Co-Production and Co-Creation

Critical Examination of Contemporary Dominant Participatory Discourses

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Abstract

Over the past decade, co-production and co-creation have become central buzzwords throughout society. The terms engender a fundamental participatory ethos, entailing an increasing involvement in decision-making processes of a variety of people across diverse contexts, who should be given a voice in a wide range of practices to a higher degree than previously done. To a large extent, this participa-

tory wave thus creates new challenges and dilemmas for employees in contemporary organizations. For instance, many public employees (frontline workers) experience challenges regarding translating (and/or enacting) co-creative/co-productive policy objectives into (in) their practices. A central obstacle seems to be the fact that existing organizational frameworks and conditions are often rooted in contradictory management paradigms and reified institutionalized practices, complicating participatory aspirations and processes in various ways. In different ways, the contributions in this issue critically address and discuss a variety of challenges related to co-production and co-creation in contemporary society.

Keywords: co-production, co-creation, collaborative research, democracy, social innovation

Over the past decade, co-production and co-creation have become central buzzwords throughout society. The terms engender a fundamental participatory ethos, entailing an increasing involvement in decision-making processes of a variety of people across diverse contexts (e.g., public and private sectors and civil society), who should be given a voice in a wide range of practices to a higher degree than previously done (e.g., Andersen et al. 2017; Tortzen 2019; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2014). As such, this shift to co-production and co-creation constitutes one of current dominant participatory discourses that permeates most organizing practices, causing a diversity of researchers and practitioners to relate and respond to it in different and sometimes conflicting ways.

The participatory discourse can be observed in diverse areas in society, among others, spanning fields such as science, politics, community life, grassroot movements, and private and public organizations. It can also be related to the development of new welfare solutions, services, products and production forms, sustainability and "green solutions," and new ways of organizing, and it may even contribute to the development of solutions to "wicked problems" (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Andersen et al. 2017) on a larger, global scale. The term *co-creation* was originally part of the private sector's focus on social innovation, whereas the term *co-production* is more often associated with public organizations' capacity-building activities (Åkerblom and Ness 2021; Ansell and
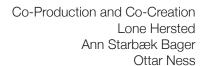
Torfing 2021). However, the two terms are often used interchangeably, and in the Scandinavian context, they are often collapsed into the umbrella term *samskabelse / samskaping* (Ulrich 2016; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2016; Krogstrup 2017; Tortzen 2019).

The overall participatory discourse is further associated with a series of related yet different terms, covering a "jungle of co-dimensions" (Heimburg, Ness, and Storch 2021, 23), such as democratic involvement, dialogic participation, co-management, co-learning, co-evaluation, co-service, co-governance, co-design, social innovation, user-driven innovation, network management, active citizenship, and many more. Thus, overall, it taps into a wide range of methodological approaches derived from various fields of research and practice. The exact choice of term(s) and method(s) seems to depend on the context in which the co-creative practices are expected to occur, on their ideological and theoretical bases, as well as on the different purposes that inspire the co-creative practices. Therefore, the field is characterized by a high degree of diversity and multidisciplinarity.

Agger and Tortzen (2015) and Agger, Tortzen, and Rosenberg (2018) point out that co-production and co-creation comprise a relatively new area of research. At the same time, it can be argued that it is an old phenomenon (Røiseland and Lo 2019) because the participatory ethos is a long and well-established aspect of participatory research approaches, such as in action research (Duus et al. 2012; Hersted, Ness, and Frimann 2019), nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2007), design thinking, and others (Beresford 2021). Therefore, we also address in this issue what we can learn from past experience and the rich literature that has dealt extensively with such participatory issues regarding co-production/co-creation.

