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**Co-production is everywhere**

**But is it useful?**

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# Co-production is everywhere: But is it useful?

## Key takeaways

1. Co-production is a form of collaboration often between professionals and those usually on the receiving end of their expertise.
2. Co-production seems to be everywhere. Advocates argue that co-production is necessary to respond to contemporary challenges, such as uncertainty, complexity and contestation. But how useful an idea is it?
3. Our work sets out three tentative answers to this question. 1) Co-production now means so many things to so many people, it has lost its distinctiveness and is perhaps not as useful as it could be. 2) Nailing down definitions is less relevant if practitioners and policy-makers are already using the concept in their work, but understanding how and why co-production is used is useful for policy-making. 3) Co-production is useful in mobilising participation as a step-change towards addressing social challenges.
4. The technical terms for these different ways of answering the question are clarification, elucidation, and provocation. A *clarification* perspective would judge 'usefulness' according to how clear the definitions of co-production are; an *elucidation* perspective would focus on understanding how co-production is interpreted by different people in different contexts and what this reveals about power dynamics; and a *provocation* perspective would assess the utility of co-production by how far it has mobilised coalitions for change and produced action on the ground.
5. Our work shows that co-production is in some ways a messy concept, and there is further work to do to define and communicate the distinctiveness of the idea. But its value lies in calling for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and citizens to come together in ways that inspire change in existing practice to better meet the challenges of the moment.

## 1. Co-production is everywhere

Co-production is a process of bringing together stakeholders with different yet relevant expertise to address a shared problem or concern. The aim is not participation for the sake of it, but rather the involvement and value of those with a stake in addressing a given issue. Co-production is particularly useful when problems are complex or contested, existing solutions are inadequate or have failed, or answers are unknown. It is important that each party involved has something the other wants or needs.

For example, one way in which co-production can enable creative solutions that would otherwise not happen is by bringing together professionals and those

traditionally on the receiving end of their "expertise" (Williams et al., 2020: 2–3) such as patients, service users, marginalised citizens, or research subjects. In this way, co-production can help policy to be better informed by the lived experiences of those it is seeking to target or impact, public services to be better tailored to need, and research to be more relevant or impactful.

Co-production may then involve patients contributing their experience of a misunderstood condition alongside medical expertise to shape practice guidance, or residents working with local authorities to address a neglected environmental health concern in their neighbourhood, or poverty researchers working with those experiencing poverty to reveal hidden or excluded perspectives.

Co-production now seems to be everywhere. Indeed, the movement towards the co-production of public services and outcomes is now well documented and intensely debated in both practice and research (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2021). It is prominent across various policy and practice fields, notably health, environment and sustainability. For example, NHS England adopted a [National Co-Production Model](#) in 2016, and in 2021 endorsed the recommendation of a national review of changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to accept '[co-production as default](#)'.

Our own work helped to inform the adoption of the principle of co-production across the work of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2017, and led to the adoption of new co-productive policy development processes in areas including environmental policy (Bellinson, 2021). By 2021, several UK cities were already beginning to use 'co-production' as a policy priority and process across a range of areas (see Figure 1).

But defining co-production can be difficult, and its framing as a solution to any number of problems can distract from the challenges of trying to realise it in practice. So how can we better understand co-production? And how can we determine if it's a useful concept in meeting the challenges of the moment?

## 2. Is co-production useful?

The rise of co-production since the mid-2000s (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021), has prompted criticism that it has become a 'concept with adjectives', as reflected in the range of associated terms such as co-design, co-creation and co-governance, and it is becoming harder to pin down what exactly is being talked about when we talk about co-production. The potential 'misappropriation' of co-production risks losing its distinctive approach to collaboration and to problem-solving in terms of "who is involved, how they are involved, the experiences people bring, and

to what extent such processes address structural and interpersonal inequalities in power" (Williams et al., 2020: 2).

Our research found that lack of clear understanding about co-production has fostered a series of 'myths' about its potential and application – for instance, leading to the assumption that everyone has to be involved in co-production, rather than those with a specific stake in the issue, or the assumption that there is only one particular method or approach to follow (Hemström et al., 2021). The danger is that lack of clarity about *what* co-production is deters policy-makers from putting it into practice, or leads to poorer practices.

