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Is co-production a ‘good’ concept? Three responses

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ABSTRACT

Co-production refers to a reciprocal process of exchange between diverse stakeholders, in order to generate outcomes that are only possible because of this deliberate intersection of difference. Whilst the concept of co-production appeals within and for futures studies, foresight and anticipatory politics, its conceptual messiness has been widely critiqued. Drawing upon an integrative literature review of co-production and concept formation in the social sciences, we identify three approaches that scholars of co-production have sought to mobilise in order to address this critique. Each approach offers a different perspective on what makes a ‘good’ social scientific concept: clarification, elucidation and provocation. Our analysis illuminates the value of holding different approaches to conceptualisation in tension, as a means of developing a richer and more contingent understanding of co-production to future studies’ debates. In doing so, we open up new conceptual imaginaries for co-production and its prefigurative value within futures studies, offering more pluralistic ways of knowing in a context of radical uncertainty

1. Introduction

Co-production now seems to be everywhere, with the concept deployed across scientific disciplines and beyond (Albrechts, 2012; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Brandsen & Honigh, 2015; Polk, 2015, p. 427; Haberhehl & Perry, 2021; Osborne et al., 2016; Osborne, 2018; Norström et al., 2020; Chambers et al., 2021). The resonance of co-production within futures studies (Polk, 2015; Nikulina et al., 2019) builds upon an acknowledgement of the value of both extended peer communities (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Meisch et al., 2022) and participatory methods for foresight (Dinges et al., 2018; Folhes et al., 2015; Pollio et al., 2021), and responds to a ‘post normal’ present and future where, ‘facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high and decisions are urgent’ (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993, p. 744).

Co-production involves the recognition of ‘the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes and improvisation in the face of unpredictability’ (Scott, 1998, p.6). As such, co-production has been perceived variously as a means to provide quality assurance in science and decision-making (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993), solve complex societal problems (Ostrom, 1996; Polk, 2015), ‘unveil fundamental agendas’ for the future previously obfuscated by ‘cognitive exclusion’ (Giatti, 2022, p.4), or to offer a ‘utopian

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space' (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p.105–106) for imagining futures, for example 'free of structural inequalities' (Gunnarsson-Östling et al., 2012, p. 914) or for reconciliation of long-standing conflict (Nikolakis, 2020).

However, when the term co-production is used in academic writing, and policy and practice circles, it is becoming harder to pin down what exactly is being talked about. In this paper, we ask whether conceptual messiness matters with regard to co-production. Asking this question allows us to assess both the future of co-production as a concept, and its relevance to futures studies.

If the answer to whether we should care about conceptual messiness is 'it depends', then we seek to set out on what grounds and for what purposes. Depending on how a 'good' concept is defined, co-production may either be not fit for purpose, very effective, or good but with more progress needed. All three may be useful answers, in their own way, depending on the purposes to which the concept is put and by whom. Without a 'concept god' (Ansell, 2021, p. 1133) that could arbitrate between contested concepts on our behalf, how should we approach such murky territories? Our response supports calls for 'a certain humility in declarations about conceptual meaning' (Collier et al., 2006, p.234), recognising the value of different perspectives, for different constituencies, on what constitutes a good concept.

The simultaneous mobility of co-production, and the constraints upon its practice, have led to concerns that its critical gaze is inhibited when addressing the challenges in its own realisation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Richardson et al., 2019a). We seek to avoid a 'flatland' of co-production, where its future value remains insufficiently examined and critiqued due to the limits of an overly essentialist or singular perspective on conceptualisation (Schultz et al., 2012, p. 129).

The reinvigoration of co-production in global academic scholarship since the mid-2000 s (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021), has given rise to a sense of co-production as a 'concept with adjectives', as reflected in the range of associated terms such as co-design, co-creation and co-governance (Osborne, 2018; Vershuere et al., 2012; Voorberg et al., 2015; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020). If popularity and widespread usage in and outside the academy is a measure of the quality of a concept, then co-production scores highly. However, as with other similar terms, like 'community', these powerful, almost talismanic, concepts mean many things to many people, to the point where the original strengths of the idea may become tainted (Cornwall, 2007; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Before co-production is rejected as a tainted concept however, there are other ways to define what makes a good concept, beyond clarity or singularity of meaning. We set out some alternatives to 'flee[ing] from this confusion' by abandoning certain concepts altogether (Weyland, 2001, p. 1).

