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The politics of insufficiency

ambivalence and boundary work in the co-production of welfare services

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The politics of insufficiency: Ambivalence and boundary work in the coproduction of welfare services

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Abstract

In the public and scientific discourse on welfare innovation and new public governance, community coproduction is thought to combine the best elements of the public and voluntary sectors, hence creating better and more efficient responses to social need. However, coproduction also blurs sectoral boundaries, potentially mixing incompatible practices, values and goals. In this paper, we investigate how volunteers and public sector employees experience and handle the coproduction ambivalence that results from cross-sector incompatibility. The paper is based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork on welfare coproduction among managers, employees and volunteers in a large Danish municipality.

Keywords: community coproduction, welfare coproduction, welfare innovation, new public governance, coproduction ambivalence, voluntary sector

Introduction

Coproduction is becoming a key strategy for developing and innovating public services across most welfare states (Voorberg and Tummers 2015), not least through the increased involvement of volunteers in the delivery of public welfare services through community coproduction (Bovaird 2007; Pestoff 2009). Coproduction is thought to increase participation, efficiency and quality in public services (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). However, research suggests that in cross-sector collaboration, coproducers experience ambivalence regarding the practical benefits, costs and potential of coproduction, hence reducing mutual commitment (Evers and Brandsen 2016; Kleinhans 2017). In the current paper, we seek to uncover the sources of this coproduction ambivalence by investigating what volunteers and public employees experience as compelling and repelling in their coproduction partners. Furthermore, we investigate the boundary work strategies employed to balance these compelling and repelling forces. As our point of departure, we take theories of boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002), public goals and values (Bozeman 2007) and voluntary goals and values (Edwards 2009; Salamon 1987). The present paper is based on an extensive qualitative case study of coproduction in the fields of elderly care and immigrant welfare services in one large Danish municipality.

For the last two decades, collaboration between the public and volunteer sectors has been high on the welfare innovation agenda. Increasingly, the focus has shifted from different forms of organisational coordination to community coproduction (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). This shift highlights the growing ambition of public administrators to involve voluntary organisations in the joint design and delivery of welfare services (Alford 2016; Needham 2008). Proponents have argued that coproduction leads to more efficient and effective public services, more empowered and engaged citizens and greater responsivity to

user needs (Alford 2016; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Bovaird and Parrado 2015; Flemig and Osborne 2019; Needham 2008).

Conversely, research also suggests that ambivalence among coproducers may preclude these benefits in some cases, partly because of incompatible mindsets and values among volunteers and public employees (Kirkegaard and Andersen 2018; Kleinhans 2017). Ultimately, community coproduction requires the development of compatible goals and interests among coproducers, which may blur the boundary between the public and voluntary sectors (Ostrom 1996), creating hybrid, cross-sectoral value compromises (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006). This blurring of the sector boundary can have adverse consequences for the legitimacy and practices of coproduction (Alford 2009; Dahlberg 2006; Vanleene and Verschuere 2017; Williams and Johnson 2016), potentially leading to coproduction ambivalence.

In this context, a better understanding is needed of what makes those involved consider coproduction as a viable organisational form and how they reconcile the conflicting aspects of the process. In the current paper, we investigate the role of the sectoral boundary as it relates to coproduction ambivalence by exploring the following research questions:

1. Which characteristics of their counterparts do volunteers and municipal employees consider compelling and repelling in the coproduction of welfare?

2. Which boundary work strategies do volunteers and municipal employees use to manage the conflict between the compelling and repelling characteristics of the partner sector?

The present paper builds on two years of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in a large Danish municipality that investigated immigrant welfare services and elderly care. We identify two opposing forces that can result in coproduction ambivalence. On the one hand, both the public and voluntary sectors perceive user needs as beyond their own capabilities in

terms of creating respective public or voluntary value, leading to a state of permanent insufficiency. Here, coproduction is perceived as a means to overcome this insufficiency, making the contributions of the other sector compelling and essential for 'completion'. On the other hand, representatives from both sectors have experienced their counterpart as incompetent, inefficient or even dangerous because of incompatible value-driven practices across the sectoral boundary. These opposing forces necessitate cautious collaborative strategies in which organisations from both sectors carry out boundary work to gain the benefits of coproduction without the disadvantages t. However, public agencies seek to direct voluntary agencies at an arm's length, while voluntary agencies seek to gain access to public resources free from direction—making these boundary work strategies fundamentally asymmetric, incompatible and conflictive.

First, we outline the coproduction concept in relation to the sector boundary between notions of public and voluntary values. Second, we describe the data and methodology before embarking on an analysis of the compelling and repelling forces and boundary work strategies. Finally, we conclude and discuss our findings in the context of welfare innovation, citizen engagement and future directions for cross-sector collaboration.

Community coproduction and the sectoral boundary

Conceptually, coproduction covers many types of benefits, actors, relations and processes (Nabatchi and Sicilia 2017). Here, we subscribe to Brandsen and Honnigh's (2018) broad definition of coproduction as the direct involvement of citizens in the production of public services, specifically at the level of design or implementation, but not at the level of strategic planning. Coproduction as a concept concerns a contribution from people outside the service delivery organisation (Ostrom 1996), often either users or concerned citizens (Pestoff 2014). Ostrom's notion of coproduction implies collaboration both across sectoral divides (between the state, market and civil society) and between the public service producer

and citizen, here making use of the public service (Alford 2014). Bovaird (2007) defines these two different forms as citizen coproduction and community coproduction. The first concerns the coproduction of public services by service users, and the second focuses on the coproduction of public services by other community members, such as volunteers. In our study, we focus on community coproduction and the cross-sector coproduction of welfare services for vulnerable elderly and refugees between the municipality level and local civil society (Bovaird 2007; Brandsen and Honingh 2018).