Our argument is that the question of whether co-production is a useful concept or not depends on the purposes to which the concept is being put. Its value also depends on who is using it, recognising that researchers, activists, policy-makers, citizens and practitioners use the idea of co-production in different ways at different times. For some, co-production is valuable if it provides space for challenge and debate, or helps people to think or approach an issue differently. For others, co-production is only useful if we can be clear as to what it is and what it isn't. These priorities are also not either/or choices.

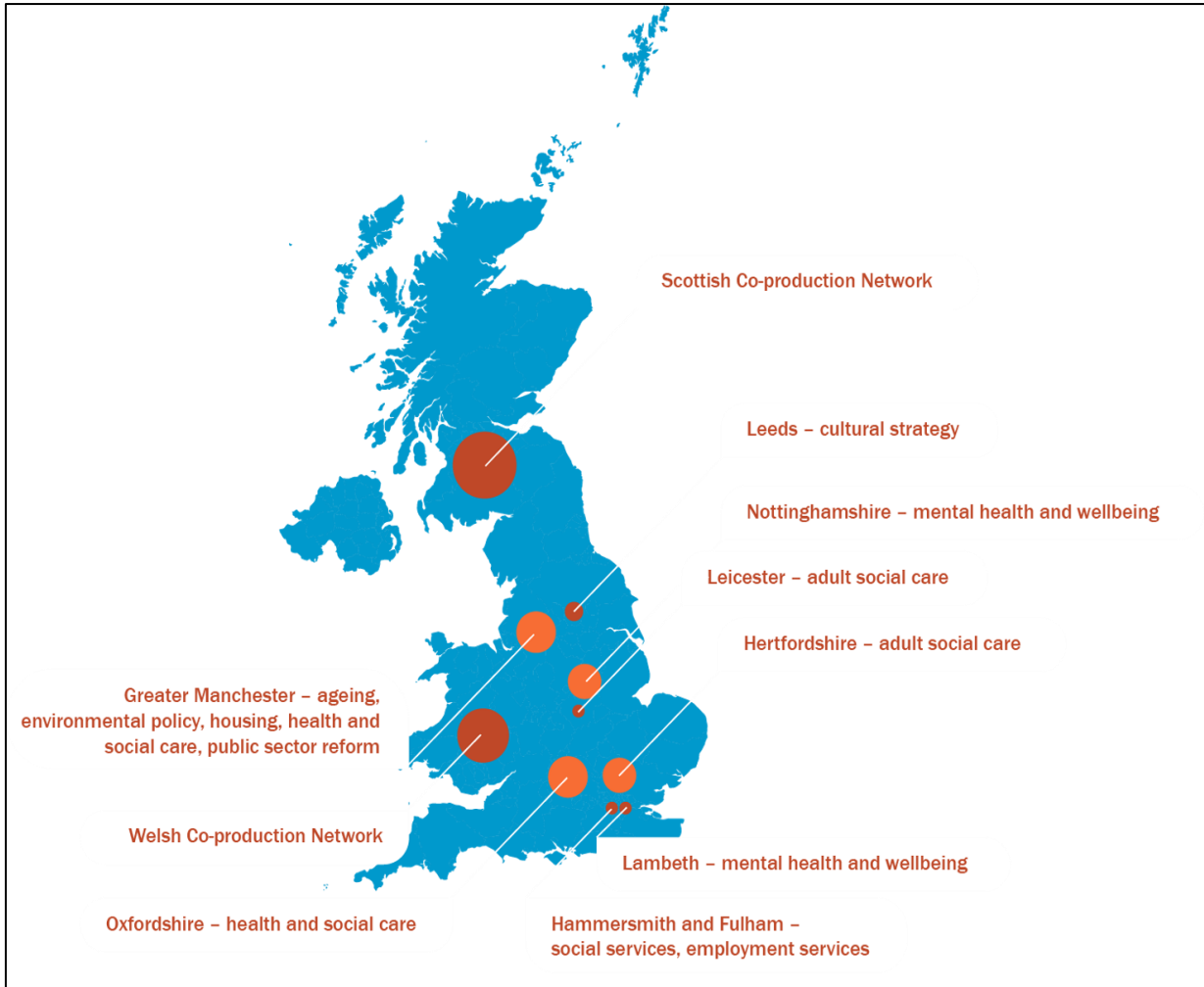


Figure 1: Examples of Local Strategies Mentioning Co-Production. Source: Authors, drawing on Perry et al. 2019

### 3. Three responses

We have identified three ways we can think about conceptualising co-production to help us better unpick its value:

A **clarification** approach would seek to determine how clearly co-production can be defined, seeking to minimise messy or vague definitions, in favour of showing the distinctiveness of co-production.