Our argument is that the question of whether co-production is a good concept or not, depends on the purposes to which the concept is being put. By implication, conceptual goodness also depends on who is using the concept, recognising that academics, activists, policy-makers, citizens, practitioners and those inhabiting multiple roles at the same time, may be putting the concept to use in different ways at different times. For some, a good concept would provide space for contestation, and provoke people to invest in it in different ways, including trying to appropriate it. Good concepts might be ones that encourage people to challenge and debate, both within academia, and outside it. For others, a good concept is one that clearly delineates between what is and is not included, in order to compare instances of the same phenomenon. These priorities are also not either/or choices, may have equal but different value, and be in operation at the same time or even for the same individual. We offer an original contribution, showing the value of multiple approaches to conceptualisation, which separately and collectively highlight the strengths and limitations of co-production as a concept. Surfacing these different approaches allows us to show the deeper roots of contestation over co-production, to recognise how different approaches are in play concurrently, and reflect on the value of holding such approaches in tension for both the future use of the concept, and its resonance within futures studies.

In the first part of the paper, we consider the alignment between futures studies and co-production, highlighting the increasing popularity and concomitant contestation over co-production, setting out debates about whether co-production is a 'good concept'. In the second part of the paper, we then undertake an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019) of conceptualisation and co-production identifying three distinct approaches for assessing the 'goodness' of co-production as a concept: clarification, elucidation and provocation. In the final part of the paper, we compare these approaches and their assessment of co-production. In doing so, we are able to develop a richer and more contingent understanding of co-production as a concept, and emphasise the value of modesty in assessing the conceptual meaning of co-production and other social scientific concepts.

1.1. Why co-production matters for futures studies

Co-production is acknowledged as a meaningful concept within and for futures studies (Melnikovas, 2018). Their intellectual alignment is evidenced in a number of ways, as recourse to Sardar (2010) four laws of futures studies helps to illuminate. Like futures studies, the concept of co-production inherently rests on a recognition of the complex, and wicked nature of problems, which require the deliberate intersection of different forms of expertise to address. Alongside complexity, co-production is proposed as a means to deal with different forms of uncertainty about the present as well as the future. Some scholars have identified how an understanding of uncertainty as an issue to be managed out or mitigated, can be challenged through co-production. Through this lens, uncertainty instead becomes 'incompleteness', a quality of not being foreclosed to inputs from other perspectives, and also the possibility of alternative configurations (Durose & Richardson, 2016; Durose & Lowndes, 2021). As suggested, like futures studies, co-production also involves an encouragement to 'mutually recognise and appreciate each other's diversity' (Sardar, 2010, p. 183). The intention of co-production, as voiced by an early seminal proponent of the concept, Elinor Ostrom (1996) is to 'remove artificial walls', 'arising from overly rigid disciplinary walls surrounding the study of human institutions', and like futures studies, in doing so, 'question dominant axioms and assumptions' (Sardar, 2010, p. 177).

Mobilisation of the future is not the sole prerogative of the powerful (Anderson, 2010). In anticipatory politics, 'dominant institutions pre-empt futures in order to manage the present' (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 641). However, other practices, such as co-production, can offer future options other than pre-emption, which runs the risk of reinforcing existing dominant paradigms and

structures. Progressive pre-figurative politics involves the ‘self-conscious channelling of energy into modelling the forms of action that are sought to be generalised in the future in circumstances characterised by power, hierarchy and conflict’ (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 644–645). Co-production shares this pre-figurative quality, for example through seeking to develop ‘performative practices for other worlds’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p.613). Such practices are designed to be pre-figurative of future transformation by the actual seeking to embody and enact the possible (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), or by creating spaces for political imaginaries exploring how alternatives can be made in the here and now (Gibson-Graham, 2014; Yates, 2021).

