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‘Co-production on the inside’

– public professionals negotiating interaction between municipal actors and local citizens

Abstract

A growing number of public professionals are now expected to facilitate co-production processes with affected citizens to produce robust policies and services. Yet the role of ‘front-line co-producers’ and how their mindset and ability to cope with the cross-pressures affects co-production remains under-theorised and empirically understudied in the scholarly literature. The article provides concepts and empirical evidence of how ‘frontline co-producers’ navigate cross-pressures by exploring the enabling and inhibiting factors for co-production. Empirically, we draw on a case study of a Danish municipality consisting of qualitative interviews with 18 public professionals at different levels, all of whom have experience working with co-production. The findings contribute to the small but growing academic literature on the role of public professionals in co-production and how their individual-level practices, together with organisational and management factors, can enable or inhibit ‘co-production on the outside’.

Keywords: front-line co-producers, facilitation, cross-pressures, co-production-friendly practices

1. Introduction

Within the last decade, we have witnessed growing interest in the public sector in Western countries in mobilising the resources existing among citizens and local stakeholders to improve public services (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018; Durose and Richardson 2016; OECD 2011). Many of these initiatives towards more interactive governance styles are launched using terms such as ‘co-production’ and ‘co-creation’, expressing new ambitions for how public authorities interact with civil society, which in turn entails a new role for public authorities (Alford 2016; Bovaird and

Loeffler 2018; Jaspers 2020;). This new role means that the public sector has lost its monopoly on public service production but also that public professionals are increasingly expected to collaborate more strategically with ‘relevant’ and ‘affected’ stakeholders (Aschhoff and Vogel 2019; Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017; Honingh, Bondarouk, and Brandsen 2018). In Denmark, these tendencies have been received positively, particularly among politicians and administrative managers (Tortzen 2017a; Ibsen 2021). Many Danish municipalities are currently working with strategic ambitions to develop more interactive governance practices launched under slogans such as ‘*Moving from authority to partnership*’ and ‘*Municipality 3.0*’ (Tortzen 2019). Consequently, bodies of local authority are seeking ways to prepare and support public professionals, particularly those working on the public service frontlines, assuming a new role as the facilitators of co-production processes working between citizen and system; that which we call ‘frontline co-producers’.

We know from existing research that frontline public professionals play a crucial role in this transition, as they must assume the role as the translators and implementers of the organisation’s co-production ambitions (Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Osborne et al. 2021). Despite research in the field of co-production pointing out how the relationship between public professionals and citizens is vital for the degree of co-production, relatively few scholars have addressed the role of professionals in depth (Tortzen 2017b; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2019; Steen and Tuurnas 2018). Part of the scholarly literature focuses on the role of citizens in co-production (van Eijk and Gasco 2018; Bovaird and Loeffler 2018), emphasising how public professionals often play a dominant role in these relations and that many public professionals tend to grant citizens a passive role as clients, providing public services ‘for’ instead of ‘with’ affected citizens. Consequently, many citizens feel ‘overruled’ and/or services do not ‘reach their target’, as citizen input is often not being addressed to tailor public services (Agger and Hedensted Lund 2017). Other scholars point out how co-

production as a governance arrangement changes the working culture of public service professionals (Tuurnas, Stenvall, and Rannisto 2016), which must take on a more ‘enabling’ (Sirianni 2009) or ‘catalysing’ role (Ansell and Gash 2012) to mobilise and integrate citizen resources to develop public policies or services. Our term ‘frontline co-producers’ thus includes not only traditional frontline professionals but also a broad range of public professionals, including middle managers.

