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Knowledge coproduction & urban governance

Collaborative research in institutionally embedded practices

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Summary

Knowledge Coproduction & Urban Governance; Collaborative research in institutionally embedded practices

Urban knowledge challenges

Urban areas worldwide are growing and consequently cities are taking first stage in dealing with global challenges ranging from migration to climate change and from mobility to poverty. In response, cities need to increase their capacity to govern, to stimulate social innovation and enable transitions.

In many cases knowledge coproduction is seen as key to better govern urban problems. This takes shape in a variety of forms such as Urban Living Labs, policy experiments and research consortia. Interestingly, there are not only diverging views on what makes knowledge coproduction work, but also about what it is supposed to do, and when it is considered successful.

This study inquires into the role of urban knowledge coproduction and how it is performed in practice. Based on a study into the Nicis Knowledge for Strong Cities program this thesis addresses the question how researchers and officials in new collaborative research practices can establish relevant knowledge for the governance of urban problems?

KSC - Funding Transdisciplinary Urban Research

The KSC programme (2007-2014) hosted over forty research projects wherein more than 400 academic researchers, municipal officials and urban professionals collaborated in transdisciplinary consortia (Nicis, 2006). The creation of a research consortia was aimed at creating horizontal working relationship between municipal officials and researchers. To this end, Nicis required the consortium partners to commit to a shared responsibility for operationalising, interpreting and disseminating the research.

Conceptual framework

While a shared knowledge base is generally seen as indispensable to legitimize joint actions and decisions on complex urban issues, knowledge coproduction is considered all but easy to achieve. There is little consensus among policy analysts about the correct concepts to describe, analyse or evaluate it.

Collaborative research can for example acquire legitimacy by being scientifically rigorous and relevant to policymaking: by virtue of being both instrumental to the professor publishing his paper and to the alderman underpinning his policy proposal with facts. However, research can also attain legitimacy by restructuring the policy making environment: for example, by learning that a local issue with youngsters can be approached more productively as an educational problem instead of safety issue, requiring better schooling instead of more policing. This leads to involving teachers besides policeman in the research, but also to the adaption of norms for sound and valuable knowledge (the value of educational insights result is established differently than the value of crime rates).

The point here being that the norms and criteria for what is considered relevant knowledge coproduction can change under the influence of coproducing knowledge. The consequence of this is that to study how relevant knowledge is made, we cannot consider collaborative research practices, their environment, and the intermediaries between them to be pre-set and stable. So instead, I will suppose that they (re)structure each other while aiming to find better ways to address urban issues.

To study this dynamic I describe what is called a process of *problem structuring*: which facts and values are applied by the officials and researchers when they co-produce knowledge in a on an urban issue? The environment they work in is conceptualized in terms of *practices*. A practice is set of relations between objects, meanings and competencies which results from, and gives structure to everyday tasks. A policymaking practice for example can contain a laptop, a tables and an email account (material), can provide those involved with status, civic duty and a fixed income (meanings) and requires the ability to write emails about public issues (competencies). The related elements together can, for example, enable the city council to better allocate their budget.

To trace (and appreciate) researchers and officials as actors collaboratively structuring *problems* and simultaneously relating them to the (academic and governmental) *practices* in which they are embedded, I use the concept of **translation**. Translations result from tinkering with the facts and values that are enacted in a network of practices to construct a common problem approach. Successful translations are established by reassembling relations and thereby the interests involved in addressing a problem in a manner that provides the impetus to pool resources for collaboratively achieving them.

Research design

To answer the main research question “How do researchers and officials in institutionally embedded collaborative research practices establish relevant knowledge for the governance of urban problems?” (sets of) sub questions are addressed in separate chapters each addressing one or multiple case studies. Each case is based on desk research, interviews and observations in the Nicis KSC program management and the consortia Lifestyle, CBA and Labour migration. In addition, I had unrestricted access to the meetings and documents of the Nicis program management for the duration of the program.