Yet, however intellectually aligned the concept of co-production might be with key ideas in futures studies, this is irrelevant if the concept itself is in some way dangerously or irretrievably flawed. Co-production as a concept has been heavily critiqued from a number of angles. How can we better understand the ‘goodness’ of the concept and its value?

2. Contesting the concept of co-production

As we shall see later, conceptual goodness is a live issue for many constituencies outside of academia, but academic environments are, in many ways, an obvious starting point, because concepts are central, ‘as the fundamental point of articulation between our work as theorists and as empirical researchers’ (Soss, 2018, p. 319), and as ‘the lifeblood of our common endeavour as social scientists to understand, explain and engage with the social world’ (Ansell, 2021, p. 1118). The concept of co-production came to prominence from the late 1970 s onwards in political science. In one widely used definition, co-production is the ‘mixing of the productive efforts of regular and consumer producers’ in public service delivery (Parks et al., 1981, p. 1002). Whilst such definitions reflect the specific branch of political economy that informed them (Brandson & Honigh, 2015), co-production has been multi-disciplinary from the outset. Co-production involves reciprocal exchange (Duggan, 2020) being fostered between multiple stakeholders, in order to generate ‘synergetic outcomes’ that would otherwise have been inhibited (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1083). This ‘disarmingly simple’ (Alford, 2014) exhortation lies at the core of the diverse appeal that the concept of co-production has gained over time.

The route to conceptual prominence for co-production has been ‘far from linear’ (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021, p. 6), and its usage across and within different academic disciplines and beyond academia, has further complicated the refinement, framing and realisation of the concept. For some, this has amounted to ‘misappropriation’ of the term, in a way that unhelpfully conflates meanings and disregards significant differences across collaborative traditions (Williams et al., 2020, p. 2). For example, expansive takes on the concept, which focused on joint working by people in different organisations to produce goods or services, have led some to highlight a risk of extrapolation so that ‘almost any service or product development that occurs between people who are not formal work colleagues is, by definition, co-produced’ (Williams et al., 2020, p. 2–3). Such expansion of meaning is immensely irritating to some, for whom the concept has unhelpfully departed from its early framing as a conceptual tool to describe a series of interactions, between specified actors, which result in particular outcomes.

Whilst having an inclusive definition may have added to the appeal of co-production, it also creates conceptual issues about what might be ruled out by such a definition, how distinctive the activities within it might be, and at what point such definitions might become ‘trivial’ (Bovaird, 2007, p. 847). For example, in the field of oral health, following definitions such as that decried by Williams et al. (2020), people brushing their teeth could be co-production. For some, this undermines the value of the concept (Davies, 2011). Others may point to interesting developments in the co-production of oral health services (Brocklehurst et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2019), which may better reflect definitions of co-production as collaboration between ‘professionals and those traditionally on the receiving end of their “expertise”’ (Williams et al., 2020, p. 2–3), such as patients, service users, marginalised citizens, or research subjects (Facer & Enright, 2016).

At the same time, co-production is closely related in academic literature and wider use to other terms such as co-creation, and may even be used interchangeably (Voorberg et al., 2015), or as a ‘catch all’ term for any kind of collaboration (Williams et al., 2020). Despite - or perhaps because of - this, co-production remains highly popular and strongly contested. As Gallie (1956, p. 121) notes, ‘any particular concept of common sense or of natural sciences is liable to be contested for reasons better or worse’, and co-production is far from unique in this respect. Pollitt and Hupe (2011), for example, consider governance, accountability and networks, as concepts with pervasive appeal but at risk of conceptual stretching. Many frequently used concepts are unsurprisingly heavily debated in academic work (Büthe, 2016, p. 40). Cornwall (2007) cites a plethora of one-time ‘buzzwords’ - including development, civil society, poverty, sustainability, participation, citizenship, gender, community, and social capital - which have become ‘feel-good’ yet ‘depoliticised’ fuzzwords, requiring ‘constructive deconstruction’ in order to be ‘rehabilitated’ as useful concepts. In relation to the ‘essential’ (Davis, 2008, p. 67) buzzword of ‘intersectionality’ in feminist theory, for example, it has been argued that it remains confused, as to whether it is a concept at all, or a full-blown theory, or merely a heuristic device.

