Managing Complexity To Make Co-Production Policies Work

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Abstract

Little research has examined the effective capacity of the public organizations to perform the complex job of co-production, which might give the impression that the topic is marginal or that service delivery redesign is a self-implementing job. Drawing on the organization and policy studies literatures, this paper argues otherwise, i.e., that complexity is inevitable in co-production endeavours. The different roles played by the actors involved in the service lifecycle and the variety of pathways that lead to the outcomes add layers of complexity that can only be partially predicted in advance. In short, co-production puts the capacity of the public administrations to meet the new demands being placed upon them to the hard and rocky test. No one can say with certainty how much administrative capacity is necessary to support and implement the co-production practices, but the one thing that is certain is that all forms of co-production force the public organizations to engage with the readiness to change.

Keywords: co-production, organizational capacity, complexity theory, policy tools, administrative capacity

Introduction

Co-production is an important topic in the public management debate, especially in terms of the budget restrictions currently faced by many governments around the world due to the persistency of the economic crisis. It goes to the heart both of effective public services delivery and the role of public services in achieving other societal ends, such as social inclusion or citizen engagement (Radnor, Osborne, Kinder, & Mutton, 2014, p. 403). Central in the dominant discourse on co-production is the question of what might motivate 'clients' willingness to co-produce and, in particular, what instruments public organizations might deploy to enhance that willingness (Alford, 2009, p. 220; 2013) and to better elicit their contribution (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 182; Pollitt, 2012). That said, the reflection that links co-production with the public sector's need for organizational capacities to address collective problems has not, as yet, received the attention it deserves.

What is striking about the scant analytical attention paid to co-production by the mainstream are the two aspects strictly related to the organizational dimension of this option. First, co-production processes are inherently interdependent, hence each variation in the number and the location of the actors (including service providers, service recipients, volunteers) within and across different levels is reflected directly on the problems of coordination between the public and private spheres, and "at the interfaces between those spheres" (Klijn, 2008b, p. 119). Second, co-production brings to the fore the problem of control and accountability. Like other forms of indirect governance, co-production involves the sharing with external actors of a far more basic governmental function, or "the exercise of discretion over the use of public authority and the spending of public funds" (Salamon, 2002, p. 2). In Bovaird's words, that means "an increasing proportion of public spending appears to be passing from … command-and-control hierarchies to networks …" (2013, p. 176).

This qualitative paper builds on the organization and policy studies literatures to stimulate the discussion and further research on the co-production-complexity nexus. The argument is that the systemic complexity that underpins contemporary public policymaking and implementation impacts the administrative capacity of the public-sector organizations. Therefore, the decision makers and the policy implementers have no

option but to focus on this systemic complexity as the key to effectively managing and improving sustainable co-production practices.

Assuming the decision-maker's perspective, and drawing from organization studies and public management literatures, the paper seeks to address the following questions:

- *How does the complexity of co-production manifest itself?*
- *Is the existence of this complexity normal and predictable?*

Co-production refers to a set of activities, expectations, and rationales (Ewert & Evers, 2014, p. 427). Here, this label denotes processes through which diverse inputs are contributed by individuals and organizations that are not part of an official government agency primarily responsible for producing a particular public good or service (Ostrom, 2012, p. xv).

This exploratory paper looks at the complexity of co-production and seeks to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this option in two ways. First, it first adopts the lens of the public organizations involved in the implementation of co-production practices, which is in sharp contrast to most research that, instead, tends to look at the micro-level implications (e.g., for service-takers, professionals, local communities). Second, it offers an interpretive key to unlock the more nuanced aspects of co-production at the meso level. Among the options available for addressing co-production complexity and its consequences, the paper makes it clear that the administrative capacity for tackling these problems plays a key role.

In what follows the paper first revisits the concept of complexity as related specifically to the three challenges faced by the public administrations: the multiplication of the policy tools in the bag of government, the networked character of policy formation and implementation, and the increasing use of the co-production of services. The paper next analyzes the set of attributes that enable an organization to fulfil its missions, or its administrative capacity, highlighting its potential contribution to address the changing landscape of service delivery. Drawing together the main insights of this preliminary analysis, the paper concludes by demonstrating that the key factor is the readiness to change, i.e., the organization's capacity to assume future responsibilities in appropriate ways for the contingent situations, on which most public administrations around the world involved in co-production, but also the academic research have probably not yet focused. Overall, co-production in all its forms means that the public organizations must engage with the readiness to change.