As co-production has become a ‘popular’ governance strategy in many Western European countries at a time when the public sector is facing more complex, unruly, and ‘wicked problems’ (Douglas et al. 2021), we find it important to debate both the light and dark sides of these governance strategies (Steen, Brandsen, and Verschure 2018; Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016). Numerous – often overlapping – definitions of co-production are found in the scholarly literature (Brandsen and Honingh 2018; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschure 2015). In this article, we define co-production as a way *public and private actors collaborate to create public value (Jaspers 2020) and thereby indirectly empower stakeholders (Nabatchi and Jo 2018) or enhance democratic legitimacy (Verschuere et al. 2018)*. Based on this understanding, we find the ‘face to face meeting between front-line co-producers’ and affected stakeholders to be about not only collaboration on improving public services, but also about ‘democracy in action’ (Healey 2010, 120). Public professionals who exert leadership directly or indirectly on the frontlines become not only guardians of public values but also guarantors for promoting fair and transparent governance processes.

The existing research on co-production points to the fact that significant drivers and barriers to co-productive practices are to be found within public organisations themselves (Brix, Krogstrup, and Mortensen 2020; Löffler and Bovaird 2016). For example, Tortzen (2017a), drawing on Pestoff,

Brandsen, and Verschuere (2012), has identified a ‘glass-ceiling’ in co-production resulting from organisational practices and inhibiting collaboration by excluding relevant participants, problem-definitions, resources, and possible solutions. In this article, we aim to study the mindset among public professionals at the individual level that enables co-production and to explore the organisational and management factors promoting or inhibiting these practices. More specifically, we pose the following question:

How do frontline co-producers perceive and practice co-production? What are key enabling and inhibiting factors at the managerial and organisational levels for supporting them in this role as informal leaders and bridge builders?

Theoretically, we are inspired by Durose et al. (2017) and other scholars who study ‘participation professionals’ (Bherer et al. 2017; Escobar 2017). They argue that the ‘practice wisdom’ or ‘tacit knowledge’ of frontline public professionals with experience in co-production activities can be used as the starting point to deepen our understanding of the role of frontline co-producers. Thus, we understand the role of frontline professionals in co-productive processes as an informal leadership role (de Jongh, Albæk, and Fiil Nybo 2018; Tortzen 2017b) and draw on new conceptualisations of what it implies to work in a more interactive governance setting, i.e. ‘boundary spanning’ and ‘linking leadership’ (Edelenbos, Van Buuren, and Klijn 2013; Williams 2002). Analytically, we look for factors that are experienced as enabling or inhibiting the facilitation of co-production with citizens at two levels: a) at the individual level: the mindset and role perception of frontline co-producers, b) at the organisational level: organisational context, strategic management, and incentive structures. Empirically, we draw on an explorative case study conducted in a medium-

sized Danish municipality, the study consisting of qualitative interviews with 18 public professionals at different levels and sectors with co-production experience.

2. Theoretical perspectives on co-production: Agents and organisational context

Much of the research in co-production dealing with the role of professionals tends to apply a relatively narrow understanding of co-production; that is, the production of welfare services in a top-down oriented manner. Several of these studies focus on the role of public professionals in implementing co-production and examining their motivation and ability to co-produce (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; van Eijk and Steen 2014; Pestoff, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2012; Tuurnas 2015). Here, we will take a different approach and focus on the co-production processes taking place in a Danish municipality, i.e., processes that may be initiated top-down, bottom-up, or in combination. In line with Pestoff et al. (2012), we apply a broad understanding of co-production as also encompassing inter-organisational collaboration with civil society and community organisations. For example, local councils and local civil society organisations within different areas, such as sport, voluntary work, local development, as well as local business associations and the like, which Pestoff et al. (2012) refer to as ‘co-management’. This means that our study will not focus exclusively on traditional frontline professionals, as it also includes a broad range of public professionals who in practice function as frontline co-producers, mobilising, facilitating, and connecting actors from different spheres.

