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**Sustainable implementation of co-production**

*exploring conflicts and coping behavior employed by street-level professionals*

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# SUSTAINABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF CO-PRODUCTION:
## Exploring Conflicts and Coping Behavior Employed by Street-Level Professionals

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# SUSTAINABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF CO-PRODUCTION:
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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** – This study explores how street-level professionals translate and implement a co-production strategy, formulated by top management, in their professional practices, focusing on conflicts that arise during this process and the effectiveness of the coping strategies employed by these professionals to manage them.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is based on a lower-level inquiry into three care services in Denmark. It adopted the translation perspective in organizational research to analyze the consequences of street-level professionals' translation choices. Data were collected through interviews and observations.

**Findings** – This study found that street-level professionals' translation choices contribute to conflicts of varying forms and extents. The finding suggests that the way conflicts are managed makes the difference between the actual organizational change and the more symbolic acceptance of co-production.

**Originality/value –** This study contributes to discourses on challenges in co-production implementation by deepening knowledge about the role of coping behavior and translation in sustainable implementation of co-production.

**INTRODUCTION**

Public organizations constantly encounter new ideas and concepts that offer potential avenues for organizational development and the delivery of better services (Røvik, 2023). Following the New Public Management (NPM) approach, public sector organizations have adopted ideas from the private sector, such as Lean and Total Quality Management (Røvik, 2007; Sharma and Hoque, 2002). But a shift towards alternative models of public services, such as New Public Governance (NPG), has brought forth a surge in new organizational ideas (Palumbo, 2016; Torfing *et al.,* 2016). Among these ideas, co-production has

gained traction as a strategy for involving service users in the design and delivery of public services to create user-centered service processes (e.g., Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Fledderus, 2015; Osborne *et al*., 2016; Tuurnas 2021). However, the fundamental concept of co-production is that it thrives when it is initiated from the bottom up. Conversely, top-down strategies are inherently challenging. This tension potentially explains why public service organizations often perceive co-production as too conflict-ridden to be successfully implemented, despite its popularity (Jasper and Steen, 2019; Nielsen and Monrad, 2023). Furthermore, the assumed effects of co-production, such as increased service quality, user empowerment, and broader economic and social benefits, still require empirical confirmation (Pestoff, 2014; Voorberg *et al*., 2015). Thus, until co-production is operationalized and translated to local practices, it represents an ideology rather than an organizational practice (Author, 2020; Durose *et al*., 2013). The argument is that the success of co-production relies heavily on the translation efforts of street-level professionals, who bridge the gap between organizational goals and everyday practices (McMullin, 2023) and between potential and actual performances (Brix, 2021). But street-level professionals' willingness to engage in co-production and their ability to handle conflicts arising from co-production implementation remains understudied (Agger and Tortzen, 2022; Jasper and Steen, 2019, 2022).

This article examined how street-level professionals translate a co-production strategy, formulated by top management, into their professional practices. Here, translation refers to the more or less deliberate transformation of a practice and/or idea that happens when actors try to interpret, make sense of, and implement co-production (Boxenbaum and Pedersen, 2009; Røvik, 2011). Specifically, the research questions on which this study is based are as follows: 1) to what extent do conflicts emerge as street-level professionals translate a new co-production strategy into their practices? 2) What strategies do street-level professionals employ to manage these conflicts, and how effective are these strategies? By understanding how street-level professionals navigate co-production and conflicts, this study contributes to a better understanding of challenges in co-production implementation and how co-production becomes more than an idea and a management ambition.

This article is organized as follows. First, this study establishes a theoretical framework based on institutional theories and the concept of translation that was developed in Scandinavian institutionalism. From this perspective, we can see that co-production represents a "traveling idea" (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996), which can provoke conflicts and organizational ambiguities, as it is translated into a new setting. Thus, it provides a foundation for understanding the implemented dynamics. Second, the case study and the methodology underpinning the study are explained, and the research approach and data collection are highlighted. The analysis focuses on how street-level professionals' translation choices contribute to conflicts of varying forms and extents. Finally, the study concludes with the narration of coping strategies and a discussion of the key implications and limitations of the study.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SCANDINAVIAN INSTITUTIONALISM**

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in organizational institutionalism and focuses on the translation of organizational ideas, particularly those of street-level professionals (e.g., Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Røvik, 2023; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008)

