What Do Voluntary Sector Studies Offer Research on Co-Production?

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Introduction

Co-production was introduced in the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s to describe the active involvement of service recipients in the service delivery process (e.g., Brown, 1978; Brudney and England, 1983; Gersuny and Rosengren, 1973; Ostrom et al., 1973; Parks et al., 1981; Whitaker, 1980). Although research on the topic seemed to languish in the late 1980s to the early 2000s, the concept of co-production has found new currency among researchers in public administration, particularly in the United Kingdom and Europe (Alford, 2009; Pestoff, Brandsen and Vesr- chuere, 2013). This research has considered questions such as, what are the costs and benefits of supplementing employees’ service-delivery activity with citizen effort, what types of co-production lead to better outcomes, and what motivates citizens to co-produce?

More recently researchers have turned their attention to voluntary sector organizations to consider how service users in these settings actively participate in the service delivery process (e.g., Benjamin and Campbell, 2015; Pestoff and Brandsen, 2008; Prentice, 2006; Vamstad, 2012). This literature has examined such questions as: Are voluntary sector organizations more able than government agencies to support citizen co-production? What are the risks of relying more extensively on the voluntary participation of service users to deliver services in these settings? What does co-production require of paid staff in voluntary organizations? With these organizations playing an increasingly central role in delivering public services, a treatment of co-production in the context of voluntary sector organizations is timely.

Accordingly, this chapter considers how the research from voluntary sector studies, which at this writing spans nearly half a century, can inform our understanding of co-production. We define co-production as the active role that service users can play in the service delivery process. This definition follows Brandsen and Honingh’s definition of co-production in this volume (chapter 2), as they state that co-production is citizens’ direct input into the production process that affects the services individually provided to them. We use the terms voluntary sector and voluntary sector studies to
refer to research about organizations that are neither for-profit nor public (government) agencies, including professional social service nonprofits and grassroots organizations with no paid staff. We reserve the term volunteer for individuals who are not direct service recipients or “co-producers” but who may assist in service delivery nonetheless.

We organize our discussion around three primary themes: motivation for co-production, capacity for co-production, and organizational conditions supporting co-production. Throughout our discussion we integrate recent research on co-production in the voluntary sector, and where appropriate reference other literature. We conclude with suggestions for further research.

**Volunteer Motivation and Co-Production**

Securing the voluntary participation of individuals to address common problems is a principal concern of nonprofit organizations. Without the benefit of funding through either taxation (government) or conventional market transactions (business), nonprofit organizations find themselves perpetually in need of generating resources to pursue their missions. One of these resources is voluntary labor contributed by citizens. In addition to the “time, talent, and treasure” people devote to participating on boards of directors of nonprofit organizations, often called “policy volunteering,” citizens volunteer their time to help nonprofits carry out their missions on the ground, through “service volunteering” activities, such as assisting clients or paid staff (Connors, 2012).

The largest repository of data on volunteering is the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), one-quarter of the U.S. civilian non-institutional population age 16 and over (24.9 percent) volunteered in the year ending in September 2015 (the most recent year for which data are available): About 62.6 million people did unpaid work (except for expenses) through or for an organization at least once between September 2014 and September 2015. Brudney (1990) estimates that between 70 and 80 percent of all volunteer effort goes to nonprofit organizations, and Hager and Brudney (2004a, 2004b) find through a survey of a nationally representative sample of charities that four in five nonprofit organizations use service volunteers. Although no one country can be representative of the volume and diversity of volunteering worldwide, the level of volunteering both in the United States and cross-nationally is substantial (United Nations Volunteers, 2015).

Given this large endowment of unpaid labor, the motivations of people to donate their time are a central issue and concern for practitioners and scholars in nonprofit organizations. How might these motivations relate to the willingness of those receiving services to take on greater responsibility voluntarily in producing the services they receive, or co-production? Empirical and conceptual research provide useful clues.
Seven surveys based on a nationally representative sample have been conducted on the motivations of volunteers in the United States (Brudney, 2016). Although, lamentably, the surveys may have become dated, the consistency of the responses of the volunteers across the surveys suggest that these motivations are enduring. Because an activity as complex as giving time may have many roots or motivations, volunteers could select multiple reasons for this activity; thus, the percentages in any one survey sum to more than 100 percent.

By far, the survey responses given most frequently by U.S. volunteers expressing their reasons for volunteering are: “doing something useful” and to “help other people,” stated by as many as 60–70 percent of volunteers, especially in the more recent national surveys. The next most common motivation of the volunteers pertains more centrally to the benefits that volunteers may receive through this activity: “enjoy doing volunteer work” or “interest in the activity or work,” stated by about 35–40 percent of volunteers. A sense of obligation is also present among a sizable group of volunteers: “Religious concerns” or a “sense of duty” command around 30 percent of volunteers. Similarly, having a “friend or relative who received service,” which may engender a sense of obligation, was a reason stated by 17 percent.