Frontline co-producers as informal leaders

In line with recent research (de Jongh, Albæk, and Fiil Nybo 2018; Tortzen 2017b), we perceive the role of frontline professionals in co-productive processes as an informal leadership role. Tortzen

(2017b) points to the fact that public professionals tend to take up an informal leadership role in co-production processes, executing ‘hands-on’ leadership (i.e., facilitative leadership), and sometimes also ‘hands-off’ leadership (i.e., designing and framing the collaboration processes). The role of public professionals as the hands-on facilitators of co-production collaboration has been widely acknowledged. Several researchers point to the fact that co-production changes the role of public professionals and the professional–citizen relation – from a top-down, one-directional relationship to collaboration based on empowerment and interdependence (Ewert and Evers 2012; Nederhand and Van Meerkerk 2018). Public professionals thus play a central role as hands-on leaders of the collaboration, filling a role as the ‘enablers’, ‘motivators’, and ‘facilitators’ of the collaborative process. This is a role requiring relational and facilitation capacities.

The hands-off leadership role is often (but not always) executed by top management. In co-production processes, frontline professionals tend to ‘lead upwards’ by negotiating the institutional context of the co-production initiative with political leaders and top administrative management; thereby also taking a hands-off leadership role. According to Steen and Tuurnas (2018), frontline professionals may play an important role in shaping the institutional context of the co-production process, creating conditions for collaboration with citizens and at the same time ensuring the production of public value (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). In line with this view, Agger and Damgaard (2018) present public professionals as the ‘custodians’ of public values, such as inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

Frontline co-producers as bridge builders

Public professionals who act as frontline co-producers have been shown by some researchers to fulfil an important bridging, bonding, and linking role (Agger and Jensen 2015; Tuurnas 2016).

They often assume the role as ‘boundary spanners’ by building sustainable relations between actors from the realms of government, civil society, and business, and by connecting governance processes with intra-organisational processes. Research carried out by Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2013) stresses the importance of the connective capabilities of actors interacting in governance networks operating on the borders of organisational structures, underlining how this work is crucial for connecting different actors and their viewpoints and interests.

In their boundary-spanning role, public professionals search for shared meaning and try to link different policy issues and policy streams across boundaries (Williams 2002). Their ‘connective activities’ help develop trustworthy relationships and improve network performance. Van Meerkerk (2014, 37) underlines the role of boundary spanners as ‘translators’ and bridge builders between different organisational logics: *‘boundaries can be spanned effectively only by individuals who understand the coding schemes and are attuned to the contextual information on both sides of the boundary, enabling them to search out relevant information on one side and disseminate it on the other’*. However, Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2013) also show that this connective role is often taken by civil society actors, as public professionals have difficulty working ‘on the edge’ of their organisation.

Organisational factors influencing the work of frontline co-producers

Traditionally, co-production research has focused on the barriers and drivers of co-production (Baptista, Alves, and Matos 2020; Brandsen et al. 2018). Voorberg et al. (2015) distinguish between the drivers and barriers originating within public organisations and those originating from among citizens and civil society actors. Here, we will concentrate on the organisational factors that either support or inhibit the activities of the frontline co-producers. Based on a comprehensive literature

review, Voorberg et al. (2015) outline three overall organisational and governance factors influencing co-production: 1) the presence/absence of inviting organisational structures and procedures to communicate with citizens within the public organisation, 2) the attitudes of public professionals and politicians towards co-production, i.e. prior acceptance of citizens and civil society as partners, including a risk-averse, conservative administrative culture, perceiving citizens to be unpredictable and leaving no ‘institutional space’ to invite citizens as equals, and 3) clear incentives for co-production. Steen and Tuurnas (2018, 87) elegantly summarise the organisational and governance prerequisites for co-production as follows:

Overall, literature suggests the importance of public professionals working in an organization that places a strategic focus on citizen participation, develops an organizational culture open towards citizen involvement and demonstrates credible commitment, for example by adjusting structures and procedures – such as for example incentive structures – in order to encourage professionals to include citizens as partners.

Other scholars point out how hands-off leadership interventions in co-production processes are often rooted in New Public Management regimes (i.e., strict deadlines, measurable deliveries, mistrust in employees and civil society actors) that inhibit collaboration between autonomous actors, entailing cross-pressures for frontline co-producers. The coping strategies applied by the frontline co-producers are therefore often essential for co-production success. One effective way of coping is by applying a ‘linking’ strategy, reflexively coping with the pressure by linking interests, actors, and governance logics (Tortzen 2017a). The assumption driving the empirical analysis below is that public professionals acting as ‘front-line co-producers’ are likely to experience some

of the challenges and cross-pressures described in this section. Consequently, their ability to create momentum and succeed depends on the municipal organisation developing a ‘co-production-friendly organisational context’.

