

A Guide to Coproduction

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Contents

What is ‘coproduction’	4
Origins of the term ‘coproduction’	5
What coproduction means	6
What coproduction isn’t	8
How to do coproduction	9
Challenges to genuine coproduction	13
Examples	15
Learning examples from within ndti	15
Blogs	15
Useful references	16



What is ‘coproduction’

Coproduction is a term that is widely used in the delivery and evaluation of many public services. It has been predominantly used in mental health and learning disability services, but is relevant to all social care sectors (including voluntary and independent sector providers) and for all kinds of people who use social care services (Needham & Carr, 2009).

Coproduction is also a term that is widely used in social research. It often involves, academics, policy makers, service users and service providers working together for change. Action research methods are often used, as are artistic mediums to explore and disseminate the research issue. By working in a co-produced way, many of the academic debates and nuances surrounding emancipatory, participatory and inclusive research are avoided (Durose *et al*, 2017).

The take up of the term and the use of its concepts in both these arenas are complementary, with the outcomes of research often feeding into service delivery and vice versa.

Definition

In service delivery:

“Coproduction means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours” (Boyle and Harris, 2009).

In social research:

“Coproduction in research aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working with communities and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience” (Durose *et al*, 2017).



Origins of the term ‘Coproduction’

The term ‘Coproduction’ was first coined in the 1970’s by Professor Elinor Ostrom at the University of Indiana as a way of explaining to the Chicago Police Department why the crime rate in the city went up when patrols moved from being carried out on foot to patrol cars. In essence the term aimed to explain to the police why they need the community as much as the community needs them.

After its initial use in this context, the term is next cited to have been used in the UK by Anna Coote and others at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the King’s Fund to explain why doctors need patients as much as patients need doctors and that, when that relationship is forgotten, both sides fail.

Professor Edgar Cahn, a Washington civil rights lawyer, then expanded and strengthened the use of the term to explain how important neighbourhood level support systems (families and communities) are and how they can be rebuilt. Cahn recognised that these systems were, in the broadest sense, an undervalued economy within Western society (Cahn, 2000).

Cahn’s acknowledgement of community and family relationships as an economy was not a new concept, as it was first acknowledged by Aristotle in 362 BC, but his exploration of the concept led to a shift in the way this economy was viewed by much of the Western world. Prior to Cahn’s work in this area, community and familial relationships were seen as a secondary economy, a view which has shifted to a core economy in more recent times. This shift has seen an increased focus on what local authorities and public service providers can do to support and reinvigorate this economy. It is within this context that the interest in Coproduction both within service delivery and social research has gained momentum. Coproduction draws families, communities, service providers, policy makers and academics together to develop and evaluate services which helps rebuild these areas and release the potential of the core economy.



What Coproduction means

There is no single formula for Coproduction as it is a flexible approach, but there are a number of core principles that must underly any service, project or evaluation that refers to itself as ‘co-produced.’

- **Equality** – everyone has assets and no one group is more important than another.
- **Diversity** – as with equality, all groups have assets, and it is important in co-produced work to include a diverse mix of people who use services as well as those who may be excluded from such services.
- **Accessibility** – the process must be accessible to all involved in co-produced work to ensure everyone is taking part on an equal basis.
- **Reciprocity** – all involved in co-produced work must get something out for what they put in.

Without these underlying principles, there is a danger that the process could be undermined and subsumed into a public service or research agenda, aimed at reducing expenditure, pursuing targets or ‘proving’ impact.

As there is no single formula for Coproduction, the organisations, charities, and groups that set out to co-produce services with those who use them, their families, neighbours and local communities, or those that undertake research in this area, will all look different. However, there will be similar processes in place in each of them, which should include the following:

- Provide opportunities for personal growth and development to people, so that they are treated as assets, not burdens.
- Invest in strategies that develop the emotional intelligence and capacity of local communities.
- Use peer support networks instead of just professionals as the best means of transferring knowledge and capabilities.
- Blur the distinction between producers and consumers of services, by reconfiguring the ways in which services are developed and delivered: services can be most effective when people get to act in both roles – as providers as well as recipients. In research, the distinction between ‘traditional researchers’ (academics) and those being researched (service users) should be blurred, to allow both to act in either role.