Related work

Revisiting the concept of complexity

'Delivery state' models of public services have become unsustainable: it is no longer credible to view government as a monolithic machine in which levers can be pulled at the centre and predicted outputs produced. As a result, scholars of public administration have started to look to 'complexity theory' in order to understand how complex systems work (Bovaird, 2013; Duit & Galaz, 2008; Klijn, 2008a; Teisman & Klijn, 2008). "Complexity emphasises that the nature and behaviour of complex systems are not reducible to their separate components. Rather, such systems generate emergent properties" (Henman, 2010, p. 192).

"Complexity lies in the space between order and chaos" (Henman, ibidem). Different perspectives help identify aspects of the external environment and how its complexity is organizationally relevant (for a review, see: (Child & Rodrigues, 2011)). The main concepts within 'complexity theory' useful to give an idea of our understanding of co-production are (Muir & Parker, 2014, pp. 12-14):

- *Connectivity and interdependence*: in an increasingly networked society the actual or anticipated decisions of one actor, organisation or system can have major and unpredicted impacts on other actors and systems.
- *Adaptation and co-evolution*: complex social systems are able to adapt and evolve, and adaptations by actors or organisations are dependent on adaptations by other actors or organisations. So managers and organisations do not simply adapt to their external environment, but their actions also impact on the wider system.
- *Self-organisation*: actors and organisations do not simply act according to prescribed roles and rules, but also act of their own accord in ways that create new relationships and new structures.
- *Emergence*: the process by which new patterns or structures emerge out of the seemingly random interaction of individual elements of a complex system. These 'emergent properties' are only observable at system level, but have their roots in the micro-behaviours of individual actors and organisations.
- *Feedback processes*: in classical economics, feedback processes are linear: with positive feedback, more leads to more and less to less, whereas with negative feedback more leads to less and vice versa. In complex systems, feedback is non-linear, with contingent factors affecting the strength and direction of feedback loops in ways that are not predictable in advance. In managing such systems there is a premium on looking at the 'whole system' and seeking to understand its dynamics, and on pilot experiments that probe how particular feedback loops work.

The next pages will not attempt a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the complexity theory outlined above, nor go into the global trends linked to the change in public services in western societies (including ageing, climate change and the shift towards post-industrial economies), it will simply use them as contextual props for the focus and aims of this paper.

Complexity and public services

The 'new public management' reforms in the 1980s led many OECD countries to experiment with new ways of delivering services. This has added layers of complexity to the public systems as they seek to adapt to the paradigmatic shifts of the external environment. Market reforms, including privatization, outsourcing, decentralisation, the creation of arm's-length agencies and, more generally, the use of 'tools of indirect government' (Salamon, 2002) are now common features of the public landscape, especially when it comes to mastering problems that go beyond the traditional policy borders. What all these intervention tools have in common is a wide array of inter-connected third parties, in a logic of 'externalization' (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012).

In essence, co-production is about creating new connections between government and citizens (Meijer, 2012b, p. 1158). Involving these subjects in one or more phases of the service lifecycle in a network of actors environment using different arrangements, fragments the processes that used to be integrated and managed as one by the public actor, who coordinated them using a top-down approach (i.e., the hierarchy). Hybrid forms of coordination that combine a mix of variables between the two usual forms of hierarchy and market are increasingly shaping the new configurations of services. As a result, each of these latter contains elements of all three forms: "in the health service, for example, bureaucracy provides for minimum waiting

times, competition gives you a choice of hospital, and your relationship with your GP provides you with the support and guidance you need to make the best decisions" (Muir & Parker, 2014, p. 18).

The fragmentation of public service systems into a multiplicity of actors, social groups and institutions with different roles brings about increasing organizational complexity; one example is the creation of competitive markets for the delivery of government services (Henman, 2010, p. 193) in the employment services, education or healthcare sectors. The interdependence between parallel programmes between agencies and the interdependence between agencies and external contributors increase 'relational complexity' because they multiply the interactions between agents in exchanging information (Child & Rodrigues, 2011). In particular, relational complexity "rises (1) with the number of actors or units that are involved in decisions or processes affecting the content or processing of relevant information and (2) with the lack of stability or uniformity in the transactions between them" (Child & Rodrigues, 2011, p. 807).

