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Coproduction with Service Users in Adult Social Work: A Study of Service Users' and Social Workers' Experiences in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Involving service users, in the delivery of health and social care, is a focal point in social policy discourse. Coproduction has become synonymous with anti-oppressive practice and service user empowerment. This article reports on a qualitative study carried out in Northern Ireland which explored service user involvement in adult social care practice and policy development. Semi-structured interviews were completed with service users ($n = 6$) and social workers ($n = 7$); thematic analysis was applied to the resultant data. The study was coproduced with service users who informed the research design and were actively involved throughout each phase of the study. Findings suggest that service users are motivated to participate in coproduction and can feel valued in these roles, but meaningful coproduction is a challenge in the current practice environment. Close working relationships, with clear and consistent communication are difficult to maintain amid the current trend of bureaucratisation in our profession. Findings point towards the need for a service-user/social worker alliance which can challenge problematic organisational cultures. Remuneration for service users, engaged in coproduction, is encouraged, alongside organisational recognition of the time and resource necessary for effective coproduction. A procedural and ethical framework for coproduction practices would also be timely.

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Introduction

This study report uses the term 'coproduction' as it appears to be the most widely used term at present; in relation to the involvement of service users in social work education (Stanley and Webber, 2022); in relation to policy development (Duffy *et al.*, 2022) and in relation to conducting research with service users and patients (Hickey, 2018). However one decides to label and define it, it is clearly important to the future of our profession, with a raft of policy stakeholders declaring their support (Bradley, 2015; WHO, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2018).

Ideas around the use and value of coproduction have re-emerged, now, at a time of deepening crisis in health and social care provision. There is increasing pressure on policy makers to identify solutions to long-standing problems. More specifically: inefficient and inflexible services and reactive, crisis-led working practices. 'Power to People' (DOH NI, 2017), a review of adult social care in Northern Ireland, delivered strong messages about the state of social care, raising concerns about a system that has become unfit for purpose and unsustainable. Recommendations include supporting the growth of collaborative models of service user involvement as a way of bringing about radical change. The authors were unequivocal in their conviction that radical reform was needed. Whilst Duffy *et al.* (2015) suggested that policy developments have supported a growth in inclusive practice and services, the current authors are inclined to agree with Heenan and Dayan (2019): Northern Ireland has had an unusually high number of reviews and policy documents with little evidence of any real change happening as a result. Raineri and Calcaterra (2018, p. 137) describe social work as "accompanying people where they want to go". We would argue that should service users be given a meaningful role in organising services, our overly bureaucratic services would be reshaped around people's needs.

The arrival and development of coproduction ideas in Northern Ireland can be tracked with reference to policy publications. In 2005, the Bamford Review (DHSSPS, 2005) called for coproduction in operational and strategic decision making for whole service delivery in health and social care. In 2007, the term Personal Public Involvement (PPI) emerged (DHSSPS, 2007); this describes 'more than consulting and informing' (p. 28) Useful PPI should feature "engagement, active participation and partnership-working" (DHSSPS, 2012, p. 21). The impetus for providers to involve non-staff is mandated by The Health and Social Care Reform Act (NI) (2009). This

placed a statutory duty on organisations to involve and consult service users in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services. In addition, the Donaldson Review (Donaldson *et al.*, 2014) emphasised the importance of supporting participation across systems. Following on from this, the Bengoa Report (DHSSPS, 2016, p. 21) put forward an "unassailable case for change" proposing more meaningful engagement with the public.

There is a consensus that coproduction was conceptualised, formally at least, in the works of Ostrom *et al.* (1978) who advanced ideas of citizen participation in public services. Those grounding principles of power-sharing, equality, collaborative working, networking and capacity building, remain fundamental (Heaton *et al.*, 2016). Although later attempts were made to define the concept (Ostrom, 1996), a universal definition has yet to be reached (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). The term itself is fairly vague and is often used interchangeably with participation, engagement, involvement and partnership (Barber *et al.*, 2011). In addition, it is not clear what activities should be considered as coproduction in health and social care (Filipe *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2020). Ewert and Evers (2014, p. 427) describe it is a "fragmented set of activities, expectations and rationales". Bussu and Tullia Galanti (2018, p. 347) describe it as a "fuzzy" concept, Bovaird (2007, p. 847) suggests that there are different "forms" of coproduction. Notably, Masterson *et al.* (2022) suggest that these debates are less important than applying the underlying principles and values. Beresford (2019a, p. 41) views it as vehicle for facilitating power-sharing, a type of "participatory democracy", a powerful means of enabling people and communities to access social rights and challenge the status quo. Its meaning has evolved, in academic literature, and the diversity and intrinsic flexibility that this suggests is actually a positive characteristic (Kvarnström *et al.*, 2013; Durose *et al.*, 2017) in these, the formative years, of an initiative which has grabbed the imagination of many in social work.

