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WHEN PUBLIC SERVICES FAIL.  
A RESEARCH AGENDA ON PUBLIC SERVICE FAILURE

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## WHEN PUBLIC SERVICES FAIL. A RESEARCH AGENDA ON PUBLIC SERVICE FAILURE

### **Abstract**

#### Purpose

This paper reviews the literature on public service failure and develops a research agenda for studying public service failure alongside private service failure. The general services management literature has devoted relatively little attention to public services, whereas developments in the private service management literature have not reached public management.

#### Design/methodology/approach

This is a conceptual paper, drawing on the public management literature. Different failure types and causes are discussed, including service failures that are specific to public sector settings. This is linked to the specific public context within which public services operate. Customer reactions to public service failure are then introduced, as well as service recovery.

#### Findings

Service failures in a public and a private context are different. There are different failure types and different standards of failure. Public management literature mainly studies collective and political reactions to service failure, whereas the private service management literature tends to focus on individual reactions. Finally, attention for service recovery was found to be very limited in the public services literature.

#### Social implications

Studying public service failure is important because failure can have dramatic consequences for customers, public organisations and society. Social inequalities that arise as result of public service failure need to have a prominent role in future research.

Originality/value

This paper develops the concept of public service failure and sets a novel research agenda for studying processes, causes, and consequences of such failure, as well as public-private differences.

Keywords: public services, service failure, exit, choice, voice, service recovery

## WHEN PUBLIC SERVICES FAIL. A RESEARCH AGENDA ON PUBLIC SERVICE FAILURE

### **Introduction**

Public service failure comes in many different ways: a passport that is not delivered in time, a permit with wrong information, failure to pay out benefits one is entitled to, an incorrect tax levy, low quality schools, a hospital that commits a medical error, a bus that does not turn up. Especially in situations where citizens are in a dependent position, such failures can have dramatic consequences, such as being evicted from one's house, losing one's job, going hungry, or even death. Failing public services feature prominently in popular images of the public sector and political discourse (Goodsell, 2003; Haque, 1998), and economic theory has frequently treated service failure as an inherent characteristic of bureaucracies (Caiden, 1991). Despite the omnipresence of public service in people's lives and the potential damage public service failure can inflict on their lives, public service failure has not attracted the same attention in the public management and public services literature as private service failure has in the services management literature (see, e.g., Colgate and Norris, 2001; McCollough *et al.*, 2011; Smith and Bolton, 1998; but see also Andrews. 2007). At a time when public sector organisations increasingly approach citizens as customers, the service failure literature offers opportunities both for public management researchers to start paying more attention to service failure using this literature, and for private service scholars to expand their research to include public services. This paper positions the phenomenon of public service failure within the wider public management and services management literature, and formulates a research agenda for the study of public service failure.

Public service failure refers to a failure or perceived failure by public organisations to deliver services to the customer against established norms. This focus on the operational level of service delivery distinguishes public service failure from other concepts, such as government failure or policy failure. Government failure (Wolf, 1979) arises 'when government has

created inefficiencies because it should not have intervened in the first place or when it should have solved a given problem or set of problems more efficiently, that is, by generating greater net benefits' (Winston, 2006:3). Typically, government failure is defined in relation to market failure: It is a failed attempt to correct a market failure. Studies looking at government failure mainly tend to address policy failures, especially policies that interfere in the free market (arguably in an attempt to correct market failures) or address the political nature of government decisions, and the bureaucratic inflexibilities and (agency) self-interest in implementing policies (Le Grand, 1991; Dollery and Worthington, 1996; Tullock, Brady and Seldon, 2002). The focus is thus on why policies fail, and less so on why services fail. The government failure literature has little attention for more mundane matters of service failure. There also is quite a substantive body of literature on policy failure and related work on policy fiascos, crises, and disasters (Howlett, 2012, Maesschalck and Van de Walle, 2006, McConnell, 2010). Policy failure is 'a negative event that is perceived by a socially and politically significant group of people in the community to be at least partially caused by avoidable and blameworthy failures of public policymakers' (Bovens and 't, Hart 1996). The policy failure literature often focuses on major failures of large policy programmes, major events or crises, and includes many case studies and analyses of e.g. information and communication technology (ICT) project failures, crashes, collapses, and disasters (see, e.g., Dunleavy, 1995; Romzek and Dubnick, 1987).