- Allow public service agencies to become catalysts and facilitators rather than simply providers.
- Devolve real responsibility, leadership, and authority to ‘users’, and encourage self-organisation rather than direction from above.
- Offer participants a range of incentives which help to embed the key elements of reciprocity and mutuality.

By incorporating these elements, co-produced services and research should:

- **Build community.**
The core of Coproduction is that it allows public services and research to play an active role in building and sustaining networks and support.
- **Support resilience.**
The purpose of Coproduction is to transform society. Developing the resilience of individuals and communities is about creating personal experiences upon which people can base future decisions. This requires opportunities for people to learn and take calculated risks that they can then learn from. To do this constructively, people need supportive networks around them. Current structures limit people’s opportunities to experiment for fear of the consequences of failure. However, without these supported opportunities people may fail to develop the frames of reference that will make them more resilient and less reliant on the services in the longer term.



What Coproduction isn't

When considering what Coproduction is, it is also helpful to think about what it isn't. The 'personalisation' of social care services through the introduction of individual budgets is a useful tool for exploring how the term can be applied incorrectly.

The rise of Coproduction in the Western world has happened in parallel to the rise in the independent living and personalisation movement. As a result, the shift towards the provision of public services via individual budgets, where individuals are able to spend the money on the services, they decide they need, has often been referred to as being a co-produced. Of course, those in receipt of these budgets often know best what priorities they have and how the money allocated to them should be spent. But if all the public services do is give people a budget and tell them to get on with it, this flies in the face of the basic ideas behind Coproduction – that people need to be rooted in mutual support networks, and that not everything can be bought.

The charity In-Control makes a similar distinction between individual budgets and what they call 'self-directed support', in which money is only one of many assets on which people can draw. It is a vital part of the picture, but it definitely isn't enough. Individual budgets without mutual support misunderstand the nature of public services. Day-care service contracts for people with mental health problems, for example, are contracted for years rather than months. These are not services that can always be dipped in and out of as if they were consumers: what users need is long-term relationships of mutual trust if they are going to benefit. Research by John Clarke at the Open University also confirms that service users don't usually regard themselves as customers: they want long-term partnerships with professionals, and these are not so easily the product of individual budgets.

Personal budgets were never intended to cover every aspect of people's lives, to replace relationships with market transactions. But when they are used by policymakers instead of rebuilding social networks, this can be the outcome: the recipients will have less money and less confidence than before. By themselves, individual budgets entrench the ineffectiveness of the consumer model of care by encouraging users to 'buy solutions' rather than have an active stake in delivering (or 'producing') their own solutions. They may be a vital aspect of Coproduction, but like co-design they are only part of the picture. (NEF, 2008)



How to do Coproduction – service delivery

Due to the lack of a single formula for what Coproduction is, there are a myriad of ways in which Coproduction can be and is done. However, within co-produced service delivery a ‘whole systems’ approach is thought to be the most effective (SCIE, 2022) as it requires whole organisations and the systems in which they operate to change. This approach is needed as for Coproduction to be successful and sustainable:

- **organisations must change at every level – from senior management to frontline staff – if they want to achieve meaningful participation.**
- **participation should become part of daily practice – and not be a one-off activity.**
- **participation operates at different levels as there are many ways to involve people who use services in different types of decisions.**

To create the ‘whole systems’ change needed for effective Coproduction to take place, there are a number of elements that need to be considered. SCIE (2022) suggest that these elements are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which need to be put together to create the picture of Coproduction within service development, delivery, and evaluation.

Culture

For Coproduction to take place, the culture of the public service organisations and research institutions intending to implement it need to be open to the concept and prepared to change the way they do things. Buy-in at every level is important but buy-in from senior management is key to ensure the balance of power within the organisation shifts and fosters an environment where those who use services, their families and communities can begin to take ownership of the services.