3. Methodology, case selection, and approach

The empirical basis of the article is a single-case study carried out in Vordingborg, a Danish municipality, January–April 2019. Vordingborg is a medium-sized municipality with slightly fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, organised along traditional sector principles. The municipality is located one hour south of Copenhagen and includes a many small communities (Vordingborg Kommune 2016). The case study was originally commissioned by the municipal management as part of its strategic ambitions to transition towards more co-productive practices, as expressed in policy stressing the need to meet local residents as co-producers of welfare and local development. The municipality has not systematically implemented co-production initiatives. However, for the purpose of the analysis, the management designated a range of recent single initiatives completed with a deliberate aim of transitioning towards more collaborative and co-productive practices.

We thus used a range of recent initiatives with a co-production intention as a starting point for exploring the ‘practice wisdom’ of public professionals working on the co-production frontlines. Through purposive sampling, a total of 18 public professionals who had gained practical experience from working with recent co-production initiatives were selected as respondents. These respondents were selected with the aim of representing three different organisational perspectives on co-production: a top-level perspective (3 respondents), a middle-manager perspective (10 respondents) and an employee perspective (5 respondents), representing a range of different municipal sectors (the social sector, eldercare, education, employment, integration, and planning and environment).

The qualitative data were obtained via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the respondents, aiming at unfolding their ‘tacit knowledge’ acquired through practical experience with co-productive activities (Durose 2009). qqThe interviews thus focused on the respondents’ experiences with specific co-production processes. Drawing on a storytelling and Appreciative Inquiry approach, we asked the interviewees to tell stories about processes of managing or facilitating co-production initiatives that they found successful as well as those that turned out less successfully – and to reflect both on their own role in these processes and on the specific factors in terms of organisational and leadership support that they experienced as essential for their endeavours. The strength of this approach is to extract practice-based knowledge about what works in co-production (Durose et al. 2017).

The interviews were then transcribed and coded through an open coding process according to analytical themes. Our approach to the analysis has been abductive, combining explorative and inductive data analysis with a reading of the existing research and concepts. This case study has made it possible to explore and conceptualise the ‘frontline’ experiences of public professionals from a range of different organisational perspectives and sectors in the co-production field. Analysing a single-case study commissioned by a specific municipality obviously has some limitations and biases. The qualitative data have been collected by one of the authors in the role as consultant commissioned by the municipality, and although a number of measures have been taken to ensure a safe space and anonymity for the respondents, this entails a possible bias. While it has not been possible to triangulate the findings (e.g., by observing specific co-production processes), the findings have nevertheless been discussed and validated in an in-house workshop with 30 municipal employees and managers.

4. Results

Our presentation of our findings begins with examination of the mindset and role perception of the public professionals acting as frontline co-producers, exploring how these frontline actors perceive and practice co-production in a variety of different ways. We then explore a number of key enabling and inhibiting organisation-level factors for supporting the frontline co-producers in their role as informal leaders and bridge builders.

How do frontline co-producers perceive and practice interactive governance?

Our study shows how the municipal ambitions regarding interactive governance are articulated and translated into practice in a variety of diverse ways by the public professionals, depending on context and type of work. A number of labels are used by the frontline co-producers to describe their practice of collaborating with volunteers, civil society organisations, and communities. While some refer to ‘voluntarism’, others label these practices ‘collaboration’, ‘involvement’, or ‘co-production’. Multiple understandings co-exist in the organisation regarding the municipal ambition to move ‘*from authority to partner*’ and what this implies for the role and behaviour of the public professionals. Based on the interviews, we have identified three main types and practices of interactive governance enacted by the frontline co-producers, partly corresponding to the typologies of different forms of co-production and network relations developed by Pestoff et al. (2012):

