

21 The Dark Side of Co-Creation and Co-Production

Seven Evils

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Introduction

Co-production could go horribly wrong. Patients could die because of self-administered treatments. Self-appointed vigilantes could “co-produce” public safety by attacking strangers. In co-creating the developments of their neighbourhoods, the highly educated and wealthy may further press their already considerable advantages.

Whether all this will happen is an empirical question. Several literature reviews (e.g. Verschuere et al., 2012; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015) and several chapters in this volume have pointed out that research on effects is the least developed part of research in this area. Nonetheless, the overall literature on co-creation and co-production of public services is optimistic with respect to its presumed effects. Proponents claim that close collaboration between regular service providers and citizens provides opportunities for improving efficiency and quality of public service delivery, and for enhancing democratization and trust in government. Indeed, the terms themselves are skewed towards optimism. “Creation” and “production” are the glittering objectives of economic discourse.

The normative tendency towards optimism tends to mask a number of potential pitfalls. It is this dark side of co-creation and co-production that we address in this chapter. We will address seven potential evils: the deliberate rejection of responsibility, failing accountability, rising transaction costs, loss of democracy, reinforced inequalities, implicit demands and co-destruction. We argue that scholars should fully open up to these possibilities and make them part of the research agenda, because otherwise they risk damaging their own academic credibility.

The Deliberate Rejection of Responsibility

User engagement and calling upon the responsibilities of citizens can be regarded as a means for government to enhance collective action and, as such, address its dependency on citizens in dealing with societal challenges

such as demographic change or climate change (Pollitt, 2014). Yet it can also be a cover for minimizing governments' responsibilities and accountability in a context of scarcity of financial resources in the public sector in general, and in social and health care services most specifically. Indeed, financial concerns and pressures for a smaller and more efficient government are assessed as driving forces behind the interest in engaging citizens in the production of public services in the UK's "big society" and "community right to challenge" initiatives (cf. Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012), the Dutch "participatory society" debate (cf. Nederhand and Van Meerbeek, this volume) and similar initiatives in other countries.

Failing Accountability

In addition to deliberate efforts to shed responsibility, co-production and co-creation may inadvertently lead to a lack of clear responsibilities. As the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors become blurred (Bovaird, 2007; Joshi and Moore, 2004), there is concern about ensuring supervision of and accountability for quality of public services in the context of co-creation and co-production. The need for clearly outlined roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved in co-creation and co-production of public services is illustrated through the example of sports clubs taking over the management of local sport facilities. Such an initiative may provide opportunity for new services to be initiated—as illustrated by the swimming hours for persons with dementia being organized in a Dutch community. However, it also calls for concern on issues such as delineating the specific responsibilities of government and co-producers, establishing financial processes and accountability and ensuring continuity of service delivery. Brandsen et al. (2016) find that social innovations often remain local and temporary. And while the authors assert that the positive effect of small, temporary initiatives should not be disregarded, this points out the precarious nature also of many co-creation and co-production initiatives. What are the implications, for example, if constant seeking for common aims among the co-producing partners, or a need to continually meet difficulties in the collaboration leads to "partnership fatigue" (cf. Huxham and Vangen, 2005) and makes one of the co-producing partners decide to decrease their engagement?

A similar problem may arise at the individual level. If clients co-design and co-produce a service, and the service subsequently fails, it is less clear who is ultimately responsible. For instance, if patients carry out part of their own treatment, are they solely responsible for failures? Or do doctors retain responsibility, despite the fact that they have less influence on the outcome? Blurred responsibilities may make it harder to litigate against failing professionals. Alternatively, the threat of litigation may make professionals wary of engaging patients in co-production.