Rather than looking at these grand project and policy failures and disasters, this paper looks at public service failures located at the more operational level of service delivery, where customers and service providers meet. While this article's focus is on the very last step in the policy implementation process – service delivery, the root cause of failures can often be much earlier in the policy cycle, e.g. through misdefining the problem, choosing the wrong solution, or by not providing sufficient budget.

The remainder of the article has four sections. First, **it is argued** public services fail differently than private services. Then, **the article addresses** why public services fail. Subsequently, **it looks** into customer reactions to public service failures, and into service recovery, each time highlighting differences between the public and the private services management literature. **The article concludes** with a research agenda.

### **Public services fail differently**

**At the level of the service interface, many** public services resemble private services: documents are ordered, payments are made, customers and providers meet at a counter, queuing systems are in place, etc. Despite many similarities at the operational level between public and private services, public services fail differently.

First, the consequences of failure are different. Unlike most private service organisations, public services tend not **to** go out of business. In the case of failure (or indeed following changes in political winds) they can be amalgamated with another organisation, or parts of their service portfolio can be transferred to another part of government (James ***et al.*** 2015). Public service organisations can be abolished, or their budget can be cut, but public agencies tend to survive rather than die (Kaufman, 1976). **Public agency termination** – or the abolishment or closing down of a public organisation - is fairly rare for a number of reasons, not at least because agency termination may lead to an altogether end of service provision. This means existential threats do not hover as prominently above the heads of public organisations as is the case for private organisations. Still, agency heads can be disciplined for service failure by their principals. Also, market share is not a primary objective of public services, because of limited competition. Many public services are even successful when their customer base shrinks – either because the problem they are created for is solved, or because they have been successful in discouraging clients. Many clients are involuntary clients (e.g. prisoners, tax payers), and there often is disagreement about who, ultimately, is the main

beneficiary of a public service: is it the person whose garbage is being picked up, your neighbours who don't have to suffer your garbage, your community that is kept clean, or the local council that buys services from the garbage collection company?

A second important feature of public service organisations is that they exist and operate within a political environment. This means perceptions and framing of service failure matter probably even more than in a private sector context, and that objective violation of service standards is just one of the elements of public service failure. Furthermore, in this perception of failure, violations of service standards are often mixed with opinions about the service, its need, desirability, prior reputation, political leanings of the service and so on. Opponents of a service, a policy, or an incumbent may tend to frame the service and policy outcomes as failures (see also, McConnell, 2010). Failure is in the eyes of the beholder. Just like the performance of a service, an assessment of failure is 'essentially a construct of the consumer made up of the confluence of their expectations of the service and their perceptions of the process (...)' (Osborne, 2010: 3). Public service failure is a matter of interpretation and perception. Not only do public services have to perform against pre-established standards (if at all these are clear); they also have to be seen to do so. Public services can fail without this being seen as such, and they can succeed without being recognised as such. McConnell's definition of policy success is useful for service failure as well: 'A policy is successful if it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal.' (McConnell, 2010: 351). Failure can be politicised and magnified because it impacts special groups or individuals, or it can go unnoticed because it is taken for granted or because it mainly affects silent or marginal groups.

A consequence of these special characteristics of public services – they do not go out of business, and they exist within a political environment – is that it is sometimes difficult to know when and whether failure has actually taken place: criteria of success and failure are

ambiguous. Though performance and quality management has taken hold in many public organisations, objective performance criteria and targets are not always present. These criteria also only tell part of the story, and do not account for all perspectives on the situation. In some cases, failure is relatively easy to assess. This is what **one for instance sees** in some of the crisis literature in public management that treats breakdowns of critical parts and infrastructures as objective indications that failure has occurred - see e.g. O-ring erosion and the subsequent disintegration of the Challenger space shuttle (Romzek **and Dubnick**, 1987), collapsing viewing platforms (Gregory, 1998), or crisis responses after hurricane Katrina (Waugh **and** Streib, 2006). Literatures on street-level bureaucracies and their service delivery likewise present accounts of clear and unambiguous failure, such as situations when children die after failure to intervene by child protection services (Garrett, 2009; Marinetto, 2011), or when police forces fail to intervene because information about a suspect was not shared. When failures are related to more complex and ambiguous projects or services, it can be incredibly hard to see whether failure has actually taken place. Think for instance about failing large-scale IT projects, or massive cost-overruns in infrastructure projects (Dunleavy, 1995). Such failures are a combination of thousands of factors, in a changing environment, with constantly shifting criteria of success and failure.