Coproduction is becoming a key policy tool in developing and innovating public services (Voorberg and Tummers 2015), as well as increasing citizen participation (Bovaird et al. 2015; Pestoff 2009). However, coproduction is a difficult and demanding endeavour (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Torfing et al. 2019), posing the risk of unwanted and unanticipated consequences (Flinders, Wood and Cunningham 2016; Prentice 2006). These potential risks are intricately connected to the differences in values and to practices guided by those values within the public and voluntary sectors, respectively (Bochove, Tonkens and Verplanke 2014; Kirkegaard and Andersen 2018; Overgaard 2015; Williams and Johnson 2016). Kleinhans (2017, 1513) has identified a characteristic 'coproduction ambivalence' that is associated with these conflicts, in which organisations actively seek to coproduce while trying to avoid mutual engagement and dependency, sometimes resulting in 'counter-production'. According to Kleinhans, this coproduction ambivalence is the product of the differences in organisational structures and mindsets. In the current paper, we focus on the latter by investigating how volunteers and public employees perceive and navigate the respective compatibility and conflict between sectoral value orientations and value-based practices.

In the emerging New Public Governance paradigm, coproduction is expected to support public sector innovation and produce public value (Howlett and Poocharoen 2017; Osborne

2006; Pestoff, Brandsen and Verschuere 2013). If the goals that are ascribed value within the public or voluntary sectors are not obtained, the result can be characterised as public failure (Bozeman 2007; Bozeman and Johnson 2015) or voluntary failure (Salamon 1987), respectively. Coproduction is argued to help avoid or rectify public failure because attaining important public values in some cases requires the collaboration of volunteers and users (Osborne and Strokosch 2016, 2013; Needham 2008; Percy 1984). The reverse case of public involvement in coproducing voluntary value has not been investigated, but it has been documented that voluntary agencies and civil society in general depend heavily on public infrastructure, resources and recognition (Gronbjerg 1987; Salamon 1987).

The literature on community coproduction has mostly focused on the beneficial outcomes in terms of innovation, public value, engagement and efficiency, but recent studies have shown that value conflicts between sectors and between practitioners are often involved when coproduction fails (Bochove, Tonkens and Verplanke 2014; Kirkegaard and Andersen 2018; Overgaard 2015; Williams and Johnson 2016; Kleinhans 2017, 1513). Sector-specific values guide practice in ways that may create cross-sector conflicts in coproduction, such as the institutional rigidity and risk aversion of public sector bureaucracy or the lack of accountability and capacity in the volunteer sector (Birchall and Simmons 2004; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Ewert and Evers 2012; Mayo and Moore 2002). Other researchers have pointed more directly to value conflicts in coproduction (Rossi and Tuurnas 2019; Tuurnas 2015; van Eijk and Steen 2014), to incompatible legitimacy claims and the potential for counterproductive outcomes (Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere 2018; Kleinhans 2017) or even to value codestruction (Williams and Johnson 2016). Consequently, it is crucial to understand the role played by public and voluntary sector values when it comes to enhancing or hindering community coproduction.

Public values and voluntary values

Institutionalisations of values and legitimate goals are a constitutive part of both the public and voluntary sectors, and differences in these institutions define the sectoral boundary. With respect to public values, an extensive literature has addressed these differences from both descriptive and normative perspectives (Jørgensen and Rutgers 2015; Van Wart 1998). According to Bozeman and Johnson (2015), public value is obtained by, for example, ensuring democratic fora for the aggregation and articulation of values; sufficient, free and equal service provision; and human dignity and subsistence. These are examples of the types of goals ascribed value and pursued by the public sector in the context of welfare and social policy, which are closely associated with social and political citizenship (Marshall 1963; Rothstein 1998). Practices in conflict with these ideals violate public values, and public agencies should seek to prevent these to avoid public failure.

The literature on voluntary value has been less developed. Based on a review of existing civil society theory, Edwards (2009) has suggested that the different roles played by civil society (related to economic, social and political life) connect to a set of unifying characteristics that are broadly ascribed value within the voluntary sector. Here, an example is the participation and collective action of individual citizens (Tocqueville 2015), which sustains the building of social capital and community (Putnam 2000). Another characteristic concerns the reproduction and renewal of values and culture while maintaining the plurality and civility of society (Alexander 2006). Finally, the voluntary sector seeks to provide care for different, individual forms of need, particularly where the state and market fail to do so (Edwards 2009; Salamon 1987).

The compatibility of values across the sectoral divide is an empirical question, one that depends on the specific actors involved and the specific cultural, institutional and material context. Values pursued by one sector may stand in direct contradiction to the values pursued by the other (Salamon 1987). They may also have direct or indirect beneficial effects on the

other sector or even be a prerequisite for its success (Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere 2018; Edwards 2009). Although coproduction rarely involves shared responsibility and accountability in a legal sense, coproduction does involve a shared practical or moral involvement in what is coproduced because these are the results of negotiations, planning and agreements among coproduction partners. This may lead to a blurring of the sectoral boundary in terms of roles, practices and moral accountability and justification. This blurring of boundaries may increase the risk of value conflicts and potential coproduction ambivalence because the values and practices of one sector may interpenetrate the material or symbolic domains that previously were the exclusive domain of the other sector. The compatibility of values across the sectoral divide is the primary focus of the current empirical investigation. In the present paper, values denote collectively justified normative goals and standards guiding the perceptions and practices of employees and volunteers within public and voluntary organisations.

