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Community Development and Co-production: Thinking Critically About Parameters and Power

Hannah Bradley
Current Student on the BA (hons) Community Education Programme, Moray House School of Education.

As the work of community development practitioners is to some degree influenced by social policy, it is important to think critically about the parameters a particular policy discourse may construct. In this paper I propose using Gaventa's (2006) 'power cube' as a framework for analysing the possible parameters which co-production constructs for community development workers, specifically where it situates them in terms of the power they have access to.

Firstly, I will explore where one might initially assume community development finds itself situated in the context of co-production and will highlight some of the opportunities this offers practitioners, specifically the potential for renewing democracy, using an asset-based approach and the opportunities to facilitate empowerment. I will then pose a more critical analysis of the parameters that co-production creates by exploring an alternative view of where co-production might situate community development and the dilemma this may pose – that of furthering the global reach of neoliberal ideology. I will conclude by suggesting the ways in which community development workers can continue to carry out meaningful, radical work – regardless of the parameters created for them by a particular policy discourse – by continuing to be critically reflective.

Using the Power Cube as a Tool for Analysis

When assessing how co-production constructs the parameters of community development, I am essentially looking at the opportunities or dilemmas that co-production policy poses in terms of the power that it makes available. A useful way to consider these areas of opportunity is John Gaventa's 'power cube' (Gaventa,

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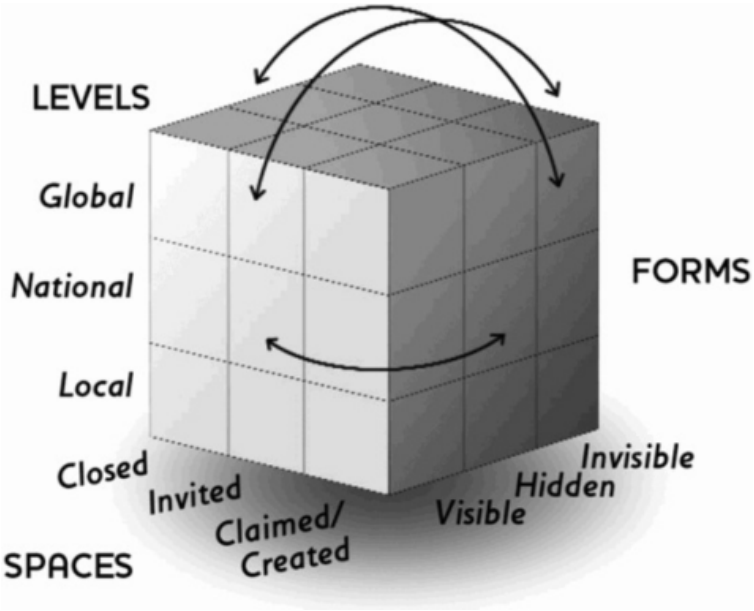
2006). The power cube, which can be seen in *Figure 1,* is a visual representation of where power lies, who might possess it, and where power might be attainable in the context of citizen engagement. Considering all of the possible positions where power can reside allows for practitioners to be critical of their own actions and the associated access to power, in terms of where they have come from and where they wish to go, as well as where they are *currently* as opposed to where they *would like* to be.

Figure 1 The 'power cube': the levels, spaces and forms of power



(Gaventa, 2006)

Parameters Constructed by Co-Production – Initial Thoughts

At first glance, co-production situates community development in an invited space; the community development worker's role has always involved being *invited* by local or national government to implement policies and engage the public with them. The level of power is predominantly on a local level, as the primary focus of community development are the individuals and communities they work with, although co-production is also a prominent policy discourse at both national and global levels. It is also a visible form of power that co-production offers community development, as the specific policies it influences are on public record. In the language of the power cube,

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therefore, co-production constructs parameters for community development where it has power in a *visible* form, at a *local* level, in an *invited* space.

Positive Parameters – Co-Production's Potential Opportunities

In terms of the opportunities that these parameters offer community development, there appear to be many. Firstly, the language affiliated with co-production bears a striking resemblance to that of the CLD Standards Council. I wish to draw similarities between three of the five core CLD values, those of inclusion, self-determination and empowerment (CLD Standards Council for Scotland, 2009).

Inclusion - Renewing Democracy

One of the criticisms of the current way that welfare provisions are delivered in Scotland is that they are undemocratic; they are 'top-down' (Christie, 2011), decision-making is centralised (Pestoff, 2006) and there is little or no participation from individuals and communities in their design and delivery (Christie, 2011). Far from consultation, co-production proposes that communities co-producing public services in a reciprocal, equal relationship allows for a renewal of democratic processes (Pestoff, 2006).