*Conceptual foundations of organizational institutionalism*

Researchers such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977) established the conceptual foundations of modern organizational institutionalism. Their logic is that organizational ideas prescribing how organizations, or their specific parts, should be organized, can become popular because organizations mimic each other and adopt fashionable trends to appear legitimate (Christensen *et al.,* 2007; Lægreid, 2017; Røvik, 2002). The high rhetorical value of organizational ideas fascinates politicians and administrative managers, who seek to use these ideas to seek legitimization and support for specific agendas (Bentzen, 2019). However, the adoption of new organizational ideas often involves substantial investments in resources and may result in implementation deficits. Thus, for effective implementation, organizational ideas must be translated, conceptualized, and applied to concrete contexts where they are adopted (Palumbo, 2016; Pollitt and Hupe, 2011). Based on the scholarship in Scandinavian institutionalism, the notion of "translation" has developed, highlighting that ideas and practices are interpreted and reformulated during the

process of adoption (Greenwood *et al*., 2008). Thus, in this context, organizational ideas and practices are not seen as something "out there" and adopted more or less "as they are" as found in the diffusion perspective associated with the more traditional institutional theory (Parrado, 2008; Yee and Theil, 2020). A particular focus in Scandinavian institutionalism has been on the interplay between translated ideas and transformed organizational identities. For example, Yee and Theil (2020) have found that internal cultural characteristics influence the "depth" of the adoption of new reforms and ideas. In this vein, Boxenbaum and Pedersen (2009) proposed the perception of strategic opportunities with different interpretations as actors altering or neglecting elements during translation processes (which they consider incompatible with their worldview), while they add, reproduce, or copy elements that can support their perspective. While this highlights how translators transform organizational ideas, the factors that determine whether such translation processes lead to changes in organizational practices remain unclear (Boxenbaum, 2006; Wæraas and Sataøen, 2014). Though organizations face well-known challenges in translating organizational ideas into frontline practices and formulate the necessary action (e.g., Linneberg *et al.,* 2019; Thøgersen, 2022), previous studies have primarily focused on top management's translation (Røvik, 2007). A growing body of literature on Scandinavian institutionalism recognizes the crucial role of lower-level actors, including street-level professionals, in translation processes (Bentzen, 2019; Linneberg *et al.,* 2019; Vossen and Gestel, 2019). These studies highlight that lower-level actors actively engage in translation processes by creating local initiatives based on strategic agendas set by the management. Yet, limited attention has been paid to these lower-level actors and the factors influencing their translation choices.

### *Street-level professionals as translators*

Previous studies on street-level bureaucrats state that these professionals face conflicts and contradictory demands from policy requirements, clients' needs, professional codes, stakeholders' interests, and established institutional practices (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers *et al*., 2015; Tuominen and Hasu, 2020). The adoption of an organizational idea, such as co-production, can add yet another demand to their already complex and ambiguous work (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen, 2013; Taylor and Kelly, 2006). To manage such organizational

ambiguities and conflicts, street-level professionals employ coping strategies, some of which aim to balance

conflicts, while others try to deconstruct them by favoring one demand over others (Nielsen and Monrad,

2023; Oliver, 1991; Tummers *et al.*, 2015). Juggling conflicts caused or exacerbated by the adoption of a

new organizational idea can also force translators to perform "window dressing ritualism," where a new

organizational idea is decoupled from organizations' ongoing activities (Bromley and Powell, 2012). As

Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017) remarked, "Organizations solve the dilemma of contradictory demands by

meeting some demands by talk, others by decisions, and yet others by action" (p. 88). However, as Bentzen

(2019) cogently argued, a robust translation cannot be achieved solely through reflective, analytical "talk,"

but it depends on concrete experimentation: "walking the talk". In this study, I merged translation theory,

which encompasses both "walk" and "talk" aspects, with theories of coping strategies. The aim was to

explore whether the conflicts that arose during the translation of co-production could prompt street-level

professionals to adopt coping behaviors that hindered the concrete manifestation of co-production activities.

### *Co-production: A popular organizational idea*

Elinor Ostrom and her research group originally developed the concept of co-production in the 1970s to

describe the empirical phenomena of citizens contributing to the production of public goods and services

(Ostrom, 1996). However, it took a long time for co-production to reach the public policy mainstream; as "it

was simply not in tune with the time" (Brandsen *et al.,* 2018, p. 4). But in the last decade when co-

production gained attention in public sectors worldwide, we saw a re-engagement with the concept in

Ostrom's work (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Osborne *et al.,* 2016; Tuurnas, 2015). Operationalization and

implementation of co-production within organizational practices pose significant challenges owing to its

fuzziness, loose form, and relational dimension. Co-production is, for example, often defined as a "joint

effort" of service users and professionals, or as "active direct input" by service users (Brandsen and

Honingh, 2018). Describing a very simple—but also imprecise and ambiguous—recipe requires

discretionary action at the street level which cannot be monitored easily and offers little practical guidance to

organizations seeking to implement co-production (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Taylor and Kelly, 2006).

