

Evaluating co-production: pragmatic approaches to building the evidence base

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For Co-production Panel, Political Studies Association Conference, April 2014

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Co-production is an increasingly high profile approach to public service reform in the UK, and one of the few positive storylines in the public service narrative of long-term austerity. This paper explores why co-production has struggled to establish a compelling evidence base despite being an approach which is mainstream and relatively mature with wide coverage of policy domains. This paper suggests two reasons for the relative weakness of the evidence base surrounding co-production: first, the breadth of the term, its lack of programmatic consistency and its focus on relational aspects of process in an era when performance measures focus on outcomes and impact; and second, the shifting parameters of what constitutes evidence-based policy within government, with conflicting messages about the value of qualitative and case study approaches making it hard for people working in co-productive ways to understand what kinds of evidence are required. Given that individual case studies are likely to be the only affordable and timely evaluation approach available to many public service provider organisations, the paper goes on to discuss three potential responses to these limitations. The first is to explicitly value knowledge-based practice, which emphasises proximity and familiarity, rather than leaving this as an implicit part of evaluation which can be dismissed as excessively normative. The second is to utilise theory-based approaches to evaluation which make clear what it is that co-production is supposed to offer and sidestep its definitional ambiguities. The third is to offer more ‘good enough’ methodologies which community organisations and small-scale service providers experimenting with co-production can use to assess its contribution. These include appreciative enquiry, critical friendship and data sharing.

Co-production is not a new concept but it is one which has an increasingly high profile in UK policy debate. Defined by Sharp as, 'the recognition that public services are the joint product of the activities of both citizens and government officials' (1980, 110), its reach is impressive. It is part of the public service reform agenda of the Westminster government, and of Scotland and Wales (Horne and Shirley, 2009, Department of Health, 2010; Boyle et al, 2010; Scottish Executive, 2011; Government of Wales, 2014). It is an approach which resonates in local government as well as national (LGA, 2013). It is not overtly partisan, gaining endorsement from both left and right of the political spectrum, with its appeal to self-help and efficiency gains, as well as active citizenship and community participation (Biagini and Sutcliffe 2013; Ostrom 1993, 231). Co-production seems to be the only positive storyline in the public service narrative of long-term austerity, a commitment to a more inclusive mindset and way of working: 'Co-production says that you start from the people themselves and find out what they think works well and what needs to be addressed' (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2009: 4).

A puzzling aspect of co-production is that it has been granted this influential role in future public services on the basis of little formal evidence. A number of co-production reviews that the authors have been involved with (a policy review for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Connected Communities programme (Durose et al, 2013) and research guides for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (Needham and Carr, 2009, SCIE, 2013) have highlighted the limits of the evidence base. Few studies have been published which would be placed at the top of traditional evidence hierarchies (e.g. controlled studies or systematic reviews). Single case studies are widely cited despite a lack of independent evaluation and/or of publicly-accessible evaluation methodologies. Many of the existing case studies are published by organisations with a pre-existing commitment to working co-productively, giving a 'boosterish' feel to the findings. There is also a lack of longitudinal evidence: cases offer a snapshot of success rather than an account of sustained organisational change. Comparative evidence (either in terms of comparing across sites of co-production, types of services or outcomes or comparing co-production with more 'traditional' approaches to local public service provision) is limited (Verschuere et al 2012; Durose et al, 2013) . The economic case for co-production in particular is hard to sustain on the current evidence base. The AHRC policy review concluded: 'The case for co-production is often made in terms of its "strong potential relationship to efficiency" (Ostrom 1993, 231) but there are limits to existing evidence' (Durose et al, 2013, 11). Brandsen et al acknowledge the reliance on case studies in co-production research: '...[T]he debate would benefit from greater methodological diversity (specifically, more quantitative comparative work) and yet further conceptual clarification' (2012, 387).

This paper suggests two reasons for the relative weakness of the evidence base surrounding co-production: first, the breadth of the term, its lack of programmatic focus and its focus on relational aspects of process in an era when performance measures focus on outcomes and impact; and second, the shifting parameters of what constitutes evidence-based policy within government, with conflicting messages about the value of qualitative and case study approaches making it hard for people working in co-productive ways to understand what kinds of evidence are required. Given that individual case studies are likely to be the only affordable and timely evaluation approach available to many public service provider organisations, the paper goes on to discuss three potential responses to these limitations. The first is to explicitly value knowledge-based practice, which emphasises proximity and familiarity, rather than leaving this as an implicit part of evaluation which can be dismissed as excessively normative. The second is to utilise theory-based approaches to evaluation which make clear what it is that co-production is supposed to offer and sidestep its definitional ambiguities. The third is to offer more ‘good enough’ methodologies which community organisations and small-scale service providers experimenting with co-production can use to assess its contribution.

