The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration

Thomas R. Klassen, Denita Cepiku, T. J. Lah

Citizen Co-Production of Public Services

Publication details

John Alford

Published online on: 21 Oct 2016

How to cite :- John Alford. 21 Oct 2016, Citizen Co-Production of Public Services from: The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
14
CITIZEN CO-PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Meanings, processes, antecedents and consequences

John Alford

Introduction

When we visit a doctor, we usually assume – if we give it any thought at all – that we are receiving a service. For a fee, the doctor brings her expertise to bear on your ailment, identifying its likely cause and prescribing medicine or other treatment to alleviate and hopefully cure it. In this and in many other fields, the assumption is that services are delivered by staff inside the organisation to consumers.

But complicating this picture is the fact that the consumer often not only receives the service but also contributes to its production. This is co-production, now the subject of a considerable body of public administration scholarship, especially by clients but also by other actors. This notion emerged first in a short flurry of interest in the early 1980s, then re-emerged on a broader and more sustained basis from the 2000s (Verschuere et al. 2012; Alford 2009; Bovaird 2007).

This chapter surveys co-production of public services, mainly by citizens and clients. It explores the meaning of co-production and how we conceive of those who co-produce. Then, after consideration of the products and processes of co-production, the chapter addresses two key issues: (1) when should it be utilised? and (2) how can it be elicited?

The chapter draws mainly on theory-building or case analysis, since the co-production research has offered very little in the way of quantitative empirical evidence. Now, however, a major study has provided the most substantial survey research evidence thus far, covering five EU countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany and UK) with a sample of 1,000 in each. This chapter will draw on that study, as the only large-sample, multi-country random empirical research in this field to date (Bovaird et al. 2015; Parrado et al. 2013; Loeffler et al. 2008).

What is co-production?

‘Co-production’ has a number of meanings. In essence, it is about government agencies involving members of the public in the ‘execution of public policy as well as its formulation’ (Whitaker 1980: 241); it was founded on the idea that not only the consumption but also the production of public services can require the participation of those who consume them.
One important dimension along which types of co-production vary is in the range of actors who play a co-production role. Originally, the focus was the role of consumers of public services in their production. As Parks et al. put it, ‘coproduction involves the mixing of the productive efforts of regular and consumer producers’ (1981: 1002).

But over time, the conception broadened beyond consumers to include citizens more generally: ‘By co-production, I mean the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not “in” the same organisation’ (Ostrom 1996, 1073). This encompasses not only the consumers of a service, but also those individuals who voluntarily contribute to co-production even though they don’t receive any private value from the organisation (for example, citizens who help with meal-deliveries for ‘Meals on Wheels’). These citizen volunteers (or ‘individual volunteers’) are not the same as voluntary/third sector organisations, which may employ their workers, but they do help create public as well as private value.

At the same time, both European traditions of civil society engagement and emerging American antipathy to big government gave impetus to more collective forms of co-production, embracing a spectrum of types of contributors to productive activity – not only individuals but organisations. These definitions could also validly be seen as co-production, but more usually they are characterised as ‘collaboration’ or ‘partnership’, which are dealt with in later chapters in this handbook.

Here we will focus mainly on the simplest form, where clients are the main co-producers, not because it is the ‘correct’ term but simply because they occupy a similar role to ‘customers’ at the organisation’s ‘business end’, but without the latter’s private-sector connotations. However, we also take into account the citizenry in their role as volunteers as well as consumers of collective value.

Whatever the type, it cannot be seen as co-production without two fundamental characteristics, illustrated in Table 14.1, adapted from Bovaird (2007). The vertical axis shows the actors’ roles, while the horizontal axis refers to who does the work.

First, co-production must entail external actors performing some of the actual work instead of (or in addition to) deliberating about whether or how to do it. This is at odds with commentators who envisage co-production as a consultative arrangement; it is about production rather than governance or deliberation. Second, the prefix ‘co-’ adds the element of jointness to the work, which is shared by the organisation with external parties, such as other organisations or individuals. In the public sector, then, co-production is where a government organisation and one or more external actors jointly create something of value, as shown in cell 5 of Table 14.1.

While these fundamentals are broadly accepted, some other aspects deserve clarification. One is how we see the ‘products’ of co-production. For it to be worth managerial attention, it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of involvement</th>
<th>Performed by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government organization alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance (deciding what to do)</td>
<td>1 Government decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production (doing it)</td>
<td>4 Production by govt organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
must lead to results which are valuable in some way to the public at large, not only to the individuals in question – i.e. they should on balance contribute to the common good or ‘public value’. Usually this entails the provision of private value as well, but the creation of some public value is the justification for devoting public resources to it (Moore 1995).