Furthermore, as most services inherently require some level of user compliance, co-production is arguably an inherent part of service-delivery processes (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018; Durose *et al.,* 2017). This makes it difficult to separate co-production from current practices, leading to confusion underlined in the question, "which services are not co-produced?" (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012). In practice, this can make it challenging for public organizational actors to grasp the content of co-production (Author 2017; Espersen, 2015). This highlights the pressing need for further research and practical guidance on how co-production can be translated and implemented in local contexts.

## METHODOLOGY AND SETTING

The Danish context was chosen for this study because co-production is a prominent focus in Danish municipalities (Author, 2020; Nielsen and Monrad 2023). Co-production may have been adopted in the Danish setting more maturely than in other potential contexts, where it may offer more nascent insights (Author, 2022). The Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE) has evinced considerable interest in co-production but observed the lack of knowledge about its practical implementation in municipalities. Espersen (2015) from the Center stated:

> "Co-production has become one of the new buzzwords in municipalities, and there is no shortage of proposals, visions, and willingness to produce more efficient, better, and perhaps cheaper welfare solutions through co-production. However, co-production is still a relatively new word in our vocabulary. We do not yet know much about how municipalities co-produce in practice" (p. 32) (Author's translation).

Aalborg Municipality, the third-largest municipality in Denmark, has particularly emphasized co-production and collaborative approaches within welfare production. The Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled articulates this change by the phrase, "leaving the care regime," which they believe has created practices where the users are seen as passive recipients or even "care objects," while street-level professionals become care providers. The Department argues, "If you are disabled, people around you often help and nurse you a lot. We have done that as professionals, but we have made a cultural turn [towards self-

determination and independence]" (Danish Design Award 2018, p. 1). The Department argues that this cultural turn requires supporting service users with a focus more on their individual definition of quality of life, than on professional knowledge, intentions, and assumptions (Danish Design Award 2018; Klinge *et al.* 2019). The Department visualizes the implication of such changes as a "focus shift" for practice (Figure 1), where street-level professionals are expected to move from circle 1 to circle 2.

[Figure 1 near here]

### *A qualitative case study*

I applied a qualitative case study as a research strategy, involving three care services for people with disabilities in Aalborg, Denmark. Cases 1 and 2 are supported housing complexes where service users rent their two-bedroom apartments and share common areas. Case 3 is an employment service that helps people with disabilities find occupations. The three cases are decentralized units within the Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled, and thus all adhere to the co-production strategy and are required to make a "focus shift" within their practice to support users' independence. As part of the co-production strategy, a "letter of freedom" grants street-level professionals the autonomy to act upon the service users' aspirations and initiatives, for example, by initiating local co-production initiatives (Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled Aalborg Municipality, n.d.).

[Table I near here]

To embrace the co-production strategy, each of the three cases conducted workshops and staff meetings to thoroughly deliberate on the implications of this strategy for their practices. The cases also developed, and aimed to implement, different co-production initiatives based on the set strategic direction. The street-level professionals were encouraged to co-design co-production initiatives with service users to ensure that the initiatives reflected the users' dreams and wishes (Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled, Aalborg Municipality, n.d.). Thus, all three cases were qualified as arenas for the study of lower-level translations since the street-level professionals were engaged in reflective activities aimed at deepening, nuancing, and

conceptualizing co-production and the experimental activities where concrete actions were put to the test (Bentzen, 2019; Linneberg *et al.,* 2014; Yin, 2014). It is, therefore, of great interest to explore and comparatively analyze their translation strategies and processes to ascertain if one approach proves more effective than the others. Nevertheless, in these cases, local variations could influence the translation of the co-production strategy, such as service type— in which condition Case 3 is a non-statutory service type, while Cases 1 and 2 are supported housing complexes—and variation in users' capacities (Table I). Because the cases operate within the same welfare sector, political tendencies, and municipal department; provide services to people with disabilities; and are part of the same strategic direction, I expected similar, rather than contrasting, results (Yin, 2014).

### *Data collection and analysis*

I employed real-time ethnographic data collection, as it was suitable for process studies (Langley *et al.,* 2013), and combined various qualitative data sources, as typical for case studies (Yin, 2014). Initially, I used participant observation to gain insight into everyday practices in the three cases, and in workshops and meetings, discussions were held in new co-production strategies. As the co-production initiatives were developed and evolved, I conducted focus-group interviews with street-level professionals to understand their reasons for the initiatives and to track the progress and challenges with the implementation of the co-production initiatives. This was supplemented by additional observations, such as those at the housing complex and during educational activities for the staff. I recorded conversations, took pictures of different situations, and compiled extensive notes to capture the "life world" of street-level professionals as realizers of the co-production strategy, going beyond reported practices and analytical talk (Neyland, 2008; Tuurnas, 2015).

