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Introducing a Platform for Co-production

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Operationalizing Sensemaking and Sensegiving Processes between Citizens, Professionals and Politicians: *Introducing a Platform for Co-production*

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ABSTRACT

With the ambition to professionalize the work with co-production in public organizations, this study introduces a bottom-up methodology that can be utilized as a ‘platform for co-production’: The BIKVA methodology. The manuscript starts by arguing for the relevancy of identifying the local ‘opportunity space’ for co-production so the co-producers become aware – both the public service professionals and the citizens – what they can change and what they cannot change in their collaboration towards e.g. reducing the degree of service failure. The BIKVA methodology is based on sensemaking and sensegiving theory and this theoretical foundation is examined in relation to the literature on the role of service professionals in co-production. Finally, the advantages and limitations of BIKVA as a platform for co-production are discussed.

KEYWORDS:

Co-production; Sensemaking; BIKVA methodology; service professionals as co-producers; user involvement

1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of New Public Governance causes many new requirements to emerge in public organizations – especially in local governments that traditionally have been operated from a New Public Management-orientation (OECD, 2011). Co-production is one of these requirements that is espoused to mitigate or even to solve complex, social phenomena (Voorberg et al. 2015; Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere, 2018). Studies however show, that the introduction of co-production is not without problems (Durose et al. 2015). Kleinhans (2017) reports on initiatives that lead to ‘counter-production’ because of e.g. inappropriate organizational structures, and Steen and Tuurnas (2018) report on issues pertaining to the lack of knowledge to the new role as co-producer ascribed to public service professionals. We propose, that public organizations need a ‘platform for co-production’ to strengthen the role of the staff as co-producers and hence to professionalize their work together with

the citizens. A 'platform' makes it – according to Gouillart and Hallett (2015) – possible for different stakeholders to engage in new forms of interaction with one another in a physical and/or online context by using a concrete methodology. The argument is, that a 'platform for co-production' can enable the professionals to process, learn, adjust and assess the outcomes of co-production initiatives (Boviard and Loeffler, 2012; Brix, Krogstrup and Mortensen, 2017) e.g. as temporal *ad hoc* or longitudinal formalized processes (Bingham, 2011). Such capabilities are important, since the study of co-production processes and the outcomes pertaining to these processes are scarce (Voorberg et al., 2015; Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere, 2018). The purpose of this study is hence to introduce such a platform that can be used to professionalize co-production initiatives and the capacities of the professionals in their role as co-producers. The 'platform for co-production' we propose is based on a bottom-up methodology that involves citizens as co-producers in the design and creation of public services. By framing co-production in the 'value-chain-school' (Pestoff, 2018), that defines co-production in relation to the desired outcomes instead of defining co-production according to existing services (Boviard and Loeffler, 2012), we discuss how this bottom-up methodology – the BIKVA methodology (Krogstrup, 1997; Krogstrup and Brix, 2019) – can act as a platform for co-production. The BIKVA methodology is based on sensemaking and sensegiving processes that are systematically structured across the domains of the citizens, front staffers, management and politicians. The purpose of this systematic bottom-up process is to use the citizens' knowledge, perspectives, experience etc. as 'triggers for learning' in the public service organization. This is unfolded further in the theoretical background section. The implication of the study is a clarification of how researchers and professionals from a sensemaking perspective can avoid that co-production activities initiated by use of the BIKVA methodology end up as old fashioned consultation or tokenism, so the users get disappointed or even disempowered in the process (Arnstein, 1969; Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015).

The study proceeds as follows. First the theoretical background is presented in which the role of co-producers and user participation is briefly described. An 'opportunity space' for co-production is introduced, and the BIKVA methodology is presented as a platform for co-production. Hereafter, the discussion provides argumentation for how the BIKVA methodology can be used as a platform for co-production and the limitations of applying this methodology are presented.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

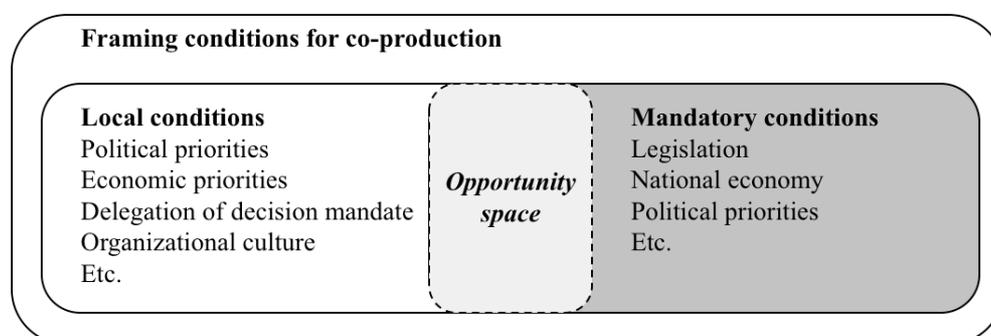
2.1 Co-Production and user participation

