Relationship between volunteering and co-production in Europe

Victor Pestoff

Ersta Sköndal Univ. College, Stockholm, Sweden

The aim of this paper is to explore similarities and differences between volunteering and co-production of public financed social services. Volunteering is often measured by the unpaid time an individual spends working with and/or for others. But most voluntary organizations receive the majority of their resources from the public sector for providing various kinds of social services. The total size of the third sector is often measured by the full-time equivalent of estimated volunteer hours and the size of the professional staff in a given country. Co-production, on the other hand, is defined as the degree of overlap between two sets of participants in public service provision – regular producers or civil servants and citizens or consumer producers. Co-production was originally motivated by cost reductions and higher quality services (Parks, et al., 1999), but more recently by new opportunities for citizens’ democratic participation in the provision of important social services (Fung, 2004; Pestoff, 2009). Initially, it resulted in a flurry of interest in the early 1980s by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues who wanted to better understand public service provision in America (Ostrom, 1999). This concept has spread in recent years to Europe and elsewhere and it is now used by researchers in many parts of the world (Pestoff & Brandsen, 2006 & 2008). Similar to volunteering, the organizational base of co-production can be either individual or collective.

In addition to the organizational base of activities, there is also the question of a volunteer’s or co-producer’s value orientation, as well as that of the organizations to which they belong. Are they primarily other-orientated or self-orientated? If they are orientated towards benefiting persons other than themselves, they are usually celebrated; they gain social recognition and public attention. But, if they are orientated toward themselves or primarily help people in their own group, this is considered an expression of self-help or mutualism. Therefore, it is assumed that they lack the same altruistic motives as volunteers. Co-production is a less well-known phenomenon and does not receive the same social approval as volunteering. However, these two phenomena may be more similar than first appearance suggests.

Ilmonen (2005) analyzed gift giving in contemporary society and maintained that it is important to pay attention to motives other than self-interest that can provide the basis for giving a gift, including the goal of maintaining social bonds. He argued that only in modern society are self-interest and other motives seen as contrary or opposed to each other. However, generosity is often not so ‘pure’ or altruistic as it may appear to be. Thus, he continued both ‘pure’ and ‘calculative’ gifts are merely ideal types. In everyday activities generosity and the promotion of self-interest are often intertwined.

The concept of volunteering is well-known and widely used in research in the USA, Europe and elsewhere, while the concept co-production is both less well-known and less understood. This paper represents a theoretical exercise that is necessary for developing, adapting and adjusting the conceptual tools necessary for better understanding and further refining the concept of co-production to the demands and constraints of European welfare states and their evolution in the 21st Century. It is based on the original ideas of Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues concerning co-production of public services in America. It combines newer ideas about that phenomenon in Europe and elsewhere (Pestoff & Brandsen, 2006 & 2008). It will be based on a literature review, in particular of the growing body of research on co-production. The main theoretical findings of this research will contribute to better understand the similarities and differences between volunteering and co-production, as ways of explaining the unpaid time spent working with and/or for others to provide social services in modern welfare states.

References:

Ilmonen, K., 2005; The Problem of Disinterestedness and Reciprocity in Gift Economy; Helsinki: conference paper.