[Table II near here]

The data collection and analysis were an iterative process, as the findings and data collection defined the research protocol (Yin, 2014). After data collection, I developed an overview of preliminary results by

revisiting my observational data, listening to audio files, and reading interview transcripts. This inductive

process helped me develop varying understandings about co-production, and different forms, and the extent

of conflicts experienced by street-level professionals. I found it relevant to use the translation theory of

Scandinavian institutionalism and theories about coping behavior from the street-level bureaucracy literature

because both these streams of theory elaborated on the language about the phenomenon I had observed well.

Incorporating theory after data collection can be described as a transition from the inductive to the abductive

process, in which "data and existing theory are now considered in tandem" (Gioia *et al.,* 2013, p. 21).

Following the iterative process, I revisited, coded, and analyzed the collected data, based on the new

theoretical insight. First, I coded the data based on the theoretical perspective that a high level of reflection

and experimental approaches within a robust translation is required (Bentzen, 2019; Linneberg *et al.,* 2015).

In this vein, Bentzen (2019) argued for the need for a strong coupling between the strategic and local

anchoring of an organizational idea. I, therefore, used the coding process to identify street-level

professionals' translation choices— did they, for example, alternate, dismiss, neglect, or enlarge elements in

the co-production strategy? (Boxenbaum and Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Røvik, 2007).

Next, I used the coding to identify conflicts and coping strategies employed by street-level professionals (de

Graaf *et al.,* 2016; Jaspers and Steen, 2019; Oliver, 1991; Tummers *et al.,* 2015). Finally, I assessed the

effectiveness of different translation and coping strategies by considering the extent to which the cases

succeeded in implementing their co-production initiatives (e.g., by overcoming conflicts), and whether the

implementation represented new practices aligned with the conceptualization of co-production found in

managements' co-production strategy.


### Ethical considerations

During the fieldwork, I was employed as an internal investigator at Aalborg Municipality as part of the

Danish "Industrial PhD program." Local managers ensured that staff, service users, and guardians were

informed about the research purpose and use. The service users or their guardians provided consent to

participate in the project and were informed about their right to withdraw their data in compliance with

GDPR legislation and ethical practices.

## RESULTS

The co-production strategy at Aalborg Municipal Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled was that

of establishing collaboration with service users to promote their opportunity to live independent lives.

Arguably, this requires a "focus shift" from providing care to supporting service users' focus on defining

their individual quality of life. The following narrative on each case offers insight into how street-level

professionals translated the co-production; how they encountered conflicts; and how effective their strategies

were in resolving these conflicts, allowing for co-production to be manifested in the new forms of practice.

### *In Case 1, co-production was kept as talk, which minimized conflicts for street-level professionals but did not lead to the implementation of the new types of practices*

In this case, when street-level professionals discussed how the new co-production strategy would influence

their practices, they said that it had always been part of their pedagogic practices (Case 1, focus-group

interview; observation). One street-level professional expressed it as follows: "There is nothing new in it [the

co-production strategy and the goal of user independence], if you look 100 years back, then it has been there,

the question of what users can do themselves. Can he pour milk for himself? Yes, he can, wow. So, for me,

the idea of involving service users is not new" (Case 1, focus-group interview). This statement illustrates that

determining the implementation of co-production and the required changes in it can be difficult.

Nevertheless, this choice of translation dismissed the "focus shift" and the requirement for a new role for

street-level professionals, described in the co-production strategy, and resulting in a low coupling between

the strategic and local conceptualization of co-production. But it also reflected the extent to which

professionals were willing to engage in reflection and self-reflection. Because street-level professionals

argued, "now we just have another word for what we have already been doing" during the focus-group

interviews, it made them refrain from reflection, as they had determined there was nothing to learn from the

new idea. This became evident during the implementation of the co-production initiative. In Case 1, the co-production initiative aimed to create a series of "Friday-afternoon get-together" events for service users.

This initiative aimed to make users active co-designers and co-producers of the events and increase their feeling of independence. However, the street-level professionals chose not to involve service users in the planning processes (Case 1, focus-group interview). They asserted that at this stage of the initiative, service users would not have been able to deliver any useful input (Case 1, focus-group interview). Instead, they argued that the service users' perspectives could be included later, as the program was not fixed—for example, the users chose between playing games and listening to music (Case 1, focus-group interview). Thus, the street-level professionals chose to alter (and later abandon) the principle of co-design, though this was clearly part of the co-production strategy (Department of Care for the Elderly and Disabled Aalborg Municipality n.d.). As the implementation proceeded, the street-level professionals did not involve the users in design or practical tasks; instead, they chose and established different activities (Case 1, focus-group interview, observation). The consequences were that the Friday events (the co-production initiative) became closely related to the pre-existing Monday and Wednesday events, where the service users could choose to dance or sing together (Case 1, observation). Thus, their strategy was to decouple the co-production strategy from action and mainly meet the co-production target by talk, as they reframed their existing practices as co-production. This translation strategy lacked reflection but minimized conflicts that the actual implementation of co-production could cause (which unfolded in the other cases). This translation strategy was not effective, as the implementation of co-production initiatives did not lead to the new types of practices and lacked alignment with the strategic conceptualization of co-production.