For some, while noting the ironies (Davis, 2008, p. 68), their response has been to observe how a concept’s very vagueness allows people to see themselves in the idea, fuelling its popularity. For others, such confusion might elicit gasps of horror. Even using the term ‘concept formation’ is already problematic from some perspectives. The phrase implies that concepts are distinct bounded entities that can be formed into definitive and final products, and also privileges the role of academics in doing so. Such concerns have led to calls for debate on the concept of concepts themselves (Khanani, 2018; Schaffer, 2018).

We follow in a tradition that wishes to ‘broaden conceptual debates and discussions that often risk “bias” and “epistemological monism” (Castree, 2016), avoiding “disciplinary chauvinism” (Sovacool et al., 2015), or “methodological unawareness” (Sartori, 1970, p.1034)’ (Sovacool & Hess, 2017, p. 704). It is not our intention to either ‘discover a meaning’ for co-production which ‘all could from then agree on’, or ‘conform to’, or indeed to ‘prove and explain the necessity of the contested character in question’ (Okoye, 2009, p. 616), but instead to reveal the different standpoints upon which assessment of co-production as a concept rests.

3. Three responses to whether co-production is a 'good' concept

In the sections that follow we develop an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). We worked abductively between two literatures: using key literature on concept formation to assess a body of work on co-production, we then drew upon our insight and experiences with co-production to help cohere three distinct approaches to assess the 'goodness' of co-production as a concept: clarification, elucidation and provocation.

We note that tensions between different perspectives may be partly a function of the life-cycle stage of conceptual development (Mullins, 1973), from emerging excitement, followed by critique, and either transformation or decline (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). This dynamic is fuelled by a dialogue between different scholars or groups of scholars. Our intention here is not to track the conceptual development of co-production, but rather to contend that there are distinct underpinning approaches that might endure over a life-cycle, and the distinctiveness of each lies in their perspectives on, fundamentally, why concepts matter, what purpose they have, how they might be used, and who gets to define them. As such, each casts a different light on the question of whether co-production constitutes a 'good' concept, and suggests limits to and divergent ways forward in its conceptual development. Again, the aim here is neither to prescribe nor privilege one approach to conceptualising co-production over another. Instead, it is our contention that by surfacing these different approaches we can open up a richer analytical conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of co-production as a concept.

3.1. Co-production and clarification

One prominent critique within academic work is, unsurprisingly, that co-production (as with many other concepts) is a messy and unclear concept. Work has highlighted conceptual stretching, conceptual travel (Sartori, 1970), and perpetual conceptual reconstruction (Weber, 1949) in relation to co-production, where these 'danger[s]' (Flinders et al., 2016, p. 263) are perceived to risk not only 'confusion' but obscuring the limits of co-production (Flinders et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2019).

Such critiques resonate with the historically dominant approach to conceptualisation within social sciences, referred to here as 'clarification', which focuses on concept shaping derived primarily from and for academic use, but also seeks certainty through establishing a transparent, replicable means for conceptual (re)construction (Gerring, 1999). Approaches to conceptualisation that prioritise clarification reject 'vague and amorphous conceptualisations' (Sartori, 1970, p. 1034).

Clarification is achieved by reducing excess meaning, with the criterion of parsimony: 'Good concepts do not have endless definitions' (Gerring, 1999, p. 371). Parsimony might be seen as reductive, but this is viewed as a strength by those seeking falsification or the identification of causality. Despite the core focus on parsimony and clarity, there is a 'highly variable process' with trade-offs between a number of criteria (Gerring, 1999, p. 357). Establishing transparent criteria, and following deductive reasoning allows for a meaningful evaluation of concepts along different criteria (Gerring, 1999).

There is a semantic and empirical boundedness emphasised in this approach: 'A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks' (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Different resolutions to conceptual sprawl or aberrant cases, such as Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, remain within the terms of reference of this approach (Collier & Mahon, 1993; Sartori, 1970), and maintain the emphasis on boundedness, and 'neatly-nested categories of things' (Sovacool & Hess, 2017, p. 734).

