

# Leading the Co-production Process: Who is in charge?

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## **Abstract**

The notion of service co-production is becoming firmly embedded in the contemporary discourse on public service provision. While talking about co-production is rapidly gaining in popularity among policy makers and practitioners, the academic discourse is characterised by significant conceptual gaps despite an ever growing range of case studies of co-production. Of particular concern here is that questions associated with leading service co-production are theoretically and empirically under-developed. This paper makes a contribution towards filling this gap by putting forward a framework for the exploration of leadership in the co-production process. An initial and preliminary application of this framework to case studies of co-production suggests that the citizen co-producer is limited in the way she can enact leadership functions, the regular public service producer appears to be firmly 'in the lead' except where citizens are engaged in a process that runs from design, to management and implementation of a service.

Key words: Co-production, relational leadership, distributed leadership, expertise, structure, power and control

## **1. Introduction**

New Public Governance (NPG) provides the contemporary theoretical framework to explore how diverse public, private and civil society actors engage in collaborative processes to generate solutions which respond to complex problems. As such NPG sees complexity and fragmentation as key challenges, rather than the inefficient management of public services, and promotes collaborative ways of working which cut across organisational and institutional boundaries as the way forward, not enhanced competition (Osborne, 2010a, 2010b). In practice, however, we witness the continued dominance of a neoliberal logic combined with doctrines of a managerial state governed by market principles. Preferred solutions to societal problems remain managerial in character while the leaders in this new era of public governance continue to be praised for short-term efficiencies, the ability to make deals and a focus on achievable results just as in the hay day of NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Taylor-Gooby, 2013a, 2013b).

This context partly explains why public agencies struggle to develop social, spatial and economic strategies which are based on principles such as collaboration, sustainability, reciprocity which would facilitate the pursuit of softer outcomes such as promoting the empowerment of civil society, development of the social economy and, ultimately, the wide spread co-production (CP) of welfare services. But lack of practical models and tools is perhaps an equally important reason for lack of adoption of CP practices. The discourse on CP suggests that there is a change in the way co-produced services are delivered, a claim supported by a rapidly growing body of case studies examples, but the question is whether the current co-production concept has the capacity to change established practice? We are aware of a wide range of barriers to CP which includes a well-established body of literature which shows that public organizations try to assume control to achieve performance outcomes and adopt instrumental approaches towards working with service users and local

communities to advance public policy priorities. For instance, public agencies encourage delivery of services through civic society organizations but they tend to exclude them from policy and decision-making processes (Bovaird, 2007; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2007; Vaillancourt, 2012). Contract and performance management systems tend to encourage and facilitate the top-down control of the co-production processes (Vancoppenolle & Verschuere, 2012) and accountability requirements drive public agencies to adopt hierarchical approaches in their collaborations with civil society actors (Freise, 2012). The prospects are not encouraging given the prevalence of managerial approaches contemporary public services, ongoing unprecedented public budgetary austerity and the fundamental inequality in the relationship between regular and citizen co-producer,.

Yet when we talk about co-production the implicit assumption is that decisions associated with the co-production of public services are somehow arrived at by agreement, which is not borne out by many case studies. For example, to improve welfare services, officials in eight European countries granted the right to parents to set up child care co-operatives but instead of collaborating with parents on equal terms, they employed hierarchical and unequal power relationships (Pestoff, 2012a). A study of co-production in welfare and housing services in the UK also identified a number of institutional and professional barriers including the 'professional and political reluctance to lose status and control' (Bovaird, 2012 #199p.48). Another case illustrates how professionals' insistence on retaining, rather than sharing power and control creates a source of conflict between collective and individual interests among citizen co-producers in a social housing project (Brandsen & Helderma, 2012). Similar barriers were identified in the relationship between civil society organizations and regeneration professionals (Schlappa, 2012). Therefore it is not surprising that risk aversion, the need for control among public officials (Bickers, 2007; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Loeffler, Taylor-Gooby, Bovaird, Hine-Hughes, & Wilkes, 2012), and lines of accountability and professional values (Ewert & Evers, 2012; Hyde & Davies, 2004; Vamstad, 2012) have been identified as the main barriers to CP. These are formidable, and well known, barriers, but in order to use CP as a lever to overcome them, we need to enable practitioners to adopt and apply principles associated with CP. But so far the CP discourse has produced a limited range of 'tools', such as the CP value chain or the CP 'Outcomes Star' (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Loeffler et al., 2012) that would assist regular providers finding ways of enabling citizen co-producers with greater control and influence over the services they pay for through their taxes.