*In Case 2, co-production was both translated with talk and walk, increasing conflicts, which street-level professionals sought to balance but ended with implementation efforts*

Contrary to Case 1, street-level professionals in Case 2 recognized the co-production strategy as a "focus shift." They reflected on co-production implications for their practices and specified that as professionals they needed to do something different for co-production to be effective, such as being less dominating to facilitate service users to play a more active role in service delivery (Case 2, focus-group interview). They

began the co-production initiative of cooking daily dinner in the shared kitchen at the sheltered housing, where service users used to adopt a passive role (Case 2, focus-group interviews, observation). Their aim was that the service users could become active co-producers of the food instead of having staff cook for them, and that this would make them rely less on professional help in their daily lives and thus become more independent (Case 2, focus-group interviews).

Contrary to Case 1, in Case 2, the co-design part of the co-production strategy was not dismissed; it was enlarged. They asked service users on camera about what was important to them regarding the change in the cooking routine at the housing complex (Case 2, focus-group interview). Based on these interviews, a peer-to-peer initiative was created for service users, while a weekly schedule and food delivery were discarded as the users were not keen on these ideas (Case 2, focus-group interview). Thus, Case 2's reflections and experimental approach towards co-production were aligned with the strategic conceptualization. Though service users were involved in the design of the co-production initiative, the implementation did not go as planned. After trying to implement the new cooking routine, the street-level professionals said that they still did most of the cooking, though they attempted to individualize, break up, and simplify service users' tasks (Case 2, focus-group interview, observation).

The professionals experienced a conflict between maintaining efficient service delivery, while they were allowing for service users' input and ideas. A street-level professional explained how she tried to meet both interests, e.g., by doing some of the cooking on weekends. She explained: "If someone [service user] comes to me and says I would like to cook this dish, I would say, yes, but how easy is it? How much can you do yourself? And maybe we should wait until the weekend when we'll have more time?" (Case 2, focus-group interview). The street-level professionals then explained that serving dinner later would lead to conflicts with and among service users (as they would become hungry and irritated), or make service users buy takeaways, which were unhealthy for them, because they were not willing to wait for homemade meals (Case 2, focus-group interview).

The street-level professionals feared that an increase in takeaways would be detrimental to users' health and result in complaints from the users' next of kin (Case 2, focus-group interview). Thus, the street-level

professionals were, on one hand, committed to motivating and providing service users with an active role; on the other hand, they were cautious about unwanted consequences and potential conflicts. One street-level professional explained how the fear of these conflicts forced them to increase their input and abandon their co-production initiative, stating, "… this is why we came to take over [the cooking], because we needed to get the food served" (Case 2, focus-group interview). Consequently, their practice remained unchanged because they (more or less deliberately) abandoned their co-production initiative to honor other interests and parties. Street-level professionals described the implementation situation as very frustrating as if they were stuck in the same situation as they were before they started the co-production initiative (Case 2, focus-group interview). Therefore, this translation strategy proved ineffective, as Case 2 failed with the implementation of its co-production initiative.

### *In Case 3, co-production was translated with both talk and walk, increasing conflicts, and the street-level professionals were biased toward co-production leading to organizational change*

In this case, the street-level professionals reflected on how the co-production strategy prescribed a new role for them. They aimed at enhancing self-determination and users' quality of life in their translation. Therefore, they argued that they needed to develop their practices to help service users based on what was meaningful to those users (rather than, for example, based on their professional assumptions), thereby making their role complementary to the users (Case 3, internal seminar). As they started the co-production initiative, they collected the service users' perspectives on the current service delivery in Case 3 and observed their' ability to listen and involve the users (Case 3, workshop, observation, focus-group interview with users). The street-level professionals used this feedback to begin a co-production initiative aimed at experimenting with different approaches to employ the users' perspectives as a catalyst for progress in their individual services.