Definitional boundaries

One of the limitations of co-production has been its elasticity as a term. In the words of Cummins and Miller, co-production is about how services ‘*work with* rather than *do unto* users’ (2007: 7, emphasis in the original). A recent report from the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit report described co-production as ‘a partnership between citizens and public services to achieve a valued outcome’ (Horne and Shirley 2009: 3). Both of these definitions highlight the breadth of public service interventions that could be captured under a co-production heading. Bovaird and Loffler note the diversity of co-produced activities and ask, ‘what services are *not* “co-produced”?’ (2013, 39, emphasis in the original).

The breadth of the term co-production makes it difficult to establish its boundaries. There are a range of perspectives and typologies on each of the following themes: who is co-producing; how many people are involved; at what stage co-production takes place; what is contributed; and how co-production relates to other forms of citizen participation (e.g. Bovaird, 2007; Needham and Carr, 2009; Osborne and Stokosch, 2013). Authors have also broken down co-production into its component parts in an attempt to bring more specificity to the analysis (e.g. Brandsen et al, 201 2.

Terms such as co-creation, co-design, co-management and co-assessment for example highlight the

different stages at which involvement can occur. However – aside from co-design which has some purchase (e.g. Bradwell and Marr, 2008) – few of these terms have any currency and it is co-production which continues to dominate as the overarching term.

Hence, as Ewert and Evers put it: ‘co-production refers to a fragmented set of activities, expectations and rationales’ (2013, 61), and these get in the way of knowing whether or not it has been done well. It is unclear, for example, whether co-production is best understood as a redescription of existing welfare models, or a transformative model for the future (Needham and Carr, 2009). Co-production can be a description of the reality that services cannot be delivered without at least a minimal level of compliance from their users (Normann, 1991). As Alford puts it, “[I]n some types of public sector activity, *value cannot be created or delivered unless the client actively contributes to its production*’ (1998, 130 – emphasis in the original). Alternatively, it can be a model for a welfare future in which professionals give up a substantial portion of their power and resources in order to allow service users to play a much larger role in designing and delivering their own services (Durose et al, 2013).

It is of course not unusual for there to be an ambiguous relationship between a policy in abstract terms and the detailed practice(s) related to it (Yanow, 1996). However, the limitations of the co-production evidence base are particularly pronounced when it is compared to the related policy of personalisation which has gained prominence at a similar time. Personalisation, aimed at delivering more choice and control for people using social care services, has a similarly boosterish appeal: organisations and campaigners who believe in it promote it with passion and use individual case studies as illustrative of wider truths (Needham, 2011). However, unlike co-production, personalisation has been able to hook itself onto a specific policy instrument (personal budgets) which has lent itself to independent evaluation (e.g. Glendinning et al, 2008; Forder et al, 2013), and quantitative data is relatively plentiful (e.g. Hatton and Waters, 2013). Personalisation has also benefitted from a national alliance of policy makers and social care campaigners and practitioners – first as Putting People First and then as Think Local, Act Personal – which has been able to give some stability to definitions (for example the four quadrants of personalisation (HM Government, 2007),¹ to sustain momentum around a range of interventions and provide a hub for personalisation-related activities (Needham, 2011). Whilst there are national alliances relating to co-production they do not appear to have a similar reach and profile.

The policy which is perhaps most analogous to co-production is prevention in health and social care: an approach which has thrived on the basis of its intuitive appeal rather than its formal evidence

¹ Choice and control, universal services, social capital and prevention/early intervention

base (Curry, 2006; Allen and Glasby, 2010). Intuition is of course, a relevant factor in understanding why policies are promulgated (Fischer, 2003). However without a programmatic focus and national coalition to stabilise its meanings, co-production is arguably nothing more than the insight that value can be created from the process of 'agent and citizen together produc[ing] the desired transformation' (Whitaker 1980, 241, 244). Even this is somewhat ambiguous since it is not clear whether the agent and citizen need to be interacting in real-time, or can contribute sequentially, such as happens when citizens submit a tax return or put a postcode on a letter (Alford, 1998). These asynchronous and transactional, (as opposed to relational) forms of co-production are not usually what advocates of co-production have in mind. A Cabinet Office report on co-production concluded: 'We also find that co-production is not appropriate in every public service. We suggest the greatest potential benefits are in "relational" services such as early years, education, long term health conditions, adult social care and mental health, rather than transactional services' (Horne and Shirley, 2009, 5).