Questions of power and hierarchy are evidently important in co-production and inherently linked to notions of leadership. Leadership is of central importance to CP because decisions on planning, resourcing and designing services are inextricably linked to the way a service is produced. Furthermore, the actual delivery of the service is bound by the way in which the co-production process is led, hence questions about who is in charge during the co-production process, and with this, issues of power and control require particular attention. Drawing on concepts of relational and distributed leadership we develop a conceptual framework which identifies attributes associated with leading in CP processes. We then make an initial attempt to apply this framework to some published case studies of CP using the definition of different CP types recently developed by Brandsen and Honingh (2014). The indications from our very preliminary exploration are not encouraging however. Exploring CP through the conceptual lens of leadership seems to suggest that regular service providers remain firmly 'in the lead' with regard to defining and determining the co-production process,

while sharing leadership functions with the citizen co-producer would appear rather limited. We conclude by arguing that the exploration of leadership in the co-production process is a priority if the concept of co-production is to move beyond supporting comforting notions of collaboration between officials and citizens and towards a rigorous conceptual framework for the study and development of co-produced and innovative forms of service provision that reflect the principles of NPG.

## **2. A conceptual framework for the exploration of leadership in the co-production of services**

The question of who leads the co-production process is of central importance but has so far received little attention. One reason for this might be that theoretical development of the co-production concept is still at an early stage and the systematic exploration of complex issues such as leadership, will in time emerge from knowledge generated through the rapidly growing number of case studies. A different reason, and one considered to be more relevant here, is that the process of leading in the co-production of public services cannot readily be explained through mainstream models of public leadership. The concept of co-production is based on notions of participation, engagement, and empowerment. These closely reflect principles associated with the concept of *relational leadership* as 'a process of organizing' (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p, 665; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) a relational process that is inherently emergent and reliant on a range of actors who continuously negotiate collective action, rather than an individual who takes the lead and has followers. Given the importance of relational dynamics in CP theory we argue that relational leadership offers useful building blocks for the development of a framework for the exploration of CP processes.

Furthermore, epistemologically, the *critical relational* approach (Hosking, 2008; Van Der Haar & Hosking, 2004) is particularly well suited for exploring leadership in dynamic and emergent processes, which arguably characterise CP, because it regards relational realities as 'multiple, local-historical constructions made in language *and other forms of actions*' (Van Der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p, 1020, emphasis in original). Further, this approach has influenced some relational leadership debates (see Ospina et al., 2012; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). The *relational* aspect of this approach focuses on interactions in which relational realities are co-constructed. Interactions could be written and spoken (face-to-face or otherwise) between individuals as well as nonverbal gestures, artefacts or events (Hosking, 2007). The *critical* aspect relates to power, which is perceived as a contested, perpetual relational process (Hosking, 2007). The critical relational approach allows researchers to examine how shared understandings, power relations, consensus and contentions about aspirations and intentions, decisions and plans emerge in co-production situations. Drawing on this literature, we can identify three key dimensions of leadership that are relevant to CP:

The first is concerned with the need to explore how individuals develop shared understandings. Fairhurst and Antonakis (2012) make a distinction between content (subject matter) and relational aspect of communication, i.e., how content is expressed and interpreted (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This is an analytically important distinction because in relation to CP it may reveal contrasts or overlaps between co-governance, co-management and co-production. This distinction is also helpful because shared understandings emerge in the relational aspect and tend to stabilize over time

(ibid). In terms of CP we could therefore explore the extent to which CP practices might become institutionalised and be perceived as established patterns of working at different levels of CP. We also draw on Collins (Collins, 2004, 2008, 2010) who offers useful insights into how groups develop common understanding. Collins (2004) argues that people have two types of expertise : *contributory* (knowledge of their own discipline) and *interactional* expertise (developed through linguistic interactions with others from different domains). This part of our conceptual framework enables us to explore the extent to which the regular and co-producers of a service develop shared understanding of what is to be achieved.