On the surface, the participatory discourse promises a range of positive effects, such as more symmetrical dialogic encounters and collaborations across different stakeholder groups, prompting empowerment of voices that are often merely overheard or silenced, as well as shifts of power imbalances, which are difficult to oppose (Bager and Mølholm 2020; Phillips 2011). However, as reflected in the diverse contributions in this issue, the co-creative participatory aspirations are often not as straightforward as they may seem. On one hand, co-creative aspirations and ideals carry great potentials for the development of new interdisciplinary knowledge, as well as
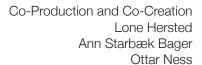
for experimentation with innovative methodologies and new practices, together with novel ways of learning. On the other hand, it opens a set of complex theoretical, ideological, power-related, and context-dependent challenges as it tends to bring along a wide variety of complexities, ambivalences, conflicts, and paradoxes for the stakeholders involved.

When preparing the call for contributions to this issue, we particularly wanted to generate insights into the interdisciplinary diversity in approaches and practices regarding co-production/co-creation. We also wished to address the abovementioned complexities and the built-in paradoxes, dilemmas, and ethical concerns emerging from such complexities. Upon receiving a significant number of high-quality articles, we initiated a challenging selection process and further decided to separate the issue into two volumes to provide space for as many contributions as possible. In this respect, we thank all authors for their truly inspiring and intriguing contributions and the blind peer reviewers for contributing with important and knowledgeable feedback to the authors. This first volume mainly focuses on theoretical and conceptual discussions related to participatory studies, together with critical examinations of the often contradictory political and scientific conditions that complicate these methodologies. For instance, a recurring discussion across several contributions is that organizational frameworks and conditions in diverse contexts are rooted in contradictory management paradigms and reified institutionalized practices, thereby complicating the participatory aspirations in various ways.

The second volume of the issue will be published in the spring of 2022, focusing on practical and empirically based studies of co-production and co-creation. Here, the scholars further examine how co-productive/co-creative efforts tap into many different normative positions and opinions and show how there tends to be no common definition or consensus regarding what co-production and co-creation mean and signify in practice. These contributions highlight how co-productive/co-creative practices occur in many forms and in diverse contexts; they can take place at different organizational levels and involve varying degrees of co-production and co-creation.

Co-production and co-creation as part of new forms of cooperation between private and public actors

We find that the new and increased focus on co-production and co-creation can mainly be justified as it has become an essential part of the new guidelines for public management and development of welfare solutions in the Nordic countries, as well as in several other European countries (Pestoff 2019; Pestoff et al. 2012; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019). This trend is increasingly demanding closer partnerships and collaborations among stakeholder groups that were previously more sharply separated, for instance, collaborations among citizens, public institutions, and private organizations.

Some researchers point out that these new collaborative constellations are part of the efforts to find new solutions to complex problems and challenges — often termed "wicked problems" (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Andersen et al. 2017) cite climate change, gang-related crimes, anxiety among young people, and traffic challenges in and around major cities as examples of wicked problems. In trying to overcome complex societal challenges, network-based collaboration is considered an opportunity to involve many different perspectives, pluralistic stakeholder groups, and various forms of knowledge (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Some scholars argue that co-production and co-creation, constituting a new welfare strategy and technology, are tied to the survival of the public sector due to an increasing economic pressure. From this perspective, whether or not the public sector should participate in co-production and co-creation initiatives is no longer an option (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Parrado et al. 2013). Likewise, proponents of co-production and co-creation argue that there is a potential for public and private actors to learn from each other and mutually benefit from developing new networks for collaboration (Durose and Richardson 2015). More critical voices contend that all the buzzwords cover up a neoliberal market dispositive (Abildgaard and Jørgensen 2021) or (yet) a neoliberal trend foregrounding cost savings and privatization, where welfare services—previously provided by professionals—are now being handed over to volunteers and other civil society actors (Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). Thus, it is important to examine the "dark side" of

co-production and co-creation. For instance, researchers can investigate whether co-production and co-creation, more or less intentionally, can lead to reduced or increased social inequality and thus, can respectively result in counter-production or co-destruction of value (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Steen, Taco, and Verschuere 2018; Williams et al. 2020).