Certainly, the relational aspects of co-production are heavily emphasised in the literature. Co-production is seen to demand 'mutual readjustment', where 'the actions taken by both the service agent and the citizen are based on their joint consideration of a problem' where both 'share responsibility for deciding what action to take' (Whitaker 1980, 241, 244). As one health clinician reflected, 'co-production is about clinicians and patients working together rather than leaving the patient to manage their own care on the one hand or completely taking over their care on the other' (NESTA 2013, 3). There can be an emotional and reflexive element to these encounters. Co-production is described by Ewert and Evers as a process through which the 'emotional knowledge' of users (such as the experience of having a particular disease) is taken into account (2012, 76). Cahn and Gray, writing about timebanking, suggest: 'We see co-production involving a reflexivity that leads to transformation at a different level. The system itself undergoes change. Producer and product, process and outcome are changed' (2012, 131).

The focus on relationships aligns co-production with recent interest in the 'relational state' (e.g. in work by the Institute of Public Policy Research, Participle and the Royal Society for the Arts (for a review see Needham, 2013). A 2013 report by the IPPR argued, 'Recognising the importance of human relationships could revolutionise the role of the state' (Cooke and Muir, 2013). However although the relational state is a term with some currency, it sits awkwardly with the countervailing pressures that all public policy interventions be measurable for their outcomes – what Tunstall and Blewett (2013) call 'outcome theology'. Capturing the emotional and transformative aspects of the co-production process may be difficult to do when measurement focuses on outcomes. The

increasingly popularity of mechanisms such as payment by results (PBR) and social impact bonds can impede the co-productive process. The reductionist character of these forms of ‘black box’ commissioning can drive down the quality of service to the minimum that can be shown to produce pre-specified outcomes (thus maximising the cost-benefit ratio) (Rees et al, 2014). Certainly in the case of PBR in the Work Programme the incentive structure appears to operate in ways which are inimical to co-production, not least because they drive providers to select particular categories of service user/client to work with over others (Rees et al, 2014).

The recent IPPR report on the relational state – *Many to Many: how the relational state will transform public services* – suggests linking relationships and outcomes through expanding frontline autonomy at the same time as increasing reputational competition (ranking of provider performance data) (Muir and Parker, 2014). However, performance data can only include aspects of relational practice if these elements can be captured. In the health sector it is widely recognised that performance measures have focused too heavily on clinical measures of health outcomes whereas patients take for granted that health professionals are technically knowledgeable and competent (Bridges et al, 2010). It is relational aspects of care that patients prioritise (respect, dignity, being treated as an individual) and health outcomes are not a reliable proxy for such aspects (Richards and Coulter, 2007; Bridges et al, 2010). Even a greater emphasis on satisfaction measures that can incorporate these relational dimensions may not be so straightforward in a context of greater co-production. Vamstad (2012) writing about Swedish childcare cooperatives, suggests that co-production can muddy the process of gathering user satisfaction data, since how can users demand accountability for low quality when users themselves are part of the production process. There is a broader point here about the extent to which regulators and quality assurance bodies are able to understand and measure citizen-generated input using appropriate metrics.

The shifting policy context of evidence-based policy

A second factor to consider when exploring the apparent mismatch between the reach and evidence-base of co-production is that the political context in which what is meant by evidence – and what counts as good or appropriate evidence – is shifting. The New Labour governments’ commitment to evidence based policy-making (EBPM) ushered in an era of large-scale evaluations of flagship social policies such as New Deal for Communities, neighbourhood renewal, and the employment New Deals. The initial optimism among academics about this gradually evolved into scepticism, as learning from evaluations appeared not to influence further rounds of policy design

and politicians rushed on to seemingly novel and headline grabbing policies (Durose and Rees, 2012). As Wells (2007) notes, Labour's early commitment to building evaluation into the design of many social policy interventions gradually solidified into a belief in the need for more hard quantitative data amidst a drive to deliver. According to Meager (2010): 'the objective of EBPM was rarely fully achieved during this period, partly because the research evidence was rarely considered at the policy design stage, and also because the political imperative for quick results barely allowed time to collect robust evidence.' Arguably too, evaluators were rather too keen to please their (Government) funders, given that a significant 'industry' grew up around evaluation under New Labour (Allen and Imrie, 2010; Sullivan, 2011).