Rising Transaction Costs

There are hidden costs associated with involving citizens. A wider objection against collaborative governance is that it comes with high transaction costs, including process costs related to the information asymmetries between actors, information seeking and sharing; *implementation costs* related to changed response capacity to others' concerns and needs; and *costs associated with participant behaviour* including, for example, accounting for non-participants or dealing with different viewpoints of actors, adverse reactions and delays (Agranoff, 2016, 94, based on Weber, 1998). Of course, this also applies to co-creation and co-production. Meetings and consultations without added value may seem like victimless crimes, but they draw resources from service provision that can only be compensated for by significant improvement in the quality of the services.

Loss of Democracy

Co-production is usually seen as a tool to reinvigorate democracy. Yet there are also grounds for seeing it as a potential threat to democracy. According to Bovaird (2007, 856), the redistribution of power among stakeholders that comes along with co-production "calls into question the balance of representative democracy, participative democracy, and professional expertise". Leach (2006) presents a normative framework consisting of seven democratic ideals to assess collaborations: (1) inclusiveness, or openness to all who wish to participate; (2) representativeness, ensuring that the interests of all stakeholders are effectively advocated; (3) impartiality, or all parties being treated equally; (4) transparency, or clear and public rules governing the process; (5) deliberativeness, allowing participants to brainstorm, critically examine each other's arguments, identify common interests and build a base of shared knowledge and social capital; (6) lawfulness, upholding all existing statutes and regulations and (7) empowerment, enabling participants to influence policy outcomes. His empirical assessment of the democratic merits of collaborative watershed management as practiced in two US states shows diverging results across these indicators, with strong deliberativeness but weak representativeness of the partnerships studied. Yet, he acknowledges that by judging collaborative processes against a set of abstract democratic ideals, he arguably "holds collaborative management to a higher standard than is typically applied to traditional forms of public administration (. . .). Neither this study nor many others that I know of can confirm whether collaborative public management is generally more or less democratic than its alternatives" (Leach, 2006, 108). In other words, holding high expectations of the democratic level of service delivery through co-production might imply that we tend to be overly critical, especially when compared to the expectations held of non-co-produced forms of public service delivery. However, the reverse is also possible: institutionalizing

involvement of users paradoxically may prevent them from taking a critical stance (cf. Salamon, 2002; Ishkanian, 2014).

Reinforced Inequalities

Co-creation and co-production challenge the relative power positions of government, civil society and citizens. The usual assumption is that this will help to level power imbalances and make co-producers equal partners in the co-production process. However, in practice, unequal power positions—in terms of formal position, knowledge, expertise, resources or ability to set the rules of the co-production game—will pose barriers for partnership and affect the collaboration. It may indeed allow stronger parties to exercise power over or increase the dependency of weaker parties (cf. Agranoff, 2016). While at first sight, co-creation and co-production strengthen the role of non-government actors, they may do the opposite. Ishkanian (2014, 335), for example, argues that due to diminished funding availability and challenged working conditions, they might instead be “creating a situation where the independence and ability of civil society organizations to engage in progressive policy making is weakened”.

The same may occur at the individual level. Some studies have argued that co-production lowers the bar for citizens to participate and that it encourages a representative mix of participants (Clark, Brudney and Jang, 2013; Alford and Yates, 2016; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2015). Yet wealthy and highly educated citizens may come to dominate such processes, as is often the case with classical types of participation, because of their superior social and cultural capital. Research focused on motivations of citizens to co-produce (e.g. van Eijk and Steen, 2014; van Eijk, Steen and Verschuere, 2017) shows that not only willingness, but also feeling capable to co-produce, explains engagement in co-production. Dodge (2012) finds that public organizations tend to increase requirements regarding expertise and technical knowledge needed in order to be allowed to participate. This kind of “professionalization” is a threat to the democratic character of user co-production.