Although much research effort is made in the study of co-production, the literature is biased towards the citizens’ role as co-producer and less on the front staffers’ role as co-producer (Voorberg et al, 2015; Steen and Tuurnas, 2018). There is lack of research on the ‘enabling skills’ of front staffers and studies establish that relational competencies and the ability to facilitate and mobilize citizens as co-producers are imperative (Davy and Ågård, 2017; Steen and Tuurnas, 2018):

“There is a need for professionals not only to mobilize and activate citizens as potential partners, but also to support and “orchestrate” the collaboration, yet taking into account the expectations of the public organizations in terms of whether, what and with whom to coproduce (...) and ensuring accountability of co-production efforts” (Steen and Tuurnas, 2018, p.84).

Fledderus (2015) emphasize the importance of creating trust between co-producers and having clear expectations to what is ascribed to the different roles of the co-producers (i.e. the front staffer and the citizen) so e.g. self-serving biases are reduced. On the organizational level it is important that managerial support is given towards co-production and that institutional workflows and structures support co-production initiatives (Tuurnas, 2016; Kleinhans, 2017). The important question to ask before initiating co-production initiatives is: *What is the ‘opportunity space’ for co-production we have when inviting the citizens to take the role of co-producers? And – “how is the public organization (or unit(s) herein) prepared and organized for co-production so counter-production does not occur?”* (see e.g. Kleinhans, 2017), and equally important: *to what extent are the citizens capable to take on the role as co-producers?* (see e.g. Fledderus, 2015).

Figure 1: Identifying the opportunity space for co-production



Source: Authors’ own development

The argument is that local conditions such as economic priorities, organizational culture, delegation of power, control mechanisms and performance requirements influence the opportunities, either directly or indirectly for co-production equally as the mandatory conditions such as legislative requirements and ethical considerations (Tuurnas, 2016; Kleinhans, 2017; Krogstrup and Brix, 2019). Identifying the 'opportunity space' for co-production is imperative, because it sets the frame for what can be done and what cannot be done in the co-production process. The logic is that when front staffers invite citizens to take on the role as fellow co-producers, the citizens are made aware of the elements that can be modified and/or rethought as well as the mandatory conditions that cannot be changed. It is however important to notice that the 'opportunity space' not only is affected by mandatory (external) conditions or local conditions (i.e. barriers). Dialectic interactions between professional co-producers and fellow co-producers such as citizens and front staffers from other organizations also influence priorities (what is regarded as being 'important') and what the actors perceive as 'correct' behaviors and attitudes in this opportunity space. Hence, the opportunity space is open for negotiation of meaning (Brix, 2017) which makes it a dynamic context for co-production. The clarification of the opportunity space hence makes it possible to identify on which step of the involvement ladder the citizens can be invited to participate in the co-production initiative (Arnstein, 1969; Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015). While Arnstein's seminal work on the gradation of citizen participation range from 'informing' to 'citizen control' is still important, Hurlbert and Gupta's (2015) 'split ladder of participation' is equally becoming a relevant framework to advance to our understanding of citizen participation in the opportunity space for co-production. The split ladder e.g. requires that professional co-producers consider '*what type of learning is required/desired?*' when inviting citizens as participants (Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015). In addition to this, the split ladder makes explicit if the problem being solved by co-production initiatives is considered to be 'technical' or 'complex' (Krogstrup, 2016). Having discussed the importance of identifying the opportunity space for co-production we proceed in the following to introduce the BIKVA methodology as a potential platform for co-production (Krogstrup, 1997; Krogstrup and Brix, 2019) that can be utilized as a systematic process within the identified opportunity space.