This is surely a key opportunity, as facilitating the involvement of citizens in democratic processes is fundamental to community development. Indeed, 'no other profession is explicitly charged with the task of facilitating democratic participation in community settings' (Shaw, *forthcoming*). This renewal of democracy and the inclusion of individuals in democratic process so closely matches the CLD Standards Council's value of *inclusion*, that the parameters which co-production constructs for community development surely allows practitioners to operate within a framework that complements their professional values.

Self-Determination - An Asset-Based Approach

Co-production operates within a non-deficit model whereby there is a focus on a community's assets rather than its needs. It does so by drawing on society's 'core economy' (Cahn, 2008), where service users are viewed as having expert knowledge

about how their services should be better designed and delivered (Boyle and Harris, 2009) and the skills and experience they possess is considered underestimated and highly valued (*ibid*).

This is another opportunity that co-production offers community development, especially in terms of its professional identity. Much of the radical work carried out in community education aims to make the link between the 'private and the public' (Mills, 1959), exposing the oppressive nature of societal structures. Doing so allows learners to appreciate the enormity of the powers at play on a macro level and, despite how overwhelming this reality may be, this is the first step to 'practicing freedom' (Freire, 1976). Achieving this in practice means that community development *must* work from a non-deficit model, where workers maintain a respect for the individuals they work with, the potential they possess and the decisions they make. Co-production should allow for this core value of community development to flourish within the parameters it constructs.

Again, this element of co-production has similarities with the CLD Standards Council value of *self-determination*, which sees community development 'respecting the individual and valuing the right of people to make their own choices' (CLD Standards Council for Scotland, 2009). This is only possible with an asset-based approach.

Empowerment - Empowering Individuals and Communities

Another key element of co-production policy is that it is potentially empowering for communities, as it involves a shifting of power *away* from professionals *towards* co-producers (Boyle and Harris, 2009). Traditionally, power in decision-making and service-delivery resides with welfare provision professionals. Co-production challenges this by putting communities and professionals on an equal footing giving communities genuine power over the quality of welfare provisions (Scottish Co-Production Network in SCDC, 2011).

In addition to *empowerment* being a CLD value in itself, power distribution is also central to the SCDC's definition of the purpose of community development in that it

should seek to change the nature of the relationship between those who possess it and those who do not.

It would appear that within the parameters which co-production constructs for community development, with the availability of invited, visible and local elements of power, there is the opportunity for community development to work towards empowering communities and renewing democracy using an asset-based approach. This not only offers opportunities for the actual work that community development carries out, but it is an opportunity to do so in a way which complements its professional values and identity.

Problematic Parameters - Co-Production's Neoliberal Underpinnings

Returning to the power cube, I wish to explore another dimension of power in terms of the parameters co-production constructs for community development. I previously stated that when community development workers facilitate communities to become co-producers of public services they could be seen as having power in an *invited* space in a *visible* form on a *local* level. However, there is another way of viewing power that needs to be considered if community development practitioners want to think critically about the parameters that co-production constructs for them.

I still believe that the power community development workers have in terms of facilitating co-production is in an *invited* space, but I wish to explore the ideological elements of co-production which may result in community workers having power to facilitate the spread of neo-liberalism on a global level in a form which is hidden from view. Using the power cube to assess the available power to practitioners in implementing co-production as a policy discourse changes the parameters for the actions of community development workers quite drastically.

Implying Welfare Dependency

Firstly, the language which appears to show co-production as having an asset-based approach to communities may, in actual fact, be in response to the assumption that there is currently welfare dependency amongst service users.

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One of the statements from NHS Tayside which was taken from the Scottish Co-Production website describes the act of co-producing services is a way 'to change [communities'] relationship with services from dependency to genuinely taking control' (Communities in Control, NHS Tayside Health Equity Strategy in SCDC, 2011). By co-producing services, communities can become 'involved in the delivery of services, *behaviour change initiatives* and solutions, as well as in their design' (Tayside Health Board CDAS in Christie, 2011 emphasis added). Similarly, co-producing public services allows for 'self-help and behaviour change' (Boyle and Harris, 2009 p20) and can 'encourage independence' (Boyle and Harris, 2009 p15). This implication is potentially problematic for community development in that it has a deficit view of individuals and fails to address social issues on a structural level.

De-Professionalisation

Co-production also has the potential to de-professionalise the trained staff that co-produce with communities, where volunteers are viewed as undermining the skills of service providers (Pestoff, 2006). Professional staff, once thought to be 'autonomous experts who use specialist knowledge and skills for the social good' (Clarke and Newman, 1997), have recently been under scrutiny and the concept of 'professionalism' devalued (Cooper, 2008).