Like Case 2, street-level professionals in Case 3 were also concerned about potential conflicts arising from their translation choices. First, the service users' dreams and hopes for their occupation could be unrealistic in others' eyes (Case 3, focus-group interview, observation). One street-level professional explained that

many users had had the same (internal) occupations for decades. Therefore, changing users' occupations could cause conflicts with service users' next of kin or other municipal workers, as they could disagree with service users' choices and preferred that they did not change their occupations (Case 3, internal seminar, workshop). The street-level professionals in Case 3 collectively discussed how to handle such conflicts, and contrary to Case 2, their strategy was that of not preventing or toning down the conflicts (Case 3, workshop). Instead, they argued that their job was to support service users and their decision-making processes. Therefore, if service users' next of kin or other parties disagreed with the changes, they could legitimize it because it was the service users' choice. Thus, their strategy was that of solely focusing on their co-production initiative even if this could cause or escalate conflicts (Case 3, workshop, observation).

Street-level professionals also discussed if they should create a "job bank or catalog" of the service users' potential occupations. Such an initiative could help service users consider different types of jobs and could match people with their jobs faster (as it would decrease the necessity of outreach work at different companies) (Case 3, workshop, focus-group interview). However, the street-level professionals decided not to implement this idea because they were concerned that this would make them focus on matching service users with pre-existing jobs, instead of *actually* listening to service users' preferences for what they wanted (Case 3, workshop, focus-group interview). This highlights the conflict between maintaining standardized and efficient service delivery and creating opportunities for service users to contribute to the process. Again, their strategy was that of focusing on their co-production initiative, where the co-production interest was given precedence over other conflicting interests—in this case, efficiency (Case 3, focus-group interview and observation). Therefore, their translation included both analytical reflection and concrete actions. This translation strategy was consequently found to be more effective than the ones found in other cases, as the translation and implementation of the co-production initiative ended up representing new types of practices, which aligned with the management's conceptualization of co-production.

[Table III near here]

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, three different translation strategies were identified, though the studied cases were of decentralized units within the same department and translated the same co-production strategy. In Case 1, street-level professionals translated the co-production strategy in such a way as to dismiss co-production elements and abandon the reflection of newness (Bentzen, 2019; Thøgersen, 2022). Thus, this translation strategy did not lead to the implementation of new practices, and the conflicts arising from the translation were minimized since co-production remained predominantly a "ceremonial adoption" to satisfy surroundings, including management, and not to develop internal organizational activities (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017; Bromley and Powell, 2012; Røvik, 2011). Both Cases 2 and 3 had a higher level of analytical reflection than Case 1, as both cases acknowledged co-production as a "focus shift" prescribing a new role for them as professionals, corresponding with the cultural turn described in the co-production strategy. However, these translation choices caused the emergence of conflicts, such as those regarding effectiveness and those involving service users' next of kin. The key difference between these two cases was the way street-level professionals handled conflicts. In Case 2, the street-level professionals' strategy was to tone down and balance conflicts. This study found such a strategy as unsuccessful, as co-production ended with failed implementation efforts, as a form of paralyzation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Lipsky, 2010). However, as de Graaf *et al.,* (2014) emphasized, resistance could lead to the overturning of new ideas or limiting them for a specific period—to be considered later again. Thus, the training of staff and leaders may "mature" organizations over time (Author, 2023; Tuurnas, 2015), and make street-level professionals more capable of realizing co-production in the future. Finally, in Case 3, the street-level professionals were "biased" as they favored "demands" for co-production, even if it caused or escalated conflicts (Graff *et al.,* 2014; Oliver, 1991; Tummers *et al.,* 2015). This study found such a trade-off, in which one interest is given preference over other conflicting interests, as effective, as it seemed to succeed in creating organizational change towards co-production to a larger extent, shown in Case 3. Causal claims cannot be made based on the data, but by holistically studying all these aspects, I put forward the following three propositions, which theorize the relationship between the translation of co-productions, conflicts, and coping behavior.

- First, the translation of co-production must be made to challenge existing practices, norms, and values so that these have potential for creating organizational changes and minimize the risk of window-dressing ritualism and symbolic acceptance.

- Second, if conflicts arising from the translation of co-production are not appropriately handled, street-level professionals may abandon co-production, either intentionally or unintentionally.

- Third, translation processes should involve collective dialogue and planning to effectively address conflicts and prevent unwanted coping behaviors.