The second element of our conceptual framework focuses on the 'structure' in which CP is enacted. Leadership is shaped by and shapes structures in which it is enacted, hence notions of structure underpin concepts of accountability, control and authority.. Gronn (2002) suggests that organisations are as much a structural outcome of leadership action as they are a vehicle for it. But one of the conceptual challenges associated with the exploration of leadership in co-production is to define the 'space' in which a service is co-produced. Where do individuals, who are often accustomed to working in different cultural and structural domains and pursuing different political and social interests and agendas, reach consensus on design and deliver a service: in the Council Chamber, the meeting room or the nursing home? Generally organizations are 'purposive, structured and often highly politicized' (Hendry, 2000, p, 967), a description which would apply to regular service provider organizations. Yet we find many CP case studies which suggest that CP happens in emergent structures, spaces co-producers create to undertake co-production, for example tai chi classes in the dining room of care homes. Barker suggests that such emergent and 'fluent' structures are more effective to create new and relevant outcomes than the ones imposed from above (Barker, 1993) hence CP would be well suited to improve public services by virtue of its inherently emergent character. Hosking's notion of 'light structure' (Hosking, Shamir, Ospina, & Uhl-Bien, 2012) also allows us to see CP as taking place outside rigid and defined organisational frameworks. Hosking et al suggest that there is a need for enough structure in terms of participants agreeing to abide by a small number of rules so that open discussions and learning can emerge, but institutional structures should not dominate and define how the shared process is led. How much structure is 'enough' will depend on many factors in each unique co-production case such as legal and/or professional codes of conduct, resource and accountabilities. However, Hosking's message is clear; relational leadership requires free, open-ended, minimally-restricted organizing. Put another way, regardless of how differently institutions, professionals and citizens operate from each other, people who engage in CP need to operate within a 'light structure' with a minimum of rules so that discussion on the aims and process of the CP initiative can take place freely.

In the final element of our conceptual framework we focus on the question of power. While concepts of command, authority and control define organizational structures and the power individuals have within them, leadership is a process through which power is negotiated amongst people who operate in different parts of the institution and outside it. The critical aspect of relational approach relates to 'power' being theorized as relational and paradoxical in that it is both enabling and constraining at the same time (Hosking, 2007; Van Der Haar & Hosking, 2004). The relational and paradoxical nature of power may also result in inclusions or exclusions of individuals or groups in the leadership process (Stacey, 2001, 2007). Hence there could be a disconnect between notions of distributed leadership and distributed power.

For example, research on distributed leadership in education shows that practice of distributed leadership, where staff at different level lead on particular actions without being directed by a 'senior leader' does not necessarily result in distributed power (Hatcher, 2005). In relation to CP this points to fundamental power dynamics between regular producers and citizen co-producers, as being negotiated and fluid.

### **3. A preliminary application of our framework**

Building on the early definition of CP by Parks et al (1981) and current attempts at defining co-production Brandsen and Honingh (2014) identify the main variables through which distinctions can be made between services that are co-produced and those that are not, and also between different kinds of co-production. At the core of the definition is that co-production is based on the active participation of citizens through a relationship between paid employees of a service providing organisation and citizens who do not receive financial compensation for their participation in the CP process. The level of control over the design and implementation of services, together with the proximity of the work that citizens perform in relation to the primary processes of the service providing organisation, generate a conceptual framework which allows us to distinguish three forms of co-production: *complementary co-production*, *co-production in implementation* and *full co-production* (ibid. P.13-14). We apply the conceptual framework developed here to these three types of CPs, using recent case studies to create a preliminary indication of how leadership of CP works out in practice.

- a) Complementary co-production occurs when citizens are undertaking work that complements the primary service provision process. In his study of childcare care services Pestoff (2006) provides a wide range of examples of such complimentary co-production in institutional context as diverse of Romania, Germany, Italy and Sweden. Here parents assist with the provision of after-school or extracurricular activities, lead on fundraising and physical improvement projects but do not directly affect or contribute to the care service provided by paid employees. The case points towards a distribution of leadership: regular producers lead on their educational services while citizens lead on their contributions towards the service. We can assume that both parties have the contributory and interactional expertise through which shared understandings were developed and where such arrangements persist over longer periods of time we could expect that these become 'institutionalised' and define working practices of regular as well as citizen co-producers. In terms of structure it would seem that regular co-producers remain in a clearly defined organisational structure, defined by rules, roles and accountabilities. Citizen co-producers, on the other hand, seem to create their own structures, which compared to the professionals are likely to be 'light' in terms of rules, regulation, hierarchy and accountability. Leadership here is likely to be more relational and shared than among professionals operating in rule bound institutions. Both citizens and regular co-producers have the power to include and exclude the other, but the distribution of leadership across the two groups does not equate to the distribution of power: Each group has control over a distinctly different domain of the CP process. So our analytical framework suggests that the notion of 'complementary co-production' is associated with the distribution of leadership functions but these are enacted in parallel and in different structures. The locus of power over the features of the actual

service remains with the regular producer, while the citizen co-producer has power over the complementary actions they pursue. The influence of the citizen co-producer is limited.

