients with special needs are easily influenced by their environment and by other people. Often times they are dependent, for example, on the opinions of their family or close-ones. Currently, the service model prioritizes working with individual clients and there is not enough time or resources to engage their family, relatives or peers. At the same time, the experience of the service providers showed that the client cannot be treated as a single, autonomous "unit"; rather, working with the client involves understanding and engaging with the client's network.

Based on pragmatism, it can be argued that to change the client's habits (which are collective by nature), one must also change the habits of people in the client's immediate network, so that they too would support the change. The capability and skill of service providers in working with the clients' networks varies greatly, and the service requirements and funding model does not sufficiently provide for this.

Clients with mental disorders are often strongly influenced by the physical and temporal context. Both surrounding people and environmental conditions, such as the weather or the physical space, have their impacts. For example, a client's coping skills and health may be seasonal. We discussed the example of one otherwise highly qualified client with his client worker who explained that although the client is usually very good at his work, "he has regular low periods. As soon as the leaves fall from the trees in the autumn. Autumn and spring are in general the worst". The service model is not currently flexible enough to take these fluctuations in people's health and the effect of the environment and people who surround the client into account.

*4. Information about clients' actual needs and profiles gathered by service providers are not implemented in the design and planning decision-makers due to monetary losses it may imply for effective communicators*

While the above factors are critical for the success of the service, our study also ascertained that the experiences of the clients and the information accumulated about their actual needs, challenges and limitations during the provision of the service does not reach back to policy-makers and service planners to inform the decisions regarding the design, planning and delivery of service. The lack of an effective communication mechanism does not support co-inquiry, co-design and co-planning, all of which, as discussed above, are also key to effective public services.

Opening up and gaining trust takes place during joint activities and requires time. This is particularly true for people with mental disorders who are used to hiding their problems. Good personal contact between a client and a client worker that is established overtime during the sheltered employment service provides a sound basis for getting to know the client and his/her actual needs and limitations. This is one of the most universal positive outcomes, acknowledged by most of the service providers, and illustrated by the subsequent quotes:

> "I can see what suits them and what doesn't. It's not really possible to hide anything here, sitting together every day."

> "A person may not always see themselves in the most appropriate way, even ordinary people. Here we see even things such for example when someone finds it in general difficult to wake up early in the morning, just can't do it."

> "You can hide your problems for weeks, but not for six months [duration of the first phase of the service]".

> "You're just working or cleaning with them, maybe several months together with them and then it turns out they've tried to kill themselves three times in the meantime."

Effectively, a more complete picture of the clients' needs and limitations will start to form only when the clients already participate in the service and especially during work exercises. The service providers shared many stories of the unexpected challenges, e.g. a chef's assistant who had gone through the training and who was generally motivated, but who was afraid of ovens; or a janitor who is afraid to pass by larger windows on higher floors.

Lack of contact and detailed information was also acknowledged by the representatives of the Unemployment Insurance Fund:

> At the Unemployment Insurance Fund office, I have a client sitting across the table, in a large hall, and people moving around behind their back. This does not give you a suitable environment for the person to want to talk. And so, maybe they come here once a month for ten years, and we still don't know anything about them.

When dealing with officials, people also often take on a specific attitude in which they already presume to know what is expected of them and how they should behave. If we also take the previously mentioned meagre agency and the habit of solving situations in the moment as they appear into consideration, it is clear why it is very difficult to acquire an adequate picture of the client during such formal encounters. Yet, in the framework of the current sheltered employment service, the case manager should know the clients' needs before directing them to the service

There is another aspect that should be highlighted here: the interviews conducted with the clients revealed that they may be inclined to wishful thinking and fabrication. For example, in one interview, a client spoke about how she made an agreement with an employer and will start cleaning work next month. She was very confident when talking about plans and agreements. Later, her instructor explained that, in fact, the same 'future employer' she mentioned had clearly expressed that he is not willing to hire this employee under any conditions due to very negative experience with her. In a 30-minute interview, however, it was not possible to comprehend that this was a made up and even fabricated story.

In the current service framework, it is presumed that the needs and limits of the clients are established before assigning the person to a service. This is why there is no effective feedback system for how the service provider can inform design and planning of the service. At the same time, this feedback system is needed since it is where the actual needs of the clients are learnt and established. Even service providers who consider communication with the Unemployment Insurance Fund to be good, refer mainly to organizational and technical issues as examples of efficient cooperation.