### **Why public services fail – a reassessment**

Unlike private service management literature, that has tended to treat failures as anomalies or stumbling blocks on the path to service excellence, public management literature tends to consider failure (and perceived failure) as a normal feature of public sector functioning. This is visible not only in the discipline's attention for administrative reform. It is also reflected in the body of work dealing with bureau bashing (Hall, 2002; Goodsell, 2000), and in more general reflections on public perceptions of government performance (Bok, 2001; Goodsell, 2003). **The** adoption of economic theory and public choice thinking in the 1980s by public management scholars ( see, e.g., Perry and Kraemer, 1983) strengthened the belief that absent market pressure, incompetent or self-serving civil servants, and politically inspired meddling



and micro-management made failure almost inevitable. These criticisms frequently conflate two dimensions of failure: failure to provide what citizens want as customers, and failure to provide service against pre-established criteria. The former has to do with failure to respond to market signals or with a deliberate (policy) decision to go against such signals. The latter brings public services into the realm of the more traditional services management literature, where typologies of service failure have already been developed with a specific focus on certain sectors, such as retailing (Kelley *et al.* 1993). Below, common types of public service failure are discussed. The first three are based on Boin and 't Hart's (2000) influential work on crises and policy failure in which they were the first to distinguish clear types of general failure: crisis by ignorance, crisis by rigidity and crisis by failed intervention. Three more failure types are added based on recent public management scholarship (see below), reflecting the particular political nature of public service environments: failure by neglect, failure by design, and failure by association.

#### *Failure by ignorance*

Just like Boin and 't Hart's *crisis by ignorance*, failure by ignorance refers to failure to recognize a need for adaptation or reform (Boin and 't Hart, 2000). In a context of public service delivery, this means service users perceive a failure, while those responsible for the public service do not recognize this failure or potential for failure, and therefore do not take action to improve services. This ignorance can be due to an absence of (market) signals in the public sector about what customers want, and this, it is claimed, leads to services that fail to deliver (Tummers *et al.*, 2013). Likewise, literatures on customer relations in the public sector and public sector reform have frequently argued for a wider adoption of tools to monitor customer opinions on public services in order to reduce the information deficit (Van de Walle, 2010)

*Failure by rigidity*

Boin and 't Hart defined a *crisis by rigidity* as a situation where policy makers know what is going on, but they seem unable to take action. In a context of service failure, one can observe this phenomenon in accounts of service failure where bureaucratic rigidity, red tape, or impossible rules stop an organisation from performing effectively, let alone correcting its failures (Mascini, 2005) or where rigid decision making processes stop the organisation from making a decision at all. In his work on administrative failure, Hood (1974: 445) refers to 'over-organization' in a public organisation. It means that rigid regulations and excessive control make it difficult or impossible for an organisation to take action. For public services, rigidity may also follow not just from inability but also from illegality of response. This means public services are not always able to respond to failure because of legal safeguards or their inability to single out individual citizens for special assistance or preferential treatment (Varela-Neira *et al.*, 2010). Solving problems may also mean violating rules because they are seen as unworkable or impossible

*Failure by failed intervention*

Failure by failed intervention is based on Boin and 't Hart (2010)' concept *crisis by failed intervention*, referring to a situation where wrong solutions are applied or where a solution is applied to the wrong problem. Such a failure occurs when the public service indeed responds to a situation – and is thus not hampered by rigidity, follows its own procedure, and where ample information is available. Still the intervention is considered a failure, either by pre-established standard or by actors inside or outside the organisation. This is a typical phenomenon in public service settings because public service providers often deal with wicked social problems. Such wicked problems are complex, open ended, and intractable. These are nonroutine and not standardised, making an adequate service response difficult (Head *and* Alford, 2015). The eminent public administration scholar Christopher Hood already talked about administrative failure back in 1974. He explains that many failures have to do with the dilemmas governments have to deal with, in an environment where little

agreement exists about the problem (and even about the fact whether there is a problem in the first place) and what counts as an adequate solution. Standards of success are not generally agreed upon. As a result, well-intentioned service delivery may therefore be interpreted a failure, simply because unequivocal success is just not an option.