Coproduction can be done well, or badly, and guidance in avoiding the latter has yet to be established. This is the core of the rationale for this study. We have had an emphasis on inclusion, social justice and anti-oppressive practice in social work education (Levin, 2004) for four decades now. The assimilation of service users' perspectives and experiences is considered an essential part of the student experience (Chiapparini, 2016; Laging and Heidenreich, 2019). The proactive involvement of service users in the design and delivery of teaching programs is a specification of the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Loakimidis and Sookraj, 2021). Coproduction, in some form, is embedded in the education of new social workers.

Beyond the field of social work education, we have also had service user involvement in service delivery and in research (Beresford, 2010). These efforts have been met with much acclaim (Beresford, 2019b). However, across the spectrum of coproduction, both locally and more

globally, there is a lack of clarity about what best practice is. This can lead to ambiguity in the application of core values and principles. Steen et al. (2018) offer a discussion around the difficulties of creating genuine equality and power sharing. For example, there is ambiguity around the remuneration of service users, but there should not be (Levin, 2004; Turner and Beresford, 2005). Whilst it is viewed as an important part of valuing the efforts of service users (Speed *et al.*, 2012) it is also viewed as problematic because it can be difficult to organise.

Remuneration is one of several challenges (Boyle and Harris, 2009; Beresford *et al.*, 2021). We hoped to contribute towards an understanding of best practice by offering insights into the experience of social workers and service users who are engaged in collaborative activities. We explored the enabling factors and the specific challenges that each group faces. Key findings of the study are presented, alongside discussion of implications and recommendations for the continuation of coproduction across all areas of social work practice.

Method

Coproduction in study design and management

The study was designed with a research advisory group, consisting of four service users, a social worker and lead researcher. The principles of coproduction were applied to the study design, using Reason and Bradbury's (2008) Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. PAR refers to a type of collaborative inquiry concerned with advancing emancipatory goals, shifting power and democratising research processes (Jacobs, 2018). As well as challenging traditional hierarchies (Pinfold *et al.*, 2015), coproduction adds a level of quality assurance and rigour (Hickey, 2018). We engaged with ideas and guidance from INVOLVE (2018) on making the process meaningful. Based on this, we began with support and training for the service user group, to enhance their knowledge base and increase their capacity to contribute. The group made key decisions about the project, relating to participant recruitment, ethical review and the conduct of interviews. One member of the group undertook specialist software training and contributed fully to the data analysis phase of the study.

Participants and sampling

Social workers ($n = 7$) and service users ($n = 6$) were recruited to the study via purposive sampling. Social workers who were known to have involvement in co-production activities were asked to take part.

Snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) was deployed to extend the recruitment of social workers further. In keeping with this recruitment strategy, social workers who were recruited to the study referred service users they had worked with on coproduction activities. Social workers sought permission from potential service user participants, before passing on their details to the research team. All participants were provided with participant information sheets. Accessible versions of all documentation were produced and provided to participants as required.

Participating service users were in receipt of adult social care services at the time of the study. Three attended day care facilities. Three received social work support from one or more of: mental health services, hospital outreach, older people community services. The six service users, who were interviewed, were either involved in workforce training or advocacy groups. Of the six service users, four were women and two were men. All lived within the geographical area of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data on the views and experiences of study participants. This offered an opportunity to build rapport and support people to feel comfortable in sharing their lived experience (Galletta, 2013). The interview schedule included a range of open questions, based on themes identified in the literature review (Burns and McGinn, 2019) completed before embarking on the project. The first author conducted all interviews. Interviews averaged 88 min in duration. One service user required support with communication during the interview, symbols and pictures were used to aid communication. More time was allowed for the completion of this interview. Interviews were audio recorded and results were transcribed immediately after the interview had taken place. The BHSCT data governance procedures were applied to the management of data.

Analysis

Data were systematically organised and synthesised into key themes, according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2014). The qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO, was used to develop a coding tree. Areas of interest were identified within the data as per guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Diagrams were used to organise codes and establish relationships, which were then translated into headings. This was undertaken as a collaborative process, involving the lead researcher and one member of the advisory group. The data

were cleaned of confidential information before embarking on the task of analysing it.