But the sectors of intervention just mentioned are also those that manifest increasing policy complexity and administrative complexity. The shifting nature of the issues (Peters, 1998, p. 306) and the unceasing flow of new legislation (particularly heavy in countries with a Napoleonic tradition, such as Italy and other Southern European countries) keeps the policy implementers, the service delivery organizations and the service recipients in a continual flux of responding to change. Interestingly, observes Henman (2010), complexity grows when both the policy change is radical and when policy change is incremental and piecemeal. In fact, paradoxically, this latter often becomes more problematic for the administrations involved. For example, Henman (2010, pp. 194-195) identifies three main sources of administrative complexity on the subject of the new conditional policies, i.e., those that place new conditions on the receipt of particular benefits or services, which segment recipients into separately profiled subpopulations: "the process of segmenting the citizen base; [the need to develop] … different policies and procedures for each of the different sub-populations where there may have previously been one; and administering the differentiated policies and procedures, including keeping records of which group an individual is in".

It is becoming increasingly apparent that a very different set of strategies to those deployed by governments in the past (Muir & Parker, 2014, p. 17) is needed to achieve results in this ecology of systems and sources of complexity. Coordination is always a problem within the public sector, given the multiple demands on government and the difficulties in getting numerous complex organizations to work together (Peters, Pierre, & Randma-Liiv, 2011, p. 19).

In short, it is not possible to anticipate the many complex problems of public import when these are driven by multiple, non-linear causal interactions; nor can they be effectively tackled, either individually or in aggregate, by simply relying on top-down planning or market incentives. Rather, according to Muir and Parker (2014, p. 30), these problems require a major change in the way public services are organised at both the system and the individual levels. "At the macro level we need systems that are more interconnected, so that we can manage their complexity more effectively. At the micro level, complex problems require deep relationships: intensive and ongoing engagement between professionals and citizens characterised by detailed knowledge of individual cases, personalised responses, and the creative brokerage of solutions".

Complexity and co-production

Having clarified in what terms the public sector becomes increasingly complex due to the multiplication of the policy tools in the bag of government, and the networked character of policy formation and

implementation, we will attempt to identify which factors of complexity apply to co-production in the provision of public services.

Above all, co-production is different to the other forms of collaboration, partnership and alliance because it involves ordinary people who contribute to the achievement of public purposes (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 176). All forms of co-production challenge traditional forms of organizing public services, in particular expert-based practice (Dunston, Lee, Boud, Brodie, & Chiarella, 2009). In the cases of healthcare and education, for example, the ordinary people involved in the service extend beyond the direct recipient (patient or pupil) into the family circle and sometimes to volunteer workers and the communities in which the recipient lives. But what effects does this have in terms of systemic complexity? The first thing to note, observe Alford and O'Flynn, is that "the involvement of each extra provider has an incremental effect, in that it adds one more relationship to be managed" (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 195). Moreover, depending on the policy domain, the service recipient can play multiple roles: citizen, customer, partner (Thomas, 2013). Alford and O'Flynn underscore that these three labels refer to 'roles, not positions', which means that in some situations they may be combined in the same individual (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 229). According to these authors (ibidem, p. 229-230), it is precisely this distinction between the roles that enables the public administrations to identify the typical tasks that the public managers must perform in relation to each 'label'. Generally, the tasks involved in moving on or from the engagement of third parties are more likely to be the domain of senior managers, while those involved in managing the ongoing relationship with external providers, including partnership managers, fall under the category of boundary roles. The organizational relations of these roles must be reconciled and coordinated.

A second distinctive feature is the purpose of the co-production: this can be adopted to replace or to integrate a service provided by a public agency. In the case of the former, the public manager must address two key aspects, both of crucial importance: a) identify the type of solution (traditional delivery or co-production) best suited to the specific problem and that can ensure the best performance – in other words, "the tool should be matched to the job" (Hood & Margetts, 2007, p. 145); and b) ensure that the co-producers have the requisites (or the motivation) needed to make the co-production effort a success. In the second case, however, in which the "outcomes are determined using citizen inputs as well as public sector inputs" (Bovaird, 2013, p. 170), the key issue is how to best use the contribution of the co-producers. In both cases, the disappearance of direct managerial control over the resources needed to produce the expected outcomes means that the main organizational problem is to better elicit and foster the contribution of the receivers. However, the service recipients sometimes are involved in co-production practices against their will, i.e., they are not there from voluntary willingness or the ability to co-produce, but because they are obliged to co-produce. This category includes what are called the 'unwilling clients', a label that may apply to, for example, prisoners, taxpayers and others subject to regulatory or other obligations (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 177). Co-production helps to reshape the experience of service receivers.