2.2 Introducing the BIKVA methodology

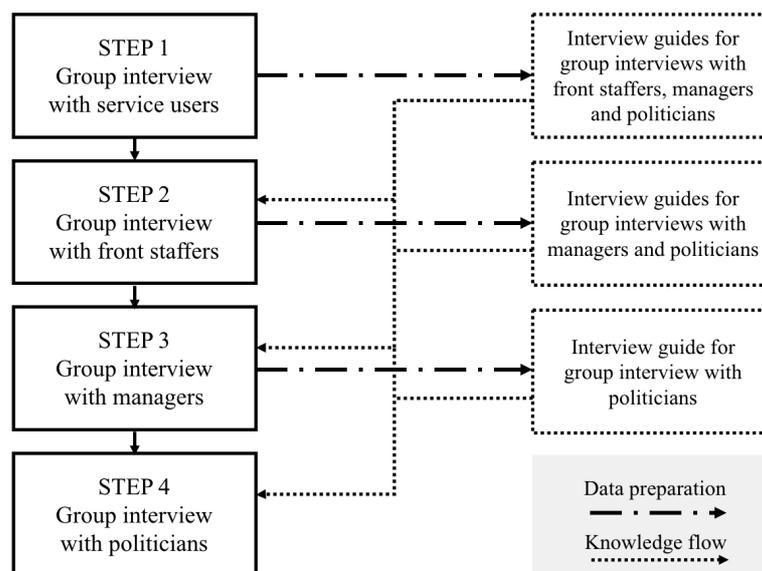
The purpose of the BIKVA methodology is to challenge existing norms, routines, and practices in public service organizations and in local governments from a service user perspective. In BIKVA, the service users are given the role as the central informant, while at the same time, the service users

are asked to define the development or evaluation questions for the study being initiated. As the service users define these questions, it is their values that constitute the organizing principle of the co-production initiative. An example of an open question could be: “*In your opinion, what is good about ‘x service,’ and what is not so good?*” Such a question allows the service users to choose the dimensions they want to describe about the public service. The first step thereby enables the identification of the service users’ criteria for what they think should be the basis for assessing or improving the public service. The consequence of giving the service users this authority is that the BIKVA methodology must be characterized as a normative evaluation and development approach. It is important to note that this approach is not more or less normative than any other evaluation of the solutions to complex, social problems, regardless of what rationale is used (Julkunen, 2012; Krogstrup, 2016).

2.2.1 The four steps of BIKVA

The BIKVA methodology consists of four steps, which are processed by a facilitator. See Figure 2 below. The *first step* is a group interview with the service users concerning the phenomena or topics that are to be rethought, improved, or evaluated. In the *second step*, the front staffers are presented with the service users’ knowledge and perspectives stemming from the service user group interview.

Figure 2: The BIKVA methodology



Source: Translated from Krogstrup and Brix (2019)

This presentation enables the front staffers’ reflections concerning the service users’ knowledge and perspectives, which can be used to inform the front staffers about the effects, the advantages, and

disadvantages of their work, from a service user perspective. In the *third step*, the service users' knowledge and perspectives and the front staffers' reflection on these are presented to the management. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the causes and reasons for the service users' and the front staffers' knowledge and perspectives on a managerial level. Finally, in the *fourth step*, the knowledge and perspectives from the three previous steps are presented to the political level, with the purpose of discussing and investigating potential causes and effects for the service users' knowledge and perspectives and the ones existing in the public organization.

2.2.2 The service users are “triggers for learning”

The BIKVA methodology gives public service users an active role in the debate on how social provision should develop and be developed. The service users act as ‘triggers for learning’ in BIKVA and based on the knowledge and perspectives presented by the service users, the facilitator can involve relevant actors and stakeholders in a dialogue throughout the group interviews in the public organization. It is important to note that the BIKVA methodology can have both a retrospective and a prospective view in the way the initial questions are asked by the facilitator. If the purpose of the BIKVA process is the creation of new routines for co-production between the service users and the public organization, the question could be: “*How would you imagine a collaboration between you and our institution could look like in the future concerning ‘x theme’?*”. If the purpose of the BIKVA process is evaluation and development, the question could be: “*What can be done to improve ‘x theme’ in your meeting with us [the public organization]?*” or “*What do you think adds value to you in ‘x theme’ and what provides less value to you?*” An essential part of the BIKVA methodology is that the process is initiated by a facilitator with an open group interview *where only the service users participate*. Front staffers and street-level bureaucrats in the public sector have—when introduced to the BIKVA methodology—questioned whether it would not be advantageous for both themselves and the service users to participate in a collective group interview. An essential argument for not assembling both parties in one group interview is one of *power asymmetry*. To get the service users' subjective opinion on quality and to get an idea of the intersubjective validity criteria which exist in the service user group, it is important that the “helper” and the “help-seeker” are not invited to the same interview (Krogstrup and Brix, 2019).