#### *Failure by neglect*

Failure by neglect is the result of disinterest by management or policy makers in the service involved, allowing it to falter. It can have various reasons. The low public profile of the service may make it unattractive for policy makers to get involved, for competent managers to take up a position, and for public employees to prefer this public employer over another. The public service may serve parts of the population **who are not vocal or who are socially marginalised, making these services less important for politicians as vote-winners, such as is the case for social work.** There is a long tradition in political science and public administration of research revealing unequal service levels depending on socio-economic status and place of residence, and demonstrating a territorial segregation and middle-class bias in public service delivery (Serra, 1995). Public services can also be used as spoils to reward loyal voters or to attract new voters, or to discipline and punish opposition districts (Khemani, 2015). Neglect can also result from an unwillingness to challenge the status quo, because a well-performing public service may drive out private or non-profit initiatives offering similar services, and that enjoy political or social support.

#### *Failure by design*

Organizations can deliberately design their services in such a way that service levels are deficient, and likely to be perceived a failure, or that using the service comes with social stigma. In the public sector, such failure by design exists in areas where demand for services is high but resources scarce. Examples are burdensome procedures to apply for government subsidies in order to curb demand, excessive red tape in order to discourage welfare applicants to apply for benefits or for health care (Moynihan, Herd, **and** Harvey, 2015), or

lengthy proposal forms in research grant applications. Burdens and unpleasant service experience may be part of organization policy; Moynihan *et al.* (2015) ‘argue that administrative burden is a venue of politics, that is, the level of administrative burden placed on an individual, as well as the distribution of burden between the state and the individual, will often be a function of deliberate political choice rather than simply a product of historical accident or neglect’ (43). This type of failure resembles what the (private) services management literature -confusingly- calls policy failure. Policy failure here is a ‘result of store policy, which was perceived by the customer as being inequitable’ (Kelley *et al.* 2003: 433). Another example would be a company’s complaints or cancellation department that is difficult to reach in order to hinder subscription cancellations. In other words, the organization has not actually violated any service procedures or norms, but has a deliberate policy to deliver the service (or the service recovery) in this way. The customer perceives the service as having failed.

#### *Failure by association*

Failure by association occurs when actors’ assessment of public services is affected by negativity bias. Minor and exceptional failures are interpreted as major and common ones, and users may (unconsciously) fail to recognise objectively good performance as measured against benchmarks (Lowery *et al.* 1992; Van Slyke and Roch, 2004; Marvel, 2016). Failure by association occurs when a service has a bad reputation, and this reputation clouds actual experience. The perception of failure persists even after a positive experience, which is interpreted as an exception (Del Pino *et al.*, 2016). This means that relatively well functioning public services are perceived to fail because of their status as public services. Failure by association is an important phenomenon in the public sector because the public sector often enjoys a quite negative reputation (Bok, 2001). Failure by association is more likely when users evaluate a more abstract type of service as opposed to more concrete ones (Goodsell, 2003).

The six failure types are summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Failure types

Failure type	Meaning
Failure by ignorance	Failure to recognize a need for service adaptation or reform
Failure by rigidity	Failure as a result of an inability to adapt or reform the service
Failure by failed intervention	Failure as a result of applying wrong solutions or of applying a solution to the wrong problem
Failure by neglect	Failure as a result of disinterest
Failure by design	Failure as a deliberate design element of the service
Failure by association	A perception of failure as a result of negativity bias

### How customers react to public service failure

Public services often operate under the assumption of failure (Ariely, 2011; Van de Walle, 2004). For this reason, attention for failure, and customer reactions to failure has remained fairly limited. Indeed, one could say that low expectations leave little chance for expectancy disconfirmation. Still, customer expectations, also in the public sector, are on the rise (Hodgkinson, 2013). Unlike the private service management literature, public management research is less concerned with reactions such as brand loyalty, customer retention or repurchase intentions. Also, it tends to be less concerned with individual customers' reactions to failure, but rather with collective responses.

