

2 Definitions of Co-Production and Co-Creation

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Introduction¹

In this chapter we discuss definitions of the two terms central to this book, co-production and co-creation. The term “co-production” finds its scholarly origins in the public sector, in the work of Ostrom and other economists who studied collaboration between public departments and citizens. “Co-creation”, by contrast, is a term from commercial business that has only fairly recently become popular in the public sector. To confuse matters, these are only two of various terms that seem to denote similar practices, such as collaborative governance, community involvement, participation and civic engagement (Voorberg et al., 2015). Part of the practical appeal of such terms is of course exactly in their fuzziness, in innate goodness (who can be against any of it?) combined with a supple application to diverse phenomena. In practice, they are used to cover a wide variety of phenomena.

Yet for academic purposes, it is useful to try and arrive at something more precise. The main reason for this is comparability. The opening chapter of this book noted the swift advance of research in these areas. However, there are also grounds to be less optimistic about the linearity of progress (Verschuere, Brandsen and Pestoff., 2012; Alford, 2014). The cumulative effect of past research still remains relatively weak. Although scholars have inspired each other, they have not been able to link their findings systematically and contribute to theory-building as effectively as they otherwise might.

The confusion has been heightened by the increasing multi-disciplinarity of the discussion. The research community studying these phenomena has over time become larger and more multi-disciplinary. One can now see sociologists, economists, political scientists, public administration, marketing and management researchers engaged in a joint discussion, which is in itself good. However, it has also made the original definitions of the terms less suitable and on some points less clear. What is straightforward from one discipline’s perspective is not so from another.

First, we will examine the commonalities and differences between co-creation and co-production. Next, we will demonstrate certain ambiguities, which point to underlying variation, which can be used to identify different

types of co-production and co-creation. On this basis, we will then construct a basic typology of six categories of citizen input.

A Plea for Stricter Definitions

There are three ways of understanding the relationship between the two terms:

- 1 They mean roughly the same and refer to any kind of citizen input in public services.
- 2 Co-creation is the more encompassing term, referring to all kinds of citizen inputs in services, whereas co-production has a more specific meaning.
- 3 Co-creation and co-production have distinct meanings, referring to different kinds of citizen input.

There is something to be said for all these interpretations. In practice the terms are often used interchangeably, in various sorts of ways. However, in the context of public services at least, co-creation is the newer and more slippery term, whereas co-production already has a longer tradition, in which a more definite meaning is beginning to crystallize. This meaning usually relates to the later stages of the production cycle, the design and/or implementation of a service.

Voorberg et al. (2015) go a step further and define more specific meanings for the two terms:

Some clarity can be provided by making a difference between three types of co-creation (. . .): (a) citizens as completer: involvement in services which refer to the transfer of implementing activities in favour of citizens that in the past have been carried out by government, (b) citizens as co-designer: involvement regarding the content and process of service delivery and (c) citizens as initiator: citizens that take up the initiative to formulate specific services. Furthermore, based on this distinction, we would like to reserve the term ‘co-creation’ for involvement of citizens in the (co)-initiator or co-design level. Co-production is being considered as the involvement of citizens in the (co-)implementation of public services.

(p. 15)

Although this is still fairly broad, such efforts to define tighter meanings are far preferable over letting it all hang out. One should distinguish between recognizing phenomena as important and accepting them as part of an academic definition. Of course, citizens deliver all sorts of inputs that impact upon the effectiveness of core services of an organization (Marschall, 2004). If people peep through their curtains at night and call the police when they

see signs of trouble, or when they request government services electronically, are they not effectively helping to deliver public services (Clarke, Brudney and Jang, 2013)? Yet expanding concepts to cover all these inputs make them less distinct and makes systematic research much harder—whereas our starting-point was that we should be heading in the opposite direction, given the state of the art of the research.

As Agarwal (2013) has noted, “would my printing a boarding pass at an airline kiosk or using the Internet to buy an airline ticket make me a co-producer in the transportation business? I hardly think so. However, in public service, beginning in public safety in the 1970s, we have taken a rather expansive view of the term” (p. 702). Whether such activities from citizens matter is not at issue here. Daily teeth-brushing helps the dentist do his work and ultimately saves public money. Sucking a lollipop does the reverse. Whether it is useful to cover it all under the label of co-production is another matter.

The purpose of stricter definitions is not to exclude (as in: this does not fall into the scope of our definition, so it is irrelevant to society). The point is to avoid comparisons between activities that are entirely dissimilar. Distinguishing co-production and co-creation as distinct categories of activity will help in making cleaner comparisons, allowing a deeper understanding of the social mechanisms that shape their internal dynamics and outcomes. Distinguishing between subcategories will help even more. Even where scholars disagree on the definition, positioning themselves systematically in relation to one another will lead to greater clarity. Through the discussion of definitions, we hope to contribute to developing shared points of reference.

