Book Review


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The notion of co-production has been theoretically well-developed in public administration and policy to explore new ways of engaging citizens in providing public services (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Torfing, Sørensen, and Reiseland 2019). Little is known, however, about the beliefs, values, rules, and shared assumptions – institutional logics – that shape co-production in nonprofits. In Non-Profit Organizations and Co-production: The Logics Shaping Professional and Citizen Collaboration, Caitlin McMullin (2023) addresses this gap, providing insightful empirical and theoretical elements by combining institutional logic and co-production to explain the relationship between nonprofit professionals and citizens in designing, implementing, and delivering services from a comparative perspective. Leveraging three case studies in Sheffield (England), Lyon (France), and Montreal (Canada), the author argues that co-production in nonprofits varies and, thereby, results from complex and multiple interactions between actors, institutional pressures, and context specificities. In this argument, nonprofits are complex organizations that provide more than just a last resort for delivering those goods and services that neither the market nor the state offers.

In Chapter Two, the author narrowly defines co-production “as the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized service providers and service users or other members of the community” (p. 21). Under co-production, professionals and citizens should cooperate to co-produce, design, and implement services. Seeking an operationalizable definition integrating co-production, the author defines nonprofits as the group of “professionalized service providers…who engage citizens/service users in co-production” (p. 32). One novelty under this definition is that it moves away from studying the market-state-nonprofit organizational relationship, placing instead “the dynamics between individuals at the delivery level” (p. 32) as a unit of analysis. As such, the embraced definition of co-production focuses on the services people need – like caring, entertainment, education, or health – instead of adopting a broad definition encompassing other collective goods, such as advocacy and channeling social discontent. Similarly, this co-production concept emphasizes nonprofit professionals’ role as “equivalent to public servants” (p. 32) in co-producing services,
which is worth noting. In co-production, nonprofit professionals and community members engage in service delivery.

By adopting the institutional logic framework in Chapter Three, the author provides a helpful theoretical structure to approach external pressures affecting individual dynamics in delivering goods and services. This framework is a set of constructs and concepts to understand organizational decision-making that the author adopts as “the cultural beliefs, norms of behavior, and rules that structure cognition and inform decision-making in organizations” (p. 41). According to the author, three mechanisms or pillars are the main drivers of institutional logic:
1. Regulative rules or laws that guide behavior.
2. Values, norms, beliefs, or ideas on desired outcomes.
3. The shared conceptions, assumptions, and drivers for action under preconceived social reality.

The abovementioned mechanisms are socially constructed and historically contingent and could take either objective (material) or subjective (symbolic) forms. In this vein, a complex interplay of external and internal institutional logics shapes the co-production dynamics between nonprofits and citizens. Therefore, these forces play a crucial role in determining the services provided, the level of citizen engagement, and the success or failure of the expected outcomes.

The iterative approach combined with the comparative analysis employed regarding theory building on co-production and nonprofits is worth mentioning. Case studies in three contexts – England, France, and Canada – were used to explore “whether, why, and how co-production practices differ between nonprofit organizations in different contexts” (p. 9) and, I would add, to what extent institutional logics (laws, practices, and narratives) are helpful to address these questions comparatively. The author employed three methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews for capturing narratives, direct observation to identify practices, and content analysis on organizational and legal documents. Nonetheless, each case had limitations – geographical and communicational (language) – and may have warranted using different qualitative approaches (for example, there was more observation in Canada than in the other two contexts). As a result, as shown below, institutional logic and types of co-production were re-defined according to the context specificities.

In England (Chapter Four), the author found the co-production dynamics that better fit her theoretical framework. She analyzed five Sheffield organizations and two programs. The services provided by the studied organizations include libraries, employment support, and caring for older people with mental health difficulties. Based on the semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and content analysis, the author found the assimilation of at least three logics: the market, the state, and
the community. The author defines, thus, this assimilation as a Service Delivery Logic, which means a blending of responses from organizations, where values and beliefs stemming from the community logic – enforced service provision by citizens – deal with the market (professionalization, efficiency, and business-like practices) and state (accountability) rules. Co-production is categorized as pragmatic, given that it tends to be instrumental in conforming to the established rules, focusing only on delivery, and adopting a more individualistic approach by delivering services to individuals or small groups rather than wider communities.

In France (Chapter Five), the author’s findings suggest new avenues for adopting a broad definition of co-production. In this chapter, she analyzed five social centers and two organizations. These centers are in disadvantaged neighborhoods and provide space for community and advocacy activities. The two organizations focus on local cooperative nurseries and caring for the social isolation of older people. As a result of the interviews, the author found a “blended type of hybridity” (p. 88) formed by two logics: the Napoleonic state and local solidarity. In conjunction, both blend what the author calls the “Social Solidarity Logic” (p. 88), explained by a strong republican ideology centered on the state’s power and the community’s legitimacy based upon trust, reciprocity, and geographical proximity. This logic drives a formalized co-production, where organizational practices and values are “formalized and codified through official documents” (p. 88), professionals and citizens are involved in planning and decision-making instead of only in delivery and implementation, and collective benefits are privileged over individual benefits. The French case shows that, as defined, co-production loosely grasps what the nonprofit sector means regarding building spaces not only for fulfilling service needs but also for seeding organizational channels through which social and advocacy movements can flourish.