Scholars have pointed to a lack of agreement or consensus on what co-production is, and the 'conceptual confusion' around the term (Brandsen & Honigh 2015, p. 428). Alongside reaching across academic disciplines and policy domains, co-production is also used conceptually at different levels of analysis, for example, Jasanoff's work in science and technology engages with co-production as an epistemological position that values 'knowledge as experience' (Flinders et al., 2016) and uses co-production as an idiom for the social world, whereas for others it has a more specific applied meaning as a form of collaboration - although there is even contention here amongst collaborative traditions which view co-production differently (Williams et al., 2021). For example, research seeking to systematically map global initiatives to co-produce outcomes for the sustainable development of ecosystems has highlighted that co-production 'collaborative[ly] weaves' together 'diverse aims, terminologies and practices', with 'poor clarity' over the implications of doing so (Chambers et al., 2021).

As such, a clarification approach has been proposed repeatedly by prominent scholars of co-production who have argued that, 'as an academic concept, coproduction has little value unless it is clearly demarcated' (Brandsen & Honigh, 2015, p. 428). For scholars interested in co-production within a public services context, for example, strengthening 'conceptual clarity' is perceived as 'an important precondition for taking co-production research forward' (Brandsen & Honigh, 2015, p. 428), and, for instance, to enable more systematic and comparative research on co-production (Vershuere et al., 2012, p. 1095).

Fuzzy concepts from this perspective undermine the extent to which they can 'be reliably identified or applied by different readers or scholars' (Markusen, 2003, p. 702). Indeed, the perceived limits to conceptual clarity in research on co-production is said to have rendered the 'cumulative effect' of such research as 'relatively weak' (Brandsen & Honigh 2015, p. 428). For example, scholars undertaking a systematic review of co-production with citizens in public innovation criticised co-production as a 'magical' concept (Voorberg et al., 2015, p.1340), both acknowledging its appeal, but also establishing 'the creation of conceptual clarity' as a key research agenda within the field.

There have also been criticisms about the allied problem of conceptual sprawl. For example, Williams et al. (2020), reflecting on co-producing health research, highlight how the growing appetite and emphasis for participation and partnership, in combination with 'the related emergence of a plethora of "co" words has put the ethical and political distinctiveness of co-production at risk; they call this 'cobiquity'. Voorberg et al.'s (2015, p. 1340) systematic review also highlighted the interchangeable empirical use of various 'co-

concepts, with the implication that this detracts from conceptual clarity.

Efforts within the co-production literature to address concerns of conceptual confusion, stretch and sprawl, include attempts to: re-narrate the lineage of co-production and integrate different academic standpoints (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013); revise classical definitions (Brandson & Honigh, 2015); produce taxonomies or classifications of different kinds of co-production (Brudney & England, 1983); frame or delineate phases of co-production (Polk, 2015); and, identify core principles (Norström et al., 2020) or different modes (Chambers et al., 2021). The intention of such efforts is to 'remov[e] ambiguous terms that cause confusion in a research context' (Brandson & Honigh, 2015, p. 433) and instead to produce 'clear, unambiguous conceptual definition' (Brandson & Honigh, 2015, p. 431).

Criteria for conceptual goodness emphasising empirical application, and causal explanation include analytic utility (the usefulness of a concept within a particular theoretical context or research design) and field utility (the usefulness of a concept within a field of closely related terms) (see discussion in Goertz, 2006). Again, co-production is judged as falling short of the goals of 'address[ing] blanks in our knowledge' (Brandson & Honigh, 2015, p. 433, 431), or in offering 'practical guidance on how to engage in meaningful co-productive practices, and how to evaluate their quality and success' (Norström et al., 2020 p. 182).

3.2. Co-production and elucidation

We turn now to a different approach for assessing the conceptual 'goodness' of co-production: elucidation. This approach shares some ground with clarification, but through emphasising how concepts are used in practice, and the meanings they are given by people. The focus of elucidation therefore, is to expand our knowledge of the many meanings that may have been associated with a concept. This expansion of meaning is in sharp contrast to the emphasis in clarification approaches on reducing the number of different meanings associated with a concept. Elucidation also shares with clarification an interest in the explanatory power of concepts. But, again, what is distinct from clarification is what is meant by explanation (Jasanoff, 2004), rather than fashioning precise conceptual tools of the researcher's design, the aim of conceptualisation within these approaches is to 'elucidate' the meaning and use of concepts in lived practice (Schaffer, 2016).