An **elucidation** approach would focus on how co-production is interpreted by different people in different contexts emphasising understanding of how co-production is shaped by the prior relationships and power differences between stakeholders.

A **provocation** approach would assess co-production by how far it has mobilised change, emphasising the role of co-production in challenging existing ways of thinking and doing.

These different ways of thinking about co-production matter to policy-makers because they help to show the different purposes of co-production, and the different action that may be needed to realise them. For example, if policy-makers are most interested in comparing the impact of different co-productive processes over time, then they may need clarification of definition or criteria for co-production.

If, however, policy-makers are interested in understanding how co-production is being applied by different stakeholders, then evidence is needed to elucidate its impact in different contexts. Alternatively, if policy-makers are more interested in how co-production can be used to expand a vision for change in public service that organisations working differently can get behind, then provoking a common vision for reform is more important than different definitions. We will now look at each in turn.

#### **Co-production and clarification**

One prominent critique of co-production is that it is a messy and unclear concept. This critique resonates with the dominant

*clarification* approach in social sciences which argues that we should be able to clearly define and differentiate ideas, and rejects vagueness and ambiguity as unhelpful.

Scholars have pointed to a lack of agreement or consensus on what co-production is, and the confusion around the term. Indeed, a systematic review of co-production with citizens in public innovation criticised co-production as a 'magical' concept (Voorberg et al., 2015, p.1340), recognising it has wide-ranging appeal, but highlighting that the difficulty in pinning down what it means then makes it harder to criticise or challenge it. As such, a *clarification* approach has been proposed repeatedly by prominent scholars of co-production who have argued that co-production has 'little value unless it is clearly demarcated' (Brandson and Honigh, 2015, p. 428).

There have also been critiques about the related problem of understanding the distinctiveness of co-production. For example, the growing appetite and expectation of partnership working and participation in policy-making and research, alongside the emergence of a range of terms to describe this - from co-operation and collaboration, to co-creation, co-design and co-production - risks losing what is distinctive and valuable in these different approaches. Whilst collaboration between researchers and policy-makers may improve knowledge translation and uptake, it does not always share the aims of co-production to make research or public services 'more egalitarian, democratic or transparent' (Williams et al., 2020).

Policy-makers may label collaborative processes with marginalised groups as co-production, even if they have not sought to share power and have defined the terms of engagement according to their own objectives alone. The muddying of terms can therefore lead to a neglect of critical elements of co-production, for example the consideration of the role of power or the

legitimacy of lived experience as a form of expertise.

There have been long-standing and wide-ranging efforts to produce clear and unambiguous definitions of co-production including, for example, classifying different types of co-production (Brudney and England, 1983) and specifying core principles (Norström et al., 2020). Indeed, the sheer number of such attempts may now be a source of confusion.

### ***Co-production and elucidation***

An *elucidation* approach looks at how co-production is applied in practice, and the meanings given to it by different people. An illustration of this approach can be seen in calls within social and public policy to look beyond the big idea of co-production and instead look more closely at how co-production is understood, narrated and applied locally in different contexts (Bevir et al., 2018).

A tentative assessment of co-production from this perspective might be that some progress has been made, but more work is needed. *Elucidation* strategies are evident in co-production. Nikulina et al. (2019) for instance, seek to understand how co-production is interpreted differently by different communities, in different languages and across different cultures. One example of why this matters is that whilst scholars in the Global North have embraced co-production as a guiding principle in research partnerships with lower- and middle-income countries, this is not necessarily shared by research partners. From a Global South perspective, co-production can be still seen as an imposition that does not necessarily deliver the meanings attributed to it, and may not be appropriate in different contexts (Galuszka, 2019).