1. Co-production as a means of collaborating with several partners, which we label ‘co-management’
2. Co-production as a ‘mindset’ in the way public authorities meet and interact with citizens and local stakeholders, which we label ‘empowerment’
3. Co-production as a way of coordinating work with volunteers and associations, which we label ‘coordination’

Co-management is found in initiatives involving a range of external organisations, including companies and civil society organisations, together with several municipal institutions. The main focus is on mobilising external resources, and the role of the frontline co-producer is to facilitate inter-organisational collaboration. In our empirical data, this perception and practice of co-production was particularly found among public professionals working in areas such as planning and local development working with tourism, trade, and developing the local harbours or the physical development of the city centre. Many of these projects are characterised by how they require collaboration among multiple actors on different levels, such as the municipality, region, a number of businesses, and civil society organisations. Other empirical examples are found in the education sector, such as the ‘open schools’ initiative, which entails local public schools initiating collaboration with actors from the local cultural and business communities.

The respondents understand successful co-management as creating public value by mobilising external resources to solving the tasks, contributing to more sustainable solutions, and turning protests and complaints into collaboration. One example is the co-productive approach adopted by the harbour master in collaborating with the boards and other stakeholders around each of the local harbours. Following a period of distrust and protests among the stakeholders, the harbour master has managed to establish trusting relationships, which has resulted in the local stakeholders having taken ownership and participating in the development of their local harbours:

We're always short on resources when operating the harbours. So when we plan to sow grass in the area near the harbour, I ask the local users if they would prepare the ground for the grass. They're happy to remove the stones and get the soil ready. To me, that's a classic example of co-production. (middle manager)

Another highlighted example of successful co-management is a collaboration between the municipality, a range of tourist- and retail organisations, and civil society actors. As one manager describes:

We decided on a strategic governance effort in tourism – to collaborate on developing a brand for our destination – so we’ve worked hard to build relations with the local actors, who earlier felt kind of let down. We succeeded in establishing a collaborative forum together with the tourist organisations – focussing on finding solutions together with the actors in the field. (middle manager)

We labelled the second enactment of co-production by frontline co-producers as **empowerment**, as the main role of the frontline co-producer is to empower external partners. This perception designates public professionals or departments developing a ‘co-productive mindset’ in their regulatory work, seeking to empower individual clients/users of public services whether they are citizens or companies. In our study, this perception and practice of co-production was particularly present among public professionals working in areas such as employment services and building and environment regulation. The empirical examples in our data are a pilot project aimed at empowering the unemployed and an initiative to introduce a more collaborative approach among public professionals handling construction permissions. And finally, an initiative in the field of disabled citizens with the aim of supporting them to realise their dreams.

This group of respondents perceives successful co-production as the creation of public value in terms of better results and a higher level of satisfaction among the users. One of the public professionals handling construction applications from citizens and companies explains the response they got as follows:

We receive a lot of positive feedback on our new way of working that involves looking at things from the perspective of the citizens and companies and saying: 'We might be able to grant you permission if you do this instead of that'. (middle manager)

The same response is seen in the field of unemployment, where a greater degree of user-involvement is considered to lead to better results:

Working with empowerment by involving unemployed citizens and supporting their wishes with a small number of extra resources clearly creates results in better employment rates. Involving the unemployed citizens clearly makes a more positive difference. The citizens feel they're being listened to and involved – and they're better able to influence their situation. (middle manager)

Finally, the third type of co-production we label **coordination**. In this perception and practice, co-production consists of a type of collaboration between professionals and individual volunteers and civil society organisations that can simply be described as coordination. Civil society organisations and individual volunteers contribute by supplementing existing public services, and the role of the frontline co-producers is to coordinate the work of public employees and volunteers. Empirically, this type of co-productive activity was mainly found in relation to institutions for the elderly and

activities aimed at integrating refugees and immigrants. The empirical examples in our data include contacting families and meeting places for refugees and immigrants, as initiated by civil society organisation such as the Red Cross; groups of local citizens volunteering in nursing homes, helping with outings and events; and, finally, in the form of volunteers from sports clubs and patient associations organising rehabilitation activities (e.g., for cancer patients).

