



EDITORIAL



Bridging the great divide: toward a comparative understanding of coproduction

Thus, let me recommend that the bridging of gulf between the analysis of private activities apart from those of government agencies needs to be high on the agenda of development theorists and activists. No market can survive without extensive public goods provided by government agencies. No government can be efficient and equitable without considerable input from citizens. Synergetic outcomes can be fostered to a much greater extent than our academic barriers have let us contemplate.¹

Overview

Dated back to the 1970s, Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at Indiana University came up with the idea of ‘coproduction’ to describe the fact that local governments and citizens often jointly produce public services.² Without the involvement of users/citizens, the quality of public services is often compromised. From then on, coproduction has become a fruitful area of scholarly inquiry in public administration and political science. The third sector is also regarded as an important participant/facilitator of citizen coproduction of public services.³ Despite such rapid development in the study of coproduction, empirical evidence concentrates on European and North American counties. There is little research conducted in other geographical or political contexts where the state and the society interact in different ways, with China as an important example.

Why is coproduction an important concept in understanding state-society relationships in contexts beyond advanced democratic socialites in North America and Europe? Why should we introduce this concept to contexts where very different political and cultural systems prevail? Elinor Ostrom, in her provocative article published in *World Development*, makes the statement that ‘coproduction of many goods and services normally considered to be public goods by government agencies and citizens organized into polycentric systems is crucial for achieving higher levels of welfare in developing countries’ (p. 1083). When the discussion of the relationship between the state and society focuses on whether we should want more government or more market – the great divide between the market and the state, coproduction represents an alternative to go beyond the state and the market.⁴ Although the word coproduction is not used in Ostrom’s most famous book, *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, the whole idea behind the book is how to design proper institutional arrangements to cultivate coproduction and cooperation.⁵

In developing countries such as China where the boundaries between the state and the society is still negotiated,⁶ coproduction is an important idea for scholars and policymakers to think beyond the framework of ‘either-or’. Instead, the focus should be on how to create better cooperation between the state and citizens to produce higher quality public services. More importantly, because of the lack of formal political participation processes in non-democratic systems, coproduction may be an even more important mechanism of

citizen participation compared with other democratic systems where citizens may have multiple ways of political participation.

This special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Governance* seeks to collect studies from a wide array of topics and geographical contexts around the concept of coproduction, thus contributing to the understanding of coproduction from a comparative perspective. We include both theoretical papers and empirical papers in this special issue. The topics covered by this special issue range from the alternative framing of the coproduction concept to emerging forms of coproduction of e-government services, from the rise of community foundations in China to Scottish National Health Service, and from the implications of coproduction for Chinese governance to the role of communication and information in coproduction. Articles included in this special issue aim at addressing at least one of the following key questions:

1. How do different political and community contexts shape the forms, motivations, processes, and impacts of coproduction?
2. How does coproduction link to civic engagement, collaborative governance, and the capacity of local communities?
3. What is the role of government in promoting and inhibiting coproduction?
4. What is the role of community organizations/nonprofit organizations in the coproduction of public services?
5. How does coproduction influence the quality and distribution of public services?
6. What are the different forms of coproduction and how do they link to each other? What are the distinctions and connections between individual and collective coproduction?

Summary of the articles in this special issue

This special issue opens with an article by Jeffery Brudney which puts forward a coproduction amplification model to increase the effectiveness and involvement of coproduction. Brudney⁷ offers a historical review of the evolution of coproduction research in the USA. Although coproduction research emerged and flourished in the 1980s, it lagged in the 1990s. Brudney⁸ attributes the lapse in the 1990s to the migration of scholarship to three directions under the New Public Management regime: volunteer involvement in public service delivery, interdisciplinary research on citizen involvement, and the rise of nonprofit studies programs. He further shows that the reemergence of coproduction research in public management in the 2000s is largely driven by Australian and European scholars. This historical overview provides a nice context for understanding the evolution of coproduction research in the last three decades. Brudney⁹ concludes the article by proposing a coproduction amplification model that 'moves the field from a preoccupation with definitional and conceptual purity to a focus on the expansion of citizen involvement in, and the effectiveness of, coproduction.' (p.14) This article is particularly useful for readers who want to get an overall understanding of coproduction research and think about the 'usefulness' of coproduction research.