The coalition government initially appeared hostile to the notion of EBPM. Evaluations were cancelled, and new ones were not commissioned as expected amid a general 'bonfire' of quangos; and a range of existing data gathering activities were threatened, including the Census. As part of the Coalition's small state, 'Big Society' and localist agenda, rhetoric focused on a supposed era of Open Data, in which the balance would shift away from academic evaluators and government statisticians, towards citizen 'armchair auditors' poring over newly released administrative data such as the COINS [Combined Online Information System] database (Guardian, 2010). However, this period of political positioning – arguably serving to distance the Coalition from its predecessor, justify significant spending cuts, and 'play to the gallery' – has been belied by a number of subsequent developments both inside and outside of government (though often having elements of co-dependency) which have suggested the continuation of the sorts of technocratic and elite-driven forms of EBPM evident under New Labour. This trend has been driven as much by highly networked think tanks and institutions, such as Nesta, the Young Foundation, the Early Intervention Foundation, and New Philanthropy Capital, as they have by government itself.

The general position can be summarised as one in which there has been a renewed scepticism towards 'soft' evaluative research, critical accounts (that are viewed, and dismissed as, ideological), and qualitative research. Instead, an implicit (and sometimes more explicit) notion of the evidence hierarchy has been imported from the natural sciences into the policy context. Thus greater use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and natural experiments have been promoted (Cabinet Office, 2012), along with a more enthusiastic uptake of payment by results (PbR) in public service reform – for example in the DWP's Work Programme, 'troubled families' scheme, and criminal justice – which by its nature is ultimately a real-time monitoring process of a programme's success *in its own terms*. The introduction of nurse family partnerships in the UK has been justified on the basis of successful

use of randomised controlled trials in the US which demonstrated its effectiveness in improving outcomes for disadvantaged families (Eckenrode et al 2010).

An example of evidence hierarchy comes from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) (2013):

- Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)
- Meta-analysis of high quality studies
- Evaluation studies employing matched comparison groups
- Evaluation studies that demonstrate the value of the intervention or service by comparing the actual reconviction rate against the predicted rate

The strongest statements of this apparent enthusiasm for RCTs in particular are contained in the Treasury's Green Book and civil service Magenta Book, which set out for other government departments and agencies guidelines on policy assessment and evaluation (HM Treasury, 2014; Government Social Research Unit, 2007). The Cabinet Office also has an important co-ordinating and influencing role within government – particularly the Behavioural Insights Team's publication *Test, Learn, Adapt* (Cabinet Office, 2012). This shift can be seen in a variety of policy areas: for instance a Ministry of Justice (NOMS) publication recently bluntly pointed out that "case studies [and] process evaluations will not tell you about impact" (NOMS, 2013).

Of course this apparent commitment to the methodologies of the hard sciences should not be taken as an indication that policy is not also influenced by other sources of knowledge: 'positioning, portals, polling, partnership, partisanship and punditry' as Pawson puts it (2006, 4-7, cited in Powell, 2011, 20). However it marks a shift within the evaluation communities of government about what kinds of evidence is admissible. The demand for more rigorous 'scientific' forms of evaluation and the establishment of 'what works' in terms of the success of narrow policy interventions, and a corresponding scepticism towards qualitative research focusing on limited areas or assessment of case studies, potentially weakens the case for co-production still further (HM Government, 2013).

Some co-production case studies have used formal evaluation methodologies such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) to measure cost-effectiveness (Nef 2010). However, these economic evaluations themselves can be problematic: they face the difficulty of establishing 'cause' and 'effect' and the savings produced by preventative services and longer-term outcomes (Turning Point 2010). It is extremely difficult to convincingly filter out the influence of the wide array of public (and other) services that such individuals are likely to be in contact with. These analyses may also be

misleading without measuring user and community inputs (Bovaird 2013, 9). A practical barrier is that demands for formal cost-benefit methodologies such as SROI puts evaluation out of the price range of many public service provider organisations.

There is also danger that evidence thresholds which assert a formal hierarchy will narrow the range of interventions that can be evaluated, as inclusion criteria become methods driven rather than content driven. This tension was evident in the two co-production briefings that one of the authors undertook for the Social Care Institute for Excellence in 2009 and 2013. The first review included 73 publications, based on a screening process focused on 'the topic, its theoretical framework and other basic criteria (such as date range, country or population), rather than on the methods or other research criteria. All types of research may be included as long as they bear centrally on the topic and its underlying theoretical framework and meet basic criteria' (SCIE, 2009). The second review, coming after SCIE had been awarded NICE accreditation for its research briefings, required a systematic search strategy which excluded all studies except controlled studies in peer-reviewed journals, consistent with the accrediting body's requirement of 'a systematic review and synthesis of the most relevant evidence base' (NICE, 2013). This search led to only 13 studies being included, most of them systematic literature reviews. Eight of the 13 were on peer support in mental health services, a much narrower range of interventions than had been identified in the earlier narrative review of social care co-production.