Co-production in the form of coordination is perceived by these frontline co-producers as creating public value in terms of mobilising more resources for the task at hand. Civil society organisations are also seen as contributing with an approach to the citizens that is more empathetic and equal than the one taken by public professionals. One employee in the field of integration explains this as follows:

The volunteers make a big difference. They help the immigrants become more grounded and help to give them a more stable base. That isn't something I can do between 9am and 5pm. We see many refugees who experience life here as very empty and dark – 'Where is everybody?', they ask. It's important to offer them a network through civil society organisations. (employee)

Also in the field of eldercare, working with volunteers is considered very valuable. As one of our respondents explains:

We have volunteers who come here to help – and that's extremely important for the kind of services we're able to offer – and for the quality of our work. We can deliver better quality of care when collaborating with volunteers, as it means extra hands. As an

employee, it's practical to be able to draw on volunteers for the practical work, while you concentrate on the care. (middle manager)

In summary, then, the findings in the first part of our analysis demonstrate that the municipal ambition of working more strategically with co-production is translated and enacted differently across the sectors of the municipal organisation. Our empirical analysis thus contributes with a nuanced understanding of the different roles of frontline co-producers assumed by public professionals. Another finding in our study is that co-production initiatives tend to originate from a range of different actors. Contrary to our expectations, most of the co-management initiatives studied in Vordingborg have not been initiated top-down by public professionals; instead, they have either been initiated bottom-up or developed gradually in response to local needs, dissatisfaction, or protest among actors from civil society or elsewhere. Likewise, some of the coordination initiatives have been initiated bottom-up by voluntary organisations or citizens.

The table below summons the characteristics of the three types of co-production practices and the different roles of the professionals acting as frontline co-producers:

Co-productive practices enacted by frontline co-producers

Type of co-production	Co-management	Empowerment	Coordination
Characteristics	Collaboration between a range of different actors: municipal, civic, and local organisations, companies	Public employees with a 'regulatory role' meet citizens/companies with a 'partnership mindset'	Voluntary citizens/organisations contributions as a supplement to public welfare
Role of frontline co-producers	Facilitating inter-organisational collaboration	Facilitating empowerment of users	Coordinating public employees' activities with voluntary activities

Perceived public value	Mobilising resources More sustainable solutions Turning protest into collaboration	Better results Higher levels of satisfaction among users	Mobilising resources Contributing with relations of empathy and equality among the participants
Empirical examples	Developing local harbours in collaboration with relevant local actors Developing local tourism in collaboration with tourist organisations and businesses	Unemployment measures: empowering citizens in job-creation Treating users as partners in building and environment regulation	Voluntary organisations welcoming and supporting refugees Local volunteers helping in assisted living facilities

Managerial and organisational support and obstacles

As described by Tortzen (2017a) and other scholars (Durose et al. 2013; Tuurnas et al. 2015), ‘organisational culture’ in public institutions in terms of, e.g., degree of cross-sector collaboration and risk-averseness, are important factors influencing how co-production processes can progress. Our study points to successful co-production as being linked to a high degree of collaboration among different entities within the organisation. An organisational context that allows for risk-taking and experimenting with new ways of interacting with civil society actors is also seen as supporting co-production.