Gazley and Cheng,¹⁰ from a different angle, argues for a more integrated application of coproduction theories into voluntary sector theories. They offer three main reasons why coproduction theory complementary existing voluntary sector theories: its system-oriented perspective, its emphasis on entrepreneurship and citizen initiatives, and its temporal flexibility. By employing a systematic literature review of coproduction and other related collaborative service provision mechanisms in China, they further demonstrate how these

three features of the coproduction theory help explain the evolvement of government-nonprofit relationship and the evolvement of public service provision systems in China. This article appeals to readers who want to integrate the coproduction theory into the study of nonprofit and third sector organizations. It also sheds light on how the coproduction theory may be used in the Chinese context.

Thompson¹¹ provides a macro-level examination of how political and cultural systems of the state shape the development and formulation of coproductive activities. Using the Scottish National Health Service as an example, Thompson¹² shows how policy, problem, and politics streams work together to create the window of opportunity for Scotland to develop a favorable context to embed coproduction and cogovernance in Scottish health policy, and how the patterns of health services in Scotland part ways with England and other neo-liberal countries. The integration of the coproduction theory and the Multiple Streams Framework provides us promising ways to understand how macro-political development creates opportunities and barriers for coproduction. It also demonstrates how we can achieve a multilevel understanding of coproduction: from individual-level coproductive activities to institutional level coproductive arrangements.

Ma and Wu¹³ use the case of 'I find mistakes for government websites' to explore the determinants of citizen online coproduction of e-government services in China. The rapid development of e-government services provides unique context to understand citizen coproduction through online and digital platforms. Online coproduction also creates opportunities for millions of citizens to participate in public service provision simultaneously. Ma and Wu¹⁴ find that government websites at higher administrative levels attract more citizen reports. In addition, municipal government websites receive more citizen feedbacks when e-government performance and economic affluence are low, and when population size and internet access are high. However, for provincial government websites, only population size has a positive impact. These findings show that the form of engagement and the levels of government matter for coproduction.

Weng and Zhang¹⁵ apply the coproduction framework to understand the development and forms of community foundations in China. Specifically, they offer a typology of community foundations in China based on the orientation of civic participation (top-down vs. bottom-up) and the form of civic participation (individual vs. collective): top-down individual coproduction, top-down collective coproduction, bottom-up individual coproduction, and bottom-up collective coproduction. Weng and Zhang¹⁶ further demonstrate that the coproductive patterns of community foundations in China could move from one type to another. The leadership, organizational structure, and behaviors of these community foundations are the key determinants of the functions of community foundations in China. This article provides a promising strategy to understand institutional coproduction in China and other developing countries.

The final article in this special issue, by *Huafang Li*, approaches coproduction from communication and information asymmetry. When two parties work together (citizens and government officials in the case of coproduction), information is a key factor in determining the processes and outcomes of cooperation. By conducting a systematic literature of how public organizations can communicate with citizens effectively to facilitate coproduction, Li¹⁷ offers three key factors which may shape the communication for coproduction: information channels, information types, and information frequencies and contents. Li¹⁸ further provides a more nuanced understanding of citizen information needs by distinguishing the type I and type II individuals. Type I individuals demand cheap information while type II individuals ask for costly information that needs considerable efforts of cognitive

processing. This is a new area of coproduction research that points to the micro behavioral foundations of information seeking and processing in coproductive activities.

An agenda for future research

Based on the state of current research and insights offered by articles in this special issue, what is the future research agenda of coproduction? I want to offer three observations to move the research agenda of coproduction from a comparative perspective forward. First, coproduction at what scale? The origin of the coproduction theory starts with Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at Indiana University studying why smaller police departments often outperform large police departments. With the rapid growth of megacities and increasing population in developing countries, how should we envision coproduction when the scale of population moves to another order of magnitude in Asian and African countries? Are there alternative mechanisms to promote coproduction in these contexts? In addition, as we often study the coproduction of local government services in the North America and European contexts, how should we study coproduction when state and federal level public service provision are prevalent in many developing countries? Seeking strategies to study coproduction at different scales and levels seems to be a key challenge and promising future research agenda for the study of coproduction from a comparative perspective.