We investigate public and voluntary sector values from the perspective of both coproduction partners. We also investigate value complementarity and compatibility both in the generalised perceptions of the values of the coproduction partner and as they emerge in experiences with the practices of the other party in actual collaborations. In the empirical analysis, we seek to identify both notions of value complementarity and of value incongruence between the parties.

Boundary work and cross-sector collaboration

In our investigation of coproduction ambivalence, we take our cue from Ostrom's (1996) notion of coproduction as spanning a great divide and as operationalising the sectoral divide as a symbolic boundary. We draw on sociological boundary theory (Lamont and Molnár 2002) to sensitise our analysis both to the constitution of the sectoral boundary and the symbolic practices employed to define and maintain it.

Notions of boundary permeability and boundary work are especially pertinent to this investigation. Boundary work (Gieryn 1983) is a concept used to describe the strategies people employ to erect, maintain and defend symbolic and material boundaries (Fournier 2000). From this perspective, the volunteer and public sectors differ in their strategic practices, rather than in their essential characteristics (Halffman 2003; Jasanoff 1987). Boundary work may seek to make boundaries impermeable to outsiders, allowing insiders to maintain a monopoly over a set of symbolic or material resources (Lamont and Molnár 2002). This type of boundary work is also called demarcation work (Bochove, Tonkens and Verplanke 2014) and is used to defend the professional, sectoral or legal rights to define and handle specific objects or situations, to reject forms of collaboration and communication that bridge or blur the boundary or to publicly valorise the boundary demarcation as important and legitimate (Allen 2000; Berner 2010; Gieryn 1983; Moore 2001).

Boundary work that aims to increase permeability is known as welcoming work, which often involves de-emphasising professional exclusivity and sectoral boundaries and emphasising things that unite or bridge boundaries (Bochove, Tonkens and Verplanke 2014). Equally, boundary work may involve the creation of boundary objects such as problem definitions, physical sites or concepts that cross a particular boundary (Star and Griesemer 1989). Boundary objects may find mutual acceptance as part of welcoming work practices or be contested by actors attempting to influence boundary spanning agendas. This is often the result of asymmetry in the power to define or control a boundary object, making it a Trojan horse for the instrumental interests of one sector regarding the other. This is the case, for example, when volunteers seek to make integration policies a shared boundary object to influence municipal immigration practices.

In our investigation, we draw on the boundary concept to investigate participants' notions and valorisations of cross-sector similarities and differences in values. Furthermore,

we use the demarcation work and welcoming work concepts to investigate boundary strategies that emphasise the differences in defining and defending exclusive sectoral domains or, conversely, that de-emphasise differences to increase inclusivity and mutuality in coproduction. Finally, we employ the boundary objects concept to define the symbolic or material objects (such as problems, policies or resources) at stake in the boundary work of the coproducers. In this context, values, which are the main focus of our investigation, denote the collectively justified goals and normative standards that inform the perceptions and vocabularies of actors and guide their practices. As it is employed in the following analysis, practice refers to value-based practices and the way values are expressed and pursued as goals through specific practices.

Methods and design

This study is based on data from a qualitative case study of all coproduction activities targeting vulnerable elderly and refugees within one large Danish municipality (see Appendix A for a project overview). In Denmark, collaboration between the state and civil society in the field of social policy has a long and mostly amicable history, which is true as well for how current policy pursues the potential of cross-sector collaboration. Besides being embedded in this national, institutional context, the case municipality has actively promoted cross-sector coproduction as a policy tool for innovating and qualifying public service provision. This makes it a typical case of coproduction in a Danish context (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

Within the municipal welfare services, we selected refugees and vulnerable elderly as the two service areas to investigate in terms of collaborative tensions and strategies. These service areas were chosen because public sector expectations around coproduction are particularly high and both make substantial efforts to initiate different forms of cross-sector

collaboration. Moreover, they represent two extremes concerning the sectoral boundary between state and civil society because of the differences in the norms of deservingness, the degree of political conflict and the level of professionalisation. Although not a comparative study, the selection of two contrasting areas of public service provision ensures that convergent findings can be transferable beyond the present study or particular policy fields. The selection of projects for the current study was initially based on a list compiling all projects within the two fields that the municipality and/or the voluntary organisations defined as coproduction. From this list, we selected only projects involving activities directly addressing user needs and frequent cross-sector collaborative activities. However, not all projects managed to achieve the level of coproduction that was initially envisioned. Some did in fact codesign services, while others ended up practicing a form of collaboration where coproduction was limited to the coordination, ad hoc implementation and delivery of delineated services. One important reason that the projects did not achieve the level of coproduction envisioned was the conflicts and cautious collaborative strategies mapped in the current paper.

In this case study, we combine different qualitative methods to explore how the actors from each sector evoke ideal typical portrayals of the sectoral counterpart while devising strategies for handling tensions related to intersectoral boundary conflicts and value incongruency. To elaborate on the mutual expectations around cross-sector collaboration, we conducted 32 in-depth, semistructured interviews with volunteers (elderly field, N=8; refugee field, N=6), public managers (general administration, N=3; elderly N=5; refugee N=5) and public employees (elderly, N=2; refugees, N=3). We also conducted a focus group with five volunteers from the elderly field. All interviews were conducted after receiving informed consent from the participants. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim in their full length by a project affiliate. Additionally, to detect patterns

of collaborative strategies as they unfolded in practice, we observed cross-sectoral meetings and participated in concrete cross-sector activities over the course of two years from 2017 to 2019.