Another aspect is to acknowledge that the line between ‘governance’ and ‘production’ is porous, and that there are some activities which fall somewhere between the two: planning, design and management – as shown in Table 14.2.

A further aspect is whether co-production refers only to joint activity (i.e. cell 5 in Table 14.1). Some writers include cell 6 (private production/self-service) to the extent that it contributes to public value, even though external parties appear to be acting alone (Sharp 1980). But in some of these cases, the government agency, even though it does not join directly in the production, nevertheless influences the citizen/client activity. Drivers slowing down at a road intersection roundabout – which reduces the chances of accidents occurring – may be seen as producing value on their own. But if they have been prompted to do so by the presence of the roundabout, government has helped bring about the outcome (safer driving at intersections) even though none of its public servants are present at the locations in question. This is the phenomenon known as ‘nudge’, wherein policy outcomes are generated by structuring people’s contexts so that they are gently reminded or warned to behave in a particular way, rather than coerced to do so (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). So we include an (additional) cell 10 in Table 14.2, described as ‘nudged’ private production or self-service.

Also important is how relational (rather than transactional) the interaction is: that is, the extent to which it is based on frequent dealings, agreed purposes, information sharing and trust, with accompanying social bonds. Some writers criticise as too narrowly transactional the application of the term to relatively routine activities such as writing postcodes on mail, or completing and lodging tax returns (e.g. Boyle and Harris 2009). But this critique confuses the social relationship with the operational one. The issue is not whether the participants have developed close social relationships, but rather about whether any value emanates from a given interaction by citizens with government organisations, in which case it is by definition co-production – whether it is narrowly transactional or multi-dimensionally relational. Co-production should not be seen as one or the other, but rather as embracing both (Alford 2009).

A still further issue is whether only voluntary activity by clients or citizens should be seen as co-production, or it can also be described as such if there is coercion. Some scholars insist on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of involvement</th>
<th>Performed by</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governance (deciding what to do)</td>
<td>1 Government decision</td>
<td>2 Joint decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Government management, planning or design</td>
<td>2 Joint management, planning or design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning / design</td>
<td>4 Production by government organization</td>
<td>5 Co-production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production (doing it)</td>
<td>10 ‘Nudged’ private production/self-service</td>
<td>6 Private production/self-service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14.2 Elaborated types of involvement and performer
the primacy of the voluntary model: ‘If citizens act in accordance with public service goals because they fear reprisals for their refusal, …. their actions do not constitute co-operation. Co-operation is voluntary’ (Whitaker 1980: 243).

It is true that voluntarism is the animating spirit of co-production, but this does not rule out compliance measures as partial ways to enlist contributions of time and effort by citizens. The regulation literature tells us that most compliance programmes contain an element of consent or voluntarism (Ayres and Braithwaite 2002) – for example, a drug addict placed under a court order to undertake a rehabilitation programme – and it is often hard to delineate the two. Here we take the view that co-production is essentially voluntary, but it can play a role in compliance.

Finally, focusing on citizens and clients requires defining these terms, to which we now briefly turn.

Who is the co-producer?

One of the ways public management reform over the last three decades has sought to make the public sector more like the private one is by substituting the notion of public as ‘customers’ for the historical conception in public administration that they are citizens (Clarke et al. 2007; Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Scholars have reacted critically, arguing inter alia that it doesn’t capture the collective nature of the value consumed by the citizenry; that many of the people whom government serves, such as welfare recipients, pay no money directly to service providing organisations; and that some members of the public, such as prisoners, are obliged to receive the ‘service’ whether they like it or not. All of these factors negate the notion of the customer transaction as a voluntary economic exchange. Instead, the exchange is social rather than economic – an exchange of behaviours rather than of products and services for money. This social exchange, in which clients receive tangible or intangible ‘gifts’ in the sense used by Titmuss (1970) and other scholars (Ekeh 1974; Levi-Strauss 1969), offers its own possibilities for eliciting co-productive contributions.

Unfortunately, the issue has tended to slide into a somewhat sterile debate as to whether members of the public are citizens or customers (Barrett 2009; Clarke et al. 2007; Fountain 2001). However, a more integrated conception is emerging: that they are both citizens and customers – indeed they have multiple aspects, as citizens first and foremost, but also some, whom we will call clients, as paying customers, beneficiaries or obligatees. These are roles rather than categories, so that any one individual (for example, a public school pupil) might simultaneously be a citizen receiving public value, a beneficiary receiving the private value of an education without paying any money directly for it, and an obligatee subject to the school rules and liable to punishment for breaching them.