Risk Awareness

Learning from services who are doing Coproduction (see list below) suggests that being aware of risk is an important factor to making coproduction work. However, this is not risk as seen within the public service agenda of old, where risk is to be mitigated at all costs, but rather acknowledging that risk is an evitable part of life and can be managed. Furthermore, within Coproduction ‘risk awareness’ also acknowledges the risks involved with not co-producing services. For example, SCIE (2022) use safeguarding as an illustration of co-

produced risk management, suggesting that rather than being a professional responsibility, safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone in a community and where this happens it is Coproduction in action.

The commissioning process also needs to adjust its view of risk in the sense that small and medium size projects should not automatically be viewed as a 'risky' investment just because of their size.

Structure

As with culture, for Coproduction to work within an organisation, the structures involved in decision-making, leadership, communication, and the way the organisation plans and develops projects must be considered and, in many cases, reimagined. Existing structures can be built upon, especially if they connect the organisation to the local community and help foster these relationships. But it is important to reimagine those structures which do not allow Coproduction to be embedded within the organisation. This might mean developing:

- new goals
- new staff roles
- peer support networks
- new management structures
- Revising procedures for commissioning

Structures also need to be in place to ensure that those who use services, their families and communities can become involved in the Coproduction from the outset and are rewarded for their involvement. This does not have to be financial reward, systems such as Time Banking, have proved successful in many co-produced projects (see list below), but the structures need to be in place to make this work from the outset.

Resources

As noted above, the resources associated with Coproduction are an important factor in making it work within many organisations. Not only do the resources, whether financial or otherwise, need to be in place to get people on board, there also needs to be the internal resources available for the new ways of working to take shape. As a new process, Coproduction is time-consuming and needs resources to build the project. If there is a reluctance to commit resources, this may affect how the project progresses and what it is able to achieve.

Building Community Capacity

Getting the local community, whether that's those who use services and their families or those situated around them (the local community) involved in the process of Coproduction is vital to its success. SCIE (2022) suggest that organisations might find it useful to map the assets and resources in a community that can be used to develop Coproduction and where

the community does not have the capacity to develop in this way, they can support development in these areas. would be necessary to identify exactly what capacities are needed and how they can be developed.

Practice

With the culture, risk awareness, structures and resources considered, implementing Coproduction within an organisation should be plan sailing, but in practice tensions often arise between those who traditionally provided services and those who received them. There are a number of examples which highlight these tensions and how they have arisen (list below).

Learning from these practice sites provide the following tips for helping alleviate these tensions.

- Ensuring all meetings are organised for both traditional service users and service providers at the same time. There should never be separate meetings for separate groups as this causes tension, but also removes the chances for groups to build relationships and connections with one another.
- Making sure all meeting locations and the information about and for these meetings is accessible to those in attendance. This may involve using alternative formats.
- Allowing the new working groups time to connect and engage with one another.
- Having an independent facilitator to chair meetings can be helpful if tension does arise in the group.
- Offering training to both those who traditionally provide services and those who receive them can be beneficial early on in the process. Both groups are taking on new roles that require different skills to those they have used before so equipping them with knowledge can be helpful.

Commissioning

The process of commissioning services is a key area where organisations have to change their practices in order for Coproduction to be successful. Commissioners need to develop approaches which recognise the social, economic, and environmental impact of the services they commission. It also required them to see the results of their commissioning in terms of outcomes for the people who use the service, rather than outputs which largely focus on the numbers of people using the service.

For commissioning to be co-productive it should have the following aims:

- Recognise local assets.
- Apply local insights.
- Work collaboratively.
- Be innovative.
- Take a long-term view.

To achieve these aims, commissioners need to embrace including Coproduction in the commissioning process itself and including it in the services they commission. Co-producing the commissioning process means people who use services and wider communities being part of decision making. Commissioning co-productive services is achieved by awarding contracts for services to suppliers that use co-productive approaches. Furthermore, it is important that commissioner make it clear to potential suppliers that Coproduction is a key quality criterion on which tenders will be assessed.