The participatory ethos has and will most likely have far-reaching consequences for public and private organizations, as well as for citizens in general. Among other things, the use of co-production and co-creation in the public sector has and will have a profound effect on how we, now and in the future, organize and develop our societies, communities, organizational structures and cultures, and the new participatory and administrative positions that follow in its wake. Co-production and co-creation involve new forms of organizing and relating and more fluid boundaries between public, private, and voluntary actors, which in turn call for new forms of collaboration. As such, co-production and co-creation can be conceived as forming a constellation of plural, often contrasting and conflicting, activity systems, which involve situated activities and the embedded dimensions of the relationships that they constantly reproduce and change.

Clashes among diverse paradigms and rationales in the public sector

Co-production and co-creation will inevitably have an impact on the ways in which civil servants (especially frontline workers) are expected to act and carry out their work. Some researchers point out that today's public employees must navigate through a mix of co-existing management paradigms that often collide and create tensions and dilemmas (Majgaard 2014, 2017; Andersen et al. 2017). Thus, the various management paradigms are often in competition, and the accompanying sets of rules and declarations of intent create both opportunities and limitations for employees, managers, and citizens. The various management paradigms are sometimes referred to as old public administration (the Weberian bureaucracy/traditional public administration), new public management (NPM), new public governance (NPG), collaborative governance, digital era governance (DEG), and so on (Andersen et al. 2017). Likewise, the goals of increased network management and collaboration in
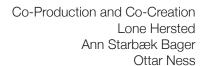
cross-cutting networks give rise to several new challenges. Therefore, as guest editors of this issue, we find it important to address the phenomenon co-creation and co-production in its diversity and complexity, as well as examine its consequences in practice.

Krogstrup (2017) focuses on the external relations between authorities and citizens and points out that the new norm of co-production requires an increase in competence and the so-called capacity-building in the public sector. Here, the focus is on how public employees can be prepared to handle the co-productive relationships in appropriate ways, from the perspective of public organizations.

Majgaard (2014, 2017) and Rennison (2011, 2014) pay attention to internal organizational management and leadership challenges. They discuss the paradoxes / dilemmas that arise and argue for the need of management systems and leadership practices to facilitate and sustain the translation between the many voices and rationales at stake. Majgaard (2014, 2017) focuses on managing the translation processes between the political levels and the local organizational practices through situated narrative strategies. Rennison (2014) opens re-paradoxical strategies, where the paradoxical rationales / voices are heard and discussed in new reflexive ways through polyphonic processes. These translation strategies emphasize analytical and reflexive competencies, where dilemmas, tensions, and paradoxes are addressed and handled as creative potentials to make organizational changes based on more equal relationships.

These perspectives shift the focus from a well-known discourse on "organizational cross-pressure" (Klausen 2017) — where public employees and managers are positioned in a kind of limiting straitjacket—to a more positive and opportunity-oriented view on organizational conflicts. In this context, pluralism is perceived as a potential to open organizational spaces for action. These perspectives further indicate the need for a change of attitude and perspective from rationales and logics tied to traditional bureaucratic consensus-oriented administration toward a more dissensus-oriented, appreciative, and nuanced view of the citizen and affiliated networks. On the same note, efforts can be made to develop capabilities among professionals — both managers and staff — to facilitate more democratic and dialogic processes of co-production and co-creation. This tendency can be reflected as a general turn from

consensus-oriented organizational forms and dynamics to dissensus-oriented practices (Deetz 2001). The latter foregrounds complexity, conflict, ambivalence, and diversity of voices at the expense of the consensus-oriented monologic quest for imaginary unitary cultures and neat streamlined practices that can be controlled in a fairly easy way. In monologic perspectives, subjects tend to be perceived in a rather static, passive, and easily manageable manner, whereas in dissensus-oriented organizational forms, subjects are framed as active and ambivalent sense-makers, capable of contributing with pivotal knowledge in the ongoing co-creation of new knowledge and initiatives (Bager and McClellan, forthcoming).