Citizens are increasingly treated as customers and consumers of public services, reducing their multifaceted and often collective relation to public services as voter, taxpayers, coproducers, and so on, to a relation based on individual self-interest and service satisfaction.

Public service liberalisation has made exit a viable option in many service settings (Le Grand 2007). Even in relation to monopolistic service providers, citizens have an array of options when faced with service failure (Dowding and John, 2011; Hirschman, 1970): they can complain directly or complain to external parties (ombudsman, politicians, press), become aggressive, go to court, demand compensation, etc.

Still, the quasi-monopolistic nature of many public services also makes reacting to failure seem futile, and loyalty is enforced. Apathy, alienation, and evasion are reactions to failing public services and public management scholars have assumed a link between failing public services and the erosion of confidence in public institutions (Miller and Listhaug, 1999). A direct causal link proves hard to demonstrate though (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). Dowding and John (2012) argue for studying neglect - referring to a passive attitude to what is happening, and a reluctance to further invest in the relationship, something which is very problematic in public services that always to some extent rely on active participation, co-production and social investment.

### *Voice and blaming*

When things go wrong in public service delivery, customers can use their voice to express dissatisfaction, either towards political leaders in charge of those services, towards those managing or operating the service, or just towards media, friends and family (John, 2016). It was only in the 1990s that direct voice became a real option for public service customers when customer surveys, complaint procedures and ombuds institutions became commonplace (Jilke and Van de Walle, 2013). Recent years have seen the emergence of newer voice mechanisms that are very similar to those common in the private sector, such as using social media to complain, or online review websites where public sector customers review public services (Trigg, 2014).

One of the core elements of the New Public Management, which emerged in the 1980s and introduced public choice in public sector practice and promoted the adoption of private sector management ideas into the public sector, was that it considered citizens as customers of public services. This meant a direct relation between citizens (as customers) and public services came into being. It replaced a former model of indirect accountability where citizens complained to their political representatives, who then intervened on their behalf in their role as principals. This relatively recent evolution means that public administration scholarship has devoted considerable attention to political voice - citizens becoming politically active in reaction to poorly performing public services (Sharp, 1984; John, 2016). In reaction to failure, citizens take their complaints about and dissatisfaction with public services to political fora, hoping to transform public services, but also to castigate those politicians responsible for service failure (James and Moseley, 2014).

Voice does not only come from the customers, but also from the principals of public sector organisations, notably politicians. Indeed, public service failure takes a prominent role in party-political programmes and electoral propaganda. For this reasons, public management scholarship has also devoted attention to electoral behaviour following service failure (James and John, 2007). It remains unclear though whether politicians get punished for poor performance, or only for high-profile service failures (see, e.g. Van de Walle, Kampen and Bouckaert, 2005).

In recent years public management research has seen a surge in attention for blaming, both theoretically (Hood, 2002; 2010), and empirically (James *et al.*, 2016). Blaming is a process of attributing responsibility for failure, and often happens in public fora. Just as is the case with policy failure, service failure only selectively attracts blame (Brändström and Kuipers (2003). While some failures are immediately classified as a result of mismanagement, others are interpreted as misfortune (Andrews *et al.*, 2006). Services may also be blamed for no reason – e.g. by ‘fault transferors’ who blame a service to hide their own mistakes and evade

their own responsibility (Reynolds and Harris, 2005: 328). This can be the case for politicians who have made decisions, including budget cuts, on public services, or for citizens who often coproduce public services.

### *Choice and exit*

Exit is a common strategy used by citizens to counteract service failure (Jilke *et al.*, 2016; Colgate and Norris, 2001). Marketization of public services, or the introduction of markets where government monopolies existed before made it easier for public service users to exercise choice. Exit in a public service context means moving to alternative providers, either within the public sector, or in the private sector (Dowding and John, 2011; 2012). But even in the absence of a market environment, citizens always had several choice and exit options as reaction to public service failure. Such exit can take different shapes, and is framed in different ways. Positively framed, concepts such as self-provision, self-production, or self-organization abound (Mizrahi, 2011). Gofen introduced the concept of entrepreneurial exit (Gofen, 2012), referring to proactive exits by citizens ‘by creating a viable alternative themselves’ (2012: 1088). She discusses a wide range of exit behaviours in response to perceived public service failures, such as home schooling or urban self-defence groups. Such exit can consist of obtaining and providing a service that is not there yet; or it can be set up alongside public services. More negatively framed, exit as a response to failing services may mean moving into illegal territory (Mizrahi, 2011), e.g. through using informal payments to obtain services.