Our analysis comprised three inductive coding passes across all data sources. First, the data were thematically coded to identify positive or negative expectations and experiences of coproduction, specifically the contributions and practices of the coproduction partner. In the second coding pass, analytic codes were developed within the thematic codes to identify and define the specific values involved in creating positive and negative perceptions and experiences and the resulting conflicts. Finally, a third coding pass identified the different strategies used to manage—adapt to, avoid or disarm—the tensions of coproduction ambivalence identified in the second coding pass. The analysis focused primarily on convergence between individual informants and between informants from the immigration and elderly care sectors, respectively. The quotes used in the current paper serve only to illustrate the findings, which are grounded in an extensive analysis of the entire set of observations and interviews. The informants are identified by numbers (refer to Appendix B for more information).

Findings

In the following sections, we present the analytical findings of the present study. First, we look at the descriptions of the characteristics that municipal and voluntary organisations perceive as compelling and motivating to coproduce with their sectoral counterparts. Second, we examine the descriptions of the characteristics and practices that repel either municipal or voluntary organisations from coproduction. Third, we examine the boundary work strategies that both sectors employ to manage the ambivalence between the compelling and repelling

forces of community coproduction. The conceptualisation of compelling and repelling forces is inductively derived from the empirical analyses; the concepts are developed to describe how the perceived value complementarity of the other sector initially makes coproduction attractive in principle yet repulsive in actual practice because of the conflicting values prevailing in each sector and guiding their practices.

The compelling forces of coproduction

The municipal perspective

In general statements about coproduction—in particular among municipal managers—coproducing with volunteers and voluntary organisations is described as having great potential to improve public welfare services and compensate for some of the self-perceived flaws in the public sector. The municipal participants consider public welfare provision insufficient because they cannot create authentic social relations that connect citizens to their local community. To volunteers, they ascribe the capacity for interpersonal authenticity, value-based action, community building and spontaneity, which they consider outside their own municipal jurisdiction and competencies but nonetheless essential to achieving public social policy goals. The following quotes from two municipal managers illustrate this recurrent pattern in the data:

> *It [cross-sector coproduction] requires that you want to collaborate with volunteers and see that it helps users and makes sense regarding the municipal core tasks. It's our job to take care of the core tasks […] So you could say that working with volunteers helps us achieve core task goals and contributes to building relations with the users that we as professionals cannot.* (Municipal volunteer consultant #21, Elderly services)

> *So if, for instance, there is a rule that if you volunteer to visit an elderly person, you are not allowed to clean and do the dishes because that is a municipal task. If a deep friendship develops between the volunteer and the elderly person then maybe the elderly person will say 'oh, can we just do the dishes?' [...] Like in any other friendship, these things happen, and you can't control what happens in a relationship, and especially in voluntary work these relationships develop.*
>
> (Municipal volunteer consultant #1)

In turn, municipal employees see the value of volunteers in responding to particular states of need, creating social relationships and nurturing values that are fundamentally different from those fostered by their municipal counterparts. Volunteers are described as responsive and unfettered by bureaucratic regulation, work schedules or administrative obligations. Volunteers respond to the users' need for 'real' relationships through direct, spontaneous and uncoerced interaction. Moreover, as the second quote illustrates, volunteer contribution is fundamentally different from municipal services in terms of quality and value to the service users. Consequently, community coproduction is considered important to the municipality's efforts to produce public value.

The municipal employees describe public welfare as orientated mainly towards core services around legal requirements and basic human needs, that is, goals linked to the public value of human dignity and equal access to public benefits. However, they perceive relational human needs, such as community, responsiveness and emotional support, as important goals that exist beyond the legitimate and professional boundaries of the public sector. Relational human needs are seen as the domain of volunteers; it is this perceived insufficiency of municipal welfare services that seems to drive and justify coproduction on the municipal side and make it a compelling prospect. This paradoxical cross-boundary dependence is apparent throughout our data: particular social relations are a necessary condition for the welfare of

citizens, but although the public sector recognises this, it does not possess the means to produce those relations Consequently, the public sector seeks to coproduce with volunteers to avoid public failure.

The volunteer perspective

In general statements about coproduction, the municipality is equally desirable and necessary as a coproduction partner to volunteers, particularly among voluntary sector managers. It is, however, municipal resources and infrastructure rather than municipal services that the volunteers find compelling. The following quotes from volunteer managers from both service areas illustrate the most notable incentives for coproducing with the municipality:

> *[…] the other thing is our pressing need for facilities. First and foremost, for the Job Club and for the Citizen Advice at the temporary housing. So whether it will be permanent or temporary, we will find out. […] So we are meeting the municipality to talk about getting this house next week and this guy at the municipality has promised to help solve our immediate problem. We will see what comes of that. And we can call that coproduction if you like….* (Volunteer manager #12, Immigration services)

> *On the other hand, we are also dependent on getting access to users, right? And we are very focused on—and interested in—getting in touch with users. It is in our DNA, it is in the statutes, and it is in the strategy […] and that is why we are interested in collaborating with the municipality.* (Volunteer consultant #29, Elderly services)

The volunteer participants emphasise that many aspects of their work would be impossible without the money, facilities, network and knowledge that the municipality invests in community coproduction. Whereas the municipality describes the relational

authenticity of the volunteers, the volunteers describe the strategic and operational capacity of the municipality. The volunteers find coproduction with the municipality compelling because it may make it possible to reach (more) users, draw on expert knowledge, get access to (better) facilities and secure (more) funding. In particular, the volunteer perspective is grounded in a self-perceived insufficiency when it comes to finding people in need and delivering services to them.

Across both sectors, the participants are highly committed to dealing with social problems but consider themselves insufficient when it comes to finding or attracting those who need their services and in matching the level of need and number of potential users. Coproduction is generally perceived as a potentially fruitful way to achieve the best of both worlds. However, if we look at accounts of coproduction related to specific, ongoing collaboration efforts, a less harmonious picture emerges.