The Similarities Between Co-Creation and Co-Production

So what distinguishes co-production and co-creation from other, similar terms? We argue that they share a few commonalities.

The first is that they constitute a direct part of the production process. In other words, they do not include all inputs by citizens that in some way affect the overall planning, design and delivery of a service, but focus on the direct input of citizens during the production phase. “Direct” here means that the input by a citizen affects the service individually provided to her or him (as an individual, family or community). This need not be restricted to face-to-face contacts. Indeed, some interesting developments in this area are based on the Internet (for example, guided online self-treatment in mental health care).

Furthermore, they both refer to collaboration between professionalized service providers in public agencies and citizens. Whether this refers to citizens individually or individually as well as collectively remains open, but the definition clearly does not refer to organizations.

Finally, both terms refer to active input by citizens in shaping services. This distinguishes them from passive clientelism or consumerism: it is not

enough simply to receive or use a product. The citizen can be a direct recipient of a service, but not necessarily so. For instance, the participation of family or community members on behalf of children or vulnerable people has been an oft-studied topic.

This excludes the research that focuses on inter-organizational collaboration, which Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) have referred to as “co-management” or “co-governance”.² It also excludes input from citizens that, although they affect the outcome of the service, require only a passive role (as in the patient helping to produce his vasectomy by virtue of lying on the operating table).

An interesting issue is whether evaluation should be considered part of co-production and co-creation. There is a growing number of examples of users assessing public services jointly with providers. On the one hand, one could argue that evaluation is part of the production cycle and that this amounts to an ex-post type of co-creation or co-production. On the other hand, it may involve different kinds of skills and activities, which is an argument for keeping it separate. This is an issue that requires clarification in future scholarship.

The Differences Between Co-Creation and Co-Production

But what is distinct about co-production and co-creation? If our unit of analysis is the effort of (groups of) citizens, then the best way of setting them apart is by defining the types of input of citizens they refer to. These can vary drastically in nature.

Some authors have argued that co-production is an inherent part of the delivery of certain services and therefore not a question of choice. This is more than saying that co-production is necessary for effective service delivery because producer and citizen inputs are interdependent; rather, that it is impossible to have a situation without co-production (Osborne and Strosch, 2013).

From a service-dominant approach, there is no way to avoid the coproduction of public services because it is an inalienable element of such services. The question thus is not how to ‘add-in’ coproduction to public services but rather how to manage and work with its implications for effective public service delivery.

(p. 146)

Yet even if co-production is inherent, citizens can design services with different degrees of active input (Porter, 2012).

If co-production is an inherent part of the production relationship, one could imagine situations where co-production is not freely given (Fledderus, Brandsen and Honingh, 2014). By extension, while co-production is to a large extent a subset of volunteering, it is not wholly so. It is possible

to coerce citizens to co-produce, even if it is counterintuitive. Consider the example of a high school class: students may not have chosen to be physically present, but they determine the nature of the lessons nonetheless, even if they freely choose to withhold their attention. Although learning is essential to an effective lesson (Porter, 2012), it is possible to design lessons in any number of ways. Pupils can sit back and listen to a talk, with learning a one-way street; the teacher can prepare questions and exercises to encourage interaction; or can actively engage students in designing the lesson, jointly choosing what to address and how to shape the interaction. In other words, the lessons have both an inherent and a chosen element. One can have the former without the latter.

There is a further possibility, which is that students sit on representative councils and discuss the general design of lessons with staff and managers at the strategic level—indeed, this may be more common than input in the design of specific lessons.

In this way, the distinction between co-creation and co-production can be specified. Co-production is generally associated with services citizens receive during the implementation phase of the production cycle, whereas co-creation concerns services at a strategic level. In other words, when citizens are involved in the general planning of a service—perhaps even initiating it—then this is co-creation, whereas if they shape the service during later phases of the cycle it is co-production. Input in the design of a service can be both individual or collective, depending on the level at which a service is addressed.

Let us illustrate these choices using the example of housing cooperatives (Brandsen and Helderma, 2012):

- If tenants actively collaborate in the maintenance or design of the housing, it is co-production. If they only passively receive what they pay for, it is not.
- If tenants initiate the constructing of their housing, or deliberate in a representative council discussing issues of maintenance and design, it is co-creation.
- If the cooperative collaborates with a local council, it is neither co-production nor co-creation. This has elsewhere been referred to as “co-management” (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006).
- If outsiders smash tenants’ windows and cars, they are helping to shape the residential experience of the latter; but they are not co-producing or co-creating.