### *Implications*

The three propositions deepen our understanding of the role of translation and coping behavior in sustainable implementation of co-production and help identify reasons why street-level professionals end up abandoning or failing to implement co-production in their practices (Ness *et al.,* 2014). Thus, this study adds to the existing literature on coping behavior and co-production (Aschhoff and Vogel, 2018; Jaspers and Steen, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). First, it highlights the significance of interpretation and coping strategies to enable true implementation of co-production as a way of working in practice. Second, this study makes a practical contribution by demonstrating the importance of coping behavior in realizing co-production ambitions within organizations through the premise that, if organizations are to "walk the talk" and ensure that their ambitions of more co-produced practices are not "lost" at the frontline, they should understand how street-level professionals handle conflicts arising from a co-production agenda. Street-level professionals cannot simply be left alone to navigate these conflicts as they did in the studied cases—the role of leaders may be important in this regard (Author, 2021). As Yee and Theil (2020) highlight, leaders play a proactive role in facilitating and supporting the transformations that organizations and organizational actors undergo to make new organizational ideas "fit" with existing practices and cultural elements, such as professionals' values and beliefs. Institutional leaders will have to 'administer the necessities of history'; namely, they should be sensitive to cultural traditions while gradually changing these (Christensen et al., 2017; Yee and Theil, 2020) Thus, the managers should facilitate organizational arrangements and discussions and develop tools to help

professionals comprehend their roles as professional co-producers and highlight the importance of co-production for socialization and for changing street-level professionals' attitudes (Sicilia *et al.*, 2019). Third, this study contributes to the debate on the role of management and frontline autonomy in co-production. We know that too narrow translation spaces can cause frustration among local actors, which in turn tends to negatively affect their engagement in translation (Bentzen, 2019; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). Thus, organizational leadership must leave room for individual autonomy while introducing co-production, but they must simultaneously create a sense of direction for street-level professionals to understand co-production in their provision of welfare (Bovaird and Loffler, 2012; Pestoff, 2014). This study suggests that a high degree of frontline autonomy can lead to variations in local understandings and implementations of co-production, potentially hindering organizational change. Future researchers should explore ways to find the right balance between autonomy and control.

This study also contributes to translation theory by providing detailed insights into translation processes at the frontline and by explaining the success or failure of different translations in creating organizational change (Boxenbaum, 2006). Only a few empirical studies have sought to explain the outcomes of different translation patterns (for example, Doorewaard and Van Bijsterveld, 2001; Røvik, 2011). However, these operate on a macro-level (e.g., an entire municipality or department). This finding of the study may be a micro-perspective of what Røvik (2011) defined as isolation, where an organizational idea, after it is formally adopted, exists in certain parts of the organization, such as among leaders and/or in staff units. Therefore, how street-level professionals handle conflicts within their translations may be the mechanisms needed to be triggered to prevent co-production or other organizational ideas from suffering a "silent death." Finally, this study's findings may hold relevance for a wider array of organizational ideas having a relational nature and interpretative flexibility, such as relational welfare and trust, as observed in the context of NPG (Author, 2021; Von Heimburg and Ness, 2021; Siverbo *et al.,* 2023). This implies that we might be on the cusp of a new "era" of organizational ideas, where managerial efforts to support local adaptation and street-level professionals' capabilities to navigate ambiguity become increasingly pivotal. However, additional

research is needed to confirm whether similar translation challenges are pertinent for other organizational ideas linked to NPG.

### *Limitations*

For this study, the data were collected over a relatively short period, when the co-production initiatives were still being implemented. Therefore, this study is limited to the investigation of the "interim struggle" in translation processes while co-production practices are still being developed and designed. This study did not aim to test the validity of the new theoretical insights stemming from the case study. Instead, it has explored and described a novel phenomenon, which can help scholars develop more comprehensive theories of translation in the future.

### *Concluding remarks*

In summary, this study contributes to the adoption of the notion of translation into the study of co-production by emphasizing its theoretical relevance and empirical significance. By sharing data from Danish sites, this study empirically shows how street-level professionals translate (or do not translate) a co-production strategy into practice, and handle conflicts—e.g., being less effective or having disagreements with users' next of kin. The findings of the study suggest that the way conflicts are coped with during translation and implementation makes the difference between actual organizational change, failed implementation efforts, and mere symbolic acceptance of co-production.