Two other roles also need consideration:

1 What we will call the ‘citizen volunteer’ or ‘individual volunteer’. This is where co-productive effort is contributed by individuals who do not receive goods or services in the same way as clients, but do it typically for reasons such as moral norms or social encouragement.

2 ‘Collective’ co-producers, where citizens organise themselves as a group to contribute. Two important issues here are: whether the production is individual or collective; and whether the consumption is of private value or public value.

Thus the public servant may have to deal with members of the public in different incarnations at the same time – providing public value to the citizenry and private value to clients. We can
therefore define *co-production* as any active behaviour by any client of a government agency which is: prompted by some action or contribution of the agency; at least partly voluntary; and either intentionally or unintentionally creates some public value. In this context: *client* co-production is co-production by clients; *citizen* co-production is co-production by individuals who do not receive private value for their contributions; and *collective* co-production is carried out by self-organised groups.

These are not the only types of co-producer, but others are dealt with elsewhere in this handbook. The multi-country research mentioned above casts some light on the issues of individual vs collective co-production and private vs public value.

**The products and processes of co-production**

Co-production necessarily entails the participating individuals or organisations contributing inputs to the operation of a government organisation’s program or service, in order to achieve valuable outcomes. But the research to date has not offered a systematic way of understanding the different types of inputs, nor of comprehending the points in the ‘production process’ at which these resources enter these processes.

Consider a child protection service (CPS) situated in a government department and employing mainly social workers, whose mandated outcome is to ensure that children are safe from (physical or sexual) abuse. From the point of view of the government, achieving this purpose requires certain tasks to be performed (Figure 14.1). First, children at risk need to be notified to the CPS. Second, the seriousness and likelihood of the risk has to be ascertained. Third, a decision will have to be made as to what should happen to the child. Among possible options are: (1) that the child could be removed from the family home and placed in a state institution or foster care.; or that s/he could remain with the family while the CPS works with the parent(s) to change their behaviour in a manner conducive to better parenting. Fourth, there needs to be ongoing monitoring to ensure that these tasks continue to be performed at a reasonable standard.

Following that, the CPS can perform the tasks of assessing the risk (with some reliance on interested parties to disclose the truth) and of assigning the child either back to its family under supervision, or to foster or institutional care. It is noteworthy that in cases where the child is returned to its family, important and sometimes difficult co-productive work has to be carried out by those who are, along with the child, also clients of the organisation: the parents. For instance, if the father (or stepfather) is unemployed and inclined to a quick temper or excessive alcohol, then he may need to undertake a rehabilitation programme for his alcoholism, attend an anger management course, and be provided with job training or job search assistance.

Of course, this situation is much more complicated than suggested by the production line in Figure 14.1; it contains feedback loops, multiple causation, and hard-to-measure cause-and-effect relationships. But what is interesting about this analysis is that although it initially puts

![Figure 14.1 Simple ‘process logic’ for child protection service](image-url)
forward a simple set of activities as seen from the perspective of the government organisation, it provides a scaffold that enables consideration of co-production possibilities. Table 14.3 sets out the specific contributions of various external parties at different points in the process. It shows first that various actors in the family’s environment provide information about children at risk, something they are more inclined to do because the CPS and other agencies adopt various ways of encouraging people to do so: ‘consciousness-raising’ publicity material; ‘hotlines’ for notifications; refuges and other transitional avenues out of threat. Also important is that the same people are willing to provide information about child abuse offences truthfully, which they are more likely to do if they are reassured that it will be acted on and they will be protected from retribution. Perhaps most importantly, the parents change their own behaviour, in many cases through programmes, but also in some cases with the support of extended family. And if all else fails, there are state-sponsored facilities to domicile the children out of harm’s way. This is often less desirable but sometimes unavoidable.

Underlying these elements of the process are two more general questions (Loeffler et al. 2008). One is whether the co-production is individual or collective. The other is whether the products delivered are consumed individually or collectively (i.e. do they constitute private or public value?)

The EU study found that, with some important exceptions, the incidence of individual and private production and consumption seems to prevail over the collective and public forms. It provided a list of 15 co-productive behaviours – five each from public/neighbourhood safety, the environment and health – and asked respondents to indicate how often they performed them. It revealed two clear findings. One is that individual co-production is much more common than collective co-production: the most performed activities don’t require interaction with other people (recycling, locking doors and windows, exercising). By contrast, the least performed activities involve group participation, liaising proactively with authorities (e.g. asking for advice on property protection) and ‘face-threatening’ activities (telling people on the street what to do).