Exit can also be complete, when citizens stop using a public service altogether in response to service failure, even when they are entitled to benefit from the service. Such non-take-up is especially problematic in social service settings, where administrative burdens, administrative mistakes and social stigma may drive users away from essential services.



The main problem with exit as a signal in the public sector is that it does not necessarily induce government organisations to improve, because of absence of direct competition (see, Mizrahi, 2011: 287). Even more, exit may reduce the financial burden of government, because fewer people want to make use of its services. Exit, and the potential for exit, may also be unevenly distributed across social groups, having important social and democratic implications (Jilke, 2015). This is the case when for instance wealthy and higher educated parents are able to take their children out of a failing school and send them to a fee-paying private school.

### **Service recovery and repair**

Public services may attempt to correct their failures. This is called recovery and repair. Such recovery consists of different strategies such as repairing the failure and resolving the problem, apologising to customers, or compensating them. Unlike the private service literature (see, e.g., Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2012), public services scholarship has hardly devoted any attention to service recovery (but see Björilin Lidén and Edvardsson, 2003).

Where research does exist, it focuses on internal responses to avoid future failure, often in the form of organisational reorganisation or leadership replacement. Examples are work on organisational coping strategies (Anheier, 1999) or on performance turnaround strategies in public organisations (Turner *et al.*, 2004). This research, however, does not look at specific instances of failure, but at recovery following an all-out sustained defective performance – a permanent failure (Boyne, 2006; Jas and Skelcher, 2005). Recovery and repair in a public service context tends to be directed at the collective rather than at the individual customer. This explains the popularity of political resignations following (high-profile) public service failures as a repair strategy.

In the private services literature, scholars have devoted particular attention to recovery efforts to restore individual customers' perceived fairness of the service transaction (Tax and Brown, 1998). Attention for recovery after service failure focused at the individual customer or groups of customers is relatively rare in the public services literature. In any case, it is a relatively new phenomenon that was only made possible when citizens became to be seen as customers (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005; Clarke and Newman, 2007), and customer satisfaction slowly became a formal objective of public service organisations against which their performance would be evaluated. The introduction of general service charters in the early 1990s laid the foundation for future specific service guarantees (Drewry, 2005), and for recovery strategies. Compensation (monetary and non-monetary) tends to be absent from most public service charters though (Thomassen *et al.*, 2014). There are examples of public organisations compensating citizens after service failure (Björlin Lidén and Edvardsson, 2003), but in some systems, individual compensation is considered undesirable or illegal (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998; Madell, 2005).

Recent developments in social media use fall in between collective and individual approaches to service recovery. The increasing presence of public service organisations on social media, with social media teams attending to complaints, means that efforts are made to assist individual customers when services fail, but at the same time attempts are made to protect the organisation's image. Both the discussion about compensation after service failure, and selective attention to high-profile social media users highlights an important paradox in public service customer relations – improving services for some customers may increase inequality in service delivery (Fountain, 2001).

### **Studying public service failure: a research agenda**

What should a research agenda on public service failure look like? This research agenda first outlines four areas where the private and public service failure literatures can learn from and complement each other. First, public management scholars should take on board mainstream

service failure research from the private service management literature. Second, there are issues that are particularly relevant and important to public services that have hitherto attracted little attention in the service failure literature. Third, comparisons between public and private services are called for. Finally, the consequences of service failure **that are specific to a public context** need to be studied.

First, the public services literature needs to do more effort to take on board the main private services literature on service failure. Communication between the private and public management literatures is fairly limited, which means both tend to operate on separate islands, with their own terminologies and research foci (Andrews **and** Esteve, 2015). At the operational level of public services, private sector insights on consumer relations have been translated by public organisations, yet very few public management researchers have devoted attention to these developments. Private services management literature can teach a great deal on consumer relations, consumer retention, consumer loyalty, individual recovery and compensation. In this way, the public service literature can move beyond its interest for collective consequences of service failure to focus on individual responses and reactions. The private service management literature has also taught a great deal about intra-organisational reasons for service failure. For public management, a focus on why things go wrong in public services would be a welcome expansion of current public management research which is still mainly focusing on HR and leadership-related topics when studying intra-organisational processes.