The narrow focus of the articles reaffirms the lack of systematic evidence of the benefits of other types of co-production. Cost evidence is particularly hard to find, even in the 13 studies that were included. The focus on mental health services reflects the disciplinary focus of medical research in which controlled studies are more common than they are in other aspects of social care. The evidence tables which resulted from this work gave a very limited view of the co-productive activity which goes on in the social care sector. SCIE supplemented the evidence table with many other perspectives on co-production (such as service user insights and practice examples), so the point is not to criticise their co-production resources, but to highlight the limitations of methods-driven searches as a way of evaluating co-production. Capturing and understanding co-production through such approaches risks being a case of the 'drunkard's search' (Kaplan, 1964) in which the criteria for inclusion distorts the effectiveness of the search (akin to a drunkard looking for lost keys under a streetlight because that's where they would be easiest to see), failing to do justice to the breadth of experience available.

Navigating through the shifting terrain of evidence-based policy making, it is important to affirm the role of values and argumentation in policy-making, often left out of the 'concrete factual realism' of

EBPM (Sullivan, 2011, 507). Sullivan points out that, '[EBPM] is associated with a hierarchy of methods that regard randomised controlled trials as the "gold standard" of evaluation method and with an evaluation stance that sees the evaluator as maintaining a clear distance from the evaluation 'subject' in order to protect objectivity and independence' (2011, 508). However this commitment to distance is rarely observed in practice. Many observers of EBPM have argued that what proliferates in much of policy-making is better characterised as policy-based evidence (Powell, 2011, 21). The label is suggestive of a context in which policy emerges from drivers such as ideology, intuition or populism, with evidence playing a supporting role. For a policy such as co-production, its legitimacy will be rooted in multiple sources, including community pressures for change and asset-based approaches to citizenship, alongside evaluation data. A focus on argumentation explains the emergence of new ideas in public policy as 'the product of argumentation between different policy "doctrines" at a given point in time' (Sullivan, 2011, 508; see also Hood and Jackson, 1991). Sullivan argues that the under-recognition of the importance of argument in policy-making 'generated a disconnection between 'evidence' and 'argument' that diminished the role of the evaluator in the policy process' (2011, 510).

To highlight the role of values and argument in explaining the proliferation of co-productive approaches is not the end of the story though. Sullivan warns of 'evaluation and evaluators being overtaken by a sort of evidence-based relativism that renders them ultimately marginal to the process of policy making' (Sullivan, 2011, 509). Given the likelihood that service provider organisations are likely to need to continue to evidence their work and that single case studies may be the only timely and cost-effective way to do so, there are a range of strategies which can be utilised to help build a credible evidence base. In undertaking the co-production reviews for AHRC and SCIE, which involved engagement with policy actors outside academia in the fieldwork or dissemination phases, the authors were told that co-productive approaches will not pass the commissioning stage in some organisations without a robust business case. Rather than acceding to the vagaries of definitional relativism or the rigours of expensive and limiting methodologies borrowed from the natural sciences, it is possible to identify ways forward for those interested in expanding the evidence-base for co-production. Three are offered here: incorporate knowledge-based practice; articulate a theory of change; gather 'good enough' evidence.

Incorporate knowledge-based practice

An alternative to evidence-based policy is Glasby and Beresford's (2006, 89) concept of knowledge-based practice. These authors reject evidence hierarchies and argue that 'the "best" method for researching any given topic is simply that which will answer the research question most effectively' (Glasby, 2011, 89). This approach enables them to argue that 'the lived experience of service users or carers and the practice wisdom of practitioners can be just as valid a way of understanding the world as formal research (and possibly more valid for some questions)' (Glasby, 2011, 89). As Glasby puts it, '...some research questions mean that proximity to the object being studied can be more appropriate than notions of "distance"' (2011, 89). Glasby makes the case for greater use of experiential evidence, in contrast to empirical evidence, 'for example, how the process is viewed and experienced by service users and staff whose behaviour shapes and contributes to empirical outcomes...' (2011, 92-3). Powell points out, 'In any policy areas there is a great deal of critical evidence held in the minds of both front-line staff in departments, agencies and local authorities and those to whom the policy is directed' (2011, 21).

