Co-Production and Co-Creation in Public Services: Resolving Confusion and Contradictions

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ABSTRACT

Publications continue to affirm that there are no agreed definitions or conceptual frameworks for co-production and co-creation in relation to public services. Consequently, across and within academic and grey literature lie many examples of confusion and contradictions. These hinder insightful discussion and explanatory research. This paper argues that underlying this muddle is a failure to be clear about the nature and structure of public services. The commonly used “service to customers” model from commerce is a misleading oversimplification. To re-frame the discussions on co-creation and co-production, a model is developed of a generic multi-actor, multi-instrument system that helps to identify the real issues associated with governmental and non-governmental actors combining to achieve a social outcome. The system can be assessed in terms of relationships (e.g. degrees of openness and collaboration) and the role of technology (e-government). The essential role of the government is determined to be policy and system design.

KEYWORDS

Co-Creation, Co-Production, E-Government, Governance, Government, Instruments, Policy, Public Services, System

INTRODUCTION

In 19th century London, fire engines needed 22 people to manually pump the water for the hoses. Rather than take a bus-load of pumpers with them, the firemen used to recruit them from the crowd of onlookers at the scene, literally crowdsourcing. Pumpers were paid one shilling for the first hour and sixpence (half a shilling) for subsequent hours. Was this co-production, or co-creation, or contracting-out, or outsourcing, or citizen participation, or volunteering? Was this a public service, an open government service, or public sector innovation? Was the fire engine owned and run by the city government or a private company under a private finance initiative? Did any of this matter?

Jo and Nabatchi (2016) sum up the published work on co-production in public services from the study group of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences on the subject, concluding that there is a need for a clear definition, and frameworks and typologies, to make sense of the concept of co-production in public services as a foundation for explanatory research. They argue that much work has focused on individual cases, like the one above, that do not provide a universally consistent definition and model.

Voorberg et al. (2015) carried out an extensive literature review on “public co-creation and co-production with citizens”. In half of the cases reviewed, citizens took the role of co-implementer, in contrast to being a co-designer or initiator of a venture. However, they found that co-creation and

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co-production frequently were given similar definitions, and challenged the lack of conceptual clarity arising from this. Similar points continue to be made (Meijer, 2016; Osborne, Radnor, & Strokosch, 2016).

Consequently, this paper aims to resolve the uncertainty around co-production and co-creation in relation to public services. To do so it will combine concepts from the political sciences concerning public policy design and implementation, and from system and network modelling. The core argument is that a failure to clearly articulate the nature of “public services” underlies the many confusions and contradictions in the discussion of co-production and co-creation that appear not only in academic work but in “grey” publications by governments, think tanks and international bodies. Where specific confusions and contradictions are discussed, citations will not generally be given: the issues are pervasive, and singling out individual authors would be unfair. This paper will use hyphenated versions of the words co-production etc., though they appear commonly unhyphenated in literature.

The Problem

Elinor Ostrom initially defined co-production simply as the process by which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization (Ostrom, 1996, cited in Bovaird, 2007; Boyle & Harris, 2009; Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). Later, when she and others applied it to “co-production in public services” they created a great variety of definitions and terms (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016) and indeed her original formulation has been challenged as appearing to embrace too much (Joshi & Moore, 2004). Bovaird & Loeffler (2012) provide a brief history, and illustrate how many more terms beginning “co-” have entered the discussion (notably co-creation and co-design among many), with interchangeable usage or various attempts at differentiations (Voorberg et al., 2015).

Early in this history, the key actor in co-production was identified as the individual citizen, variably a “user”, “customer”, “client” or “consumer” of a public service. Studies thus became focussed on the role of this individual citizen in contrast to other people in non-state organisations such as charities (Voorberg et al., 2015). In contrast, the actors within the public service became characterised as “professionals”, very often in the context of health or care related examples, but by implication extending to officials within a “traditional, bureaucratic” public service — precise definitions are rare in the literature. Boyle & Harris (2009) refer to real co-production as the intersection of planning and delivery by professionals and others (users/communities), but say that there is no agreed definition.

Similarly:

Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change. (New Economics Foundation - nef, 2012, p. 9)

Within the literature, some authors position co-production in public services as part of a new regime for public policy implementation, sometimes hypothesised to be a New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006, 2010), that follows Old Public Administration (OPA, essentially Weberian bureaucracy) and the New Public Management movement (NPM, Hood, 1991; Hood & Dixon, 2015) that embraced the application of private sector models — markets, management and measurement (Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald, & Pettigrew, 1996) — to the public sector. In contradiction, others assert that it has always existed, regardless of these, particularly as nations develop (Joshi & Moore, 2004). Developments from marketing theory, such as service systems theory and Service-Dominant Logic, are mapped by some authors on to public services (Akesson & Edvardsson, 2008; Maglio, et al., 2009; Osborne, et al., 2014; Vargo, et al., 2008) to attempt to model co-creation of value — but views differ on whether or not this leads to a different paradigm to NPM.
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