Although these surveys may activate biases in response, for example, toward social desirability and against revealing self-serving reasons for volunteering, relatively few of the volunteers across the seven surveys professed self-interested motivations that might be most germane to engaging citizens receiving services in co-production, such as “volunteer received service” (9–17%) and volunteering is a “learning experience” (8–16%).

On the conceptual level, Clary and colleagues (Clary and Snyder, 1991; Clary et al., 1998) have proposed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) to capture the motivations that may animate volunteers into action. Voluminous research has used or discussed the VFI (for a recent review see Ashhar, 2015). The VFI consists of six dimensions: The Values function expresses that the person is volunteering in order to express or act on important values, such as humanitarianism and helping the less fortunate. The Understanding function expresses that the volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world and/or exercise skills that are often unused. The Enhancement function provides that the individual is seeking to grow and develop psychologically through involvement in volunteering. The Career function proposes that the volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering. The Social function conceives that volunteering can allow a person to strengthen social relationships. Finally, the Protective function recognizes that the individual may use volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems.

Contemporary research adds nuance to these earlier findings. Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) propose that volunteering is undergoing a major
change in style from “collective” to “reflexive.” Yet, scholars continue to accept and use the Volunteer Functions Inventory to comprehend and assess volunteer motivations, although they find that these functions are related differentially to such factors as individual well-being, satisfaction with volunteering, and intention to continue volunteering (for example, Stukas et al. 2016). Again using the VFI to understand and classify volunteer motivations, Dunn, Chambers, and Hyde (2016) investigated the motivations for episodic volunteering across sectors (sport, tourism, events, health, and social welfare) and found a more complex set of functions served in this type of volunteering (more than 80 percent of the motives were classified according to the VFI functions, particularly enhancement, values, and social functions). Other research examines volunteering formally (through an organization) versus informally (alone); based on representative national samples of the Japanese public, Mitani (2014) found that while socioeconomic resources (education) were more strongly related to formal than to informal volunteering, subjective dispositions such as empathy and religious mind were essential facilitators of both kinds of volunteering. Research has also addressed the differences between volunteering on-line through electronic media versus offline in more traditional organizational settings in which the volunteer is physically present; Ihm (2017) reports that volunteering in one sphere can complement volunteering in the other sphere.

Research on co-production has also revealed diverse motivations for participation, although we should not expect these motivations to be identical to those of volunteers since co-producers benefit directly from the services they help to provide. According to van Eijk and Steen (2016, 29), “Despite many studies in the field, we know little about what drives individuals to engage in co-production.” They propose an integrative model to account for the willingness to engage in co-production consisting of three sets of factors: perceptions of the co-production task and the competency to contribute to the public service delivery process, individual characteristics, and self-interested and community-focused motivations. In earlier research to provide an understanding of “Why People Co-Produce,” these authors draw on the literatures of citizen participation, political efficacy, volunteerism, public service motivation, customer engagement, as well as co-production (van Eijk and Steen, 2014). Their review indicates that “while specific insights in citizens’ motivations for co-production is still limited” (p. 362), individual capacity, including human capital and social capital, and willingness, comprising both self-centered (egoistic) and community-oriented (pro-social) motivations, might help to explain citizens’ decisions to participate in co-production. Fledderus and Honingh (2016) found that participants in activation services are more motivated in general and have higher levels of trust and control, a finding they relate to the possibility of “creaming,” i.e., the selective participation of clients in co-production according to the strength of their intrinsic motivations.
Like van Eijk and Steen (2014, 2016), Alford (2002) conceives of eliciting co-production as a function of increasing citizens’ willingness and ability to contribute; he identifies the key motivators for co-production as sanctions, material rewards, intrinsic rewards, solidarity incentives, and normative appeals. In one study Alford (2002) observed that citizens receiving services are motivated by material, solidarity, and expressive incentives, a result confirmed by Pestoff (2008). But Alford also found that low-income service recipients in workforce development programs negotiate complex feelings of hopelessness and lack of confidence, which complicate their motivation. This finding is substantiated in a broad body of research in social psychology, anthropology, and sociology (e.g., Mauss, 1990/1950; Gouldner, 1960). Coupled with the literature on volunteer motivation, the co-production literature suggests that scholars might consider a more diverse mix of motivations for co-production, and how these motivations may vary depending on the extent to which service recipients volunteer and feel confident about their ability to engage in co-production.