The repelling forces of coproduction

The municipal perspective

Experiences of coproduction partners as repelling are present in the accounts of specific coproduction projects among managers, particularly among street-level staff and lower management. Often, municipal employees experience volunteers as disorderly and unmanageable because they voice particular political concerns and do not pursue public value goals such as universality, equality, public deliberative process or transparency. Ultimately, the practices that produce compelling outcomes from an ideal point of view become problematic in actual community coproduction across the sectoral boundary. In the following quote, a manager from the municipal immigration services describes how value incongruence leads to intersectoral misunderstandings in the context of refugee housing:

> Manager: *Some volunteers in [the village] have told the refugees that 'you just have to reject the first housing offer from the municipality, then they will come back with something better'. I don't know what the refugees heard or the volunteers said, but I have been out there twice and told the volunteers that that is not going to happen. […] To put it bluntly, these people will not get a second housing offer. They rejected it, that's it; nothing more to do.*
>
> Interviewer: *So there can be some misunderstandings there?*
>
> Manager: *This is also on the volunteers: this thing that you can just put some more pressure on the municipality and that will work. But it doesn't. And it is* super frustrating! *[…] We have experienced that a lot, and we have had to evict some refugees from their apartments. You get one offer and that's it.* (Municipal manager #7, immigrations services)

Politically, the volunteers mentioned above are critical of public housing policy and try to help particular refugees obtain better housing. Voicing particular concerns and providing care within particular relations are key voluntary values and are closely connected to the spontaneity, authenticity and relationship-building capacity that attracted the municipality to community coproduction in the first place. However, as the above quote highlights, the authentic, civic and spontaneous engagement of the volunteers clashes with public values, such as the rule of law or equal access to services. In this example, the volunteers have mobilised refugees in their critique of public housing policy, with the unfortunate result that some refugees are evicted from their apartments. Moreover, the municipality experiences the volunteers as opponents working against the best interests of the refugees. This is a recurrent pattern, whereby volunteers transgress the sectoral boundary regarding legal regulation and public notions of propriety because they are committed to specific individual needs but are oblivious to considerations of public value. Here, conflicts range from volunteers failing to

clean and do the dishes to volunteers trying to circumvent legal requirements of anonymity and equal access. Community coproduction aims to avoid public failures by incorporating specific volunteer values and value-based practices in public services, but the municipal participants experience that volunteer practices are often incompatible with municipal values and that they involve elements of community codestruction (Uppström and Lönn 2017) and public failure.

The volunteer perspective

Similarly, the volunteers experience that municipal goals, values and practices make the process of collaboration difficult and cumbersome. Access and resources are desirable public sector qualities, but the municipality often refuses to grant the volunteers the expected access, funding and facilities they need. The role of public values—such as universality, the rule of law and accountability—constitute a firm boundary between volunteers and municipal actors, repelling the volunteers who experience coproduction as asymmetric.

Accounts of these repelling forces primarily surface in statements from frontline volunteers and voluntary sector managers. The municipality sometimes acts in ways that seem opaque, unpredictable and counterproductive to the volunteers. In many cases, volunteer and municipal goals and priorities appear misaligned; indeed, even if they are aligned, the municipality may not consider this a justification for action. This clashes with a volunteer approach where decisions are more readily followed by action and require little legitimisation outside of the collaborative meeting fora. In the following account of a failed attempt to coproduce with the municipality to implement a programme meant to escort children of refugees to leisure activities, a senior manager from an NGO working with refugees expresses their incompatible values and practices:

I think there is openness from the municipality in this and in other cases. But they also hold back. And that is how it typically works with a political system. There are priorities, chains of command, policies, and so on. But let's be frank and admit that it would be great if we could just say 'this is awesome—let's do this together'. Because it is a lucrative offer we are making with external funding, lots of money for activities, support for refugee children, education for the volunteers and for collaborating with the municipality, and optimising the school classes. That is not to say that they are holding back or what it is they are doing, because I don't think that is the case…. I think there are other reasons. (Volunteer Manager #13, immigration services)

The municipality becomes repelling as a coproduction partner because they only desire selected value characteristics from volunteers, hence seeking to avoid many of their practices. The volunteers, meanwhile, feel that the municipality confines them to limited specific tasks and contributions within public service delivery.

Moreover, the municipality often makes use of a vocabulary and set of bureaucratic tools that come across as heavy-handed and threatening to the volunteers. One volunteer from an NGO working with refugees describes this unequal, intersectoral dynamic:

[…] And then I hope there can be made room for us to co-produce—create something together. Because in this café, we were told at one point 'you must build bridges with the local community'. Period. And you can't say that to volunteers: 'You must do so and so'. You can say, 'Would you like to?' But there has been a lot from the municipality side saying, 'Now you must do this and this and this. And we want and we want and we want this'. So there was never any equality in the collaboration: it was like the municipality had defined this frame and we had to fit inside it. (Volunteer #14, immigration services)

Here, the municipal practices are incompatible with volunteer values and practices regarding the free and prolific aggregation of people who share concerns and spontaneous creation of meaningful, voluntary commitments. The volunteers experience the municipality as destroying volunteer spontaneity and authenticity. The resources, legal insights and professionalism that compelled volunteers to coproduce in the first place then become a repelling, asymmetrical use of power and rigid bureaucracy in practice. Thus, the public sector's instrumentalisation of the voluntary organisations in the service of public values is experienced as disregarding the volunteers' goals and practices and a threat to voluntary value, just as the reverse was the case from the municipal perspective.