This raises the questions how equal access to services and equal treatment are ensured, and how the interests of service users, their families, people living in the neighbourhood and other stakeholders are protected. Since (individual) co-production tends to personalize services, it runs the danger of preventing more collective approaches and increasing existing inequalities. Hastings (2009), for example, found that residents of better off neighbourhoods tend to benefit more from co-production than residents of deprived neighbourhoods, further increasing their socio-economic inequality. Brandsen and Helderma (2012) discuss the case of German housing cooperatives who on paper are welcoming anyone to join at a relatively low cost, while in reality they are rather closed systems that are built around existing groups. Such insider/outsider dynamics may result in co-produced services accessible to specific social groups only. This issue of inclusiveness of the

participative process implies a need for investment on the part of (local) government in co-production, and proactivity of public officials to ensure an equitable co-production process. An example is provided by Vanleene and Verschuere (case study in this volume, chapter 18.2), who discuss a co-production initiative in the Rabot neighbourhood in the city of Ghent. Here citizens with a diverse background collaborate in running a social restaurant or keeping community gardens, but continuous efforts are needed from community building professionals in motivating and supporting these actors.

No matter what the public organization involved might set as its mission and regulations, individual professionals at street level will need to cope with pressures and uncertainties, and will be influenced by actual needs of individual co-producers, resulting in diverging on-the-ground implementation of public policies (e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000). There is a clear paradox here, as “the professional has to be prepared to trust the decisions and behaviors of service users (. . .) rather than dictate them” (Bovaird, 2007, 856), yet in practice “outcomes of self-organising processes around co-production are not always socially desirable” (Bovaird, 2007, 857). Even if no explicit misuse by co-producers for their personal benefit is at hand, the potential tension between private and public value means that professionals cannot simply use co-producers’ opinion as an indication of what is preferred by all clients of the delivered services (De Vries, 2010) nor of the community at large.

Implicit Demands

Depending on the service concerned and in contrast to engagement in deliberative democracy, it might not be the better-off members of the community but rather the less well-off who in fact collaborate in the production of public services. Birchall and Simmons (2004, 2), for example, found that user participation in housing and social care was mainly by persons on low incomes, who often were motivated to participate “through a concern about certain issues, such as poor quality of service, or ‘putting something back in’ for the service they have received”. Non-take up literature argues that feelings of indebtedness towards the helper may inhibit people from help-seeking. Co-production can then be a valuable way to ensure equality and feelings of reciprocity in the relation between the helper and the service recipient (Reijnders et al., 2016). Recently in Flanders (Belgium), a food bank closed because clients were found to be “too picky and ungrateful”. Comprehending people’s psychological needs such as need for reciprocity and self-determination helps us to understand the dynamics at hand, and shows that community led social groceries may have a more promising future. In contrast to food banks where pre-prepared food packages are provided for free, in social groceries people in a vulnerable situation (for example poverty, homelessness) pay small fees for products they can

pick out themselves, and additionally they can also contribute by acting as volunteer.

Yet at the same time, McMullin and Needham (this volume) point out that a “pay back” principle might put pressure on vulnerable service users to participate in order for them to be able to claim service provision and quality. Thus not only who is included and who is excluded in co-production, but also why citizens should have to participate (Bovaird, 2007, 856) are of concern, especially as Western welfare systems seem to shift from supporting collective solidarity towards focusing on individual responsibility (see also Nederhand and Van Meerbeek, this volume).

Co-Destruction of Public Value

Based on a review of literature on co-creation and co-production of public services, Voorberg et al. (2015, 1345–1346) conclude that while little research systematically studies the outcomes of co-creation or co-production, the research on this topic that is available focuses mainly on effectiveness. As it shows mixed results, they state that “we cannot definitely conclude whether co-creation/co-production can be considered as beneficial” (2015, 1346). Co-creation and co-production are often referred to as central in addressing current societal challenges. Yet, as pointed out by Larsson and Brandsen (2016, 299), who discuss the dark side of social innovations, wicked problems do not have easy solutions. Thus common sense should prevail as to the potential of such innovations, including also closer collaboration with service users. Moreover, while Osborne, Strokosch and Radnor (in this volume, chapter 3) focus on the relationship between co-production and the creation of value through public service delivery, they point out that interaction between regular service providers and service users “has the potential to lead to the co-destruction of value as much as to its co-creation”. Williams, Kang and Johnson (2016) use the concept of “co-contamination” to denote such co-destruction. They refer to the example of a healthy public housing project where inequitable partnerships and low trust between professionals and residents lead to missed opportunities to improve living conditions.

