CHAPTER 1

Why Co-producing Public Services and Public Outcomes with Citizens Is Timely

1.1 INTRODUCTION

User and community co-production has experienced renewed interest internationally in both academia and practice since the early 2000s, after its original short burst of prominence in the US around the 1980s. In the words of John Alford (2009, 4), “co-production is (back) in fashion”.

This has been accompanied by an exponential growth of publications on all aspects of co-production. Furthermore, the term co-production is increasingly used by a wide range of stakeholders in the policy community and public services—perhaps most obviously in countries such as the UK and Netherlands, but also in many other parts of the world (although rather less in Germany, France and the USA). Many governments have published reports on the potential of co-production, while the European Union has funded a considerable number of co-production research projects within its Horizon 2020 programme and other initiatives. European umbrella organisations such as the European Platform for Rehabilitation (2016) have also commissioned studies and briefing papers on co-production.

This chapter will explore the contextual factors which help to explain the rise of interest in co-production. This analysis uses a PESTEL framework, which covers political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legislative drivers of co-production. This is necessarily quite a brief tour through each of the relevant factors—however, some
especially important co-production drivers such as leadership and digital technologies will be analysed further in later chapters of this book.

Following this discussion of the factors driving co-production in policy and practice in OECD countries, this chapter then provides an overview of the evolution of the concept in public administration and policy.

### 1.2 Contextual Factors Promoting Co-production of Public Services and Outcomes

#### 1.2.1 The Growing Interest in Co-production of Public Services and Outcomes

Not so long ago the term co-production was mainly used for the joint productions by media companies making films or television programmes together. More recently, this has changed dramatically—co-production has become one of the most widely used terms in the social sciences, but now in the sense of citizens as users of public services or members of the community working together with public service organisations. In particular, literature reviews show that in the field of public management and administration there has been an almost exponential increase in the number of articles making reference to co-production in the last ten years (Voorberg et al. 2015; Sicilia et al. 2019). Moreover, in the UK, the term has also become part of public sector policy and practice—for example, it has appeared in civil service reports (Horne and Shirley 2009) and even in government programmes (Christie 2011) and is now to be found in the strategic plans of an increasing number of local authorities and health and social care partnerships. Co-production, and in particular co-design, is also becoming a key element of digital transformation strategies in the public sector (Scottish Government 2018).

Of course, this does not necessarily imply that there is now a shared understanding of co-production of public services and outcomes in the academic community or in public service organisations. Indeed, use of the term has become so widespread, and it has been applied to so many phenomena, that there is a risk that it is becoming the victim of its own success. If everything is described as ‘co-production’, then the concept ceases to add anything meaningful. Hence this monograph on the co-production of public services and outcomes, which seeks to both clarify and to exemplify the role, the potential and the limitations of user and community co-production.
Throughout this book, we will be exploring in detail how citizens, both as service users and as members of their communities, can contribute to improving public services and achieving publicly-desired outcomes. This means that we do not limit co-production to improving public services, since public services are only a means to an end—namely, to improve publicly-desired outcomes, including both quality of life outcomes for citizens and public governance principles.

It is also important to note at the outset that this is not a book about ‘citizenship’ in the political science sense nor about ‘community development’—we use both the terms ‘citizen’ and ‘community’ in a very broad sense. Specifically, we take the term ‘citizen’ to include residents in a particular country, whether or not they have formal citizenship status. It therefore includes people such as migrants or children who are not allowed to vote.

Again, we often contrast ‘user co-production’ with ‘community co-production’. ‘User co-production’ focuses on the co-production relationship between public service organisations and those using a specific service. ‘Community co-production’, on the other hand, highlights how people in a specific community, including many who do not use a public service, may make a contribution to improve publicly desired outcomes through their co-production. Often the communities about which we are talking will be defined by geographic boundaries—but not always. In particular, in the digital age we need to recognise that communities may also be defined by their shared interests (Loeffler and Bovaird 2018, 405).