The third and last distinctive feature of co-production loops back to the variety of pathways that lead to the outcomes and the ways in which these interconnect. To the extent that is difficult to distinguish the one actor's contribution to performance from that of the purchaser or other actors, it is harder to assess the outcome of most public services that deliver co-production practices (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 97). On the whole, the services often "have non-linear production functions" (Bovaird, 2013, p. 170); for example, in terms of the relationship between inputs and outcomes. As pointed out by Bovaird (2013, p. 176), unpredictability and context-specificity prevent the generalization of the results and the replicability of the co-production practices from one context to another.

Clearly, much depends on the type of service in question: there is significantly more complexity involved in applying co-production to areas such as vocational rehabilitation and mental health services where the outcomes are hard to measure in contrast to areas such as waste recycling or reporting to the police, where the effectiveness of programmes is relatively easy to measure.

What clearly emerges from this scenario is that, regardless of the policy domain, the co-production choices are particularly challenging and subject to many constraints: how does the public ensure the achievement of the desired outcome with the minimum spending of governmental resources and at the least human cost to the policy takers, including the recalcitrant ones? Administrative capacity is only one of many factors that help to address these complex decisional processes.

Administrative capacity

The notion of administrative capacity is both articulated and elusive in content (Natalini, 2012). Further, according to the author's orientation, the perimeter of the unit of analysis and the disciplinary perspective in which the concept is developed can vary considerably. In general, the word 'capacity' denotes a set of attributes that help or enable an organization to fulfil its missions. The attributes that any particular organization possesses constitute the organization's capacity profile (Eisinger, 2002, p. 116).

Margetts (who uses the term 'organizational capacity', among others) adopts a minimalist approach. This author equates organizational capacity, defined as "the possession of a stock of people and skills, land, buildings, materials, computers and equipment, somehow arranged" (Margetts, 2009, p. 5) with a real tool of government (Hood & Margetts, 2007) for the digital era. That means that a government's "capacity to use the Internet and related technologies internally and to interact with citizens, firms, voluntary organizations and other governments, in what is now widely known as 'e-government'" (Margetts, 2009, p. 9) has a decisive impact on its organizational capacity.

Walker, however, addresses questions of innovation (Walker, 2013) in a quantitative study that takes a similarly lean view in which organizational capacity is operationalized as a combination of administrative intensity and financial, personnel and managerial capacity. The study demonstrates that a strong administrative capacity is positively associated with the public organization's efficacious response capacity and higher levels of process innovation (ibidem).

By contrast, Farazmand is one of many authors that attribute a broader meaning to organizational capacity, applying the term to multiple environments that, in practice, correspond to the entire activity of government: "administrative capacity to manage" governance and economic systems under the new environment needs to be designed at the macro and micro levels (Farazmand, 2009, p. 1008) (emphasis in the original). Also Lodge and Wegrich (2014) tend towards an expanded notion of the term, suggesting that public administrations are a bundle of capacities. "Capacities" is used in the plural to suggest that public organizations may have multiple capacities. In particular, administrative capacities have to be understood in terms of four sub-types of problem-solving capabilities, namely (Heichlinger, Thijs, & Bosse, 2014, p. 33): *delivery capacity* as the resources an administration has available to perform its tasks; *regulatory capacity* as the way in which the state regulates economic and social activities, and in which it monitors and promotes adherence to the rules; *coordination capacity* as the ability to steer mediation and negotiation processes between parties involved at different administrative levels and among non-state actors; *analytical capacity* as the state's ability to assess the performance of its system, anticipate future

developments, and plan future demands accordingly (our italics). Capacities are different and distributed unevenly. Problem-solving means mobilizing (mixes of) capacities among state and non-state actors at the transnational, national, and local levels (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014).