Elucidation approaches are in a lineage of work on 'sensitizing concepts' that offer a general guide and steer as to the direction of study (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Developing this approach, some have used the idea of an 'organizing perspective' (Greenleaf 1993). Such perspectives 'provide a framework for analysis, a map of how things relate, a set of research questions' (Flinders, Judge, Rhodes, & Vatter, 2021, p. 4), rather than theories with falsifiable hypotheses (Gamble 1990, p. 405 cited in Flinders et al., 2021, p.4).

In parallel to Blumer (1954), Schaffer (2016) uses Geertz (1973) distinction to contrast elucidation's 'experience near' approach with clarification's 'experience distant' approach. In contrast to the latter's abstracted concepts of scholars and experts, 'experience near' concepts seek to capture 'the understanding of terms as used, felt, and imagined by the social group(s)' (Büthe, 2016, p. 40). To conceptualise from this perspective is to 'carve experienced wholes into meaningful kinds' (Soss, 2018, p. 319). For Smith (2016), concept elucidation has the potential to 'create new windows of inquiry into the objects of our study', by 'treat[ing] concepts themselves as fields of study'. An illustration of this approach applied to co-production can be seen in calls by Bevir et al. (2018), with regard to social and public policy applications, for a 'decentering of co-production', to:

look beyond the grand narrative of co-production to locate the articulation of this narrative in its specific historical and political context and to look closer at how the situated practices of designing, facilitating, or participating in co-production activities can both reflect and disrupt local meanings and relations of power.

From this elucidating perspective, extreme versions of a clarification approach have been seen as unhelpfully removing concepts from the specific contexts in which they are used, neglecting the multiple and dynamics ways in which different groups have used the term and what they understand by it, or failing to acknowledge the power dynamics that shape their use. For example, some scholars supporting elucidation approaches have argued against 'exercise[s] that remove the lived and intersubjective nature of social reality and the language in which concepts are deployed by the very social beings that we study' (Smith, 2016, p. 46). Elucidation instead includes reflection on language and how it relates to 'the practices of life and power that they evoke and sustain' (Schaffer, 2016, x). An elucidation perspective draws our attention to how co-production is understood, narrated and applied locally in different contexts. The approach involves 'grounding' concepts in 'their everyday use by layperson[s]', with a 'double perspective' of 'taking seriously the way agents use words and concepts and the critical reflexive perspective of the researcher' (Thomassen, Dow, Khanani & Schaffer, 2018, p. 319).

A 'good' concept, from an elucidating approach, would therefore offer an in-depth grasp of how it is enacted in different ways, times, and social worlds, by the participants who inhabit those worlds (Soss, 2018, p. 320). Assessing the value of co-production as a concept would be based on the breadth, diversity, and richness of studies of the concept. A tentative assessment of co-production on this score might be that some progress has been made, but more work is needed.

Reflecting that 'there is no suprahistorical perch from which to study concepts across the ages' (Schaffer, 2016, p. 69 cited in Khanani, 2018, p. 329), elucidation seek to 'locate' (Schaffer, 2016) a concept in a specific time and place guarding against the possibilities of universalising the definition of a term to a particular context. Such strategies are evident in co-production (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Habermehl & Perry, 2021): Nikulina et al. (2019) for instance seek to elucidate different interpretations of co-production in relation to epistemic communities, linguistic diversities and cultures. Indeed, more broadly, whilst scholars in the Global North have embraced co-production as a guiding principle in research partnerships with lower- and middle-income countries, co-production can be seen as a neo-colonial imposition that does not necessarily match the meanings attributed to it, or contexts of use, proposed by Southern scholars (Galuszka, 2019). Similarly, whilst 'commoning' of ownership and management of resources as a form

of co-production, is perceived within Western scholarship as a progressive social transformation, in parts of South Eastern Europe such efforts are, for some scholars and activists, still perceived as synonymous with the forced collectivisation experiment of the late 1940s (Tomašević et al., 2018).

