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Title: Case Study : Experts-by-Experience in Finnish Social Welfare

Year: 2018

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Meriluoto, T. (2018). Case Study : Experts-by-Experience in Finnish Social Welfare. In T. Brandsen, T. Steen, & B. Verschuere (Eds.), *Co-Production and Co-Creation : Engaging Citizens in Public Services* (pp. 294-296). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204956-46>

21.1 Case Study—Experts-by-Experience in Finnish Social Welfare

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Introduction

Finland—a Nordic welfare state with a history of strong public service provision and tight collaborative ties with the public and the third sector—adopted a strong participatory emphasis in its public governance outlines when entering the 21st century (see Salminen and Wilhelmsson, 2013). The co-governance ethos was presented as an answer to both the increasing political apathy and the consequent ‘legitimacy crisis’ of the state, as well as the rising costs of the public services. Tighter collaboration between the citizens, the third, and the public sectors was thought to create both more active citizens, as well as more efficient services.

Resulting from this participatory norm, public and third sector social welfare organisations were tasked with finding ‘new and innovative ways’ to include citizens in the design and production of social services. One of the most popular innovations was a new concept of *expertise-by-experience*. Drawing on examples from the UK and Denmark, mental health NGOs started to recruit former service users as new ‘experts’, performing varying co-creation and co-production tasks in social services. The concept and practice was fast disseminated to other areas of social welfare and health care, and to both public sector organisations and NGOs (see Rissanen, 2015). As it stands, the incorporation of expertise-by-experience has become somewhat of a marker for adhering to the norm of participatory governance in social welfare and health care. However, its effects remain ambiguous, with service users also reporting experiences of co-optation over true possibilities of influence in co-creating and co-producing services.

Background

Expertise-by-experience is a practice that has been employed and developed in projects carried out by both NGOs and public sector organisations. The projects have advanced co-production on two levels: they have sought to co-create and co-produce the organisations’ own activities, transforming the organisations’ own culture to become more ‘inclusive and participatory’,

and to create a ‘bank’ of experience-based experts who can be used by other organisations in their efforts of co-production and co-creation.

The projects have varying expectations towards co-production. Expertise-by-experience is presented as a means towards cheaper and better-functioning services, more legitimate governance as well as ‘empowered’ participants. Depending on which goal is emphasised, different interpretations of co-production and co-creation are translated into practice. The type of activities in the initiatives can be categorised (applying the typology of Brandsen and Honingh in this volume, chapter 2), as follows:

- 1) *Co-creation of the organisation’s core services.* Experts-by-experience partaking in service design workshops to develop the organisation’s everyday work.
- 2) *Co-production of the organisation’s core services.* Experts-by-experience producing services alongside trained professionals, e.g. in peer support groups, or having their own appointment hours in health clinics.
- 3) *Co-creation of other organisations’ core services.* Experts-by-experience ‘ordered’ from projects that train experts-by-experience to provide local knowledge to service development committees elsewhere, e.g. an NGO-trained expert-by-experience included as a service user representative in public service development.
- 4) *Co-production of other organisations’ core services.* Experts-by-experience invited to train social welfare practitioners to ‘develop’ their working methods, or to assess public services through various means of ‘service user research’ and feedback committees.

Experiences

The plethora of possible forms and aims of co-production and co-creation, placed under the title of expertise-by-experience, has caused heated debate concerning what ‘the correct form’ of expertise-by-experience is. Particularly strong views have been presented regarding who should be allowed to participate as an expert-by-experience, whether or not they should be trained, and furthermore, paid for their efforts. The proponents of training—and hence of selecting the experts-by-experience—argue that the professionals have the responsibility to evaluate when an expert-by-experience is ‘ready’ for their tasks of co-production and co-creation. The critique, in turn, suggests that such evaluation could result in cherry picking from the organisations’ point of view, and in only including those voices that comply with the organisations’ pre-existing views.

Furthermore, the ambiguity and inexplicit nature of the projects’ goals has resulted in disappointment among some experts-by-experience. It appears that the service users, the practitioners, and the administration quite frequently have different, or even contradicting expectations for co-production. While the service users often get involved in order to gain

recognition for the experiences they have experienced as harmful, and to present criticism and ‘contrasting points of view’ to service development, they feel their criticism is often silenced through strict conditions set for their participation. For example, emotion-filled speech is often deemed a sign of instability, and consequently labelled as unfitting for a setting of co-production, set to be carried out in partnership among neutral experts (see Meriluoto, 2017). The administration’s definitions for ‘usable knowledge’ prioritise technocratic expertise and, contrarily to the inclusive rhetoric, can be used to devalue individual points of view.

The experiences of experts-by-experience show how co-production schemes have a potential to select their participants by delineating what kind of contributions are ‘useful’, and what type of knowledge is ‘credible’. These initiatives tend to depart from the administration’s objectives, and value co-production practices first of all because of their outputs, rather than as the participants’ right to be included. The output-focused approach can be used to derail some service users’ critical voices. It can also de-politicise social disputes, as the issues tackled are presented in the realm of technocratic governance, where best decisions are reached not through opinion-based debate but through information-based management.

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