Making Sense of Information and Evidence for Co-creation

22.03.2021

What kinds of information can be deployed to substantiate claims for the value of co-creation? The question is an immediate and intense one for the CoSIE project.

The consortium comprises 24 partners who are variously public authorities, NGOs, universities and businesses, in 10 countries. The partners all work with multiple stakeholders at local and regional level. These include governmental authorities and agencies, community groups, membership organisations, educators, enterprises and many others. The project is guided by an external advisory group and, last but not least, monitored by the European Commission with the help of appointed experts. It is hardly surprising that with so many interlocutors, notions of what constitutes good information and reliable evidence are not fully shared, and may even be in conflict.

CoSIE partners working at local level with communities emphasize the power of authentic accounts of lived experience. A public health agency partner, in contrast, is used to demanding scientific evidence of efficacy. The idea of stories as 'narrative intervention' is vividly described in the blog post by Dr. Sandra Geelhoed Yet as she also notes, public administrations and most organisations work with pre-defined plans and targets. An advisor warned that stories may be seen as little more than 'nice embellishments'. Monitors remind CoSIE of a need for 'measured' outputs, outcomes and impacts. It can feel like the project faces a cacophony of demands and assertions about information and evidence from within and without.

As a provocation, this blog calls attention to the ideas of the anthropologist Mary Douglas who became famous in the mid-20th Century for pioneering insights into cultural meanings of

dirt and purity. She went on to develop a schema of socio-cultural variation observed in domains as diverse as organisational change, economic development, climatology, and human conflict. Her Grid & Group Cultural Theory is interesting to us because of the way it has been adapted to public services. One of the most prominent and widely cited examples is Christopher Hood's book the **Art of the State** (1998) in which he applied Douglas's ideas to contradictory recipes for the improvement of public management.

Grid & Group Cultural Theory (Douglas, 1970; 1992; 2005) proposes two basic forms of social organization. 'Grid' refers to conformity to external regulation while 'group' denotes membership attachment and collective norms. Putting them together produces a cultural map in the form of a two by two matrix, with four possible 'cultural biases', as illustrated in Figure 1.

The strong grid and strong group combination (upper right) is termed **Hierarchist**, with well understood rules and widely respected collective norms. In public services, its solutions typically lie in bureaucratic framing of problems and detailed planning of action. The antithesis (lower left) is the **Individualist** way where grid and group are both weak. Problems are framed as amenable to individual calculation and solutions most likely to be found in market transactions. When grid is strong and group weak (upper left) the result is **Fatalist**. Distrust is widespread, cooperation rejected, and apathy the norm. The *Egalitarian* means weak grid and strong group. Douglas originally emphasised its internal cohesiveness and external boundaries. In Hood's interpretation, **Egalitarian** is characterised by co-operation, participative decision making and local empowerment. Co-creation thus fits very comfortably into the **Egalitarian** quadrant of the Grid & Group space.

Figure 1: Grid-& Group generic cultural model
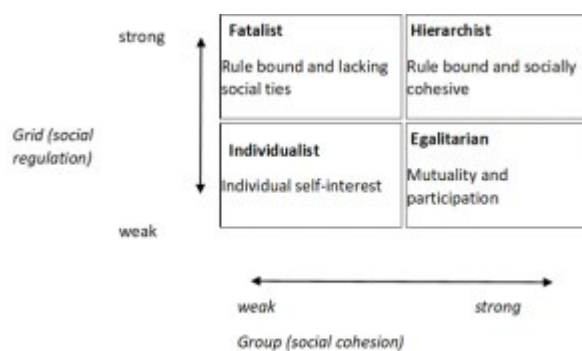
This generic Grid and Group Framework can be elaborated to consider stances towards information and evidence. In the upper part of the matrix, the **Fatalist** way implies public services organised according to professional or administrative convenience, keeping people who use them in a state of dependence where collective action is futile. Information can only ever be made sense of in hindsight so collecting and processing it seem pointless. **Fatalism**, Hood notes, is quite common in public services but rarely acknowledged. In advocacy for co-creation, it is evoked as an outdated, paternalistic 'doing to' stance. The **Hierarchist** is rule-bound with strong collective norms. It is extremely tenacious with many variants in the organisation of public services. Characterised by extensive classification, its most typical information manifestation is Key Performance Indicators and similar. Definitions of reality articulated by people who use services are likely to be secondary to those defined by experts.

Turning to the lower parts of the matrix, the **Individualist** relates to choice and competition. In information terms, this is likely to imply private sector discourses and associated techniques such as customer relationship management. In the **egalitarian** quadrant, as in co-creation, citizens who use services and workers who produce them become jointly responsible for decision-making and delivering outcomes. Because local level collective relationships matter so much, information is highly entangled in its context. From a community development perspective, this generates "knowledge-in-action based on practical experience" (Ledwith 2007). Storytelling is one of the most important tools for hearing what matters to people Cottam (2018). Storytelling curated in digital form and mobilised for change is a key contribution of CoSIE.

Grid & Group is a way of framing the dynamics of disagreement – often implicit – between 'cultural biases'. In complex, multi-agency pubic service environments, all biases are likely to be present and all have reasonable questions to ask from within their own cultural frame (Cornford et al. 2018). Although co-creation has many powerful advocates and currently appears to have achieved the status of orthodoxy in public policy, viewing it through the lens of Grid &Group reminds us that solutions are provisional and contested. In order to further advance co-creation in public services and rebut objections, it is not sufficient for advocates to share only forms of information and evidence that meet the preferences of their own cultural bias. They must also be able to enter into conversation with other worldviews that favour individual choice, hierarchical rules, or chance outcomes. Cultural biases can never agree but, as argued in an article co-authored by Douglas towards the end of her life, there is "something to be harnessed through constructive communication" (Verweij et al., 2006, p. 821).

Writer: Sue Baines, Manchester Metropolitan University

References:

Cottam, H. (2018) *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State*. Hachette, UK: Virago Press

Cornford, J, Baines, S and Wilson, R (2018) Network governance as a structure of conversations. In: *Symposium on Implementing Collaborative Governance*, University of Palermo https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/69324/

Douglas, M. (1970). *Natural Symbols*, New York, Routledge.

Douglas, M. (1992). *Risk and Blame,* London: Routledge.

Douglas, M. (2005). A history of grid and group cultural theory, manuscript available from http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/cyber/douglas1.pdf

Hood, C. (1998) *The Art of the State: Culture, Rhetoric and Public Management*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Ledwith, M (2007, updated 2019). Reclaiming the radical agenda: a critical approach to community development, *Concept*, 17:2 pp. 8-12. Reproduced in 'The encyclopaedia of pedagogy and informal education' https://infed.org/mobi/reclaiming-the-radical-agenda-a-critical-approach-to-community-development/

Verweij, M., Douglas, M., Ellis, R., Engel, C., Hendriks, F., Lohmann, S., Ney, S., Rayner, S., & Thompson. M. (2006). Clumsy solutions for a complex world: The case of climate change. *Public Administration 84*(4), 817–43.

The ideas in this blog are further developed in a journal article: Baines, S. Bull, M, Antcliff, V and Martin, L (2021). 'Good stories get lost in bureaucracy!' Cultural biases and information for co-production. *Public Money & Management*