The wave of co-production and co-creation thus creates new challenges and dilemmas for public employees internally in the administration, together with the handling of external relations (e.g., among external actors, citizens, and authorities). In this context, many public employees (frontline workers) experience challenges in translating (and/or enacting) the policy objectives of co-production and co-creation into (in) their practices, particularly as the organizational framework and conditions are rooted in previous management paradigms and reified institutionalized practices.

In different ways, the contributions in this issue address and discuss a variety of challenges related to co-production and co-creation in present-day society. They cover topics that include co-creative and collaborative research practices, co-production of social and health services, cross-institutional co-creation, co-creation of cultural experience in art institutions, and co-production in community development and city planning.

In the following paragraphs, we offer a brief overview of the rest of articles in this first volume:

The second article, written by Anne Tortzen, is entitled "Democratic Possibilities and Limitations of Digital Co-Creation – Exploring ICT-Facilitated Platforms in Reykjavik and Barcelona." Tortzen points out that information and communication technology (ICT) is gaining ground in public administration and is now being used by municipalities in some major cities, with the aim of contributing to the co-creation of solutions to major problems in the cities. She explains that experiments using digital platforms have been conducted, with the aim of involving citizens as co-creators in developing

solutions to complex problems. From here, many questions arise, among others, whether these digital platforms can offer a real democratic frame for co-creation, which includes the many voices in the city. Another question is whether and how suggestions and ideas from citizens are considered by the city administrators. Using two empirical cases, Tortzen explores possible democratic gains and limitations of introducing digital platforms for co-creation with citizens. She focuses specifically on virtual crowdsourcing in two European cities — Barcelona and Reykjavik.

In the third article, Janne Paulsen Breimo and Asbjørn Røiseland discuss how the concept of co-production (*samskaping* in Norwegian) has become a key concept in Norway's public sector over the last five years. The title of their article is "*Samskaping i Norsk Offentlig Sector – Noen Observasjoner og Hypoteser*" ("Co-Production in the Norwegian Public Sector – Some Observations and Hypotheses"). Based on theories about organizational diffusion and translation, they explore the extent to which the public sector in contemporary Norwegian society is witnessing a real transformation against a mere symbolic change. Based on searches on Norwegian public websites, their analysis shows that while *samskaping* at the national level mostly relates to welfare services (e.g., elderly care), the local level displays a more mixed picture where *samskaping* relates to both regional and local development. Based on the translation theory, their results indicate that the drive toward co-production is propelled by a mixture of different motivations, ranging from more interactions with citizens and opportunistic use of co-production to more symbolic functions.

In her conceptual article (number four), "When Peer Support Workers Engage in Co-Creating Mental Health Services: An Unexplored Resource in Mental Health Service Transformation," Kristina Bakke Åkerblom discusses the conditions in which peer support workers (PSWs) can contribute to the co-creation of new practices and innovative mental health services. Based on theoretical perspectives from public sector innovation studies, she illustrates how PSWs may play an essential role in co-designing new and improved services and engage as partners in shaping and co-creating service transformation. She further discusses how PSWs' position between service users and service professionals and between services and

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Co-Production and Co-Creation
Lone Hersted
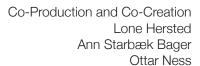Ann Starbæk Bager
Ottar Ness

civil society (user organizations and community services) is crucial. PSWs' contributions can be utilized by recognizing their boundary spanner role. She also argues that a conceptual distinction between co-production and co-creation can better prepare practices to utilize PSWs' competence in mental health service transformations.