Our research underscores how frontline co-producers find support from management to be crucial to their endeavours. Overall, they point to supportive management as having the following characteristics:

1. Allocating sufficient resources and capacity for collaboration and co-production

2. Managing to support the role of the frontline co-producer, i.e. by allowing flexibility
3. Understanding the preconditions for collaboration and providing the frontline co-producer with a clear mandate

Frontline co-producers emphasise how collaborating with volunteers and local communities requires extensive time and resources. Sufficient time and resources are therefore seen as being necessary to be able to do their job. One frontline co-producer, who collaborates with volunteers from a number of local communities to set up community meetings, explains:

The most important thing is to establish trust and relations... If you think this [type of co-production] will save resources, you're wrong. Local volunteers can be all kinds of people – you need to have good people skills – and the organisation needs to be geared to take over when you return from the field. (employee)

Several of the frontline co-producers stress the importance of flexibility and support from the immediate manager. One frontline co-producer working with urban planning, who facilitates a partnership organisation in the city centre involving a diverse group of stakeholders, elaborates further on this topic:

As [a co-producer], you need flexibility – and you need the hierarchical structure to be softened. It's difficult to work this way if you're not allowed to make decisions when needed. You need a clear mandate that is supported by managers on all levels.

This frontline co-producer has experienced situations without full organisational understanding of the co-production logic inherent in the partnership approach to urban planning. She explains:

It's bound to go very wrong if all the influential actors [in the municipality] aren't aware that this is how we're supposed to be working. In my opinion, this only makes it worse – having involved so many people, developing a lot of goodwill and willingness to contribute. When all that falls apart because some part of the municipality doesn't understand this way of working – that kind of collaboration is worse than the good old hierarchical form.

All of our respondents commented on how they need to cope with cross-pressures in terms of different government logics. They called for more attention from the top management as well as the politicians about how developing a general understanding and accepting that inviting external actors to collaborate requires acceptance of a governance logic and way of working characterised by unpredictability and the sharing of power with stakeholders.

Organisational context as a hindrance

Overall, our data shows that the present organisational context reflecting the sectorised organisation of the municipality of Vordingborg tends to hinder co-production, as it does not encourage collaborating and sharing staff and resources across organisational borders. In particular, frontline co-producers point to internal rivalry among managers as a hindrance for their work and stress that, in practice, the silo structure of the municipal organisation proves a challenge for cross-disciplinary co-production initiatives. Frontline co-producers taking a management position point out the need for clear strategic goals and binding agreements concerning inter-organisational collaboration as a prerequisite for facilitating co-production processes. As one of them notes:

In our management team, we have talked about the importance of internal collaboration – and encouraged each other to collaborate. Nevertheless, the minute you walk out the door – you’re overwhelmed by the daily operations of your own department. It’s also a matter of power. (Manager)

In line with other studies (Newman et al., 2004; Sullivan et al., 2013; Tortzen, 2017b), our research shows that discursive articulations of the ambition to generate a ‘co-production-friendly’ municipality conceived at the strategic level do not trickle down throughout the organisation by themselves. A lack of clear incentives promoting inter-organisational collaboration tends to prevent municipal departments from opening up and collaborating with other departments and external stakeholders. According to our study, co-production initiatives tend to challenge the top management of the municipality due to the inclination of the latter to guard power and control and to avoid risk. Addressing this topic, one of our respondents who facilitates local collaboration on environmental protection and tourism stated:

The people at the top – the executive management – must recognise that collaboration and co-production are beneficial and that they enable me to succeed in strategic agendas. They must realise that co-production is not just a question of formal meetings and having a good time – they must recognise the value that it brings – and prioritise it as a persistent, strategic effort over several years. (middle manager)

This perspective is echoed among other public professionals we interviewed. Another manager from the department of culture seeks to encourage collaboration internally as well as with external

citizens and stakeholders express the importance of a clear strategic position to support his internal leadership practice, advancing co-production as:

It's of vital importance that the top management is clear on their strategies and ambitions. Clear strategic ambitions will support public managers and lower-level managers who are in the process of taking initiatives – by providing support and backing, thereby granting us a mandate to work in new ways vis-à-vis our employees.

In conclusion, the municipality of Vordingborg examined here is characterised by a sector-oriented culture with little tradition for collaborating, coordinating, or sharing knowledge across the municipal departments. Furthermore, the organisation is experienced by the frontline co-producers as risk-averse, not suitable for promoting inter-organisational collaboration.

5. Contours and ingredients in enabling co-production-friendly practices

In the following, we will discuss our findings in terms of the implications for research and practice alike.