The framework developed by Alford and O'Flynn in a study of the different forms of externalization falls midway between the two extreme positions. These authors' definition of the term 'organizational capabilities' is that it covers the entire pool of the senior managers' capacity to "arrange structures and processes to facilitate the tasks of relationship managers and to mitigate organizational obstacles to their work" (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012, p. 238). The organizational capabilities therefore would refer to the managerial ability to effectively manage the resources (prevalently human) needed to achieve the desired outputs. On the other hand, the organizational capabilities fall between two levels, the micro and the macro, respectively, denominated individual competency (i.e., skills and knowledge) and enabling environment (i.e., structures, processes, norms, rules, regulations that set the parameters for organizational action) (ibidem, 251).

Interestingly, despite the diversity of all these conceptualization proposals, they each have two aspects in common: one, they have an instrumental, policy-oriented focus because all agree that the public sector can draw on a mix of abilities, knowledge and tangible resources to enable the public decision-makers to find solutions to collective problems and shape society; and, two, they all assign both an intra- and an inter-organizational character to the administrative capacity.

Administrative capacity and co-production

To the best of our knowledge, no systematic research has specifically and systematically linked administrative capacity and co-production in public service delivery. However, based on previous work that analyzed the two themes separately, we can make a number of broad observations on their linkage here.

First, we are looking at a dynamic relationship because co-production practices are both enabled and constrained by the administrative capacity.

Second, different capacities may be required according to the functions and tasks to be performed. The administrative capacity needed to implement co-production practices is inherently 'problem-centred', it varies in relation to the policy area and the setting in which the service is delivered. For instance, the service delivery capacity of a social services unit located in urban zone A can be greater than that of zone B because zone A has a consolidated network of ancillary services and facilities provided by public and private actors.

Third, the administrative capacity changes over time according to, for example, the intensive use of digital technologies. New media are an important facilitator of co-production because the cost of connecting to citizens has been reduced drastically, making it possible to interact 24/7 (Meijer, 2012a, p. 193). ICT enable an increase in productivity (Hood & Margetts, 2007). The administrative capacity shows its 'moving target' nature when the experience accumulated by an administration in a specific service domain improves the learning of procedures in other service sectors (Honadle, 2001, pp. 81-82). To the contrary, the administrative capacity diminishes when the public resources available to drive change (Sorrentino & De Marco, 2013) are reduced. Lately, financial austerity has led many central governments to impose heavy, across-the-board spending cuts in the budgets of the public administrations (the so-called 'cheese slicing strategies').

Which raises the question of how much administrative capacity is necessary and available to implement and support the co-production practices? A direct response to this crucial question is problematic at a generic level (i.e., not in relation to one particular public service setting). As noted already, the concept of administrative capacity is relative and multifaceted, and the co-production programmes are challenging. Hence, a true assessment of the capacity to manage a new programme requires the public organizations to consider the way in which those assets "are currently being used and how they might be converted *if* there were a sudden need to do so" (Honadle, 2001, p. 83, emphasis in the original). In a study of the local governments in the United States, Honadle suggests that it is better to ditch the unanswerable question about the *best* local capacity to take on new responsibilities and, instead, ask a number of more meaningful questions: "Is there excess capacity that could be brought on-line to meet the additional demands on a local government? Is the local government using all of its existing capacity to deliver essential services? Could a local government jettison some responsibilities it currently has, thereby liberating existing capacity?" (ibidem).

Basically, according to Honadle, there is nothing automatic about capacity requirements. Rather, the capacity to assume future responsibilities "in appropriate ways for the local situations" (ibidem, p. 84) is about *readiness to change*, ergo, the capacity to adapt, to be flexible, and to learn. Readiness relies on resilience and adaptiveness: it is about creating and maintaining the conditions in which state and non-state actors are capable of developing problem-solving approaches (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014, p. 20).

Finally, co-production can only take place when the environmental conditions are favourable depending on which sets of latent capacity can be mobilized to fulfil organizational missions and generate service innovation. In short, the innovation effort must perforce by supported internally using administrative capacities (ibidem, p. 23).

Recapitulation

Co-production can be understood as a promising tool in an increasingly complex social and technological context. The digital age may dramatically change the costs and practicality of government's modes of action (Hood & Margetts, 2007, p. 182). In particular, the advent of the Internet's unique many-to-many interactivity and of ubiquitous communications promises to enable co-production on an unprecedented scale (Linders, 2012, p. 446). However, despite widespread attention across a range of institutions, it is reasonable to suppose that we are unlikely to see the mass take-up and generalization of co-production in the immediate future. Moreover, co-production should not be seen as a panacea for all the problems that public agencies face (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012, p. 58).