In some cases, a few existing communication mechanisms have been hindered. A client's activity plan is currently the only form of information exchange. However, several service providers indicate that these do not work very well and can be misleading in both profiling the target groups and assessing the actual effects of the service:

> We assumed that the Unemployment Insurance Fund wants actual cooperation in solving problems. We created truly realistic action plans, writing down whether there are problems with alcohol, problems with hygiene. The action plan must be signed by the person. But the Unemployment Insurance Fund thought that correct information should not be included in this way because it means the person must sign it, and information like that would be disheartening for them to read. After that, we started to gloss things over and present action plans that do not correspond to reality.

Other service providers also admit that in the current service framework, they do not present neutral and substantial assessments, because that is not wanted. Providing proper information may even be harmful to the service provider: "When we made honest assessments about people, the Unemployment Insurance Fund wanted to remove some people from the service immediately." Within the current service framework, it was not possible to take new persons to service instead of the dropouts. This meant that the service provider lost the service fee for each person who left but still had to keep the same number of client workers and the space to work with the group.

Thus, here we have an example where the communication mechanisms are not only lacking, but there is in fact a mechanism in place that discourages effective communication. This is far from promoting the learning that could be gained through the coordinated effort of managers, policy-makers, and service providers in their work with clients to continually revise the services to better meet the needs of the people.

## Discussion

Understanding the client and considering his/her needs and capabilities is of critical importance in the design of public services in the New Public Management paradigm. However, client-centeredness is a complex and challenging perspective that could easily manifest only as a formal process and by ignoring the actual perspectives and needs of a client or the knowledge and expertise of other relevant stakeholders.

Our meta-analysis of the co-inquiry process of the sheltered employment service in Estonia illustrates several shortcomings in the established service management system that hinder the effective involvement of stakeholders. Furthermore, this paper raises the more fundamental question whether a complex service like sheltered employment could be

designed on the level of ministry without close collaboration with other stakeholders at all. The problematic aspects of the present service system that became visible in the process of co-inquiry suggest that more inclusive and networked approach would be needed in public sector (see also Ansell and Torfing 2021). Undoubtedly, this would be a great paradigmatic innovation.

The method of co-inquiry is aimed at facilitating the involvement of stakeholders in the co-creation of public services (a prerequisite of public sector innovation). Close contact with stakeholders is able to reveal several limitations in the design, planning and implementation of the services. The question is why these shortcomings have not received attention and, to us, whether pragmatist-based co-inquiry could help to address these issues. As we witnessed in our project, co-inquiry has a strong potential for innovation. It not only helps to gather critically important information for service improvements, but also to create a common ground and shared understandings of the flaws and opportunities of the service. Co-inquiry as an approach that allows different relevant stakeholders to contribute to the common understanding of the service process helps to connect actors and constitutes one step closer towards public governance as co-creation (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Some of the flaws highlighted in the study are more fundamental and not specific to sheltered employment service. Although some research is involved in the planning phase of all public services in Estonia, at best this means conducting user surveys and consulting with advocacy or representational organizations. The involvement process generally remains formal without providing any deep or holistic insights. Even if the participants, including the clients, are inquired about their opinions, such methods can neither reveal actual experiences nor help to understand the context of how the service functions, which is fundamental to client's immediate experience with the service.

During the co-inquiry process based on the human-centered design principles, we were able to involve different stakeholders, collect their views and observe service provision also *in situ*. Such forms of inquiry allow for the empathic understanding of the client experience and reveal the unconscious and unquestioned habits either working for or against the goals set by the service managers. Co-inquiry relies heavily on qualitative research principles and resembles approaches like Participatory Action Research (see MacDonald 2012). However, it requires the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. To follow the principles of a co-inquiry, qualitative data collection and analysis need to be complemented by inclusive co-creative workshops that provide an iterative process of validation and setting the new tasks for the inquiry.

Special attention must be paid to the influence of a funder who could try to set the directions and limitations in the open-ended process of co-inquiry. The present study had a neutral funder without any interests in the service of focused. Although we felt the interests of the ministry as a dominate voice over dissenting voices, we could easily treat them as any other stakeholder in the co-inquiry process.

Such in-depth inquiry is not usually possible nor optimal in regular service planning. Therefore, the service should remain flexible enough to adjust to the specific needs of the client. These client needs surface in the close contact between the client and client worker during the service. What creates the most value for each client in the process should not be standardized in advance.

It may be assumed that one of the reasons for the flaws in the current framework of sheltered employment service is that the service was first started and tested by big and well-established service providers (service centers). In practice however, the size and the experience of the service providers, and region of implementation, vary considerably. The initial testing phase did not provide adequate input for adjusting the service and for considering the actual needs of different stakeholders.