Key insights from the case studies

1. Arriving at knowledge that is considered relevant for addressing contested urban problem usually requires changing at least a part of the policymaking environment - and thereby what this environment considers to be relevant.
2. To successfully learn to address urban problem together, a collaborative research practice must direct how actors involve the policymaking and academic practices they are embedded in. Which design for knowledge coproduction is needed to keep inquiry moving ahead depends on the relations between: the properties of the practices in which the officials and researchers are embedded; the quality of their working relations and the structure of the problem they are addressing. To make these relations work sometimes requires puzzling, at other times powering and often adapting the network of participates.
3. A final insight is that participating in knowledge coproduction can provide policymakers (and researchers) with a strategic position in the policy field. By strategically organizing the puzzling and the powering, knowledge coproduction that was meant to be instrumental to policymaking can come to govern the policymaking. A phenomenon known from Knowledge Governance: a specific form of (reflexive) governance that can enable urban governance networks to find new, preferred ways for addressing complex urban issues.

Conclusions

From these insights I conclude that researchers and officials in collaborative research practices can establish relevant knowledge for the governance of urban problems by:

- a. ...*acknowledging* that knowledge practices that are set up for better addressing urban issues, requires knowledge development and the co-concurrent restructuring of the governing practices in which they are embedded.

- b. ...*designing* the knowledge practice so that it allows actors to draw on their home practices to find a perspective on the real-world problem which (a.) matches established criteria for relevance (transactional) or (b.) provides an alternative path to realize second order interests that could otherwise not be attained (transformational).
- c. *establishing* rules and a planning to shape the collaboration so that it can be adapted to changing requirements in the institutional environment.
- d. *shaping* a coalition which hosts a set of home practices that acknowledge they are mutually dependent to deal with the substantive problem and – to be successful – are willing to adapt their conception of what constitutes relevant knowledge and how it may be attained.
- e. *agreeing* on a method for dealing with power that helps to highlight and acknowledge its role in every stage of the collaboration and allows the partners to orchestrate its influence - vis-à-vis puzzling.

Practical relevance

Actions which a funder can take to better orchestrate and enable the co-production of knowledge:

- i. Require that partners in a proposed new knowledge practice establish and explicate at the outset that current practices for addressing the issue at hand do not enable them to realize their interests.
- ii. Fund or provide for a third party to (i.) design and secure the conditions needed for successful knowledge coproduction and (ii.) to organize a reflexive, participative method for evaluating the results.
- iii. Demand that the partners involve persons that have the will, capacity, and formal mandate to influence the means and the ends involved in the governance of the urban issue they coproduce knowledge on.

Scientific contribution

- From representation to performance: Studies on inter- and transdisciplinary research tend to focus on ‘what ought to be’. In this study I described ‘what is actually done’. This shows there is quite a gap between how policymakers represent their relationship with research and how it is performed by them in practice. The former centres on boundaries and instrumentality and the latter highlights pragmatically and reflexify puzzling and powering to get ahead. The difference between the representation and the performance is useful for future research into knowledge coproduction

- Turn to problematization: In trying to capture what makes a knowledge coproduction succeed, scholars have established three issues that the concepts and research design of my study can help overcome: (1.) models on knowledge transfer have fundamental shortcomings for understanding knowledge sharing between multiple practices; (2.) sharing and developing knowledge within and between governance settings is either understood as rationally or politically informed while they are known in practice to be both simultaneously; (3.) in analysing the knowledge development in shaping transitions the role of power is often, needlessly, and regrettable left out.
- Knowledge Governance: The case studies all show instances where restructuring problems is deliberately aimed at (re-)structuring the relations within and between the institutional practices they are embedded in. It is this ability, strategically enacted by officials, which shows that practices for knowledge coproduction can engage in Knowledge Governance. This finding means that a knowledge practice can deliberately change the traits of the network it is embedded in. An insight which is at odds with the established view which states that the way knowledge is moved between policy making practices is determined by the characteristics of the governance network.