Second, how can we achieve measurement equivalence in the comparative study of coproduction? Coproduction, by its origin, is a concept from the West. How can we make it a useful concept in non-western settings? Even in the existing literature of coproduction, there is a huge debate about what we really mean by coproduction and the activities that should go into the scope of coproduction. Scholars have developed different terminologies to delineate coproduction: for example, cocreation, codesign, coplanning, cogovernance, coprovision, and comanagement. Do we really need all these different concepts to describe coproduction or distinguish coproduction? As the concept of coproduction becomes narrower and more fragmented, is that still useful to citizens and public managers? To build a true comparative understanding of coproduction, we need to confront these issues with brutal honesty and practicality. The stage of the public service provision cycle may be a useful way to describe different types of coproduction.¹⁹ It may also be possible that public managers and citizens do not really care about all these distinctions scholars create to achieve the purity of our concepts. They may treat different types of coproduction in very similar manners.²⁰ We need to develop better scales to measure coproduction across different cultural and geographical contexts to build a comparative understanding of coproduction.

Third, how does coproduction fit in the rapid institutional and administrative reforms of developing countries? Using the example of Zhejiang Province in China where we held this symposium of coproduction, the administrative reform entitled 'run at most once' (zuiduo pao yici) completely revolutionizes how services are provided for citizens in the province. Local governments in Zhejiang province shift their orientation from government-centric service provision to citizen-centric service provision through this reform.²¹ It is pretty amazing that five to ten years ago, Chinese governments are still experimenting contracting out and other New Public Management strategies. Now the narrative of administrative reforms has already centered on concepts like New Public Governance,²² New Public Service,²³ and collaborative governance.²⁴ How can we make coproduction useful to public managers in China and other developing countries where they experience the transformation of governance in the last decade or so while their western counterparts started the reform in the

1980s? How can we use the concept of coproduction to understand these rapid and large-scale administrative reforms? Experiences in developing countries offer us a unique opportunity to track and observe how coproduction evolves in different types and stages of public service provision arrangements.

In conclusion, no matter for political reasons or academic reasons, we tend to create and emphasize the boundaries between public and private actions. Thus, the focus of our inquiry focuses on whether we need more governmental interventions or private actions in the study of governance and public management. However, are we asking the right question? One of the key insights offered by the coproduction framework is that we have to go beyond this 'either-or' framework to a 'both-and' framework even if sometimes these concepts seem to be paradoxical. The joint provision of public services between government and citizens point to the nature of public services. When we liberate our conceptualization and theorization from the clear distinction between the state and the market, or between the government and citizens, we can achieve greater synergy to guide effective public service provision and institutional design.

Notes

1. Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide," 1073–1087.
2. Parks et al., "Consumers as Coproducers of Public Services," 1001–1011.
3. Brandsen and Pestoff, "Co-Production, the Third Sector and the Delivery of Public Services," 493–501.
4. Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States," 641–672.
5. Alford, "The Multiple Facets of co-Production," 299–316.
6. Saich, "Negotiating the State," 124–141.
7. Brudney, "Rethinking Coproduction," 1–20.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Gazley and Cheng, "Integrating Coproduction Theory into Voluntary Sector Theories," 1–20.
11. Thompson, "Contextualising co-Production and co-Governance."
12. Ibid.
13. Ma and Wu, "Citizen Engagement and co-Production of e-Government Services in China."
14. Ibid.
15. Weng and Zhang, "Coproduction of Community Public Service."
16. Ibid.
17. Li, "Communication for Coproduction."
18. Ibid.
19. Cheng, "Exploring the Role of Nonprofits in Public Service Provision," 203–214; Nabatchi et al., "Varieties of Participation in Public Services," 766–776.
20. Brudney, Cheng, and Meijs, "Defining Coproduction," 1–20.
21. Yu, *Run At Most Once*.
22. Osborne, "The New Public Governance," 377–387.
23. Denhardt and Denhardt, "The New Public Service," 549–559.
24. Jing and Hu, "From Service Contracting to Collaborative Governance," 191–202.

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Notes on contributor

Yuan (Daniel) Cheng is an assistant professor in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches public, nonprofit, and collaborative management. His research focuses on a range of theoretical and managerial questions lying at the nexus of governance, government-nonprofit relationships, coproduction, and the distributional and performance implications of cross-sectoral collaboration.


ORCID

Yuan (Daniel) Cheng  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3937-1792>

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Yuan (Daniel) Cheng 

*Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 301 19th Ave S, Minneapolis, MN,
55455, USA*

 Cheng838@Umn.Edu

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