As suggested, a further way that elucidation can take place is through ‘exposing’ (Schaffer, 2016). Exposing is a strategy where a very deliberate effort is made to understand and articulate the otherwise hidden or implied power relationships that are embedded in concepts. ‘Exposing’ these relationships of power offers a means to ‘democratize conceptual study’ in a way that both challenges traditional elitism, and recognises the most politicised dimensions of language (Dow, 2018, p. 325).

Co-production itself is also perceived as a process for elucidation. For example, scholars have deployed co-production to illuminate often hidden power dynamics, within academic research (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Redwood, 2008). Co-production is also seen as a process that can reveal the assumed hierarchy of the expert over the layperson. For instance, Porter’s work on planning (2010), and Pohl et al.’s (2010) consideration of the work of sustainability researchers uses co-production to emphasise the ‘humanness’ of different pursuits (Jones, 2006, p. 67), and to demonstrate that ‘useful [...] knowledge is dispersed throughout society’ (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 107).

Other research has sought to elucidate the ongoing influence of antecedent power within co-production. Those who had greater status, resources or some kinds of credibility and legitimacy before the co-productive process will have more leverage and say in the co-productive process, unless efforts are made to address these power inequalities (Durose et al., 2021). This includes instances when academics retain power within knowledge production, or professionals are more influential than service users during co-production of public services. These antecedent forces are recognised to have particular significance due to the negotiation of difference that co-production inherently involves - for example, in terms of expertise, values, incentives, priorities, working cultures, standards, resources, timescales and language (Bovaird, 2007; Flinders et al., 2016; Martin, 2010).

3.3. Co-production and provocation

A third response to the question ‘is co-production a good concept’ emphasises the idea of mobilising action; we call this ‘provocation’. Co-production is advocated by proponents of this approach (e.g. Williams et al., 2020) as a potential way to generate transformative action (Robinson & Tansey, 2010; Pain et al., 2015; Brown & Head, 2019; Author, 2021b). For example, Mitlin and Bartlett (2018) writing in the context of development studies, note that ‘co-production appears to be essential to social transformation, a necessary even if not a sufficient condition’. As noted earlier, co-production is positioned here as a means of pre-figuring alternative futures (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020; Sardar, 2010) and new political and economic ‘imaginaries’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996).

Here, conceptual openness and emergence are not deficits to be addressed through clarification, or to be situated in context via elucidation. Provocation approaches are instead more agnostic about the boundaries of the concept, and its emergence in use, at times even valuing contradictions in the use of a term as a basis for debate and action, to: ‘break out of the standard frames we put around phenomena’ (Abbott, 1994). For example, commentators on co-production have argued that concepts ‘depend on the purpose to which they are put’, and as such, it is ‘not sensible to seek to impose a single definition on the field’ (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021, p. 5). This point of view has long-standing roots in the co-production literature, for example, Brudney and England’s (1983, p. 61) assertion that usefulness is more important than validity:

co-production should be defined in a way that is relevant to both policy makers interested in implementing or evaluating co-production and to academics concerned with operationalising the concept in actual service delivery situations.

The very definition of co-production resists easy categorisation (Durose et al., 2018; Habermehl & Perry, 2021), being: ‘holistic, contextual, multifaceted, bridge-building, creative, dynamic, complex, emergent, behaviour influencing and tacitly understood’ (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021, p. 30). As Loeck and Boaz (2019) note, writing with a focus on patient and public involvement in co-producing medical research, attempts to standardise definitions of co-production may be criticised as potentially belying such complexity.

Concepts in provocation perspectives are instead perceived as ‘boundary objects’ or communication tools, able to bridge gaps between different disciplines, forms of expertise or groups; or heuristics, able to open up understanding by borrowing across fields (Abbott, 1994). Boundary objects can play ‘conceptual and political roles at new boundaries of knowledge and action as tools in communication, understanding and engagement’ (Holden, 2013), opening up ‘alternative thinking’ (Bell, Eason, & Frederiksen, 2011, p. 11). Their alleged weaknesses of ambiguity and open-endedness are instead secrets to success (Davis, 2008, p. 67). The plasticity allows local adaptation, while being ‘robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become more strongly structured in individual use’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393).

