

Abstract

Research on the roles of the third sector in the delivery of public services has so far been scattered. However, there is much to learn from drawing the different manifestations of third-sector involvement together, as each represents an element of the third sector within the public services, expressed in different ways. An interesting question for research and practice is how different combinations of such elements are and should be embedded, given the variations in national structures of service provision. The studies presented in this collection have offered a stepping-stone in progressing towards an answer. Here we offer some suggestions for a future research agenda. These concern, respectively, the relationships between different roles of the third sector, links with the analysis of welfare state reform and the function of co-production.

Key words

Co-production, nonprofit, partnerships, public services, third sector, welfare state

PATTERNS OF CO-PRODUCTION IN PUBLIC SERVICES

Some concluding thoughts

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature on the reform of European economies and systems of social protection. Much of this literature deals with changes (or lack of them) in labor markets. However, it fails to take account of the significant potential contribution to economic innovation through the provision of public services. One method for introducing more innovation in this area has been to involve different types of actors in service provision, including third-sector organizations.

In many European countries, public service provision has never been equated with state provision. Voluntary and non-profit organizations traditionally played a major role in providing public services, especially in Continental countries. In the European Union generally, the significance of such organizations in the public domain has increased over recent decades. As a consequence, systems of provision increasingly combine different mechanisms of co-ordination and different types of actors (elsewhere termed ‘the welfare mix’, see Brandsen *et al.* 2005; Evers 2005). There have also been various ways in which users have been involved in service provision, as co-producers of the services they receive. Such arrangements are believed to contribute both to innovation and commitment in the public services.

Research into these various types of arrangements has so far been scattered, focusing on either governance issues or on production, on volunteers or professionals, on organizations or individuals. However, there is much to learn from drawing the different manifestations of the third sector’s role together, as they each represent an element of the third sector within the public services, expressed in different ways. An interesting question for research and practice is how different combinations of such elements are and should be embedded, given the variations in national structures of service provision. The collection of studies presented here offers a stepping-stone in progressing towards an answer. In this concluding contribution, we attempt to draw some lessons from them that could inform the future research agenda.

THE CONCEPTS OF CO-PRODUCTION, CO-MANAGEMENT AND CO-GOVERNANCE

In the introduction, we attempted to distinguish between three different roles of the third sector in relation to public services:

- *Co-governance* refers to an arrangement, in which the third sector participates in the planning and delivery of public services.
- *Co-management* refers to an arrangement, in which the third sector produces services in collaboration with the state.
- *Co-production*, in our more restricted use of the term, refers to an arrangement where citizens produce their own services at least in part. The latter could also

refer to autonomous service delivery by citizens without direct state involvement, but with public financing and regulation.

These concepts were partly traced back to the debate on user involvement. The concept of co-production was initially developed in America in the late 1960s to describe and delimit the involvement of ordinary citizens in the production of public services. It had a clear focus on the role of individuals or groups of citizens in the production of such services, although their involvement also had clear ramifications for both the meso and macro levels of society. More recently, it has been given a normative angle. Co-production, according to some proponents, could play a significant role in the renewal of democratic political systems and the welfare state (Pestoff 2007, forthcoming).

There have also been efforts to expand the meaning of the concept. In the UK, co-production has been used to analyse the role of voluntary and community organizations (VCOs) in the provision of public services (Osborne and McLaughlin 2004). Our threefold distinction builds on their work and attempts to bring together related, but different perspectives on the role of the third sector. However, by no means do we regard this typology as the last word on this issue. Rather, we prefer to view it as the starting point for what will hopefully be a long and fruitful debate.

We will now set out some potential avenues for future discussion, based on points made in this collection of studies. They concern, respectively, the relationships between different roles of the third sector, links with the analysis of welfare state reform and the function of co-production.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT ROLES OF THE THIRD SECTOR

One benefit of our approach is that it encourages a more comprehensive view of the different roles the third sector may have within a complex structure of service provision. Future research could explore the nature of these relationships more systematically. For example, a number of authors in this collection observe a trade-off between co-management and co-governance. It would certainly be interesting, not least for the third sector itself, to know whether this is a systematic trade-off or merely a temporary phenomenon. Also, there may be an advantage in a perspective on third-sector roles that embraces all its potential manifestations. For instance, the discussion of childcare and eldercare points to the need for a closer look at the unique nature of services, which often imply the active participation of clients or their relatives. The concept of co-production in providing public services might have put a somewhat different angle to Bode's interesting comparison of three European countries.

It is also useful to re-evaluate the third sector's influence on public services across the entire policy cycle and not simply to restrict it to influence on policymaking through advocacy. The output side of the political system (Easton 1965) deserves closer attention in both democratic and welfare theory. Opportunities for influencing the

actual services may be much greater further down the cycle (thereby linking the third sector to the field of implementation studies). The observations of Brandsen and van Hout in this collection show that, even if the role of organizations is restricted to co-management, there may still be scope for significantly influencing the final result, to an extent that goes beyond ‘fine-tuning’. A problem is, perhaps, that researchers have started to believe in the top–down, principal–agent perspective that is espoused by many governments, when in fact there is considerable autonomy for the agents if they take advantage of strategic opportunities.

LINKING THE THIRD SECTOR TO THE ANALYSIS OF WELFARE STATE REFORM

Given that the services delivered by third-sector organizations are mostly of a social nature, it seems logical to link it more closely to the debate on welfare state reform. Over the past decade, the latter has been strongly influenced by the notion of typologies of welfare states (cf. Titmuss 1974; Esping-Andersen 1990). These certainly offer opportunities for cross-national analysis. For instance, Prentice’s contribution explicitly links the Canadian experience to the liberal welfare regime type, in which childcare is primarily delivered through markets. This invites comparison; would third-sector services and co-production place as many burdens on women as active parents in a more ‘family-friendly’ society of the Scandinavian type? Turning to the elderly, in Bode’s analysis of Germany, France and England, we find countries representing two of Esping-Andersen’s three ‘regimes’, the continental conservative or corporatist and the liberal regime types. Do these theoretical regime differences have any bearing for the role of third-sector organizations in the provision of eldercare?

However, the studies in this collection also give cause to be wary of using the regime typology for an analysis of the third-sector’s role. Not only has the third sector been left out of mainstream regime typologies, but research on regimes has also tended to focus on formal arrangements (mostly concerning income transfer rather than service provision) at the national level. This ignores the local level, where many government–third-sector partnerships appear to have been realized regardless of the type of regime. Also, it has bypassed the issue of quality. The latter is more significant for services than for income transfer and is an issue where the third sector’s distinctive characteristics are more likely to be relevant.

THE FUNCTION OF CO-PRODUCTION

Finally, there is the question what co-production does, or in other words, what its actual function is. How exactly is the third sector related to governments, in terms of service delivery? Is it supplemental, complementary, alternative or perhaps even adversarial? To take the case of childcare: is third-sector childcare primarily a

supplement to public childcare, perhaps one that prevents or hinders governments from developing a universal early learning and childcare programme, since other services are already available? Or, is the third sector perhaps a complement to the public sector, one that can help to develop it in tandem by providing some best practice examples of high-quality care that may be emulated by public providers and/or demanded by parents elsewhere?

Future research could help to conceptualize the different types of functions more systematically and assess them on a cross-sectoral and/or cross-national basis. In the countries examined in this collection, the function of the third sector appears to be either supplementary or complementary. It would be especially interesting to include developing countries in an international sample, where there is more chance of the third sector having an alternative or adversarial function. This might help to determine with more precision which roles and functions of the third sector are more likely or more appropriate under certain conditions.

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