Cautious collaborative strategies

Clearly, then, the voluntary and municipal actors are caught in the tension between the compelling forces of coproduction (driven by self-perceived insufficiencies) and the repelling forces of coproduction (derived from the undesirable practices, goals and values of the partner sector). In this final analytical section, we investigate the boundary work that each sector employs to manage and stabilise community coproduction between the compelling and repelling forces. These strategies are ways of getting some of the benefits from the compelling characteristics of the coproduction partner while avoiding the repelling practices. These strategies come into play in both the planning and everyday execution of specific coproduction projects.

Municipal collaborative strategies

In the above analysis, we have shown that the key issues experienced by the municipality were the unruliness of and criticisms from voluntary organisations, the agendas and bureaucracy of volunteer organisations, the particularity of voluntary concerns and the spontaneity of voluntary practices.

Selection strategy

In response to the perceived unruliness of the volunteers, in some cases, the municipality adopts a *selection strategy*. When coproducing services that are subject to frequent criticism, voluntary organisations often seek to appropriate and codefine policies and goals, treating them as boundary objects. To avoid this, the municipality often seeks partner organisations that emphasise care but not do not voice and critique. In our case study, this is particularly the case in the contentious field of immigration services, where organisations and volunteers are more vocally critical of public policies and municipal services. Here, the municipality would choose to coproduce with specific, mostly religious organisations that emphasise relational care to individuals in need rather than challenging the legitimacy of municipal policies, professionals and services. This compliant and non-critical approach of the care-orientated volunteers can be observed during a meeting of the 'cross-sector collaboration forum', where volunteer and municipal actors would meet to update each other on new projects:

> After the municipal integration manager has spoken, a priest from the local congregation takes over. After providing an impressive account of several well-run projects, such as a church-based café, a food bank and various well-attended community dinners arranged by the congregation and other religious organisations, the priest explains how the local churches are ready to help should the municipality notice an unmet need. To this end, they have become part of an advisory board where they will get feedback from the municipality. (Field notes, Immigration services)

In turn, the municipality continues to demarcate a strong boundary that excludes volunteer organisations from codefining and codesigning policies, goals and services, while seeking to codesign standardised formats for voluntary care work and to codetermine volunteer goals as

shared boundary objects. This boundary work reduces coproduction to the planning, ad hoc implementation and delivery of delineated services rather than reflecting the ambitions of a fundamental involvement in qualifying public policy and service provision. This selection strategy depends on the welcoming work of voluntary organisations—described below as a *depoliticisation* strategy—which allows voluntary organisations to become preferred coproduction partners.

Individualisation strategy

A second public sector strategy concerns the *individualisation* of coproduction by directly recruiting individual volunteers without involving the overarching voluntary organisations. This strategy is efficient in circumventing the perceived unruliness, political agendas and increasingly cumbersome bureaucracy and professionalism of voluntary organisations. In both service areas, the municipal organisations would recruit individual volunteers through public advertisements and use word-of-mouth to provide specific nonprofessional care tasks under the coordination and supervision of municipal employees:

> Interviewer: *So are the volunteers organised by one of the organisations? Through Dane Age?*
>
> Municipal volunteer coordinator (MVC): *No, no, that's just the municipality's volunteers.*
>
> Interviewer: *The municipality's volunteers?*
>
> MVC: *I don't know if that's what they call themselves. I think they feel very closely connected to the activity centre where they are volunteers. That is what they identify with, I think […] So maybe they volunteer for two hours a week […] Last time I was at an activity centre to talk about dementia, some employees were thinking about what resources and knowledge the volunteer team leaders need to help support that*

> *group of weak citizens to stay active and participate in some of the activities.*
>
> (Municipal volunteer coordinator #21, Elderly services)

These volunteers were generally more activity- and care-orientated than those from the volunteer organisations, and they did not identify significantly with the volunteer organisations or the volunteer sector. As a result, these individual volunteers would not challenge the strong demarcation of the sectoral boundary and would mostly comply with the goals and practices designed and defined by the municipality.

Service separation strategy.

Finally, in most coproduction activities, the municipality employs a *service separation* strategy to maintain sectoral boundaries. This strategy involves designing standardised collaborative formats that include a temporal and/or spatial separation of volunteer services from public services. This type of collaboration aims to let volunteers deliver elements considered important to public services without becoming part of public service delivery organisation.

One example of this strategy is the 'job club', where the municipality would participate in meetings to coordinate volunteer and municipal employment services and request specific services from the volunteers. However, while seeking to use the volunteer services to supplement or fill gaps in the services, the municipality also avoided giving volunteers access to municipal services and infrastructure. This occurred despite continuous efforts from the volunteers to integrate the services. Another example is the successful 'companion' project, in which volunteers would follow elderly users to activity centres and help them become acquainted with the place and other users. This service is codesigned by the municipality and volunteer organisation, but although the municipality was only involved in the initial screening of each user, they have played a detailed role in defining the volunteers' activities.

A hallmark of this strategy, then, is the municipality defining a specific problem or need as a boundary object of mutual interest but one that is more suited to volunteer than public care. To this end, the strategy establishes a form of collaboration in which volunteer organisations become 'subcontractors' rather than coproducers, following standardised formats largely defined by the municipality. In some cases, the volunteers would propose the need, and the municipality would agree as a boundary object of mutual interest. However, the municipality would continue to do demarcation work: codefining standardised formats for volunteer practices, but keeping volunteer access and influence on public services and policies to a minimum.