In relation to co-production, therefore, there is scope for a more explicit recognition of the values-base that underpins it, linked to involvement of users and an asset-based approach to citizens and communities. In this approach, co-production could be beneficial even if outcomes and spending remain stable. For example, it could enhance the skills and sense of efficacy of participants, and foster the emergence of new social movements. Organisations seeking to evaluate their own co-productive ways of working could do so in ways which are explicit about the underpinning value base and the benefits gained by proximity as well as distance for understanding what works.

Articulate a theory of change

As well as making explicit the focus on knowledge-based practice, it is possible to root the evaluations in a stronger theoretical foundation. Theories of change-type evaluations (Fulbright-Anderson et al, 1998) have been extensively used by university evaluators in the last decade, and have their limitations (Sullivan, 2011; Powell, 2011). However they do provide case study based evaluations with theoretical accounts of how the intervention is expected to work against which evaluation findings can be compared. As Glasby puts it, 'Essentially this [approach] means articulating a clear hypothesis about how and why a policy is meant to work (which) can then be used as a basis for evaluating the success or otherwise of the subsequent policy' (2011, 93, see also Pawson, 2006).

Much of the theorisation around co-production has been of the who/when/how type (Bovaird, 2007; Needham and Carr, 2009; Verschuere et al 2012, Osborne and Stokosch, 2013), and it is less common to find accounts of why it is that co-production is expected to produce benefits. The work of one of the earliest theorists of co-production, Elinor Ostrom, remains a helpful guide to what it is that is likely to make co-production successful. Ostrom set out four conditions which 'heighten the probability that co-production is an improvement over regular government production or citizen production alone' (1996, 1082). These potentially offer a benchmark against which co-production approaches can be evaluated, having themselves been validated in other studies (e.g. Brandsen and Helderma, 2012. For a review see Verschuere et al 2012).

Ostrom's first condition is that co-production offers scope for synergies when it is additive rather than substitutive: '...when co-productive inputs are diverse entities and complements, synergy can occur. Each has something the other needs... if inputs are strictly substitutable, no potential for synergy exists....' (Ostrom 1996, 1082, 1079). Here there is an additive logic, rather than a substitutive logic (Barker, 2010). Long-term efficiencies in local public services will be delivered through bringing together existing resources and assets (for example, pooled, whole-place budgets, professional skills and experiential expertise) in new and creative ways, not through divestment and shifting responsibilities from one provider of public services to another.

Ostrom's second condition is that there must be flexibility for participants: 'options must be available to both parties' (Ostrom 1996, 1082) so that there is a real sense of flexibility to local circumstances. This condition warns against organisational fixes, such as attributing intrinsic advantages to particular organisational forms (e.g. private companies, social enterprises, mutuals) (Goldfinch and Wallis 2010; Durose et al 2013). Instead, co-production suggests an organisational culture underpinned by a 'logic of care' (Mol 2008), recognising that individuals are nearly always situated in communities or networks, which demand collaborative, inter-dependent relationships between public authorities and local communities (Sullivan 2011, 191-192).

The third condition that Ostrom sets out is that 'participants need to be able to build a credible commitment to one another so that if one side increases input, the other will continue at the same or higher levels' (1996, 1082). Co-production will not 'occur spontaneously simply because substantial benefits could be achieved' (Ostrom 1996, 1082). Indeed, 'designing institutional arrangements that help induce successful co-productive strategies is far more daunting than demonstrating their theoretical existence' (Ostrom 1996, 1080). Within many current providers of local public services, there is a recognition of the need to re-think the roles and relationship between citizens, communities, elected representatives, practitioners and policy makers. As

Vamstad puts it, 'the positive effects of co-production on service quality come from the extensive, two-way communication between staff and users in the co-production' (2012, 314). Exemplary practice in working with local communities to take and sustain action has been extensively documented (see Hulst et al, 2011). Exemplary practitioners are understood to share four key characteristics: an entrepreneurial way of working; a broader commitment to social change; credibility with professionals and communities; and local knowledge, an in-depth understanding of local communities built through their lived and professional experience (see also Durose 2009, 2011).

Ostrom's fourth condition is that co-production input is incentivised appropriately. As she puts it, 'incentives help to encourage inputs from both officials and citizens' (1996, 1082). Incentivising transformative co-production is about connecting with the values and everyday experiences of both front-line professionals and communities. It recognises that citizens 'donate their valuable time and effort to the achievement of organisational or program purposes...*when they receive, or expect to receive, something at least as valuable in return...*' (Alford 2009, 188 emphasis in the original). Staff training will be an important element of making co-production work, so that staff feel motivated and skilled to undertake new ways of interacting with citizens. Skills for co-production may include, 'individual co-ordination, personal advocacy, financial support, community development' (Bartnik and Chalmers 2007, 38); 'part good neighbour, part facilitator, part advocate, part support-worker' (Poll 2007) and new forms of brokerage (Spalek 2011).