Above, we have already used the term ‘public service organisations’, so it is also important to note right at the beginning that we include within this category all organisations, whether from public, private or third sectors, which make a significant contribution to public services—which also means, of course, that they are likely to have an interest in co-production of public services with citizens.

1.2.2 User and Community Co-production in a Context of Austerity

How can this increasing interest in co-production be explained? Academic interest in the concept of co-production originated with the Ostroms and their colleagues in the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University, Bloomington (known as the ‘Bloomington School’), who coined the term (see Parks et al. 1981 and Ostrom 1996). This
was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of economic uncertainty and even recession in the US. Similarly, the recent renaissance of co-production research around the world has occurred in the context of financial austerity, which has meant a reduction of government spending and lower living standards in many countries (Loeffler 2016, 325).

It is therefore tempting to assume that interest in co-production is essentially an offspin from austerity and, in consequence, that it is being used as a strategy for cutting public spending. Indeed, it sometimes suggested that co-production is just a cover for ‘dumping government responsibilities on the public’ and that public sector interest in the potential benefits of co-production is actually just a pretence. From this perspective, co-production is simply a nice way of describing how responsibility for citizen wellbeing has been passed to those least able to cope—essentially it is the public sector saying ‘make better use of your own resources, because you can’t have ours’. As a community activist commented in 2012 on the launch of a major co-production initiative of the London Borough of Lambeth: “It was a top-down initiative. There had been no large-scale attempt to engage the community and voluntary sector in debating and shaping it [before it was announced]. Many affected treated it with a great deal of scepticism, as a cover for a Labour council to make massive budget cuts palatable” (Creighton 2012). Seven years later, another local resident blogged: “Lambeth Council is still officially a Co-operative Council. This may come as a surprise for some residents, especially those living on estates threatened with unwanted regeneration, or those fighting to keep their libraries open or people who don’t want to see their precious parkland handed over to private companies every year” (Cobb 2018).

This perceived “deliberate rejection of responsibility” (Steen et al. 2018, 284) by the public sector points to an aspect of the ‘dark side’ of co-production. However, far from being the purpose of co-production, ‘hollowing out the state’ by transferring full responsibility for public services to citizens actually means the end of co-production. This book is about both public service organisations and citizens contributing to improvements in quality of life, not one side dumping all responsibility onto the other.

However, perhaps surprisingly, there is actually little evidence that co-production has been even considered by managers in local public services as a budget saving strategy, at least in the UK. While evidence from case study research in English local authorities shows the importance of a wide
range of cost-cutting and efficiency measures, as in previous periods of austerity (Lowndes and McCaughie 2013), few of these have any connection to co-production. Moreover, front-line staff and middle managers who would like to promote the concept of co-production within their organisation or across partners often find it very challenging to get top managers, in particular those with financial and budget management responsibilities, to show any interest in the concept, let alone in the design and delivery of a savings plan which gives weight to co-production. It is telling that the major UK professional body for public finance, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA) has not really engaged much with the concept—at least, not in its policy documents nor in its training programmes for finance officers. We therefore suggest that the potential effects of user and community co-production, and the means by which it can be implemented, have to be understood in the context of austerity—but not simply as a reaction to austerity.

So what might be the other reasons for this growing interest in co-production? In the following chapters there will be a close analysis of many case studies and quantitative research that suggest that co-production can be highly effective in improving public services and outcomes. So, as strong advocates of ‘evidence-based policy’, we might wish to attribute the growth of interest in co-production to the increasing data base of positive results. However, as we will see, it is too early to say ‘case proven’ in respect of co-production—the initiatives in these case studies are usually still too small-scale and the evidence base is still too thin to be conclusive.

More generally, we now turn to look at a wider range of drivers of change in public services—first, through a PESTEL analysis of macro-environment factors, then through a consideration of the academic discourse around how government and the public interact in a co-productive way.

1.2.3 A PESTEL Analysis of the Drivers of Co-production

Clearly, we need to consider a more comprehensive explanatory framework in order to understand the drivers of co-production. For this purpose, we shall start by using the PESTEL framework (Political, Economic/Financial, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal/Legislative), which highlights key factors at the macro-level in the
external environment that need to be taken into account in the context of each specific service or outcome.