In the fifth article, "Creating Equality for Those in Crisis," Michael John Norton and Calvin Swords discuss the potentials of co-creative approaches in acute inpatient mental health services as means to help practices become more recovery oriented and less coercive. They argue about how this transformation entails a move away from dominant biomedical approaches and discourses toward approaches foregrounding empowerment. On this note, they propose a social constructionist lens, which is sensitive to the power dynamics and discursive practices in everyday practice. Their critical discussion includes pointing out the lack of evidence and the scarcity of literature that focus on how such co-creative practices can unfold, and they advocate more critical ethical discussions in relation to practice.

In the sixth article, *"Samskaping som Revitalisering av Samfunnsarbeid i Sosialt Arbeid,"* ("Co-Creation, Revitalizing Community Work in Social Work"), Ole Petter Askheim points out that community work at present has a weakened position in social work, while individually oriented practices are dominant. This development is foregrounded as paradoxical since the term co-creation has simultaneously obtained a prominent position in several countries' welfare policies. However, even if both concepts — community work and co-creation — share the prefix "co," the terms have very different backgrounds. Askheim notes that while community work is rooted in a bottom-up perspective and a left-wing ideology, the co-creation approach has its background in innovation literature, where it has moved from the private to the public sector and is mainly introduced by the state authorities. According to Askheim, besides expressing democratic intentions, co-creation is associated with the goals of efficiency and increased sustainability in the welfare sector. Askheim discusses whether the co-creation concept may contribute to a revitalization of community work or if a co-creation strategy

would imply a dead end if the original intentions of community work should be sustained.

Article number seven, "*Hvilke Posisjoner Kan Være Vanskelige* å *Innta i Forskning for Medforskere, Som er Avhengige av Hjelpeapparatet?*" ("Which Positions Can Be Difficult to Take for Co-Researchers Who Are Dependent on Welfare Services?") is written by Ellen Syrstad and Håvard Aaslund. They discuss two research projects in which socially marginalized co-researchers, who depend on the aid program contribute to the co-creation of research. The first study includes parents whose children are placed under public care, and the other involves homeless people. Their studies' findings indicate that such dependency can act as a barrier to critical research or critical actions in two ways: 1) It is difficult to be critical of one's own position in research. 2) It is difficult to be critical of the aid program.

In article number eight, entitled "Social Research at a Time of Fast Feedback and Rapid Change: The Case for 'Slow Science'," Rick Iedema challenges some of the most prevalent mainstream critique against participatory inquiry and participatory studies. Such critique often points to how such studies prompt methodological indeterminacy that, according to Iedema "undermines its scientific credentials by rendering its processes and outcomes vulnerable to idiosyncratic events, subjective interpretations, local variability and chancy outcomes" (as quoted in Iedema, this issue). Iedema challenges these assumptions by drawing on perspectives such as slow science, affect theory and post-qualitative critique, in combination with experiences from involving healthcare practitioners in methods of reflexive video ethnography. On this basis, Iedema innovatively challenges the "scientific-technocratic order" that tends to foreground "strict methods tyranny." He argues for the need for slow and participatory science approaches that do not only give voice to those whose lives are studied and affected but also legitimize the need for scholars to be affected by these voices.

In article number nine, "Mapping and Understanding the Potentials of Co-Creative Efforts in Museum Experience Design Processes," Kristina Maria Madsen and Mia Falch Yates focus on the initial movement in the museum world toward a higher degree of co-cre-

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Co-Production and Co-Creation
Lone Hersted
Ann Starbæk Bager
Ottar Ness

ation with the users and co-creation in the relationship among the involved professionals with different positions, capabilities, and professional backgrounds through more collaborative and participatory strategies. The authors point out that this movement is in its initial phase. They examine the attempts to work with co-creation at three different Danish museums and discuss the co-creative process through the lens of a "Venn diagram," which graphically illustrates the overall collaboration among different stakeholders. The authors propose the first step toward a framework for visualizing, understanding, and discussing the dynamics of a co-creative museum experience design. Their intention is to create a foundation for discussing the complexities of collaborative processes.