Citizens attribute value to co-production not only for the contribution that they receive from the practice, but also for the contribution that it can give to the wellbeing of society. Reasonably, co-production practices will be increasingly adopted in combination with other tools to achieve public purpose. The appropriate option, or combination of options, needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Different models may be dominant within different policy areas. Therefore, the ecology of the tools available to the public service providers will become complicated.

In the words of Entwistle (2010), we can say that co-production is politically attractive because, like other forms of collaboration in the public services sector, it promises new ways of dealing with old problems. While the research of new service approaches through the reorganization of the scale and scope of service

delivery (Entwistle, 2010, p. 178) is not new, co-production differs from other tools in that it gives the policymakers a "more palatable way of presenting these ambitions to key stakeholders" (ibidem).

Also Kettl (2006) believes that using the lever of political attraction is important to establish the new tools of government. In this case, co-production has the advantage of tempering two goals that, until yesterday, were believed irreconcilable, i.e., it can provide a way to tailor broad programme to community needs and allow government to increase its reach without increasing its size.

The task facing contemporary public organizations is to maintain and enhance their administrative capacity, seen as a means to mobilize latent capacities and to meet the new demands being placed upon them. That is no easy task, given the repertoire of resources that must be mobilized to handle administration "in an environment of rapid changes and hyper-complexities" (Farazmand, 2009). Rethinking public services from the co-production perspective raises two of the many serious questions. First, reorganization around clients' needs "costs money upfront, and takes time to implement and yield savings. These 'invest-to-save' characteristics of holistic reorganizations do not fit well with short-term pressures for financial cutbacks" (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013, p. 9). Second, readiness and bureaucracy are at odds: "Readiness, which emphasizes anticipation and resilience leading to adaptive practices that solve problems, and bureaucracy, which emphasises predictability and routinisation, are not natural bed-fellows" (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014, p. 23).

The few longitudinal studies on large N settings found in the international literature (Brandsen, Verschuere, & Pestoff, 2012, p. 386) seems to suggest that the current co-production experiences, while investing a wide range of policy fields, are the public landscape's outliers. Obviously, we cannot go into the why of this state of affairs here, but we can reasonably assume that the patterns of co-production in public services reflect how difficult many administrations in many countries find it to build capacity.

Conclusions

This paper has taken a multidisciplinary approach to a better understanding of the co-production of public services, considered as a tool of government. In particular, it has sought to explore a theme that has remained in the shadows of the debate, i.e., the relationship between organizational capacity and co-production, and highlighted the main implications for the policy implementers. Overall, the paper argues that organizational capacity matters to co-production and profiles the conditions that should enable the change in the public service delivery systems.

In terms of the first research question: *How does the complexity of co-production manifest itself?* The paper has sought to respond by drawing on complexity theory. Above all, the complexity of co-production has been linked to the change underway in the public services, to the ensuing multiplication of the connectivity and interdependence levels between actors and processes, and to the hybrid forms of coordination that exist alongside the traditional forms of hierarchy and market. But, apart from confirming the general principle that when the rules of an organizational process change, it is necessary to intervene on the methods of organizational coordination and control, none of that is particularly new.

However, it is far trickier than it seems to respond to the second research question: *Is the existence of this complexity normal and predictable?* While, on the one side, the multiplication of the interconnections due to co-production appears physiologically (at least on paper) 'normal', on the other, that complexity is by no means 'predictable'. Problem-centeredness and context-specificity make the co-production endeavour

challenging. Co-production reveals the capacity of the public administrations to develop and mobilize administrative capacity to deliver services in a situation in which the administrative capacity itself is hard to predict because it too changes over time. The paper suggests that an elementary step in addressing and managing these challenges is to focus on readiness for the future. Naturally, this is a preliminary hypothesis that needs to be verified from both the conceptual and the empirical viewpoint. The mixed evidence of co-production practices around the world shows that some aspects of the design and management of this tool perhaps need to be at least rethought.

Overall, the paper, despite its many limitations, offers a nuanced understanding of co-production and its implications. There is still much to be learned about co-production but we need new interpretive frameworks that can guide also the practice, and this must necessarily be an interdisciplinary enterprise, especially in the fields of organization studies, policy studies, and public management. The paper aspires to raising further interest in this topic and to sharing this cognitive effort with other scholars in the future.

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