By way of illustration of how these macro-environment factors can result in a move to greater co-production, Table 1.1 shows a PESTEL analysis for a co-production initiative in Services for Young People of Surrey County Council. This initiative involved the recommissioning of all services for young people (from 14 to 19 years of age) characterised as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in order to improve their outcomes, especially their employment and educational outcomes. The Table draws mainly on information from Tisdall (2014) and Bovaird and Loeffler (2014).

As far as political factors are concerned, there is a gap in the co-production literature. While there is emerging research on leadership for co-production (Bussu and Galanti 2018; Schlappa and Imani 2018; Schlappa et al. 2020), little attention has been paid to the specific role of elected politicians, particularly at the local level. Hendriks and Tops (2005) suggest that facilitative leaders can only become ‘champions’ of a project if they have a ‘sponsor’ who gives political backing to their often unconventional practices. In the case of Surrey County Council, this was the Conservative Party Leader of the Council at the time, who did not necessarily embrace co-production but gave permission to the senior management team of the service to undertake a radical transformation of Services for Young People in order to work toward the highly ambitious political vision of ‘Zero NEETs’. The importance of support and strategic guidance from (at least some) top leaders in the organisation will be a pattern that we see often in this book (and will be discussed further in the section on leadership).

Moving to the financial and economic factors in Table 1.1, these have clearly been a key concern for public service organisations around the world since the financial crash of 2008. In the case of Surrey County Council, a major budget cut to Services for Young People (which, unlike Children’s Services, are non-statutory in the UK) provided a window of opportunity for the Assistant Director of the service to start a major reform process. The budget cut was important enough to justify a systems transformation but not large enough to reduce slack completely. The existence of slack resources which can be put to new uses is important for innovation processes and, in this case, the transformation team in Surrey CC decided that co-production would be a key element of this process.
Table 1.1  PESTEL analysis of key drivers of co-production in services for young people, Surrey County Council

| Dimensions      | Factors driving co-production                                                                 | Likelihood that the factor will occur (as seen in advance) | Impact on co-production (in hindsight)                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political       | Leader of County Council promoted vision to reduce number of NEET young people               | High probability that a policy promoted by the Leader (with a stable majority) will be implemented | Medium—co-production was not specifically promoted by the Leader but was an obvious option               |
| Economic and financial | Budget cut of 25% within 3 years Presence of wide range of specialist third sector providers in the market | Definite—clear decision of Council | High—made options other than co-production within outcome-based commissioning more difficult            |
| Social          | Constant level of number of young people at risk of becoming NEET                              | High—had already remained almost constant over 10 years | Medium—co-production became increasingly likely over time, as all other strategies to tackle NEETs over a decade appeared to have little effect |
| Technological   | Increasing use of social media by young people (e.g. Facebook)                                | High probability this trend will continue or even grow in pace | Medium—made it easier for young people to interact with other young people but staff faced barriers in using social media at work |
| Environmental   | NEET young people may be at risk of becoming homeless unless they have access to temporary accommodation | Medium—increasing housing prices mean that fewer young people will be able to afford to rent their own flat | High—Surrey County Council set up Volunteer Host Service to help to prevent young people aged 16–21 becoming homeless |

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| Dimensions | Factors driving co-production | Likelihood that the factor will occur (as seen in advance) | Impact on co-production (in hindsight) |
|------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Legislative | Raising of participation age, which local authorities had a statutory duty to enforce | High—little leeway for councils to avoid enforcing this duty | High—gave strong mandate for bringing young people into council decision making and service delivery |

Source Author

Looking at social factors, co-production also offers new collaborative service models and solutions to deal with social trends such as the ageing society, rising health service and social care demands, changing family relationships, educational needs and homelessness. In the Surrey example, a key factor was the constant number of young people in each generation who showed all the signs of becoming NEET, whatever policies had been tried to help them—this longstanding trend meant that the problem was unlikely to go away but also demonstrated that it was unlikely to be successfully tackled by previously tried interventions.

