

Democracy on the frontlines? Coproductive approaches to reforming public services

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What is coproduction?

- **Emphasises**
 - the role that so-called consumers play in producing outcomes.
 - the relationship between users and frontline staff as a key variable in service effectiveness
- **Includes**
 - Co-delivery (gym workout, healthy eating, essay writing, flatpack furniture)
 - Co-design (Wikipedia, Linux, Expert Patients, direct payments)
- **Applicable** to public and private sectors, although is particularly relevant for services which require transformation of the user and offer limited exit, as do many public services.

Ed Miliband, Cabinet Office Minister

“Rather than a ‘letterbox’ model in which we see the individual as simply having the service ‘delivered’ to them, we must think in terms of a more collaborative model... The task for the future must surely also be to systematically look at each public service and think about how the user can become an integral co-producer”.

Miliband, 2007

Benefits of Coproduction

“More personalised solutions, in which the user takes responsibility for providing part of the service, should enable society to create better collective solutions with a less coercive, intrusive state, a lower tax burden, a more responsible and engaged citizenry and stronger capacity within civil society to find and devise solutions to problems without intervention”

Leadbeater, 2004: 88

Barriers to Coproduction

1. Limited individual and social capital of users
2. Limited individual and social capital of staff

Attitudes to frontline staff

- “Doctors, teachers, nurses, they go through years of training. Council worker you can go straight into that job tomorrow. There’s no commitment to that job necessarily” (Winchmore Hill, female, spoken).
- “The staff [in the NHS] do the best that they can do. The cleaners may not do, but you can’t really get decent cleaners” (Bristol, female, spoken).

[Focus group data taken from Needham, 2007]

Barriers to Coproduction

1. Limited individual and social capital of users
2. Limited individual and social capital of staff
3. Limited agenda
4. Uncertain role:
 - abstract versus ‘situated knowledge’;
 - ally, adversary, enemy

Case Study

- Social housing
- All day deliberative workshop involving 15 tenants and 10 staff in a local authority in the north of England.
- Run and funded by Unison and the National Consumer Council
- Moderated by Opinion Leader Research
- Small scale – illustrative, not representative

The start of the day...

- Tenant (when asked in a warm-up exercise 'If you were an animal what animal would you be'):
'And the reason I want to be a lion, I can maul all these council workers to death'.

Tenants on Staff

- *‘The people in the rent office...there’s no help whatsoever...’*
- *‘Because when you go down they think you should be paying them to speak to you.’*
- *‘I think it goes down to the staff are not trained to deal with the public, top and bottom of it.’*
- *‘They look down at you, they think that they’re better than you.’*

Staff on Tenants

- *'I think something we suffer is the abuse, that has to be really recognised, is the abuse.'*

Shared Discourses - Disempowerment

- *‘At the end of the day the officers are not really bothered. You could talk to them for two and three hours and it just goes in one ear and out the other, they are not bothered because they don’t live in the area, they can go home and close the door, they live in a nice area...’*
(Tenant)
- *‘We don’t know what’s going on, we can’t tell tenants what’s going on.’* (Officer)

Shared Discourses - Expectations

- *'[P]eople's aspirations are different now. People won't just accept a council house now. They want a house in a nice area with a nice garden with nice neighbours'. (Officer)*
- *'There's no way I would get a house with a garden and all that. It's just all I'll be happy is if they modernise the flats and do what they say they're going to do.'* (Tenant)
- *'I'm not bothered, as long as the street was tidy and I didn't have bins, loads of bin bags outside me front door that don't even belong to us, just rubbish.'* (Tenant)

Shared Discourses - Fairness

- *'As far as I can see, if you've been a good tenant, looked after your property, paid your rent and you've been a tenant for years, you're penalised.'* (Housing Officer)
- *'I know, get a baby and get a house. Which I think is wrong.'* (Tenant)

The End of the Day

- *'I think there's a lot of common concerns between the customers and our organisation, that's been apparent from this morning, because it's, the common vein has run through the whole day that our frustrations and concerns are also the tenants. It's about how we deal and tackle them of course is the key.'* (Officer)
- *'It looked as if we've all been looking at each other's sheets cos we're all saying the same thing.'* (Tenant)

Workshop - Benefits

- Building respect
- Sharing expertise
- Identifying shared priorities (anti-social behaviour, housing shortages, etc)
- Negotiating change (time-scale for repairs, waste collection)

Workshop - Concerns

1. Agonistic relationship – ‘enemies’ to ‘adversaries’ (Mouffe).
2. Common collusion against outsiders
3. Agenda setting
 - Limited scope of the discussion – various key issues off limits
 - Link into senior management decision-making
4. Cost and scope of the exercise

Conclusions

- Increasing move to make explicit the coproductive nature of public services and involve users and staff in co-design and co-delivery.
- Various advantages to increased collaborative working between staff and users – instrumental and expressive.
- Need to recognise the variety of relationships between staff and users, and the barriers to collaboration
- Deliberative exercises may be particularly valuable for marginalised staff and users, in situations of mistrust, helping them to recognise common agendas.
- But need to work out ways that these groups can interact cheaply and regularly – and avoid neutralising broader political challenges

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