- b) Co-production in implementation occurs when citizens can influence the primary implementation process but not the design of a service. The authors refer to classic examples of this type found in education where teacher and pupil jointly create the learning process (Porter, 2012). However, there is a wide range of other examples from social care settings that would fall into this category (see for example Loeffler et al., 2012). Staying with the education example we can assume that both teacher and pupil have the contributory and interactional expertise to develop shared understanding of what their CP aims to achieve. The structure in which this interaction takes place is likely to be characterised by clearly defined roles, explicit rules and accountabilities. The citizen co-producer has no recourse to operate in a 'light structure' which would indicate a very limited distribution of leadership functions. Issues of authority and control are defined through the institutional structures in which the CP takes place and as the pupil has to function within these confines her power and ability to enact leadership functions are limited. Again, both parties have the power to include and exclude, but the power of the teacher would appear to have far greater reach than that of the pupil. Applying our conceptual framework to this dimension of CP suggests that leadership is not shared or distributed in any meaningful way. The regular service provider leads and controls the CP process.
- c) Full co-production occurs when citizens are directly involved in producing core services of an organisation and participate in both design and delivery of the service. Brandsen and Honingh refer to housing projects where future tenants are involved in design and construction processes but the work of many third sector organisations, such as those serving older people, would also fall into this category (see for example Paine, Ockenden, & Stuart, 2010; Schlappa, 2008). The example of the social housing project suggests a high level of shared understanding and the ability to generate a stable exchange about what is to be achieved, thus creating institutionalised conditions for sharing of leadership functions. The space in which CP takes place could be created and controlled by citizens or officials; control, is likely to be 'fluent' in terms of the degree to which rules, roles and accountabilities are defined and may oscillate between 'light' and 'heavy' structures depending on the stage of development of the housing project. This would facilitate the sharing and distribution of leadership functions between regular and citizen co-producers. Given that the two parties are likely to have shared control over the 'place of co-production' and a shared understanding of what is to be achieved it can be assumed that power will also be shared. While much of the experience of partnership working would counsel caution in making such assumptions, based on our conceptual framework it would be reasonable to assume that the power of both parties in a housing project would be such that each is seeking to share leadership as well as power. This suggests that in the case of 'full co-production' leadership would be distributed and power shared.

Brandsen and Honingh (2014) identify two further categories of service provision where co-production does not occur. First, when citizens do not influence the design or implementation

of a service. Here the professional is fully dominant if the service provision and the citizen simply receives a service. Second, when citizens produce services without connecting to the professional processes by regular producers, Pestoff and Brandsen(2008) termed this 'parallel production' in earlier work. For example, many third sector organisations establish services because public agencies do not serve particular target groups or the services that are provided are considered inadequate. In the UK a high profile area where such parallel production has led to co-production arrangements is the criminal justice system. Making services for ex-offenders and their families part of statutory mainstream provision and delivering such services in collaborative ways is an example where third sector organisations which started off from a position of parallel production moved to a situation of co-production (Schlappa, Pitcher, & Thornhill, 2008). If 'full co-production' is needed to facilitate citizens exercising leadership and control over the service process, then we might want to encourage civil society organisations to provide services in parallel to regular producers. This might be beneficial to the cause of CP and challenge the status quo in which regular producers seems to have the upper hand when it comes to leading co-production processes. Such thinking is not new; it reflects deep debates about the relationship between the third sector and the state (Billis, 2010; Harris, 1998b, 2001b; Taylor, Craig, & Wilkinson, 2002; Zimmer & Freise, 2007). In the context of CP, the argument about the 'crowding in or crowding out' of voluntary agencies and the 'glass ceiling' (Pestoff, 2012b) point to enduring challenges of policy and practice. The question is whether and to what extent CP as a concept and as a practice has the capacity to tackle them.

#### **4. Some preliminary conclusions**

An empirical application of our framework would of course be required to ascertain its utility for the analysis of the CP process. We believe our framework can be usefully linked to different types (Brandsen and Honingh, 2014) as well as different levels of CP (Pestoff, 2012a). This is important because leadership is enacted differently by front line experts and service users, middle managers and staff of third sector organisations, directors or politicians engaging with board members or representatives of communities. Our framework also allows researchers to explore the fluidity (or otherwise) in relations, discourses and roles the regular and citizen co-producer encounter as they work through different levels of CP, which would provide important insights into different barriers as well as facilitators of CP.

The development of indicators that signify different leadership 'modes' would be an effective way to operationalise our framework. This might lead to the development of leadership models that could be applied to practice in public, voluntary and also private sector organisations, which leads us to our final point: There is a dearth of leadership models that reflect the realities of staff and volunteers who work in the delivery of public services. More effort is required to enrich the curriculum of our programmes of study with concepts that are different from those developed for profit seeking enterprises which underpin much of the contemporary critique of NPM. The surge in interest in CP might provide an opportunity to channel resources and energies into new working practices that reflect the principles of NPG.



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