**Capacity for Co-Production**

Dating back to the writings of de Tocqueville in the 1830s, observers of voluntary organizations have pointed out that citizens do not simply help solve common problems, but as Clemens (2006, 207) points out, in working to solve these problems individuals “become citizens”: they conceive of themselves in public ways and they learn skills needed to participate more effectively in public life. What does this understanding suggest for scholars of co-production? Although the voluntary sector literature has primarily focused on developing the citizenship capacity of volunteers, we extend this logic here to suggest that how direct service recipients are asked to co-produce has consequences not only for service outcomes but also for their capacity as citizens.

For example, nonprofit mental health clubhouses are organizations where individuals with mental illness work side by side, with paid staff to run the organization. The first clubhouse was started in the late 1940s and grew out of an effort by individuals with mental illness to provide a place of mutual support and an alternative to institutionalization. As these members work with staff to run the house (e.g., answer telephones, perform administrative tasks, help prepare meals, etc.), they also learn to develop common agendas, work through conflict, consider another’s viewpoints, deal with other people, and lead. This experience can in turn foster solidarity among a larger community and realization of a common cause. Such development can also help support norms of reciprocity that make future collective action possible and lead to greater engagement in political life, for example, voting (Putnam, 1993). In this respect voluntary organizations are not only alternative sites for co-producing publicly financed services, but also they function as “schools of co-production,” to adapt a phrase from de Tocqueville.
For their part, co-production scholars have called attention to the fact that citizens must learn to co-produce, and that not all citizens are equally equipped or prepared to do so (see Jacobsen and Eriksen, 2013 and Pretice, 2006). These researchers have also pointed to the importance of co-production for revitalizing democracy, but to our knowledge this research has not considered the development of service users as citizens, as a separate and important result, alongside desired policy outcomes. The voluntary sector literature suggests that citizenship development is an important outcome for those participating in these not for profit, non-governmental organizations. Although most attention by voluntary sector scholars has been given to the citizenship development of volunteers, some recent literature considers the citizenship outcome for those participating in services (see Karriem and Benjamin, 2016; Small, 2009). Examining these two distinct outcomes is also consistent with research on policy feedback, which has found a direct relationship between policy design and civic and political engagement by service recipients (see Bruch, Ferree and Soss, 2010; Mettler and Soss, 2004; Soss, 1996).

But the voluntary sector literature also suggests that enhanced capacity of citizens is not a foregone conclusion of participation. Three observations may be of particular interest for scholars of co-production. First, this literature indicates that voluntary organizations are more likely to cultivate these citizenship skills and attitudes when these organizations are less professionalized and less bureaucratic. In other words, voluntary organizations are more likely to cultivate these skills and attitudes when they provide more opportunities for participation, and when that participation comes with greater authority to make decisions (Clemens, 2006, 210). Second, this literature suggests that we cannot assume that more participation is better, that it leads to better outcomes, democratic values, and enhanced citizenship capacity. The literature contains numerous examples of voluntary organizations which have enhanced solidarity among citizens but used exclusionary practices that resulted in uncivil behavior (Berman, 1997). Finally, the voluntary sector literature shows that although participation can lead to the development of civic skills, individuals do not necessarily use the skills they have developed to participate in public life. For example, Eliasoph (1998) found that individuals participating in voluntary organizations avoided talking about politics, which led to more apathetic behavior. Brandsen and Helderman (2012) reported similar results in their study of housing cooperatives.

Because much of this discussion in voluntary sector studies has focused on volunteers, not necessarily on service users, the question for researchers of co-production is what kinds of lessons do service users learn in the service delivery process? What do they learn about their capacity and role not only as co-producers but also as citizens? And how does this learning change when service users participate to a greater or lesser degree or engage in some types of service related activities rather than others?
Conditions for Co-Production

The question of what conditions might support greater and more effective co-production on the part of those receiving services has been a central concern for scholars of co-production since the 1970s. In early research Ostrom and her colleagues found that decentralized service provision provided more opportunities for citizens to engage with municipal police, which resulted in enhanced neighborhood safety (Ostrom et al., 1973). In addition to this service arrangement, researchers have identified several other conditions that can affect co-production, including the attitudes and skills of professional staff, the size of the organization, and the accessibility of services (Bovaird and Loffler, 2012; Pestoff, 2012).

The voluntary sector literature also considers how organizational form/structure can constrain and/or facilitate participation among volunteers, members, and clients. As noted in the previous section, one of the principal findings of this literature is that the more professionalized and bureaucratic the organization, the less likely that the organization will engage in participatory practices with clients and the broader community. This literature identifies a number of reasons consistent with the findings in the co-production research, including staff resistance, lack of dedicated resources to support such efforts, and professional jargon (Benjamin in press).