More generally, looking beyond this example of the problems of young people, the social challenges facing public service organisations which have had most attention in OECD countries have been the increasing numbers of older people and of people living with chronic health conditions. Co-production not only offers new interventions to respond to these challenges but actually provides a quite new perspective on the ‘ageing society’, highlighting not simply the negative consequences of extra public spending associated with an ageing population but also the positive side, constituted by an increasing number of citizens, who now have the time to make valuable contributions to improving the wellbeing of local communities. Indeed, taking this positive perspective, and categorising people not by their age but by their “remaining life years”, we find that “the population may be getting younger” (Potter 2013, 7), over the past few decades, in the sense that on average, people at any given age (e.g. the statutory retirement age) now have much longer life expectancy than used to be the case, with the implication that many people now can be active co-producers for a much longer period.
There are, of course, many other social factors which may impact on the level of co-production. Pandemics such as the recent Covid-19 crisis have led many governments to call on volunteers to meet a sudden rise in demand for help. In the UK, more than 750,000 citizens have responded to a call from the government for volunteers to support the NHS (Royal Voluntary Service 2020), mainly consisting of different types of co-delivery, including doing the shopping for or distributing food to ‘at risk’ groups, peer support to deal with mental health challenges, and co-influencing people to accept major behaviour change such as physical distancing (Loeffler 2020).

Technological factors are also highlighted in the PESTEL as playing a key role in the evolving role of co-production. In particular, many digital technologies enable new forms of co-production or transform existing personal forms of co-production. However, as Lember (2018, 118) points out, in some cases, digital technologies such as remote health-monitoring devices, which automatically record and report their health data may mean there is less need for active contributions from citizens.

The co-production literature (for example, Meijer 2012; Paletti 2016) has also highlighted the role of social media, which can enable local authorities to support community initiatives and also to invite citizen support for projects initiated by public service organisations. The Surrey County Council example in Table 1.1 highlights the potential of social media to connect young people with other young people, so that they are able to provide peer support to each other. However, the ability of public services staff to connect with young people through social media has been limited for a number of reasons, so that digitally enabled technology has had, at best, only medium impact as a driver of co-production. Nevertheless, as Meijer (2012, 196) points out, many of the ideas of social media champions are highly supportive of the concept of user and community co-production—actually, we would go further to suggest that many digital solutions in public services actually rely on citizen-professional collaborations. For example, according to research from Oxford University, for any digital contact tracing app to be effective it would need to be used by more than half the total population (Hern 2020).

Environmental factors in the PESTEL framework cover both the natural environment and built environment. They also include both local environmental factors, such as urban pollution, and also macro-scale factors, such as global warming and the loss of wildlife habitats. Most
such environmental challenges typically require public service organisations to bring about collective behaviour change and community action on a major scale. Environmental issues are one of the public policy areas in which there is a very high level of volunteering. Local initiatives such as the Street Ambassadors Network in Wales (Carnegie UK Trust et al. 2013) highlight how this can be achieved. However, increasing concern with the state of the global and local environments suggests that there will have to be a great deal more collective co-production if better environmental outcomes are to be achieved.

In the case of Services for Young People in Surrey, lack of suitable accommodation was identified as an important environmental risk factor for NEET young people. In order to prevent homelessness Surrey County Council set up the Volunteer Host Service to provide successfully both short-term and longer-term accommodation for young people.

