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Co-production

Paper presented by Teodor Mladenov at ENIL's online workshop 'A European Framework for Social Services of Excellence for Persons with Disabilities', 26 July 2023

The terms 'co-design' and 'co-decision making' are part of the more general concept of 'co-production'.

History: The term 'co-production' emerged within the US academia in the late 1970s. It has been introduced by the US political scientist Elinor Ostrom (the first woman to win a Nobel Prize in economics) to explore the workings of public services. In Britain, the term has been introduced in the 1990s by the British left-leaning think-tank the New Economic Foundation, and later by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), a government-funded NGO that provides information about good practices in social care and social work.

Independent Living movement: Importantly, the term 'co-production' and the associated ideas of citizen participation and user involvement have been embraced by people from the independent Living movement. Prominent examples include the work of Jim Elder-Woodward (2016) and John Evans. Jim Elder-Woodward has argued that the development of the Scottish SDS Act of 2013 has reflected a process of genuine co-production:

within Scotland, a close working relationship between the ILM and Scottish Government, both at the executive and political level, has developed. This was truly evident in the development and passing through the Scottish Parliament of the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act, where the ILM was closely involved from its very inception.' (Elder-Woodward, 2016: 261)

In a recent interview, John Evans told ENIL that he puts a lot of hope in co-production: <https://youtu.be/yxE92EJyoeI?t=2346> [00:39:08 – 00:41:21].

Definition: In my teaching on co-production at the University of Dundee, I have used a definition provided by the New Economics Foundation because of its emphasis on redistribution of power:

Co-production is a relationship where professionals and citizens share power to design, plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve quality of life for people and communities. (Slay and Penny, 2014: 7)

Co-production without redistribution of power is not only fake co-production but it is harmful because it legitimises the status quo. Of note here is that co-production is often framed as a matter of service quality improvement, but it is also (and, for me, primarily) a matter of social justice and human rights. Genuine co-production helps counteract professional power, fight epistemic injustice, and enhance the self-determination of people who use services.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) identifies the following components in co-production:

- co-design, including planning of services
- co-decision making in the allocation of resources
- co-delivery of services, including the role of volunteers in providing the service
- co-evaluation of the service. (SCIE, 2022: n.p.)

The earlier in the policy making process co-production happens, the more genuine it is. I teach my students that people who use services should be involved in the development of policies, and not only in the evaluation of their implementation. Another point to make is that co-production is more likely to happen when citizens have (at least some) control over the funding of services (as in 'direct payments'). So, timing and control over resources are crucial.

Issues to consider:

- **Tokenism:** A huge problem with co-production is when tokenistic participation is misrepresented as genuine co-production. Fake co-production tends to bolster the status quo much better than straightforward exclusion from participation.
- **Internal divisions:** Another problem is that the group of people who use services is not homogeneous. For example, there are problems when disabled people's parents represent disabled people. There are also internal ideological tensions within the disabled people's movement. The movement is also fragmented due to hierarchies of impairments and intersections between disability and class, gender, age, nationality, and ethnicity. As a result, some groups that are under-represented within the larger disabled people's movement (e.g., people with intellectual impairments, or disabled migrants) may experience continuing exclusion even in the case of a genuine co-production.
- **Soft power:** Professionals may also exercise soft forms of power to control co-production – such as non/provision of information, 'nudging', professional jargon, categorising/labelling, or subtle silencing.
- **Peer support:** A significant barrier to genuine co-production is lack of peer support for service users. Within the Independent Living movement, peer support is usually provided by Centres for Independent Living, so lack of CILs weakens co-production. In the words of Jim Elder-Woodward, one cannot empower the individual without an empowering collective – people who use services need to be enabled to work together and learn from each other (which includes learning how to cope with soft forms of professional power, or how to speak with people in positions of authority). Peer support also helps overcome 'internalised ableism'.
- **Resources:** Co-production is expensive. It costs money and it is time consuming. It should be properly funded and planned well in advance to happen.

SCIE has also produced a brief video on co-production that highlights some of these issues: <https://youtu.be/0jG4mLjaZBU>.

References

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