Co-production itself is also perceived as a process for *elucidation*: in other words, to bring attention to hidden power dynamics. Co-production is mobilised in debates on planning and sustainability to demonstrate

that the knowledge needed to address the climate emergency is dispersed across society, and that this needs to be valued and used. In a contrasting example, co-production has been perceived as a way to recognise the previously hidden informal labour that citizens contribute to the delivery of public services (Governance International/Local Government Information Unit, 2012). Our research has showed that to do this successfully, co-production involving policy-makers requires a strong emphasis on the value of 'honest' practice, being clear what is on the table and what isn't, taking seriously differences and dynamics of power amongst stakeholders and, giving space for discussion and relationship-building (Perry et al. 2019). One way to achieve this is for policy-makers and practitioners to adhere to clear principles for co-production and commit to a process that may have outcomes different to the ones they expected (see Figure 2).

Power dynamics are critical to consider within co-production processes (Durose et al., 2021). This includes, for example, instances when the prior status and formal resources of professionals leads to their expertise being privileged over that of service users in co-producing public services. This is particularly important as co-production necessarily involves bringing people together with different expertise, values, incentives, priorities, working cultures, standards, resources, timescales and language (Bovaird, 2007; Martin, 2010; Flinders et al., 2016).

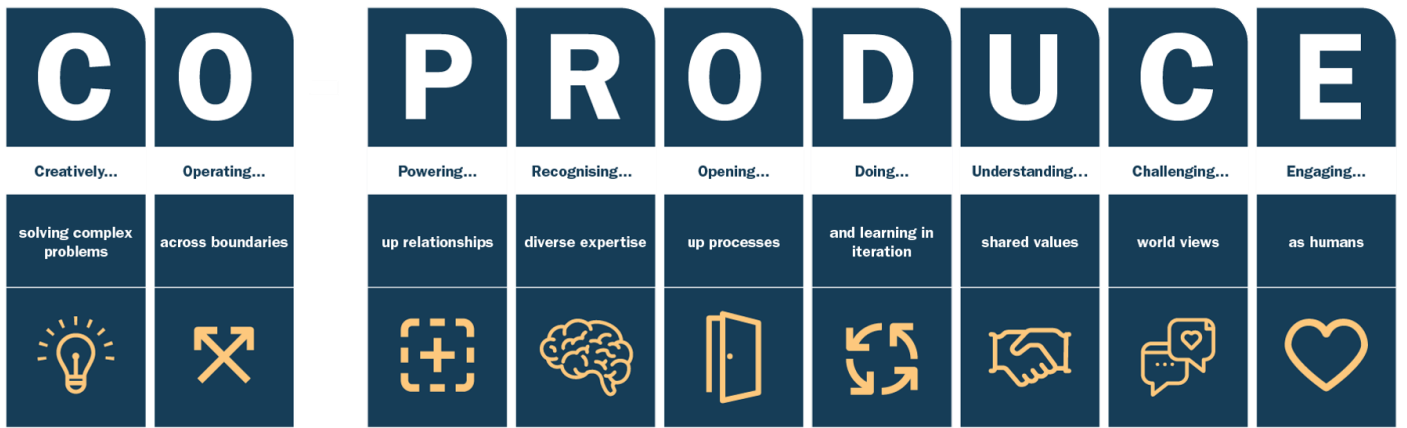


Figure 2: The Jam and Justice Principles for Co-Production. Source: Authors, drawing on Perry et al. 2019