The outcome of this separation is that volunteer spontaneity, values and particular concerns are kept apart from public service delivery, thereby avoiding hybridisation and volunteer involvement in public services and policies. The strategy is effective in maintaining asymmetry and sectoral differences while also allowing the municipality to coordinate and influence the activities and goals of the volunteers. It is equally efficient in keeping the volunteers from influencing public service delivery and works best when combined with the selection strategy.

Volunteer collaborative strategies

For the volunteer organisations, the key factors contributing to coproduction ambivalence are the cumbersome and inscrutable nature of their municipal counterparts, who seek to demarcate and maintain boundaries, making collaboration with the municipality feel instrumental, invasive and unequal to the volunteers. The volunteer organisations employ several strategies to demarcate boundaries while still making the sectoral boundary permeable enough to gain access to municipal resources.

Depoliticisation strategy

One such approach is a *depoliticisation* strategy, which is characterised by a division of labour within the voluntary organisation, whereby one branch coproduces services with the municipality, while another is responsible for advocacy and influencing politicians and municipal senior management. This decoupling strategy is applicable to large organisations across service areas where advocacy becomes an issue for employees at the national or regional level, while the local branch volunteers and project managers focus on coproducing specific services. Depoliticisation is an effective form of welcoming work, in that it addresses the municipal desire to keep disorderly and unmanageable volunteer organisations at a distance.

The division between the municipal responsibility for policies and service design and the volunteers' commitment to care is voiced by a manager from a volunteer organisation working in immigration services:

> *So you can say things are happening [...] that change the traditional ideas about who does what, and coproduction is seriously interesting, really. There are lots of places in the municipality where they see a huge value in this and where civil society organisations take part in organising [services] with the approach that: yes, of course, we are a critical watchdog [...] and grassroots organisations are meant to be and all that, but we are on the same team as the municipality. We have a common interest in creating solutions, and the municipality sees a huge value in citizens getting engaged and making a cohesive community for the people who live there.*
>
> (Volunteer Manager #13, Immigration services)

More specifically, displacing the boundary conflicts to negotiations with politicians and senior management makes collaboration with practitioners and lower-level management less conflicted. Separating care and critique allows voluntary organisations to make boundaries

more permeable and invite the municipality to codefine and codesign the voluntary care work. Some organisations—in particular in the field of immigration services—have successfully pursued an extreme version of the depoliticisation strategy by focusing exclusively on care goals and not targeting the influence of municipal policies or services to any significant extent. This welcoming work unilaterally turns voluntary goals and practices into boundary objects, inviting the municipality to become codesigners of voluntary practices and codefiners of voluntary goals. This extreme strategy is predominantly pursued by organisations that do not define democratic participation and voice as a key objective in their ongoing collaborations with the municipality, making them more successful in the face of municipal selection strategies.

Symbolic compensation strategy

A second strategy employed by volunteer organisations is a *symbolic compensation* strategy. This combines welcoming and demarcation work to symbolically rectify coproduction asymmetry. The strategy relates to municipal demarcation work because it substitutes volunteer influence on municipal goals and practices with symbolic recognition of the volunteers' contributions. In this sense, symbolic compensation is not so much a strategy aimed at gaining cross-boundary influence as it is symbolic work aiming to make the asymmetry of coproduction more tolerable for the voluntary organisation.

In community coproduction, the asymmetric distribution of power and resources across the sectoral boundary makes it difficult for voluntary organisations to avoid the municipality's cumbersome and instrumental approach toward volunteers and voluntary organisations. To some extent, this is the price of access. However, several voluntary organisations have sought to re-establish symmetry through demarcation work that emphasises the unique and valuable contribution of voluntary organisations to coproduce public services. The symbolic compensation strategy plays out in different ways in each case,

but characteristically, the voluntary organisation performs welcoming work by accepting a focus on care work and turning voluntary goals and practices into boundary objects codefined by the municipality. The voluntary organisation also performs demarcation work: demanding to be present in important planning processes, to have representation in specific fora, to be treated with respect in negotiations and, in particular, to receive recognition and respect for the value and importance of the volunteer effort. This strategy typically emerges in contexts where volunteers are part of standardised coproduction formats and where access to users requires that they accept goals and practices largely defined by the municipality. Rarely, however, does this symbolic recognition lead to any real influence on municipal goals and practices.

The acceptance of symbolic recognition where tangible influence was impossible was a theme in several volunteer interviews, but the inefficacy of the strategy in terms of influence is particularly clear in descriptions from the municipal side, for example in the following:

> *We have to teach the volunteers what they need to know, and they need to be nursed. There must be some kind of event for volunteers at least once a year, right. With some nice food or something. There is a new leader of one of the elder care centres where some volunteers came every Tuesday to go for a walk with some of the elderly people in that facility. […] And they were not too happy that a new leader was incoming. So she said to them, 'Next time come 15 minutes early and we invite you for breakfast'. And just because they had this talk, now I have heard 'it's fantastic'. And I don't know what the price of 10 or 20 breakfast rolls is, but it is not a lot. So it is not about money; it is about being recognised.* (Municipal volunteer coordinator #5)

The symbolic compensation strategy shows that the voluntary organisations are compelled by both the material and symbolic resources of the municipality and that municipal recognition is a sufficiently important resource to justify coproduction, despite the evident lack of influence. In the end, symbolic recognition of volunteer contributions is important because it ascribes worth to the values and goals of the voluntary sector, even if such recognition is not associated with material reward or genuine influence.