Together these four conditions help to explicate a theory of change relevant to the unique setting of each particular case study, and can be the basis for more transferable insights into the transformative potential of co-production. It is an approach which focuses explicitly on opening up "'black box" between programme inputs and outputs' (Sullivan, 2011, 503), and in that sense offers an alternative to the dominating discourse that it is only outcomes that matter.

Gather 'good enough' evidence

Theory-based evaluation that makes explicit how co-production is likely to operate, alongside a more overt articulation of knowledge-based practice, is only part of what is needed to build support for co-production. A third approach to strengthening the evidence base for co-production is to identify pragmatic and cost-effective ways to gather evidence. Many co-productive activities will be small-scale and will be undertaken by organisations operating outside of the core of central and local government. These are not initiatives that could ever command a formal government evaluation of

the kind that proliferated in the early days of New Labour (Sullivan, 2011). Such groups need to better understand the sorts of evidence which are most likely to carry weight with the decision-makers operating in their sector (local authority commissioners, councillors, civil servants, ministers, etc), recognising that 'some groups seem to reject forms of evidence or information that others see as potentially valid' (Glasby, 2011, 94). As Sullivan puts it, 'There are multiple sources of evidence and hence multiple "truths", to engage with policy makers as "policy entrepreneurs"...' (Sullivan, 2011, 509).

Three approaches which might be useful for case study evaluators include:

(1) Appreciative enquiry:

Appreciative enquiry is a process that, 'promotes positive change by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past' (Mathie and Cunningham 2002, 7). It draws on educational psychology about the sources of collective and personal motivation (Mathie and Cunningham 2002, 7) and aims to challenge internalised negativity and move towards a more appreciative constructive of a community, organisation or situation. Appreciative enquiry utilises the 'heliotropic principle' (Elliott, 1999): 'just as plants grow towards their energy source, so do communities and organisations move towards what gives them life and energy. To the extent that memory and the construction of everyday reality offer hope and meaning' (Mathie and Cunningham 2002, 7). Appreciative enquiry is associated with asset-based community development (ABCD) due to its shared 'commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets', rather than a 'community's needs, deficiencies and problems' (Krentzmann and McKnight 1993, 1).

Appreciative enquiry uses interviews and story-telling as a way of drawing out positive experiences and memories and then relies on a collective identification and analysis of critical elements of success. Story-telling is particularly important in co-production in not only evidencing the significance of its relational dynamics but also in representing different voices and experiences in an accessible way (Beebeejaun et al, 2013), building shared commitment and understanding (Layard et al, 2013), and in identifying community successes and identifying the capacities of communities which contributed to those successes (Mathie and Cunningham, 2002). For example, Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust collected patients' stories of their experiences of health care in the community and community hospitals and shared them with staff as part of a learning and development programme. The initiative was a way to circulate patient experiences and demonstrate how simple misunderstandings can impact on

that experience. The stories were then used to make a short film raising the question, 'do you always see the person in the patient?' (Cumbria Partnership 2012). Structured dialogue method (SDM) developed by the Chamberlain Forum in Birmingham, is a technique for listening critically to stories and using them in policy development and evaluation, 'Stories don't just reflect the culture: they ARE the culture. If you want to change culture, you need to change the stories and the way people tell them'. Key elements of the approach involve: a provocative theme – something to generate animated discussion; a diverse storytelling circle of around ten to fifteen people; two storytellers willing to share their experience; active reflection of all participants – not just the storytellers; structured questioning – not general discussion; and a skilled facilitator to manage the process (Slatter 2010).

(2) Peer review

A second approach to gathering data can be to utilise peer review processes. Research emphasises the centrality of the role played by informal interpersonal contacts and networks of near peers in spreading new ideas (Kolb and Fry 1976; Page et al 2004; Brannan et al 2008). Such contacts are considered, 'the most truthful and useful sources of information' (Wolman and Page 2002, 27). Peer-to-peer learning is useful in inspiring and mobilising by example, through learning about practicalities and building confidence to take on new ways of working. There is evidence of the value of peer-to-peer learning, with participants often citing the extent of learning from peers as the same, if not greater, than from specialist trainers (Richardson 2008, 223-224). Ideas are spread through horizontal connections, such as geographical proximity or regional identification, socio-economic equivalence, political similarity, and psychological identification (Brannan et al 2008, 26) rather than vertical scaling.