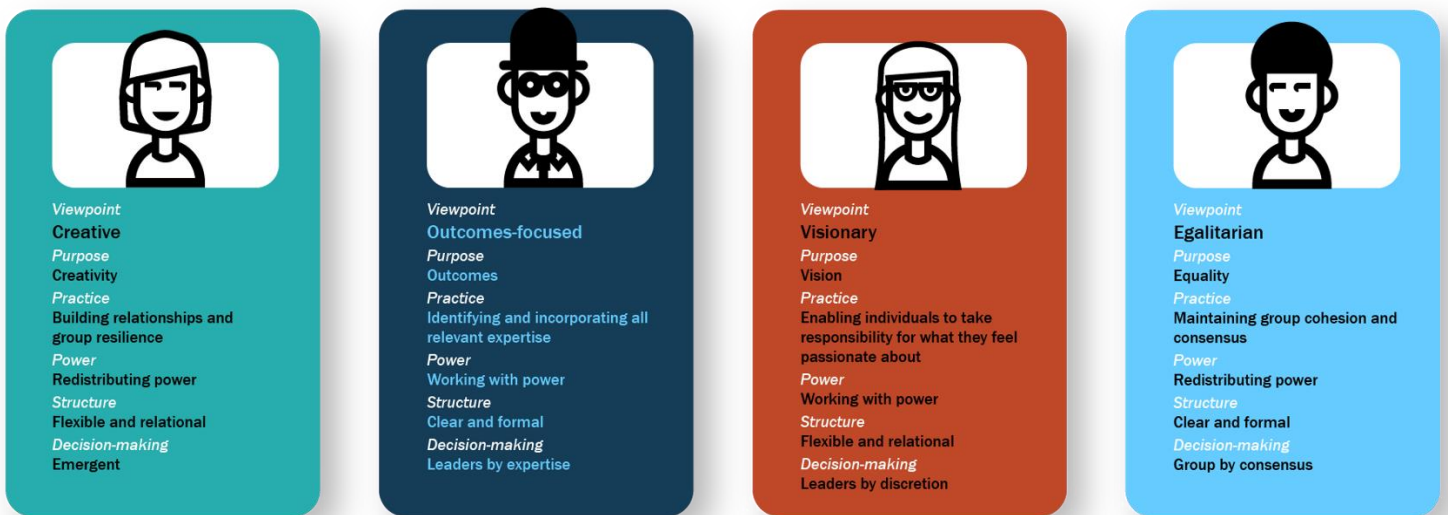


Figure 3: Leading Co-production. Source: Authors, drawing on Durose et al. 2023.

### ***Co-production and provocation***

A third approach is *provocation* which focuses on how far co-production is able to mobilise action for transformative change. For example, Mitlin and Bartlett (2018:366) writing about development, note that “co-production appears to be essential to social transformation, a necessary even if not a sufficient condition”. The *provocation* perspective argues that the definition of co-production should ‘depend on the purpose’ to which it is put (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021, p. 5). From a provocation perspective, co-production is useful if it can bridge gaps between different experiences, expertise or ways of thinking to *get things done*. As Locock and Boaz (2019) assert about patient and public involvement in co-producing medical research, attempts to standardise definitions of co-production (following a *clarification* approach) may be unhelpful, and fail to capture how co-production appeals and actually works in a specific context.

Co-production may be assessed positively against its ability to offer a mobilising narrative for change, for example across public services to involve and value the contributions of service-users and citizens (Osborne et al., 2016). In another example, co-production was used in efforts to generate a sustainable future for the Georgia Basin, an area of Western Canada, where it was understood to provide an opportunity for communities to ‘actively alter the social conditions in which they find themselves’ (Robinson and Tansey, 2006, p. 152). This focus on action for transformative change still strives to meet the highest standards for co-production, but judges its usefulness according to what is produced, rather than solely on the quality of the process. To this extent, it focuses more on pragmatic, ‘good enough’ processes to galvanise different communities of interest.

### **4. Conclusion and implications**

Co-production recognises the value of practical knowledge, informal processes and improvisation, and in doing so provides a useful response to a policy-making environment characterised by uncertainty, complexity and contestation. Co-production’s distinctive take on collaboration provides a means of opening up policy-making both as a way of providing quality assurance, bringing new and different forms of expertise to bear upon complex policy problems, and opening up new ideas and solutions that would otherwise be missed.

The different approaches to conceptualisation outlined here help us to think in different ways about the usefulness of co-production, and in doing so develop a richer understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. But these perspectives also show that the value of co-production may not lie in it being a fixed idea. One practical implication of these approaches relates to the [kinds of leadership needed for co-production](#). Each requires a focus on different aspects of leadership – depending on whether a single vision and understanding of co-production is needed, or whether creativity, adaptability and flexibility in meanings are not only recognised but also celebrated. Leading co-production may mean adopting or combining different styles of leadership including creative, outcomes-focused, visionary or egalitarian (Figure 3).

Our analysis shows that co-production is a messy concept, and there is further work to do to define and communicate the distinctiveness of the idea. But rather than abandoning co-production, we should recognise that it is an idea with wide-ranging appeal, which is able to bridge gaps and open up understanding between policymakers, practitioners, researchers and citizens. In this way, co-production is not only helpful in challenging existing practice, but inspiring change to better meet the challenges of the moment.



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Further detail on the research underpinning this policy briefing can be found in the following recent articles:

Durose, Catherine., Beth Perry, Liz Richardson and Rikki Dean. 2023. 'Leadership and the hidden politics of co-produced research: a Q-methodology study'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 26(1). 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1960738>

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