2.2.3 The procedural steps from the service user group interview into the public organization

The result of the group interview with the service users will introduce a number of themes, which the facilitator turns into triggers for learning in the interview guides. These interview guides are to be used on each of the three levels in the public organization, cf., the steps in the BIKVA methodology. An estimate is that 80% of the knowledge that is generated in the service user group interview concerns the relationship between the service users and the front staffers. Therefore, the BIKVA facilitator has to consider the relevance of the knowledge that is used as foundation for the group interviews on the different organizational levels. Not everything has to go to the managerial or political level. When the facilitator has presented the front staffers with the themes stemming from the service users' knowledge and perspectives, and responses are given, the interview guide for the managerial level is updated. When interviewing the management, the facilitator could ask a question like: "*Why do you think the service users raise this topic concerning 'x theme,' and why do you think the front staffers respond to this as they do?*" A similar process is initiated when the BIKVA facilitator enters the political level. It might be irrelevant to include the political level in some BIKVA processes if the issues raised or the potentials identified can be either mitigated or implemented without political intervention. However, if the BIKVA process represents a larger study, potentially based on multiple sub-studies, then a synthesis of the BIKVA processes can be presented to the political level, so potential changes can be discussed concerning the themes presented.

Based on these four steps, the BIKVA methodology can create valuable triggers for learning that enable public organizations to approach the increased requirement for collaborative governance by involving the service users as the most important stakeholders in the context of public service creation and provision (Julkunen, 2012; Brix, Nielsen, Krogstrup, 2017).

2.2.4 Sensemaking and sensegiving in the BIKVA methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the theoretical anchoring of the BIKVA methodology is based on sensemaking and sensegiving processes, see Table 1 below. Sensemaking¹ and sensegiving processes are dialectical constructs that can be used to understand how people understand new information and make sense of it, both as individuals (subjective sensemaking) and groups of individuals (intersubjective sensemaking) (Weick, 1995; Brix, 2017).

¹ It is important to notice that sensemaking theory is constituted by 7 interrelated dimensions which are not further explained here. Please see e.g. Weick (1995) for further explanation.

Table 1: Sensemaking and sensegiving across domains in co-production

	Sensemaking	Sensegiving	Comments
<i>Politicians</i>	What the politicians think about the managers, front staffers and citizens thoughts and logics	Why the politicians think like this about the managers, front staffers and citizens thoughts and logics	What can be done on a local, national or international political level to increase the outcomes for citizens which is not possible within current legislative or political framing conditions?
<i>Managers</i>	What the managers think about the front staffers and citizens thoughts and logics	Why the managers think like this concerning the front staffers and citizens thoughts and logics	What can be done differently in the current opportunity space to increase the outcomes for the citizens?
<i>Front staffers</i>	What the front staffers think of the citizens thoughts and logics	Why the front staffers think like this concerning the citizens thoughts and logics	What can be done different by the front staffer in the current opportunity space to increase the outcomes for the citizens?
<i>Citizens</i>	What the citizens think of “x theme”	Why the citizens think that about “x theme”	What it – according to the citizens – would require to decrease service failure or increase perceived value of the service

Source: Authors’ own development

Sensemaking theory accepts the premise that people can make different senses out of the same type of information and/or events (Weick, 1995). What some individuals might see as a disadvantage, other individuals might recognize as a unique opportunity, and it is important to notice that the ambition in a collective – intersubjective sensemaking process – is not necessary to agree on a common understanding, but it is equally important to understand other individuals subjective sensemaking and compare these to find divergent and convergent meaning. Sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) is an important construct in this regard used to tell other individuals *why* a person’s subjective sensemaking is as it is, and sensegiving theory also emphasizes that that ‘sender’ (sensegiver) makes an effort to translate his/her subjective meaning to a language/discourse that is perceived to be understandable for the ‘receiver’ (Brix, 2017).

3. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION: DO WE HAVE A PLATFORM FOR CO-PRODUCTION?

Whether or not the BIKVA methodology can be utilized as a platform for co-production is an empirical question that is based on how the ‘opportunity space’ for co-production is framed by the public organization and its employees, and the degree of participation that is ascribed to the citizens in their role as fellow co-producer (Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015; Fledderus, 2015; Tuurnas, 2016; Krogstrup and Brix, 2019). Although the citizens and front staffers are separated in the BIKVA

methodology, which could seem counter productive to the creation of trust (Fledderus, 2015), the argument is that this separation leads to the reduction of power asymmetry and thus a more 'real picture' of advantages and disadvantages of the existing or proposed services (Krogstrup and Brix, 2019). We argue, that BIKVA represents a systematic approach that is required to professionalize public service professionals in their work with orchestrating co-production (c.f. Steen and Tuurnas, 2018) as well as the capacities of utilizing the systematic approach can be build by the front staffers or consultants that utilize the model as an important part of the enabling skills of co-production (Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere, 2018).

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