Ethical considerations

Approval for the study was granted by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and ethical permission was granted by the Research Ethics Board of the School of Applied Social and Policy Studies at Ulster University, Belfast. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were provided with full written details about the aim and purpose of the study prior to interviews taking place. Documents were produced in accessible formats. Verbal and written consent was obtained before the interviews took place. An opportunity was provided for verbal discussion about what was involved before providing consent and scheduling an interview. All participants were advised that they could withdraw from the study and interview at any time. Interviews were recorded and deleted immediately after transcription. As this was a small study carried out with a relatively small population involved in coproduction, it was particularly important to ensure that participants could not be identified. Therefore, reported findings do not contain any information that could identify an individual who took part in the study.

Study limitations

This was a small scale study from one region in the UK and Ireland; the generalisability of findings should be considered. The service users who agreed to take part in the study were all engaged, or recently engaged in co-production activities. It is possible that service users who had more negative experiences of co-production were likely to have dropped out of these activities, and this precluded their recruitment to the study. In response to this potential sampling bias, inclusion of an interview question about the challenges of co-production invited more critical thinking around the subject and both positive and negative comments.

Findings

Relationships

Service users spoke about relationships with individual social workers. The importance of having a trusting relationship built over time with a social worker who was open, honest and regarded them as equals was emphasised. A service user who provided an emotive account, about a

personal crisis, described part of her journey towards co-production work:

> She [social worker] just listened and helped me decide things, that was all, she just cared. I ended up getting through it, we just had a good relationship from the very start. I've gone from that to doing everything going, I even speak at conferences, I never thought I would be able to do that. (SU5)

This view was shared by social workers, who unequivocally emphasised the importance and value of building relationships with service users. However, without exception, all social workers expressed concern about a lack of time and resources to spend with service users on coproduction activities. They discussed high volumes of administrative and paperwork and reflected openly about the pressures and demands they faced daily. Whilst, this was not directly related to the aide memoire of questions/discussion prompts, it was raised in each social work interview. This has reduced their capacity to build relationships and support service users in becoming involved:

> For me, as a social worker, it was fitting it all in. I don't have enough time to do all that is required of me. I can't afford to be out of the office for a morning. Involving service users, feels like an add-on, a very luxurious add-on. I feel very strongly that it should be an integral part of what we do, I am a social worker, it is my job. (SW1)

The social workers described practice that was increasingly process driven, dominated by form filling and tick box exercises. They were clear about the impact that this had on the relational aspects of their work, and had concerns about the negative impact on their own morale:

> I feel that this damages my morale as a social worker, I feel frustrated, because I'm not getting the opportunities to work in this way all the time, I feel that I don't know enough to take this approach forward, I am always dipping in and out. We are not working the way we should be; it is not social work, it is a managerial tick box exercise. (SW5)

Also, in managing relationships, some social workers experienced situations where boundaries had become 'blurred' resulting in 'competing agendas'. They described tension; linked to a lack of clarity around roles and poor management of service user expectations.

> I think that it is hard to strike a balance between being friendly and building relationships within a professional domain. I have had some boundary issues arise, when it feels more like a friendship to the other person [service user] as opposed to a professional relationship. Individuals can have their own point of view, but it isn't the point of view of other service users then different agendas have come into play. It can be hard to challenge, because you don't want to cause offence. (SW11)

When this was explored further with this social worker it could be seen that the problem was linked to over-dependence on just a few service users:

> Sometimes the same group of people get involved and they are involved in lots of things, it can be only a few people, that is my experience and what happens is, you get the same people telling their story and there is not a range of perspectives and may be some people who would like to be involved, just don't get involved. (SW11)

Inclusive practice

The importance of relationships based on respect and equality in coproduction work was arguably the strongest take-home message from the data. We also identified a theme we termed 'inclusive practice' which pulls together several closely linked discussions. It was evident that all participants interviewed enjoyed being involved in co-production. Some more than others, but all had some positive experiences to share. Service users emphasised the importance of feeling validated and valued by social workers.

A significant part of feeling valued for service users was about being involved in work that they regarded as meaningful, this was associated with shared decision-making, the presence of good support, encouragement, recognition and contributing to change. For example:

> It [coproduction] was just such a different experience, I felt like an anonymous kind of person without hope before, but the support was always there, we had space and time, I felt like I was growing as a person, developing myself, doing things that I never thought I would be able to do, it felt like we were doing something really quite worthwhile, for me it was very satisfying. (SU6)

The importance of meaningful involvement and potential for 'tokenism' was raised by social workers at several junctures. They described a lack of insight into the power imbalance that service users contended with. In relation to service user advocacy groups, one social worker pointed out:

> I think there can be more of a consumer mind-set, where people are just asked what they think about a service, they aren't really able to change anything and there isn't much of a focus on rights, there is a power imbalance, people don't want to risk losing a service if they challenge it or ask for it to be improved, they are grateful and in need of support and they maybe don't feel comfortable saying things. (SW10)

One social worker included the lack of remuneration to service users as an example of tokenistic practice. Whilst none of the service users mentioned how or if they were paid for their contributions, one of social worker pointed out:

> I really do think if we are asking people to give their time then they should be properly paid like everyone else. (SW1)

Accessibility and communication practices

In relation to communication practices, there were some negative comments. Some service users also used the term 'tokenistic' to describe such issues as: receiving last minute invitations, late arrival of information prior to meetings, lack of support and direction. One service user who had been involved in coproduction activities for many years commented:

> It's hard to get information when you ask for it, you just turn up and you go, and you don't know if anybody has even listened to what you've said or if your input is valued or not. Attitudes of people who are organising it matters, some people just treat it like a job and don't have a personal aspect. It almost seems as if some of them are ticking a box to say that they have done it. (SU1)

Concerns were expressed by service users with specific communication needs about practices in service user advocacy groups. They described being subjected to poor facilitation practices and receiving inadequate support before, during and after meetings. Inadequate preparation time or lack of support to prepare made it difficult to contribute at meetings. Information shared was not always in an accessible format and it could be complex and difficult to understand. In addition, the pace of discussions and the often complex language used during meetings made it difficult to participate:

> If everyone is talking fast in a big group, I can't understand what they are saying. It makes me feel a bit left out. (SU4)

Social workers shared these concerns, they described what appears to be a failure to tune-in to service users. They described an 'ad-hoc' approach, a lack of structured induction, training or opportunities for skills development. Support for service users in navigating the complex organisational structures and processes was a central concern. One social worker felt that there was a lack of insight into this, on the professional side:

> Sometimes service users are just expected to know how we do things, and that is just not right. How can they know how things are done? We go through years of training, and it is still sometimes a struggle for us. I think we might be excluding loads of people because it is so difficult to understand. (SW2)

Whilst, accessibility issues mainly related to communication practices, for some service user's physical accessibility was their greatest challenge. Some relied on staff members to transport them. When this option was

not available, they faced difficulties with public transport in terms of support needs, cost and availability. For those with access to their own transport, the physical accessibility of buildings and suitable parking were raised as a barrier to their involvement.

> I need help to get to places, transport is a big issue for us. The cost is too much as well, I can't afford that, the staff paid it a few times and that helped, people need it paid, they need travel expenses paid for them to get to places. (SU3)

Discussion

A pressurised environment

The most concerning finding from this study is how problematic the current social work practice environment is. This casts a shadow over the future of coproduction and service-user-centred work more generally. Concerns about high caseloads, excessive administrative work and bureaucratic processes are far from new. Turbett (2014) argued that social work has evolved into an administrative profession. Pascoe *et al.* (2023) state similar concerns: social workers do not have the time to engage directly with people like they used to. Considering current findings, we would agree, our profession is under threat. At the time of writing, the bureaucratisation of social work has arguably become a more acute problem in Ireland and the UK; and where bureaucratic social work rules, tokenistic coproduction efforts (Beresford, 2019b) seem almost inevitable.

In their early work, Beresford and Croft, present us with two distinct models for involvement, the 'democratic model' and 'consumerist model' (Beresford and Croft, 1993, p. 281) with the latter considered to have increasingly dominated practice. Goossen and Austin (2017) point out that consumer-style coproduction will not bring about meaningful change. Brosnan (2012) examined power dynamics in coproduction and found that even though service users and workers may perceive their contributions to be worthwhile, it is likely to be an illusion, if service users do not actually have real power, if their insight and ability are not genuinely accepted as equal to professionals.

This study findings point to possibilities for challenging power structures and centralised decision making, but the authors are sceptical this can be achieved within existing managerialist approaches in social work. These approaches appear to be in the ascension (Madden and Speed, 2017). Process driven practice undermines service user empowerment (Ocloo and Matthews, 2016) and social workers in this study have offered an insight into how this affects coproduction efforts on the ground

with reference to their time, available resources and the general dissatisfaction within their profession.

Good relationships based on good communication

Our findings underline the importance of relationships in coproduction and the threat to relationship-based practice more generally. Relationships were key in supporting service users to feel valued and it was apparent that positive experiences of coproduction depended on how valued service users felt in their roles. This accords with findings from prior studies (Neech *et al.*, 2018).