Yet this literature also shows that even voluntary sector organizations that start out using participatory practices may eventually abandon them. In fields as diverse as domestic violence, community development, and community health care, studies have shown how difficult it is to maintain participatory practices in these organizations (e.g., see Hwang and Powell, 2009; Stoecker, 1997; Wies, 2008). Although several factors may lead to voluntary organizations abandoning more participatory practices, including Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy,” of particular interest to co-production scholars is the impact of government funding. If we are interested in the co-production of publicly financed services, which are increasingly delivered by voluntary organizations, how does such financing affect co-production in these organizations?

When nonprofits receive funding, particularly government funding, the organization must meet the attached accountability requirements. Studies have found that these requirements lead to organizational formalization and a reduction in responsiveness to service recipients and the community more broadly. For example, researchers have noted that client and community engagement becomes limited to advisory groups or boards of directors, which often have little influence on organizational decision making (Smith, 2012); other studies corroborate this finding (e.g., Hwang and Powell, 2006; Smith and Lipsky, 1993). Recent co-production research likewise supports these findings. For example, Vamstad (2012) found that in municipal agencies providing childcare, staff saw themselves as professional experts, and consequently engaged parents less in service delivery. In contrast, in
cooperatives providing the same service, the staff and parents worked side-by-side to deliver childcare.

We cannot take this conclusion for granted, however. Other research suggests that receipt of government funding does not inherently preclude more participatory practices in voluntary sector organizations. For example, Ospina and her colleagues (2002) found that despite funding requirements, nonprofits do find ways to engage clients and remain responsive to them. LeRoux (2009) determined that government funding was associated with more participatory practices in nonprofit human service organizations; more specifically, she reports that nonprofits receiving government funding were more likely to have clients participate in work groups compared to nonprofits that did not receive government funding. In her in-depth study of twelve human service organizations, eleven of which received government funding, Benjamin (in press) found that these organizations used a wide variety of strategies to reduce bureaucratic and professional authority and increase client participation in the service delivery process. These strategies included reducing rules, allowing clients to choose the staff person they worked with, using peer based learning strategies, and supporting staff to build more mutual relationships with participants.

For co-production researchers, this literature leads to the conclusion that we cannot paint government funding of voluntary organizations with a broad brush. For example, government contracts come with more specific requirements than grants, which may make it more difficult for voluntary organizations to have the flexibility they need to engage program and service participants (Salamon, 2002). Some government financing comes with explicit requirements that voluntary organizations demonstrate responsiveness and accountability to service recipients. At the same time, we need to understand government funding of these services in the larger nonprofit revenue context. For example, organizations that match public funds with private donations may find it easier to sustain greater service user engagement, compared to nonprofits that receive a majority of government funding. In part this is because individual donors usually do not require specific reports or requirements.

Conclusion

The literature on voluntary sector studies is extensive, and a chapter of this length cannot do justice to this work or to the burgeoning research on co-production. Instead, we focused on three themes from the voluntary sector literature of interest to co-production scholars. First, we suggested that motivations for co-production may vary depending on the extent to which the citizen receiving services also volunteers. Second, we suggested that the form and type of participation that services require of recipients have consequences not only for policy outcomes but also for citizenship outcomes. Finally, in reviewing the conditions that support co-production, we focused on whether government funding, and the resulting requirements attached to
this funding, support or constrain co-production in voluntary sector organizations; the results to date are mixed.

As research and practice on co-production continue to cross disciplinary boundaries, policy domains, and organization types, we see many areas that could benefit from further inquiry. We suggest four broad questions that might inform the contribution of voluntary sector studies to research on co-production: First, to what extent, and in what ways, might co-production differ in voluntary organizations versus government agencies? Second, and relatedly, can we view co-production through these organizations as “laboratories” not only of service outcomes but also of citizenship development? Third, how might government funding, regulation, and evaluation of voluntary, nonprofit organizations affect co-production processes? Will such extrinsic interest by government in co-production mediated through these organizations distract or even displace them from their presumably intrinsic interest in and commitment to client participation? Finally, if nonprofit sector service-delivery organizations are to support the co-production of programs and service participants, do staff possess the appropriate background and training? What curricular changes might be needed in nonprofit management (and related) education programs to support or equip staff members for this responsibility?

In this chapter we considered how the research on voluntary sector organizations not only furthers our understanding of service users’ motivation to co-produce, their capacity to co-produce, and the conditions that support their co-production, but we also suggest that this research raises new questions for co-production scholars. As we rely on many voluntary sector organizations to help achieve public outcomes regardless of whether they are delivering publicly financed services, we anticipate that the research on these organizations will become even more useful for public management scholars interested in co-production. In the end we see far more generative research possibilities from fully integrating the research on voluntary sector organizations and co-production in public management.

References