Canada’s case (Chapter Six) also challenges the narrow definition of co-production, appealing not only to incorporate different collective goods but also to unpack the role of the state and the intergovernmental relations therein. This chapter’s analysis was based on two community development corporations (CDCs) localized in Montreal, Quebec. CDCs primarily foster coalitions of organizations (grassroots organizations) “that provide services in the social services, family, employability, literacy, housing, culture, environment, and migrant integration sectors” (p. 122). The collected data primarily came from observations in meetings, events, and similar activities. According to the findings, the author defines a Social Movement Logic as a response against the market logic and an “intentional distancing from the state logic” (p. 123). This logic embraces service delivery and advocacy activities favoring social justice and change. In the studied CDCs, the social movement logic leads to a citizen-led co-production, where citizens “take a strong leadership position” (p. 143) and professionals mostly facilitate and offer support for
service delivery. Provincial governments in Canada also play a critical role as communities’ counterparts in grant funding agreements. This finding expands the co-production definition to include political settlements where dissent movements and political activism in favor of most disadvantaged groups may occur. Also, given the different levels of government and agencies that form the state, this finding calls for going beyond the central government role and addressing the intergovernmental relationships among central and subnational (provincial and local) governments to provide local services where nonprofits could be involved.

Recapping, I would have liked to see a more in-depth discussion of why tangible services predominate over political needs in co-production, especially when defining co-production in Chapter Two. Given that there is a lack of explanation on what professional means or what kind of knowledge, expertise, and interests guide this definition, one can argue that professionalization tilts at efficiency, management, and rules compliance, among other technical rationalities that tend to depoliticize and constrain citizen’s voice (Alexander and Fernandez 2021). With this, the implications of co-production and professionalization deserve more attention from different perspectives in future theoretical and empirical research.

Likewise, while the focus on individual interaction in co-production is clearly stated in this book, particularly in Chapters Two and Three, the findings and discussions sometimes require effort to follow regarding the level at which the unit of analysis is placed. At times, the author’s analysis centers on individual interactions at the micro level as intended. However, in other instances, the author reverts to the organizational level, which she had previously suggested had been surpassed. Given the complexities of contexts and the diverse roles of actors (e.g., citizens and organization professionals with unaligned interests) in nonprofits’ co-production, a comprehensive discussion on the blurred line between micro and organizational dynamics would have benefited this book.

Empirically, the findings suggest that more research is needed to test the abovementioned findings in different contexts. For example, the author might, in the future, focus on highly challenging institutional environments where poverty (LiPuma and Koelble 2009), corruption (Fowler 2012), authoritarianism (Li, Lo, and Tang 2017), and other democratic failures impede citizens and professionals’ interaction in co-production. It would be interesting to see how the author’s approach applies to African or Latin American communities, where it is less likely to find “best practice examples of co-production” (p. 171), as in this book. Also, the theoretical framework and the empirical findings rely heavily on a determinist perspective, meaning that the way institutional logics vary will determine the type of co-production. In this sense, it is worth asking if one can explore a feedback loop between co-production and institutional logic instead.
In conclusion, this book makes a valuable contribution to theory building in co-production and nonprofits. By stressing individual interactions and institutional logic, this book goes beyond the conventional definition, which centers on organizational interactions between the state, the market, and nonprofits. Instead, this definition allows for incorporating internal and external institutional pressures or logic that guide, regulate, and shape decision-making in attempting to provide public services at the local/community level. This book also becomes an insightful asset for those interested in conducting comparative research on nonprofits and co-production worldwide since the author provides several issues that researchers may face with cultural and local context aspects. Furthermore, policy implications arise from this book, underscoring the role of governments in shaping the relationships between nonprofit professionals and communities and how governments’ closeness – particularly provincial/local governments – could be more effective in encouraging and improving co-production dynamics.

This book would particularly interest scholars who study collaboration, partnership, and co-production within nonprofit organizations. It can also aid in designing courses on theories related to nonprofit organizations and how they function in an open environment, especially regarding sociological, organizational, civic, and political theories. Scholars interested in introducing and promoting a critical perspective on nonprofit organization theories can use this book to challenge the current constructs and concepts that shape the field. Specifically, scholars who advocate for moving from a narrow perspective of nonprofits as service providers to considering them as key contributors to civil societies (Toepler et al. 2023) and those interested in examining the democratic implications of relying on nonprofits as service providers (Eikenberry 2007) would find this book a valuable source of critique for furthering and enriching these discussions.

References