Core and Complementary Tasks

It is possible that the co-production in question does not directly produce public services, but does contribute inputs to an organization that supports the production process indirectly. This is more than a theoretical possibility,

because various activities described in the co-production literature arguably do not relate directly to the organization’s core services, even if they undoubtedly contribute to them. When university alumni give a guest lecture as part of a regular course, they directly contribute to the teaching process. When they speak at a publicity event for a university’s programs, this ultimately contributes to the goals of the organization, but it is not a direct contribution to teaching. It does involve a joint process with the organization’s employees, but it is not part of the core (primary) process, which makes it co-production of a different sort.

Of course, the question what is the core process of an organization is open to different interpretations, which may shift over time. This cannot be determined a priori and should be defined on a case-by-case basis (and even where there is doubt, the discussion is in itself useful).

In other words, there is variation in the extent to which citizen inputs involve tasks that are part of the organization’s core services. This is a basis for distinguishing different types of co-production and co-creation.

Varieties of Co-Creation and Co-Production

This means that we have now identified two key dimensions that help to distinguish citizen inputs:

- The extent to which citizens are involved, not only in the implementation, but also in the design and initiation of a service. Co-production concerns the design and implementation of a service, whereas co-creation is about the initiation and/or strategic planning of a service.
- The proximity of the tasks that citizens perform to the core services of the organization. This cuts across both co-production and co-creation.

The combination of these dimensions then leads to six various potential types of co-creation/co-production, visualized in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Different Types of Co-Production and Co-Creation

	<i>Planning</i>	<i>Design and implementation</i>	<i>Implementation</i>
Complementary	Co-creation of a complementary service	Complementary co-production in service design and implementation	Complementary co-production in implementation
Core	Co-creation of a core service	Co-production in the design and implementation of core services	Co-production in the implementation of core services

Co-creation of a complementary service is a situation in which citizens are actively engaged in the strategic design and planning of a complementary task. Examples are parents taking the initiative to organize a sports competition between schools, or relatives suggesting excursions and Christmas entertainments for residents of elderly care homes. Again, these activities are undoubtedly necessary and important, but they do not directly contribute to the core activity of the organizations in question.

Co-creation of a core service occurs when citizens are actively engaged in the strategic design and planning of a core task. This happens, for instance when a depressed patient or group of patients are involved in the development of a coaching app or in defining a strategy to make better use of apps in treatments. Apps can be used as supportive devices in a treatment to report tasks and get some support with structuring daily life. If patients are involved in strategic choices about the use of apps, this is a clear example of co-creation of a core task, since apps support treatment and directly affect the work of the psychiatrist. Likewise, the general evaluation of such initiatives in service delivery could be seen as part of the co-creation process.

Complementary co-production in service design and implementation occurs when citizens are engaged in co-production, but in tasks that are complementary to the core process rather than part of it. This happens, for instance, when parents help plan and organize extra-curricular activities like school excursions or the design of a school garden. These activities are part of the professional organizations' mission, but they do not directly involve citizens in the core activities of teaching.

Complementary co-production in service implementation occurs when citizens are actively engaged in the implementation, but not the design, of a complementary task. Examples are students assisting the university in organizing welcome weeks or parents helping to prepare school plays: they are undoubtedly necessary and important, but they do not directly contribute to the core activity of teaching and they usually do not have the opportunity to design or redesign the events.

Co-production in the design and implementation of core services is a situation where citizens are directly involved in producing core services of an organization and are directly involved in both the design and implementation of the individual service provided to them. Examples are post-graduate training modules where entrants, together with instructors, define their own learning objectives and learning activities; participative building projects in which (future) tenants of a housing cooperative work with architects and builders in the design, construction and maintenance of their homes; or patients working with dietitians to modify their lifestyle.

Co-production in the implementation of core services occurs when citizens are actively engaged in the implementation, but not the design of an individual service that is at the core of the organization. For instance, as discussed earlier, co-production may be inherent to the production process ("inherent" meaning that active engagement by the client is essential

to its successful implementation), but institutionally designed so that citizens do not have direct influence on how it is designed in their individual case. Examples are children's education during which students follow strictly defined lessons, yet their input is still crucial to effective learning; or enforced services, such as mandatory employment reintegration. Alternatively, co-production may not be inherent, but deliberately included as part of the design.

Using clearer definitions of co-creation and co-production will contribute to the comparability of different studies and allow a better understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of co-production. Recognizing variety within these broad concepts and working towards consistent typologies will enhance the cumulative value of research in this area and allow scholars to collaborate more effectively.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is partly based on Brandsen & Honingh (2016).
- 2 The term "co-production" with reference to inter-organizational links appears to have originated in a different tradition of research and the terminological similarity appears to be accidental. As Bovaird and Loeffler (2015) point out, some scholars have merged the different approaches and used co-production as a more encompassing label.

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