The same authors point out that co-destruction of value may go beyond mere missed opportunities. Co-producers may go as far as to misuse their role, as shown in the example of a neighbourhood watchman shooting an unarmed teenager in a gated community (Williams, Kang and Johnson, 2016). Similarly, Brandsen et al. (2016, 307) point out a risk for value destruction: social innovations may “represent cultural, economic and social aims and practices that are highly controversial or even seen by many as threatening rather than promising”. Apps and social media generate personal information that may allow (self-)control of health and performance, for example enabling elderly persons to co-produce their health and social care, allowing them to (longer) live at home. However, this also

risks government or private actors abusing data for their own purposes (cf. Brandsen et al., 2016). Scholars such as Bouchard (2016) or Bherer (2010), studying citizen deliberation, in turn refer to the potential misuse or manipulation of user input by government officials for their own ends, for example by manufacturing support for their own policy agenda. They call for “more critical assessments of participative exercises to deepen our understanding of when and why they may be manipulated for less democratic ends” (Bouchard, 2016, 516).

Also, if co-creation and co-production processes fail to meet inflated expectations, they risk increasing rather than diminishing distrust (cf. Fledderus, 2015). Scholars themselves may be responsible for creating these inflated expectations.

Conclusion: Avoiding Evils by Looking them in the Eye

Few have explicitly addressed these potential evils of co-creation and co-production. Not only are co-creation and co-production seen as instrumental tools for enhancing the quality and democratic quality of public service delivery, they are often regarded as a virtue in themselves. This implies that even if outcomes such as increased efficiency or effectiveness of public services are lacking or remain unproven, co-creation and co-production are still seen as holding a positive value in themselves (cf. Voorberg et al., 2015, 1346). This is dangerous. If research is or comes to be seen as biased, it will lose its credibility among academic colleagues and mislead the professionals and policymakers who are willing to experiment with these new approaches. As noted in the introductory chapter, the agenda-setting phase of co-production research, with its emphasis on best practices, is over.

Fortunately, recent research has started to address potential paradoxes related to co-production. This is illustrated not only in this chapter, but throughout this volume where different authors address “the dark side” of co-creation and co-production initiatives. Examples of things going bad referred to in this volume include co-creation and co-production being co-opted by government to limit the scope for collective approaches (McMullin and Needham in this volume, chapter 12) and to push forwards its financial cutback agenda (Nederhand and Van Meerkerk in this volume, chapter 4.1). Mangai, De Vries and De Kruif’s example (this volume) of co-production inducing substitution of paid professional work by unpaid labour in the health care sector in developing countries must raise questions of exploitation. Other concerns relate to outcomes of co-production, such as parental involvement in education potentially enhancing cultural and social reproduction (Honingh and Brandsen in this volume, chapter 13).

Delving further into potential pitfalls of co-creation and co-production is needed. At present, when empirical data is available on the dark side of co-creation and co-production, this data tends to pertain to the study of

specific cases of co-production, limiting the generalizability of findings. Yet gaining insight into the dark side of co-creation and co-production may help us learn from failure. As our discussion already shows, in order to avoid pitfalls, co-creation and co-production need real investment of time and money by government, but also an openness to comprehend the concerns of different actors involved. In sum, assessing the dark side forces us to pose more critical questions when looking into the practice of co-creation and co-production, including questions such as:

- Who is in, and who is out?;
- Who benefits, and who loses?;
- How is power redistributed?;
- What were stakeholders' goals, was there consensus over these goals, have goals been met and, if so, whose goals?;
- Which services are scaled up, and which are slimmed down?; and
- Who can service users or other stakeholders keep accountable for lacking or inadequate services?

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