Secondly, as discussed above, the possibilities of acquiring feedback are very limited for the officials who plan the service. Today, the impact assessment or outcomes of services is based on whether the prescriptions derived from public procurement documents are fulfilled in the institutions providing the service rather than whether the clients are capable of using the services and creating the desired value. There was resistance to the conclusions of our research as well, with Ministry of Social Affairs officials indicating that we are dealing with a few isolated and disproportionally "problematic" examples which do not have to be considered at all. From these discussions, it was visible that, for the officials, an "actual and true service" is understood to be found in the service description documents rather than in the lived models carried out in the service centers. The fact that the actual service experiences tend to deviate from the initial "good" models and plans is seen as a problem.

This approach proceeds from the mistaken premise that all participants understand identically what is written in these documents and are able and willing to execute it accordingly. The notion that the provision of a service/program is not universal has often been seen by the service planner as a mistake in implementation fidelity (see, for example, Carroll et al., 2007). Such a misconception is in turn related to the habit of planning and providing the service as a mechanical and linear process. In reality, services and the situations of experiencing the service cannot be similar. The service depends on a multitude of factors; primarily on the client's motivation, capability, the support provided by the environment for using the service and the service provider's specific strengths and weaknesses. Co-creation, the actual involvement of clients in the service planning and creation process and co-assessment could help to avoid the simplification trap when systems are projected to be unrealistically standard and linear.

There are also several (implicit) cultural fallacies that affect the general public service provision model. These paradigmatic limitations or blinders are difficult to overcome and require theoretical grounding and shifts in general understanding. For example, in a Pragmatist perspective, a person is inseparable from their environment; their experience depends on their relationship with the environment which is coordinated by habits. Habits are also social and cultural by origin; i.e. even individually enacted habits characterize the dynamics of a social group rather than a single individual. In the western individualistic cultural space, the individual is perceived as an autonomous agent. This is the implicit model driving public service thinking, even though, in reality, service clients are not isolated from their environment. This is even more manifest in case of disabilities, or if a person's autonomous agency is diminished for other reasons.  Clients act in concrete environments and relate to these environments based on their habits. The purpose of the sheltered employment service is in fact (but not explicitly and officially) to change the habits of the client, and to increase their coping skills; however, this is not practically addressed in providing the service. Instead, the clients practice simple and detached work exercises and simple jobs, which often are not at all related to the labor market and its needs.

The human-centered logic of providing public sector services is based on the study of the experience of the client while receiving the service. This is because the client is the one who (co)creates actual value. Thus, co-creation can only function if the necessary habits are already present or helped to take shape. Since habits are collective and dependent on the environment, it is not sufficient to engage only with motivating the client; instead, one must engage the client more holistically (by involving their close network) and create a suitable environment for the new habits to emerge.

There is also a continuous need to reflect on both the explicit and implicit political agenda behind the public sector innovation incentives and bring this reflection into the service design process if needed. On the one hand, in these processes we must often acknowledge that there is a commissioner with an authority to have a final say. On the other hand, if we look in the broader context of how these variously embedded services are implemented, we discover the different strategies used by less powerful to have their "final say". Ignoring these voices in the initial stages of problem setting and goal setting is much to the detriment of the state authorities' intended impact.

Human-centered design thinking must become part of policy shaping processes and constitute a single organic whole with service provision and service assessment based on the democratic process of co-creation. Without constant engagement with the participants of the service, policy-makers cannot acquire adequate feedback about what truly takes place while providing the service. It also requires the willingness to acknowledge and understand the fact that there are great differences in the representations and more deeply-rooted perceptions of the world (habitual level). If it is not embraced, the "empathy" remains superficial.

## Conclusion

Taking a critical approach based on pragmatism, the notion of co-inquiry, and semiotic theory of habit, our paper presents an experimental study of the Estonian sheltered employment service (the labor market service for activating people with special needs). Co-inquiry brings together the perspectives of various parties related to the service, therefore helping to reveal simplified or one-sided assumptions that may stay hidden but still influence the provision of service and the design of service process. Our paper provided additional evidence that the current logic of designing and providing public services has large drawbacks and, due to its mistaken presumptions, cannot fulfil its purpose. Considering that people are inseparable from their environment and behave habitually, a further point of discussion considers how to foster changes in the logic of designing and providing public services in the public sector. Based on our research and investigations of current practice in Estonia, we suggest that co-inquiry is of a great value since it is a practice of an ongoing survey of service experience with effective communication and feedback mechanisms between all relevant stakeholders and decision-makers. In order to detect and potentially solve many of the problems illustrated in this paper, we suggest co-inquiry as a method and pragmatism as a philosophical tradition. As resourceful groundings for human centeredness and service design, they both help to account for nuances and to overcome (implicit) cultural fallacies and simplifications that tend to ignore the perspectives of the less-powerful. In our case, this included people with special needs as clients and social workers providing the service. Co-inquiry as a method should thus be introduced in the public service delivery in all phases and at all levels of management.

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