Our single-case study exploring role perceptions and practices among public professionals working on the frontlines of co-production in a Danish municipality contributes to research by nuancing our understanding of the co-production concept. We suggest that applying a broad, empirically founded understanding of co-production allows a nuanced understanding of the many ways this phenomenon is unfolding in practice in public organisations. Thus, distinguishing between three different types of co-production (i.e. co-management, empowerment, coordination), our study shows that, in

practice, co-productive initiatives may be articulated and performed in a number of ways depending on the sector and the specific context, contributing with different kinds of public value, and allowing public professionals to assume different roles in the co-production process. Having a clearer vocabulary for different modes of enacting co-production can help to avoid conflicts and align expectations among actors in organisations striving towards interactive governance.

The study also points out how co-production initiatives are in practice not always initiated by public organisations as part of strategic governance initiatives. On the contrary, co-production sometimes result from frontline public professionals responding to protests or frustrations among relevant stakeholders in a certain field or from initiatives taken by citizens or civil society. The study generally confirms research findings on the informal leadership and bridgebuilding roles taken by frontline co-producers and the importance of the organisational context (de Jongh, Albæk, and Fiil Nybo 2018; Mens et al. 2021). However, it also adds nuance to our understanding of frontline co-producers, pointing to the fact that managers as well as employees may fill a role of front line co-producers acting as informal leaders leading internal as well as external partners to align their agendas.

In terms of implications for practice, the study points to several key ingredients for promoting co-production-friendly practices in public organisations as well as specific measures that may be taken by organisations wishing to realise co-production ambitions. In relating to collaborating with citizens, communities, and civil society organisations, the frontline co-producers represent the ‘face’ of the municipality. The frontline co-producers often act as ‘informal leaders’ collaborating with external actors over whom they have no formal capacity to make decisions. This implies leading external partners who may decide to leave the collaboration arena at any minute should a

situation become too complicated. Consequently, frontline co-producers must master skills of articulating the ‘gains’ and ‘values’ each participating partner may obtain through collaboration. In this role, they are expected to represent ‘the municipality’ as a whole and must be given conditions to fulfil this role.

Our data also points to the importance of the frontline co-producers being nurtured and supported organisationally and by top management. In line with extant research, our study shows how frontline work, face to face with citizens and civil society organisations, can be exhausting, particularly in the absence of back-up procedures and/or support for cross-departmental collaboration within the municipality (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2019; Tuurnas 2015). In particular, all of our respondents emphasised the importance of political anchoring and incentive structures that acknowledge and value co-production. This includes assessment procedures accounting for how not all outcomes are easy to measure and which acknowledge some of the qualities potentially obtained in co-production (see, e.g., Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018). The study thus points to a need to educate and guide politicians by providing them with an understanding of the essence and consequences of taking a co-productive approach for their role as well as for the organisation and the tasks at hand.

6. Conclusion

This article contributes to the special issue on facilitating citizen engagement in interactive governance by studying the role of public professionals acting in face-to-face relations with citizens and local stakeholders. Our claim is that their ability to motivate and co-produce public services with citizens or to support and facilitate self-organising stakeholders in creating initiatives with public value depends on the conditions ‘on the inside’ of the public organisations.

Our study contributes to the small but growing number of studies focusing on the vital role public professionals play in relation to supporting and enacting co-production. Overall, the conclusions correspond well with the co-production literature, adding some nuance and a deeper understanding of how co-production may unfold in practice as well as the central role of frontline co-producers and organisational and strategic preconditions for co-production. The article has shown how frontline co-producers navigate the cross-pressures of working between citizen and system, and it has provided examples of organisational factors supporting or hindering their work.

Our study points to the fact that a range of co-productive practices already exist in public organisations promoted by frontline co-producers, who may be perceived as role models in organisations aiming to advance a more co-production-friendly organisational context. The reflections and narratives delivered by these role models through qualitative interviews are valuable resources for developing more co-production-friendly practices in the future.

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