The last category in the PESTEL framework is legal or legislative factors. An early example is given by the Economic Opportunity Act 1964 in the USA, which required the planning of national government poverty programmes to incorporate ‘maximum feasible participation’ of the poor (Cahn and Gray 2012, 132). There are now a number of legislative and regulatory frameworks encouraging co-production, although none of them make it obligatory. For example, the Framework on Integrated, People-Centred Health Services of the World Health Organisation (2016, 4) promotes a strategy for empowering and engaging people and communities which “aims to empower individuals to make effective decisions about their own health and to enable communities to become actively engaged in co-producing healthy environments, and to provide informal carers with the necessary education to optimize their performance and support in order to continue in their role”. Although most governments have signed up to it, this framework is, of course, only a guideline and therefore not mandatory. The Welsh Government (2015, 3) has gone further in its Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which aims at “improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales”. The Act requires all public bodies to publish an annual Well-being Statement which demonstrates that “they make sure that they involve people with an interest in achieving the [well-being] goals, and that those people reflect the diversity of their area” (Welsh Government 2015, 8). The Health Services in Ireland are even more specific by making co-production a key principle for recovery-promoting services in the new
national framework for recovery in mental health (Mental Health Services 2017).

In the case of Surrey County Council, Services for Young People, there was a key legislative driver in the raising of the participation age, which placed a duty on local authorities to ensure young people participate in education, training or employment (with training) up to age 19. This helped considerably by giving the service a mandate which local councillors and other local public services could not dispute.

The overall governance system also determines how important the legal framework is for co-production. This is particularly apparent in the co-production of public safety and law and order. In administrative law countries, many activities to improve public safety are often considered to be ‘sovereign tasks’ of the state and unsuitable for co-production (Loefller 2018, 213). This may be different in countries with a Westminster public value tradition such as the UK where the police actively promotes community support, e.g. through Neighbourhood Watch or Speedwatch groups.

More research is needed to identify the extent to which different drivers (at macro- and micro-levels) are necessary and which drivers are sufficient to promote co-production. This will also involve research on obstacles to co-production in order to reveal what gets in the way.

These contextual conditions are likely to differ from service to service and also between countries. This book will mainly explore co-production in OECD countries, with a particular emphasis on the UK. We recognise, of course, that developing countries offer many lessons in relation to co-production (as Elinor Ostrom highlighted in her work). However, their contextual conditions and challenges are often quite different, so we believe that a proper exploration of co-production in these countries will require a separate analysis.

In many cases, it may turn out that the combination of factors is more important than any single factor. Indeed, it is likely that ‘wicked problems’ are caused by a combination of factors which may be related to social factors such as demographic change and environmental challenges such as climate change—and, as Head and Alford (2015) highlight, this means that they need to be tackled by strategies with multiple components, which go beyond simple collaboration and coordination strategies.
1.3 Academic Discourses Around User and Community Co-production

In the first section of this chapter, we discussed how a series of factors have produced a context in which there is lively practical and policy interest in co-production. In this section, we will briefly complement this analysis with a discussion of the discourses which have driven renewed academic interest in co-production.

We shall begin with the ‘citizen-centric turn’ which can be identified in public policy from the 1960s and which was effectively captured by Sherry Arnstein (1968) in her ‘Ladder of Participation’, about which we shall say more later. The most visible policy manifestation of this turn in the UK was the statutory requirement from the 1960s onwards for public consultation in the preparation of development plans by local authorities. In exercising this right, however, citizens generally have to show that they have a material interest which will be affected by the proposals in the plan. This means that some citizens who might have potentially valuable contributions to make are limited in the roles they can play.

At this time, academic research was particularly concerned with the rights of citizens to have their say around public policies which affected them. It therefore focused on ‘citizen voice’, rather than ‘citizen action’, on citizen rights rather than citizen capabilities, and on the opportunity of people to make known their individual concerns rather than wider social concerns.

However, the ‘citizen-centric turn’ quickly gained a further dimension. Social movements became active from the 1960s. In the US they were initially identified closely with the civil rights movement but soon encompassed feminist, environmentalist and other causes. This quickly generated a literature which again had a major focus on rights rather than capabilities but now analysed collective goals and benefits and citizen actions, not just voice, although these collective goals were differently prioritised within each social movement.