There are, of course, positive elements to individuals being sceptical of professionals' 'expert' opinion; community development should surely be an advocate for this application of critical thinking. However, not only has co-production been criticised as *specifically designed* to 'de-professionalise workers' (Needham, 2013 p101), the ideological foundation of de-professionalisation is thought to be a deliberate attempt to reduce the welfare state (Shaw, *forthcoming*).

From Rights to Responsibilities

Shifting power *from* professionals *to* communities may be seen as empowering, but shifting power also means shifting responsibilities, blurring the boundaries between private, public and third sectors. Co-production also assumes that communities are willing to co-produce. Wishing to be consulted about how services are delivered does not necessarily mean that communities want to be involved in service delivery

(Bovaird, 2007). When they are willing, communities may lack the skills to participate in co-production (Pestoff, 2006) and community development workers run the risk of exhausting the energies of willing co-producers (Birchall and Simmons, 2004). Although this is an opportunity for practitioners to develop the necessary skills amongst those who lack them, the bigger question here is 'who participates and why do they *have* to?' (Bovaird, 2007 p856 emphasis added).

Marshall's (1950) theory of social rights underpins the purpose of the welfare state; its mere existence acknowledges both the existence of social problems and the state's responsibility to put compensatory measures in place. Public participation should not be *required* in order to receive the same quality of services as society's more fortunate. Making citizens responsible for co-producing public services serves to devalue the welfare state and goes against these individual social rights.

It could be the case that by facilitating communities to become co-producers, community development is simply distributing individual responsibility under the guise of opportunity (Cooper, 2008) and despite co-production's potential to make social policy more participatory, facilitating participation in this way could simply be facilitating cuts to welfare spending (Shaw, *forthcoming*). Considering co-production's neoliberal underpinnings, community development workers are not only working directly with *local* communities in a *visible* form, they also have the power to further this dominant ideology in a *hidden* form on a potentially *global* scale.

Critical Reflection for Radical Action

When thinking critically about the parameters that co-production constructs, and to adequately assess the degree to which those parameters are problematic, individual community workers must be critical about where they situate themselves in relation to the radical and reformist traditions. It may very well be the case that for some community development workers, co-production is largely unproblematic. What is important is that, as a profession, community development continues to be reflective and self-critical and continues to consider the purpose of its role by asking the question: "Am I becoming part of the problem?"

Community development needs to respond directly to the issues identified by the communities in which staff are working. If co-production is constructing parameters

for community development by already dictating what those issues are, this is potentially problematic. Economic development and the involvement of citizens in improving public services may well be *part* of community development, but it need not be its *focus*.

I consider the power cube to be a valuable resource that allows us to be critically reflective as it forces practitioners not only to think about the parameters that a policy discourse is creating for them, but to consider where their current practices situate them and how they might reposition themselves.

The reality may be that the invited spaces which are on offer are simply not enough. If the policy discourses available to community development are similar to co-production in terms of the potential dilemmas, community development needs to simultaneously facilitate 'strategic participation' in *invited* spaces, avoiding participation which is both manipulated and tokenistic, alongside facilitating 'strategic non-participation' in *claimed* spaces to strengthen and promote democracy (Shaw and Crowther, 2014).

Conclusion

At first glance, co-production creates parameters for community development by granting access to power in a *visible* form at a *local* level in an *invited* space. These parameters offer workers opportunities to renew and develop participation in democratic processes using an asset-based approach which has the potential to facilitate the empowerment of the individuals and communities they work with.

However, when considering the neoliberal elements of co-production – such as the implication of welfare dependency, the de-professionalisation workers and supporting the trend in a shift from rights to responsibilities – it appears that having access to power on a larger, global scale may, in fact, go against the interests of community development and its social-democratic foundations (Tett, 2010).

In this article I have proposed the use of Gaventa's 'power cube' as a tool for analysis, showing the ways that it can provide practitioners with a clear framework to critically reflect on the parameters being constructed for them by co-production. Beyond this, it may well be useful in a wide range of contexts for a variety of practitioners and disciplines.

Whether or not community workers use the power cube, or any other framework for analysing the parameters that a specific policy context creates for them, what is essential is that they to continue to be critical about the work they do and where it situates them in terms of the historical traditions.

After all, 'failing to be vigilant about changes in the political context [runs] the risk of developing practice that reinforces discrimination whilst still waving the banner of social justice' (Ledwith, 2007 p8).

It appears to be that for the radical worker, using the invited spaces offered by co-production simply are not enough to carry out the work necessary for community development to involve citizens in meaningful, non-tokenistic democratic participation. The initial parameters which appear to be constructed for community development need not be the only parameters in which workers operate.

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