A 'critical friend' role is one way to formalise the peer learning experience. The term originates in the field of education research and consultancy (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2002), and under the New Labour Governments was used specifically to describe the role of a school improvement partner. Smith (2004) uses the term critical friend to describe the balancing act that is needed when providing external input to a project with which one sympathizes and where power imbalances persist. This might be for example a university department acting as a critical friend for a small voluntary sector organisation. Costa and Kallick (1993, 50) suggest that a critical friend: 'asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work..... takes the time to fully understand the context of the

work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.’

Pairing up a small organisation with one that has experience in running large scale, robust evaluations offers the smaller organisation expertise in where to focus effort and what type and level of evidence might prove to be ‘good enough’ for policy makers or commissioners. An important aspect of the role of a critical friend is that of the advocate identified by Costa and Kallick (1993), and reinforced by Smith (2004, 344), who suggests that a key role of the critical friend is to ‘articulate and bring out into the open aspects of the project that may ... enhance its impact and thereby assist it to gain recognition for its achievements.’

(3) Data sharing

A third approach is to facilitate the better sharing of existing data. For example, the Data Lab approach suggests one way in which organisations can establish and benchmark the work that they do. A ‘Justice Data Lab’ has been created by the Ministry of Justice – with others proposed in other policy sectors – which allows the organisations (such as charities) working with offenders the opportunity to establish the reoffending rate of the offenders they work with, as well as to compare with the reoffending rate of the wider released prisoner population or a matched group within it (de Las Casas et al, 2013).

Labs may be virtual, providing remote access to data, or physical settings. However, because administrative data are confidential, often with statutory obligations on the public body to protect privacy, there will be access controls associated with protecting the data from misuse. It can be seen that in such approaches, evaluation is bypassed in favour of organisations demonstrating directly with administrative data the success or otherwise; not only this but the subsequent knowledge is used by the organisation to convince commissioners they should be funded, or that they can win PbR contracts (de Las Casas et al, 2013).

Good-enough evidence also requires attention to who the audience for the evaluation is most likely to be, to ensure that the findings resonate and spread. Elsewhere the authors have argued that co-production is most likely to grow through ‘scaling out’, developing locally appropriate practice and reflecting citizen preferences, for ‘small-scale, informal activities’ (Durose et al, 2013) and spreading ideas and innovation between organisations, enabling local innovation to flourish (Bunt and Harris 2010, Berry 2012, O’Donovan and Rubbra 2012, Porter 2012, Bovaird 2013). This approach offers sharp contrast to traditional ‘scaling up’ approaches to spreading innovation which are underpinned

with the aim of maximising efficiencies through economies of scale. As Locality (2014, 18) argues, diseconomies of scale are just as likely given that 'specialisation and standardisation lead to services that match the convenience of the commissioner, or sometimes the provider, not the variety of the need.' In 'scaling out', 'economies of scope' are sought where efficiencies are achieved as a result of horizontal connectivity (O'Donovan and Rubbra 2012) and generate 'mass localism' (Bunt and Harris 2010). A scaling out approach depends on arguments and evidence being presented in a way which resonates with the audience's lived experiences and values. As one contributor to the authors' AHRC policy review reflected, 'people have to believe it's real. They've got to get the idea that.... [it's for] people like me' (Durose et al, 2013).

Conclusion

The scarcity of independent studies of co-production reflects the cost and time implications of commissioning independent evaluation, particularly for the third sector provider organisations that have led the field in trialling co-production (Durose et al, 2013). The approaches set out here offer ways in which the evidence base for co-production can be strengthened. For policy entrepreneurs seeking to make the case for co-production there are a range of strategies that can be utilised. However there also needs to be greater understanding of the role of values and argument in the policy process, and the limits to what evidence-based policy-making can achieve. EBPM is too often a narrowly instrumental approach which privileges the measurement of impact and outcomes, failing to capture the relational possibilities of co-productive ways of working, and denying the inevitably political nature of evaluation (Wells, 2007).

Rather than accepting a dichotomy between 'cosy stories of a few people's gains' (a phrase Beresford, 2008, used to describe some of the personalisation evidence but which could equally be applied to co-production) or a cost-benefit analysis worthy of the Treasury's Green Book, the paper has suggested pragmatic approaches for small-scale evaluation based on theory, values and attentiveness to the audience. Co-production may be hard to avoid in debates around public service reform but it needn't be hard to evidence.

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