Barnes et al. (2007) map four different directions taken by this ‘citizen-centric turn’:

- ‘Empowered public’ discourse—which conceives of communities’ disadvantage as deriving from institutionalised discrimination/neglect and therefore supports interventions which will empower these communities to act on their own behalf.
‘Consuming public’ discourse—which conceives of individuals as free agents, able to exercise choice in their use of available public services, acting as active consumers in the process of service selection and delivery, with rights and opportunities for redress.

‘Stakeholder public’ discourse—which conceives of “the public (as individuals or groups) having a stake in the good governance of the public realm” (Barnes et al. 2007, 15), thereby acting to strengthen representative democracy or, in some cases, to provide a fundamental challenge to it by privileging citizen control and consensual decision-making in participatory democracy.

‘Responsible public’ discourse—which emphasizes “the role of individuals and groups in owing a duty to others and to the state in their conduct” (Barnes et al. 2007, 19), acknowledging the vital role of the family and civil society, and highlighting the importance of self-governance, whether it be through self-discipline at individual level or communities governing themselves.

The original academic exploration of co-production, by the Ostroms and colleagues in the Bloomington School, can be seen as a combination of several of these directions. They examined the contribution of citizens to policing in Chicago and highlighted how intense forms of police collaboration with the public increased policing effectiveness (Parks et al. 1981). Here, citizens were acting in their own interest as stakeholders to reduce crime in their community, but there was also a strong flavour of the ‘responsible public’ discourse, as communities were encouraged by the police to practice self-governance and use social pressure to dissuade those who might otherwise be tempted to commit crimes. Moreover, there was an element of ‘empowered public’ discourse, as police engaged particularly with disadvantaged communities in Chicago, where crime levels were high.

Inspired by the empirical work of the Bloomington School, a number of academics undertook important conceptual work to clarify further the concept of co-production—for example, Sharp (1980) and Whitaker (1980). In particular, Brudney and England (1983) made the valuable distinction between individual, group and collective co-production.

After this first outbreak of academic interest in co-production in the early 1980s, published research on co-production in the public domain rather languished until the mid-1990s, as New Public Management (NPM) captured academic attention and most researchers focussed on
marketisation and managerialism as alternatives to direct government production of public services (Alford 2009, 4–5). John Alford (2009, 6) suggests that a major reason for the reduced interest in co-production at the time was that it was perceived to be about volunteering, which in the era of NPM was considered as too much dependent on altruistic behaviour.

Since the early 2000s, the concept of co-production has taken on a new life in the academic public administration literature, demonstrating exponential growth in recent years. An early catalyst to this new interest was John Alford’s influential set of publications in (2002, 2009), which focussed on co-production by clients—which in this book we call user co-production. Later, the multiple roles of the public as citizen, customer and partner were highlighted by Thomas (2012).

Widely cited and influential publications at this time on user and community co-production in the public sector include (for example, Bovaird 2007; Dunston et al. 2008; Loeffler et al. 2008; New Economics Foundation 2008; OECD 2009; Jakobsen 2012; Pestoff et al. 2012; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Osborne et al. 2013; Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Brandsen et al. 2018). Furthermore, interest grew in co-production through third sector organisations (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Pestoff 2012; McMullin 2019), particularly in their role of mobilising citizen involvement in co-production.

Most of the recent empirical research has been based on a rather narrow range of qualitative methodologies, mainly involving single case studies, sometimes expanded to involve case comparisons (Voorberg et al. 2017). Qualitative research on co-production based on ethnographic methods or other methods is still rare. An increasing number of experimental studies have also been undertaken recently (Kang and van Ryzin 2020), sometimes showing positive results of co-production on outcomes (for example, Jakobsen 2012; Jakobsen and Andersen 2013), sometimes with negative results (for example, Thomsen and Jakobsen 2015). The absence of quantitative studies with a wider scope therefore constitutes a serious gap in the literature. In particular, comparative quantitative studies have been rare. A rare exception has been the quantitative comparison of co-production across five EU countries (Loeffler et al. 2008; Parrado et al. 2013; Bovaird et al. 2016), which has recently been expanded by inclusion of similar study of Australia (Alford and Yates 2016).