Review and Evaluation

For Coproduction to be successful, it should be viewed as an on-going process which requires regular reviews and evaluations. Everyone involved in the process of creating the co-produced services should be involved in the review and evaluation of its work. This is vital to ensure that everything is going as planned, to learn from any challenges and celebrate any achievements.

Whilst review and evaluation are vital to the success of Coproduction it is important to ensure that these processes are guided by the core principles of Coproduction and not a public service agenda. As with commissioning, this means shifting the measures of success towards an outcome rather than an output focus; measuring what matters to the people who use the services rather than just the numbers of people using it. Commissioners of services can help in this regard, by making it a requirement of the services they commission to report what people who use the services think and feel about the service throughout the funding cycle. Independent evaluators can also help organisations stay on track, but it is vital to ensure that these evaluators comprehend the core principles of Coproduction before undertaking the work.

SCIE (2022) suggest that regular reviews can be introduced in co-produced services to explore:

- the Coproduction process itself and how well everyone works together.
- social, wellbeing and environmental outcomes.
- the full costs and benefits, including added value such as the benefits of reciprocity.



Challenges to genuine Coproduction

As the 'how to do Coproduction' section suggests, if any of the jigsaw puzzle pieces are not present, or are not underpinned by the core principles of Coproduction, then developing genuine co-produced services, evaluations and research will be challenging. However, there are also several other elements that might challenge the development of Coproduction:

Lack of resources

A lack of resources whether financial or otherwise will have an effect on the ability of Coproduction to work. This may be especially true for work being done in rural areas as the costs of Coproduction in these areas will be particularly high because people will be coming to the project from a wide geographical area, and they may need to travel some distance.

Getting everyone on board

Whether this is within organisations, service users or the local community, it can be challenging to engage people in new co-produced projects. Within organisations this may be due to fear (staff not wanting to lose power or fear losing their jobs) or cynicism about the new way of working. For those who use services and/or local communities there may be cynicism about the new way of working being genuine and some individuals may feel overburdened by requests to be 'experts by experience' from lots of different arenas.

Poor communication

Poor communication within organisations can be a real challenge to making Coproduction work especially with regard to senior management buy-in without consultation with other staff members. Communication within Coproduction teams is vital as well, ensuring that all communication is accessible and clear to all involved.

Taking risks

Shifting towards co-produced, well managed risk taking from the risk adverse culture of many social care organisations is a challenge for many organisations but can be overcome through genuine embedding of the core principles of Coproduction.

Commissioning

Shifting the measure of 'success' to an outcomes rather than outputs approach proves challenging for many commissioners as outcomes are less quantifiable than outputs. Furthermore, commissioners can find shifting towards commissioning smaller co-produced services difficult as they have traditionally been seen as high-risk investments. Embedding the core principles of Coproduction in commissioning practice can help alleviate this.

Diversity

Getting people there who represent all groups who use services, but also those who are excluded from these services is a challenge for many organisations trying to introduce Coproduction. Building on and developing community networks is one way of overcoming this challenge in the longer term.

Being tokenistic

If the core principles of Coproduction are not embedded into organisations and those who work for them, there is a risk that the entire process becomes tokenistic. Services

The current state of social care

One of the greatest challenges to creating co-produced social care services is the current state of the sector at the moment. A lack of resources



Examples

Learning Examples from within NDTi

Strengthening the circle <https://www.ndti.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/coproduction/strengthening-the-circle/>

A guide to Coproduction with older people:
<https://www.ndti.org.uk/resources/publications/a-guide-to-Coproduction-with-older-people>

Coproduction with people with long term conditions:
<https://www.ndti.org.uk/resources/insights/insights-25-Coproduction-with-people-with-long-term-conditions>

Coproduction in mental health <https://www.ndti.org.uk/news/Coproduction-in-mental-health-call-for-practice-examples>

Blogs

<https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Blog/Effective-Coproduction-three-simple-steps/>

<https://www.iriss.org.uk/news/news/2018/09/17/making-Coproduction-happen-blog-launch>

<https://www.boingboing.org.uk/collective-perspectives-Coproduction-leandran-co-researchers-blog/>

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2016/10/Coproduction-inconvenient-truth>



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