In article number ten, *"Tilrettelegging for Samskapt FoU i et Tverr-Institusjonelt Partnerskap om Universitetsskoler"* ("Facilitation of Co-Created R&D in an Inter-Institutional Partnership between University Schools"), Torild Alise W. Oddane and Ingrid Stenøien address how the co-creation of public services calls for new leadership practices, placing high demands on leaders in traditional bureaucratic organizations. The authors explore leadership practices that enable co-creation in cross-institutional partnerships. Their study is based on data from a co-creation project in a cross-institutional university school partnership. While using the complexity theory as a theoretical lens, they examine how the leaders developed an inter-institutional network, enabling 14 collaborative projects between researchers and teachers. The study suggests that formal and informal leadership actions aimed at creating cross-institutional managerial commitment, preparing emergent semi-structured plan, developing a broad targeted information strategy, and connecting people across institutions are vital for enabling co-creation in cross-institutional partnerships.

In article number eleven, "The Conceptual and Methodological Development of the SIMM-Q," Atle Ødegård, Ragnhild Holmen Waldahl, Elisabeth Willumsen, Tatiana Iakovleva, and Jon Strype point to new insights and call for an elaboration of research methodologies, which can explore and investigate the phenomenon of innovation (i.e., processes and outcomes). They describe the development of a conceptual model of social innovation at the micro level and the

development of a quantitative methodology, named the Social Innovation Measurement Model Questionnaire (SIMM-Q), linked to research on social innovation and its relevance for co-creation.

As editors of this volume, we would like to emphasize that none of the contributors romanticizes co-production and co-creation, but they all discuss the dilemmas, tensions, and complexities related to the participatory discourse. They do not only discuss the dilemmas and tensions experienced by citizens, practitioners, communal workers, managers, and so on, but they also critically examine the dilemmas experienced by the researchers themselves while undertaking projects based on ideals of co-production and/or co-creation. In different ways, the authors of each article point to the need for an augmented critical-reflexive awareness while attempting to enact the participatory terms and the corresponding methods in political and institutional policies, programs, and strategies, as well as in the so-called collaborative research projects. After reading through all the intriguing contributions, we find that they point to the relevance for researchers and practitioners to pay attention to several aspects, including the following:

1 What conditions and circumstances are offered for co-creation and co-production?
2 For whom are researchers and practitioners doing these kinds of projects, and who will benefit from the co-creative initiatives?
3 How do we, both as researchers and practitioners, ensure real democratic involvement where people are provided choices and not merely a voice?
4 What kinds of systemic structures and conceptual taken-for-granted assumptions either support or prevent diverse co-creative initiatives?
5 What kinds of new employee and citizen positions emerge from diverse co-creative processes, and what are the consequences?
6 What kinds of new power balances and imbalances are co-created at the expense of others?
7 What kinds of leadership practices are needed, and how do we develop new ways of leadership, which can sustain co-creation and co-production?

Regarding the last reflexive aspect, a possible and obvious avenue is to engage in processes where new narrative translation (Majgaard 2017) or re-paradoxical (Rennison 2014) leadership strategies are co-created in close collaboration among leaders, employees, and researchers. In such co-creative processes, the paradoxical and often clashing rationales/voices can be encountered and discussed in new reflexive ways and in a tension-embracing and dissensus-based manner, potentially leading to more egalitarian and plurivocal practices.

While reading through the articles, we also identify the need for educating students, professionals, managers, consultants, researchers, and other relevant actors in practicing and facilitating co-production and co-creation, with the aim of contributing to the development of democracy. It certainly becomes evident that co-creation and co-production are not just something that we, as researchers and practitioners, can do without preparation or training but must be learned through education and practice based on a critical-reflexive approach.

It is our aspiration that this volume and the second one can contribute to a critical-reflexive discussion that may help qualify and improve projects and initiatives, invoking co-creation and co-production in addressing minor and major challenges in our complex society on both local and global scales.

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