Second, the context within which public services operate makes it attractive to expand current research on service failures to include topics that are particularly relevant to public services. Public service delivery has a collective and political dimension, which means that failure extends to the collective and political sphere. This is for instance the case for customers' reactions to failure, which can consist of collective and/or political action. **Little is currently known about how individually experienced failure transforms into collective (re)action.** The

same is true about how service failure is constructed in political debate and how political principals react to service failure. A different context may also mean that the private and public sector are characterised by different types of service failure. This means current typologies of service failure (see, e.g., Kelley, 1994) need to be scrutinized and possibly expanded to capture relevant failure types in the public sector.

Public-private comparison is needed to compare types and causes of service failure, and reactions to service failure across sectors. Such comparisons may reveal important differences across sectors, or indeed show that public and private service do not differ much when looking at service failure. Some questions to consider include: Do certain types of failure occur more often in one sector? Are recovery strategies from the private sector transferable to the public sector, or would these trigger a backlash? Does difficulty of exit in the public sector lead to different reactions to failure? How does blaming for service failure differ between a public and a private context? How common is failure by design or failure by neglect in a private sector context?

Finally, researchers need to look at the consequences of public service failure. This article has already indicated that the private services literature tends to be interested in customer- and firm-level consequences of failure, while the public services literature tends to look at collective and political consequences of service failure. Public service scholars may want to devote more attention to these consequences at the customer- and –organisation-level. Attention should also go to how public service failure affects the overall image of government, or to how successful service recovery spills over to perceptions of other public services, and government as a whole. Attention should also go to inequalities that arise as result of public service failure. Are particular groups more affected by failure, or does failure affect customers randomly? Are some groups more likely to respond to failure through blaming, complaining, or exiting? Are some groups more likely to be compensated for service failure?

In line with the three main sections of this article, looking at failure types, responses to failure, and service repair and recovery, and the four broad areas for future research outlined in this research agenda, table two lists a number of potential research questions for future research on public service failure.

Table 2. Potential research questions on public service failure

Focus area	Potential research questions
Failure types	<p>How common are different types of failure in the public sector?</p> <p>Do types of failure differ depending on service characteristics, policy area, or customer type?</p> <p>Do types of failure differ between public and private services?</p> <p>What intra- and extra-organisational factors cause public services to fail?</p>
Individual and collective responses	<p>Do users of public services react similar to those of private service to service failure?</p> <p>How do responses to service failure in areas where exit is not possible differ from those where exit is possible?</p> <p>How do political responses to service failure such as blaming, electoral behaviour or political engagement and disengagement look like?</p> <p>How do citizens react collectively to service failure?</p>
Organisational responses and recovery	<p>How do public organisations react to service failure? Do they react?</p> <p>How does public service failure trigger performance</p>

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	turnaround strategies?
	Does service recovery in a public setting work in the same way as it does in a private setting?
	Are individual service recovery strategies that are common to the private sector considered acceptable in a public service setting?
Impact of public service failure	How does service failure impact government legitimacy?
	Are particular groups disproportionately affected by service failure?
	Does public service failure create inequalities in society?

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## Conclusion

Public services that fail can have dramatic consequences for the people involved. While the private services management literature has developed a substantial body of research on service failure, its antecedents, and consequences, very little of this work has focused on public services. Now that public organisations increasingly treat citizens as customers, these organisation as well as public management scholarship can benefit from the insights from this private service failure literature. This article has emphasised that public and private services operate in a different context and that therefore the reasons, types, and consequences of service failure are likely to be different. It has also discussed a number of failure types, as well as different ways in which citizens react to public service failure, both individually and collectively.

For scholars working on service failure, public services remain largely unexplored and offer a wide range of areas where pioneering research into service failure can be done. For public management scholars, the services management literature offers many new concepts and approaches that will allow them to expand their research on service failure to studying individual level consequences of such failures, as well as service recovery and its effects.

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