Across the immigration and elderly care sector, these cautious collaborative strategies are found to reoccur in the data. However, there are some differences worth noting. First, as mentioned above, the selection strategy employed by the municipality is aimed at avoiding disruption and critique from politicised coproduction partners. This is particularly an issue in the context of immigrations services; consequently, this strategy is more prominent in this domain. Conversely, the individualisation strategy is more common in the context of elderly care, where individual volunteers may not have a particular agenda but where organisations often represent the collective interest of particular groups of elderly. Differences also emerge among types of organisations. Large organisations may adopt the decoupling version of the depoliticisation strategy, whereas smaller local organisation do not have the resources to separate care from politics and risk getting caught in a race to the bottom in terms of de-politicising the relationship to the municipality.

Conclusion

In the current study, we have investigated the phenomenon of coproduction ambivalence in the public and voluntary sectors and the boundary work strategies used to handle coproduction ambivalence. Our research has sought to answer two research questions:

1. Which characteristics of their counterpart do volunteers and municipal employees consider compelling and repelling in the coproduction of welfare?

2. Which boundary work strategies do volunteers and municipal employees employ to manage the conflict between the compelling and repelling characteristics of their partner sector?

In response to research question 1, our study suggests that coproduction ambivalence emerges in the cross-section between the compelling values and practices of the partner sector and the repelling consequences of those values and practices once they cross the sectoral boundary. The compelling forces of coproduction in both sectors stem from self-perceived insufficiencies concerning values or value-dependent resources, competencies and practices, for which community coproduction is perceived to provide effective compensation. However, during the process of coproduction, various repelling forces emerge from the sectoral differences in values and practices. Often, those same characteristics of the partner sector that attracted an organisation to community coproduction in the first place become repelling during actual collaboration. These repelling practices violate the fundamental values and notions of legitimacy of the partner sector, consequently making coproduction appear problematic and potentially harmful. The perceived, potential harm comes from the conflict between values and goals. Municipal employees striving for equal treatment within the law may see volunteer spontaneity and particularism as a threat to their key public values. Conversely, volunteers committed to forming a close and relationship with users may see public sector insistence on anonymity and proper procedure as a threat to their key voluntary values.

In response to research question 2, we find that both sectors employ different cautious collaborative strategies to either increase or decrease boundary permeability. These strategies aim to balance compensating for self-perceived sectoral insufficiencies and avoiding the more unpalatable practices of the coproduction partner. On the municipal side, these collaborative strategies are leveraged to mitigate criticism, untimely intervention and the

general unruliness of volunteer organisations while maintaining access to their capacity for relational care. The municipality seeks to convert the practices and goals of the voluntary sector into boundary objects codetermined by both sides without allowing the volunteers access to the municipal side. On the voluntary side, on the other hand, cautious collaborative strategies are devised to gain access to municipal resources while maintaining some degree of sectoral demarcation and autonomy. The more successful strategies are intended to either displace criticism to other collaborative areas or to withhold criticism altogether in favour of gaining access. Some voluntary organisations are seen as settling for symbolic recognition from the municipality as a substitute for any actual influence or resource access.

Discussion

More generally, the current study points to several important issues in both coproduction research and coproduction practices. First, community coproduction may increase the asymmetry between public and voluntary organisations, despite all intentions to achieve the opposite. Our analysis suggests that the municipality may achieve their coproduction goals of increased public value while keeping the sectoral boundary impermeable to volunteers because they seek to direct or alter the practices of voluntary organisations. In contrast, voluntary organisations depend on being welcomed across the sectoral boundary to achieve their coproduction goals of resource and infrastructure access. This increases asymmetry because volunteers depend more on cross-sector access than their municipal counterparts. In turn, this asymmetrical power balance compels voluntary organisations to accept municipal direction and compete with other voluntary organisations over access by appearing as the most compliant and noncritical partner. When docility and compliance become a competitive advantage, community coproduction ultimately demands volunteers to suppress critiques that could help improve public service provisions. Furthermore, the absence of volunteer influence on the public side of the boundary suggests

that innovations in public services may be minimal: it is the volunteer services that are the innovated, not the municipal services.

Second, our study indicates that the informal modes of cross-boundary collaboration, as well as the boundary strategies employed on both sides of the sectoral boundaries, are insufficient measures for enforcing commitment to mutuality and substantial policy innovation on the part of the municipality. Rather than realising the compelling ideal of complementarity and completion through community coproduction, the fundamental asymmetry between sectors around needs and resources inadvertently enables the municipality to perform *boundary incursion*, prompting the voluntary sector to be the docile partner and fully compliant with municipal needs and agendas. Moreover, if the municipalities wish to engage in cross-sector coproduction that leads to a genuine impact on—and innovation in—current policymaking, it seems necessary to establish some form of boundary organisation and invest it with the power and mandate to enforce commitment and mutuality in organisations on both sides of the sectoral boundary.

A final issue identified in our study is that the overly optimistic notions of coproduction that exist in the general discourse on coproduction, particularly at the management level, may in fact have detrimental effects on coproduction practices. This is because the compelling forces of coproduction are evident in policy development, general discussions and in the early planning stages of coproduction, whereas the repelling forces only really emerge when coproduction is put into practice. Such over optimism relates to both what it is possible to coproduce and the extent to which practitioners will be able to bridge the sectoral boundary in their everyday practice. Policy development and project planning focus almost exclusively on the potential benefits, but practitioners must deal with all the problematic, repelling characteristics of the coproduction partner once the sectoral boundary begins to blur and hybridise. In ongoing activities, the coresponsibility for coproduced services activates issues

of (il-)legitimacy and cross-boundary value incongruence that can be readily ignored or downplayed in more general discussions about coproduction. This disconnection—between management and street-level practitioners, and between optimistic discourse and problematic practice—is a major cause of coproduction ambivalence, creating ongoing tensions and dissatisfaction among lower management and practitioners in both sectors.

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