The other clear finding is that the most-performed activities are mainly devoted to producing private value – for instance, the personal benefits gained by saving on electricity costs or exercising more. Recycling is an exception, but its popularity can be explained by the efforts authorities have put in to making it easier in various ways. Also commonly performed are activities involving reciprocity (e.g. neighbours keeping an eye on each other’s properties). By contrast, most of the least-performed activities produce largely public value, with a smaller component of private value (Parrado et al. 2013; Loeffler et al. 2008).

Thus, the forms and outcomes of co-production seem contrary to commonsense understandings, which would most likely assume co-production to involve communities and groups within them.

Table 14.3 Contributions of co-producers of child protection services, by stage of process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>External co-producer(s)</th>
<th>Specific contributions of external co-producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notification</td>
<td>Neighbours, extended family, teachers, doctors, police</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>As above in some cases</td>
<td>Accuracy and truthfulness of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment/referral</td>
<td>Courts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing care</td>
<td>Parents, extended family. State institutions</td>
<td>Behavioural self-change. Care if all else fails.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When should co-production be utilised?

‘One size fits all’ reforms have bedevilled the public sector since at least the 1960s, from the handing over to business of many government functions under NPM to the more recent interest in network governance. Partly this ‘one-size-fits-all’ mentality derived from reformers’ ideological predilection for market solutions (Alford and O’Flynn 2012; Boston 1996; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Pollitt 1990), partly it was facilitated by the system-wide nature of reforms, which were mainly introduced on a ‘whole-of-government’ basis (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).

Indeed, when co-production enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the early 1980s (after which it languished until the 2000s), it was governments’ preferences for market solutions that pushed co-production to the margins.

Now, however, a more contingent approach is increasingly prevalent across most types of public services, including co-production. Instead of saying ‘Everything should involve co-production with clients’ or ‘Everything should be done in-house by our own staff and delivered to clients’, it is now increasingly recognised that ‘It all depends’. What it depends on is whether the benefits outweigh the costs – which is in turn shaped by factors such as the nature of the service, the context, or staff capabilities.

Addressing these benefits and costs first requires analysis of the degree of inter-dependency between the actors in question. One possibility is where the work of the organisation is inter-dependent with that of the clients – for example when unemployed people need the assistance of a public employment agency to find vacancies and refer them to possible employers, while the agency depends on the clients to make themselves job-ready and persuade employers to hire them. Here the issue for the organisation is not whether to utilise co-production but how better to do it. This challenges the idea that co-production is a kind of ‘optional extra’ that it would be nice to have. Where the organisation and the clients have an inter-dependent relationship, co-production is embedded in the service, so the parties have no choice but to acknowledge its presence, and indeed to make it function more efficiently and effectively.

If, on the other hand, there is a relatively low level of inter-dependency between them, then client co-production is basically a substitute for in-house production by the organisation’s staff. In this situation, the organisation should weigh up the benefits and costs of each, much as it would when determining whether to contract out to the private sector. In the early work of Ostrom and her colleagues on this issue, they argued that the key consideration was the marginal costs (for all intents and purposes, the relative ‘wage’ rates of internal workers and external co-producers) (Parks et al. 1981: 1003). However, recent studies indicate that probably a more important criterion is the relative capabilities of the internal and external workers, which vary from case to case (Alford 2009). In some situations, citizen co-producers may constitute well-meaning but bumbling amateurs, whereas in others they may have a real edge in knowledge of or legitimacy with a particular community or constituency.

Thus, the relative weight of what we might call the service costs and benefits will vary according to the situation. But there are also two other types of benefits and costs to consider in this substitution scenario (see Alford and O’Flynn 2012). One is the relationship costs and benefits, i.e. those concerning the dealings with the other party to make the arrangement work. The costs might involve those to do with: choosing which citizens are to be engaged in the task (or given more encouragement to do so); specifying (and promulgating) what work is required; ascertaining whether it is being done; and incentivising them to do it. A benefit in this respect from a more collaborative client relationship might be a greater sense of social connection with the other party.

The remaining types of benefits and costs are those relating to the strategic positioning and core competences of the organisation as a whole, i.e. where the particular co-production
initiative affects some aspect of the organisation other than the service in question. On the plus side, these effects could include: more coherent and widely accepted strategies; distributing risks; or enhanced reputation. On the minus side, they can include impacts on underlying values or diminished reputation. Taking these three factors together, it may be that a child protection service determines that placing a child in the care of its extended family offers the best net service benefits, but on the other hand finds that the costs of monitoring, and of reputational loss by the CPS, outweigh those benefits.