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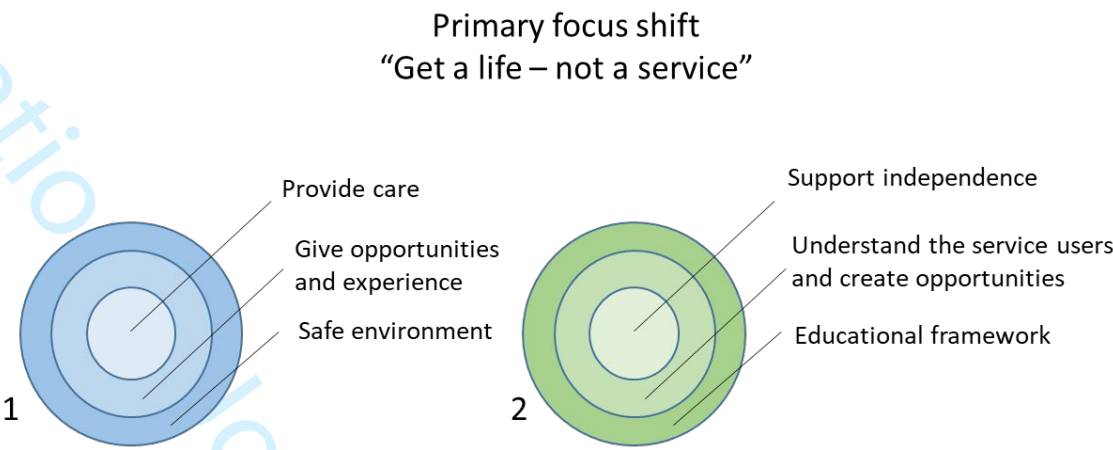
Figure 1: A Focus Shift in Social Care, Aalborg Municipality

Source: (Klinge et al. 2019, p. 30) (Author's translation)

**Table 1: Care services included in the case study**

| Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|---|---|---|
| Sheltered housing service | Sheltered housing service | Employment service |
| Community with six service users (called a log) within a larger sheltered housing service with 30 service users | An entire sheltered housing service with 11 service users | A non-statutory service offered to citizens with a disability pension to help them find "meaningful employment," e.g., voluntary work, jobs under special conditions, or "employment" at the municipality's day centers |
| Five employees are regularly working at the log | Five employees work regularly at the sheltered housing service | The organization has six employees |
| Service users lack mental capacity and need support with activities of daily living e.g., bathing and going for a walk | Service users lack mental capacity and need support with activities, such as grocery shopping, paying bills, cleaning, and cooking | They provide services to citizens with both low and high levels of capacities as well as physical and learning disabilities |

**Table 2: Summary of the fieldwork**

| Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|---|---|---|
| **May–October 2017** | | |
| About 30 hours of fieldwork at the sheltered housing *Field notes of 8,811 words and 25 pictures. 1 video clip and 2 audio recordings* | About 30 hours of fieldwork at the sheltered housing *Field notes of 10,758 words and 41 pictures. 2 audio recordings* | About 44 hours of fieldwork at the organization *Field notes of 9,878 words and 3 pictures. 2 audio recordings* |
| 10 hours of participation in meetings (staff meetings, managers' meetings) | 3 hours of participation in meetings (staff meetings, managers' meetings) | 7 hours of participation in meetings (staff meetings, managers' meetings) |
| **November 2017–February 2019** | | |
| 2 hours of participation in managers' meetings *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* | 7 hours of participation in managers' meetings *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* | 3.5 hours of participation in managers' meetings *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* |
| 15 hours of fieldwork at the sheltered housing *Field notes of 5,452 words with 36 pictures* | 14 hours of fieldwork at the sheltered housing *Field notes of 3,089 words with 14 pictures* | 9.5 hours of fieldwork—participation in internal seminars and workshops for employees and service users *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* |
| | 11 hours of fieldwork—participation in educational activities and internal seminars for employees *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* | 40 hours of participation in workshops with the frontline agency *(Detailed notes or audio recordings)* |
| 4 focus-group interviews with the frontline agency (13 hours in total) *(Audio recordings)* | 4 focus-group interviews with the frontline agency (10,5 hours in total) *(Audio recordings)* | 2 focus-group interviews with the frontline agency (5,5 hours in total) *(Audio recordings)* |
| 1-hour follow-up meeting with managers | 4-hour follow-up meetings with managers | 3.5-hour participation in focus-group interviews with service users |

**Table 3: Translation strategy and processes identified in the three cases**

| | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Translation choices and conflicts** | Dismissing co-production elements because they lack reflection on newness and, instead, framing existing practices as co-production, thus minimizing conflicts. | Enhancing co-production elements and reflecting on how co-production has prescribed a new role for professionals, thus increasing conflicts. | Enhancing co-production elements and reflecting on how co-production has prescribed a new role for professionals, thus increasing conflicts. |
| **Employed strategies and their effectiveness** | Co-production objectives are predominantly achieved through discussions but are disconnected from actual actions, thus lowering effectiveness. The translation of the co-production strategy did not form the new types of practices and lacked alignment with the strategic conceptualization. | Striving to balance conflicting interests results in unsuccessful implementation efforts. This occurs when street-level professionals forsake the concept of co-production in an attempt to prevent conflicts, ultimately reducing effectiveness, as the translation does not result in the emergence of new types of practices. | Deconstructing conflicts by solely focusing on co-production was found to be effective, as it led to organizational change aligned with the strategic conceptualization of co-production. |