We would draw readers' attention to findings relating to communication. The ad-hoc approach to communication and absence of key supports such as induction and targeted training, which this study participants describe, was also reported by Rooney *et al.* (2016). We would also link this finding to the fact service users end their participation when they feel ill-prepared and overwhelmed for an activity (as reported in the systematic review by Brett *et al.*, 2014). It can be linked also to the issue of service user exclusion in coproduction (Ward *et al.*, 2016). People with particular needs and challenges can easily be overlooked; only with considered communication, ideally based on a close working relationship with social workers, can individual needs be accommodated. Encouragingly there was evidence in this study that, in some cases at least, good relationships and quality communication existed. MacSporran (2015) also explored this issue and noted the critical role of support staff for people who may not have otherwise been able to participate.

Implications for further research

Fox (2022) and Hatton (2017) observed that although service user involvement in social work education is largely regarded as valuable, insights into outcomes for service users, or the work they were involved in are missing. This study report develops our understanding of the workings of coproduction, and an insight into how it is experienced. Lakhani *et al.*(2018) described the need for research into the effectiveness, or usefulness, of coproduction for service users and the quality of social work delivery. On reflection, the current authors concur. This study, bound to a solely qualitative method, could not provide any insight into outcomes for service users who have been involved in coproduction, or outcomes for service users using programmes developed or governed using coproduction. Subsequent research, better resourced, might deploy methods for the investigating the efficacy of coproduction

in terms of service-user outcomes. This would be a challenge but guidance for evaluating complex interventions could be enlisted: Campbell *et al.* (2007), Craig *et al.* (2008), Datta and Petticrew (2013) and Coly and Parry (2017).

Implications for policy and practice

We should acknowledge the argument that, currently, opportunities for coproduction are quite limited. Schön (2016, p. 214) suggested that projects are often developed on an 'ad-hoc' basis, with limited understanding of the out-workings. The importance of service users and social workers working together is a concept that may be undervalued in the current environment. The implication for practice is clear, social workers and service users need to come together as allies to challenge, oppressive systems and overwhelming organisational structures (Baldwin and Sadd, 2006). McLaughlin (2016, p. 2) argued that efforts to challenge damaging aspects of the status quo require 'strategic alliances' with service users. Davies *et al.* (2014, p. 37) suggested that the establishment of alliances that empower service users to make tangible changes and challenge existing power structures are the only way forward. Consensus around a practice guide for coproduction may be a logical next step towards such an alliance. We are not the first to suggest this (Anghel and Ramon, 2009; Farrow, 2014). Such a framework, built by service users and their social workers together, would embed coproduction in our profession, in a more solid way.

Although, the issue of renumeration was commented on by social workers, it was surprising that there was no mention of it from service users. The literature reflects inconsistencies and a range of problems around renumeration. The authors argue that remuneration proffers respect for service user contributions, but the bureaucracy around these payments can be very off-putting. Duffy and Hayes (2012) draw attention to duplicity in government policy: coproduction is encouraged, yet income earned from it is fraught with bureaucracy, and tax implications, despite the diminutive nature of payments made. The authors argue that a policy adjustment is necessary to allow service users to be remunerated for their coproduction contributions without incurring extensive paperwork and tax liabilities.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from the study is the impact of organisational culture on coproduction. Social workers described a managerial and process driven culture that inhibited the development of inclusive practices. The study strengthens the idea that service users and social workers experience similar oppressions in the current climate. Both groups will benefit from establishing partnerships and strategies to challenge the issues. Service user involvement is legally mandated

and promoted widely at policy levels across the UK. But, if governments are serious about it, they need to take steps to address the bias towards social work paperwork and provide funding for coproduction, rather than simply adding more rhetoric through policy documents.

This study findings highlight the reality: building genuine and meaningful relationships takes time (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). Tanner *et al.* (2017) found that students who benefited from the involvement of service users in the classroom struggled to take the approach forward in practice. Organisations need to recognise that coproduction should be adequately resourced. Collaborations can be fragile, requiring financial and practical support (Driessens *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusion

Current findings support the need for more critical analysis of how coproduction is progressing in social work. Findings contribute to our understanding of both meaningful and tokenistic coproduction. This study report suggests modifications to coproduction practices, developments needed in policy, and it suggests further research. All of it needed to encourage the inclusion of service users on an equal basis to employed workers. Coproduction must become a resounding success for social work. The alternative is to remain mired in rhetoric and idealism, which only serves to reaffirm the inequalities and oppression we seek to challenge in social work. The bureaucratisation of social work and relegation of face-to-face relationship-building practice needs to cease if we are to bring initiatives like coproduction to fruition.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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