In summary, whether to enlist co-production by clients depends in the first instance on whether their work is inter-dependent with that of the organisation, in which case it is unavoidable. If it is not inter-dependent, but rather a potential substitute for it, then the relative benefits and costs – service, relationship and strategic – of each alternative must be weighed up.

Thus, the theory suggests that co-production is perhaps a more significant phenomenon than we might expect at first glance. This is implicit in the structural reality that co-production can be either inter-dependent with or a substitute for the work of the organisation’s internal staff. But the available empirical data indicate that this assertion should be modified. In the EU study (Bovaird et al. 2015), the researchers compiled an index of individual co-production, and another of collective co-production, each a composite picture of people’s propensity to co-produce. They found that on average 62.4 per cent of people were willing to take part in individual co-production, whereas only 35.5 per cent were willing to engage in collective co-production – findings consistent with those cited above about the propensity to co-produce different types of activities.

Eliciting co-production

The question of what makes clients and other external parties co-produce public services is probably the most studied area in the co-production literature (see Bovaird et al. 2015; Verschuere et al. 2012; Alford 2009), although much of it, as with other co-production aspects, is focused on theory-building rather than quantitative empirical research. However, the EU research provides some insight (Bovaird et al. 2015).

The theoretical consensus is that people’s propensity to co-produce is motivated by multiple factors: the motivations and capacities of the co-producer; perceptions of the service itself; and satisfaction with the government’s communication, consultation and overall performance. On the first of these, the public administration and wider social science literature point to a variety of motivations as major drivers. These include: a desire to avoid sanctions, economic self-interest, and various non-material incentives such as intrinsic rewards, social connection and moral values (Thomas 2012; Verschuere et al. 2012; Clary et al. 1996, 1998; Rosentraub and Sharp 1981; Wilson 1973). Co-production is also encouraged by facilitators that make it easier to do, such as task-simplification or information and training (Thomas 2012; Verschuere et al. 2012). These two sets of factors – willingness to co-produce and ability to do so – have been the central focus of case analysis and theorising about people’s propensity to co-produce (Verschuere et al. 2012; Alford 2002, 2009). No single factor accounts for this phenomenon; rather it is the specific mix of them that is important in each situation.

One way that some of the research encapsulates aspects of motivation and facilitation in a single construct is to focus on citizen self-efficacy, that is, ‘the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process’ (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954: 187). The EU study found this to be one of the two major factors associated with willingness to undertake individual coproduction, with a regression weight of 0.22, while the other factor was age (0.24). Other lesser factors were: female respondents (0.13) are more
Citizen co-production of public services

inclined; and satisfaction with government information (0.11) also prompts individual co-production. On the other hand, those supporting individual co-production had a negative satisfaction rate (−0.10) with the performance of government overall. By contrast, the only substantial driver of collective co-production was efficacy (0.28).

Thus efficacy, with its basis in sense of competency and also intrinsic and social motivations, seems to be of signal importance. A further layer of understanding may come from the emergence recently of behavioural economics (Kahneman 2011) as well as the related and increasingly popular notion of ‘nudge’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). If people’s propensity to co-produce (or indeed take any action) is largely a function of their willingness and ability to do so, then the way in which motivators and facilitators are framed will affect their actions in important ways.

Conclusions

Co-production seems to be here to stay. Governments around the world are designing and implementing service reform measures that owe a lot to co-production ideas, and research in the field is approaching maturity, with a bedrock of theory, likely to be fuelled by the emergence of more empirical research.

This will have implications for important aspects of our social, economic and political life. By activating citizens to engage more with the work of the public sector, it has the potential to increase popular trust in government and help develop social capital (Fledderus et al. 2014). As a corollary, it may enhance the political influence of ordinary citizens, as well as improve the workings of public services. On the other hand, each of these potential consequences could be negated or over-shadowed by shortcomings in political systems, service capabilities or unsustainability.

In the public sector itself, the spread of co-production will amend the role of public servants and their managers consistently with other governmental reforms: in addition to or even instead of their task of delivering services, they will partly have the job of inducing citizens and clients to contribute to service delivery. Given that these actors are external to the organisation, and therefore outside public managers’ command authority, this task will call for the ability to influence, encourage and negotiate rather than to give orders – which in itself may be an additional benefit of co-production. Thus changes in the roles of members of the public may also generate change in the public service, for which it will need to develop increasing capability.

References