In parallel to the public administration literature, the service management literature in the private sector highlighted that in service systems,
the client appears twice, once as a customer and again as part of the service delivery system. Normann (1984) discusses how sometimes service professionals use a “relieving logic relieving logic,” in which they “do the service for the customer”, whereas in other services, the client actually performs at least some of the key tasks and the service professional plays mainly an enabling role. Early private sector examples, such as the self-service supermarket and bank ATMs were clearly meant to increase the efficiency (and profit levels) of their services. This customer service logic means that “When using resources provided by a firm together with other resources and applying skills held by them, customers create value for themselves in their everyday practices” (Grönroos 2008, 299). This approach has recently been explored further by Osborne et al. (2013) in a public service context. Normann (1984) predicted that as service users become increasingly competent, providers who could offer enabling relationships would become more prominent and pose tough competition for “relievers”. Until recently, this forecast appears to have been more prescient in the case of private services than in public services but what is perhaps most remarkable is that co-production in the public and private sectors has proceeded largely independently, with little interactive learning from each other’s experiences.

The fast growth in academic publications on co-production is highlighted by Sicilia et al. (2019), who found in their electronic search of papers listed in the ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus databases nearly 1500 papers using the terms “coproduction” or “co-production” in the title, abstract, and/or keywords sections (The search was restricted to English language papers published in peer-reviewed journals in the subject areas of management, business, public administration, economics, or sociology). Interestingly, of the 53 papers which presented empirical material which met their selection criteria, 62% were published since 2015.

Important roles in promoting the academic study of co-production have been played by the annual meetings of the Study Group on Co-Production of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), the Permanent Study Group on ‘Civil Society, Citizens and Government’ of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) as well as many panels dedicated to co-production themes at the Annual Conference of the International Research Society for Public Management (Pestoff 2019, 5). Furthermore, Special Issues of the journal Voluntas (Vol. 23, No. 4, 2012), the International Review of Administrative Sciences (Vol. 82, No. 1, 2016), the International Journal of Public
Administration (Vol. 39, No. 13, 2016), Public Management Review (Vol. 21, No. 11, 2019) and Public Money and Management (Vol. 39, No. 4, 2019) demonstrate how popular this topic has become in public management and governance academic research.

While most of the published co-production research has focussed on OECD countries and, in particular, on English-speaking countries (with the partial exception of the USA, where interest has remained muted), there are now also more publications on co-production in African, Asian and Latin American countries.

Unlike research into public participation, where most academic work has been based in political science, public administration and sociology, research into co-production has attracted scholars from across almost all social science disciplines. The theoretical and conceptual bases for co-production in political science, public administration, sociology, economics, psychology and critical theory have been set out in Bovaird and Loeffler (2012), and in this book we will call upon elements of analysis from each of these disciplines at various stages. Of course, this disciplinary focus raises the question as to whether co-production might be more productively studied from an interdisciplinary perspective—indeed, the Palgrave Handbook of Co-production of Public Services and Outcomes (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020) has been compiled to contribute to this purpose.

One final academic discourse which deserves mention here is the ‘anti-participation’ school. This approach is well represented in the book of readings Participation: The New Tyranny, edited by Cooke and Cothari (2001), who recount how the idea for the book arose from conference discussions with academic colleagues who told tales of “participatory processes undertaken ritualistically, which had turned out to be manipulative, or which had in fact harmed those who were supposed to be empowered” (p. 1). As we shall see, a number of academics have made similar criticisms of some practices of co-production.

1.4 Conclusions

Co-production has become a buzzword in public management and governance—both in practice and in academic research. Its growth in policy and practice has been encouraged by a wide range of factors (which we
have categorised within the PESTEL framework). Simultaneously, co-production has become a major theme in recent academic research into public administration.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for doubting whether the commitment to co-production by public services is as full as public service organisations often maintain. In the rest of this book, we examine the different ways in which co-production operates and its potential benefits and costs—and also the factors which make it likely or unlikely that the public sector will choose this approach to transforming its services and improving the outcomes it achieves.

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