Recognition that the meaning of co-production may unfold and develop in use, with different groups able to shape the definition, is evident within the literature. As Albrechts (2012) notes within the field of spatial planning, co-production is perceived as ‘a process of becoming, a process of negotiating and discussing the meanings of problems, of evidence, of (political) strategies, of justice or fairness and the nature of outcomes’. These emergent qualities of co-production are also positioned as a useful response to the challenges of complexity, contestation and uncertainty that are now increasingly recognised to characterise society, which demand transdisciplinary forms of expertise and new modes of social enquiry (Richardson et al., 2019b). Assessed against such a perspective, the concept has been assessed positively against its ability, for example to offer a ‘utopian space’ for rethinking and (potentially) remaking the world for the better (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 105–106).

An emergent and action-orientated perspective on co-production has identified the value of the concept as a mobilising narrative for reform across sectors of public management (Osborne et al., 2016; Vershuere et al., 2012), and its perceived potential to generate transformative change (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021). All three approaches consider how concepts are used in different

contexts and by those outside academia. However, rather than seeing this as a problem to be resolved through reducing meaning (as with clarification approaches), or as the topic of enquiry (as with elucidation approaches), provocation explicitly seeks to foster the use of concepts by practitioners, activists, policy-makers and citizens.

The particular orientation implied by the provocation approach is that co-production involves egalitarian, democratic and social justice goals, as well as utilitarian potential (Williams et al., 2020, p. 8). Rather than simply revealing power dynamics, like elucidation, within provocation approaches, the point is to transform them. As Bevir et al. (2018) have argued, ‘for most advocates, co-production... reflects a political agenda to rebalance inequalities and promote democracy’. Bell and Pahl (2018) similarly suggest that co-production may be positioned “‘within, against, and beyond” current configurations of power in academia and society more broadly’. For example, in an effort to combine public values and preferences with expert knowledge to generate a sustainable future for the Georgia Basin, an area of Western Canada, co-production has been said to provide an opportunity for communities to ‘actively alter the social conditions in which they find themselves’ (Robinson & Tansey, 2006, p. 152). In this sense, co-production constitutes ‘necessary’ conceptual space to ‘activate, expand and apply’ different forms of expertise and knowledge ‘to effect change’ (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p.107).

A further example, in a context of service delivery, is how co-production is perceived to recognise previously hidden informal labour that citizens contribute to public service delivery (Governance International/ Local Government Information Unit, 2012). In knowledge production, co-production has been used to recognise the rights of those who are traditionally the ‘subjects’ of research to be active participants in research that affects them (Williamson & de Souza, 2010; Durose et al., 2021), for example the involvement of the poor in research on poverty (Lister et al., 2000). An argument that is also relevant in research on futures, for example, that learners are experts in their own futures (O’Brien & Forbes, 2021). Co-production within knowledge production, for example, has been perceived as a conceptual tool for democratisation within the academy (Ersoy, 2017): not seeking to devalue science, but rather to re-evaluate other ways of knowing (Durose et al. 2018, p. 33); and, as in futures studies, to ‘extend peer communities’ as a means of responding to complexity and uncertainty (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Meisch et al., 2022).

In the context of a provocation approach, the role of co-production in knowledge production becomes to challenge elitist and exclusionary knowledge production cultures. Co-production, for example, offers an opportunity to ‘destablise academia as a privileged site’ (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 107), through troubling, and re-imagining relationships of power and authority in the relationships between academics and the communities beyond (Duggan, 2020, p. 356). For example, in the context of sustainable urban development, and attempts to ‘realise just cities’, co-production is perceived to have the potential to work ‘beyond critique’ and construct alternative urban visions in and with communities (Perry & Atherton 2017, p. 36).

This perspective critiques the primacy given to abstract academic categories which force our minds to reproduce ‘prevailing ideas’ in a ‘circular and self-reinforcing process’ (Wills & Lake, 2020, p. 3–4). From a provocation perspective, the aim instead should be to challenge established practices of research and abstraction that may close us off from engaging imaginatively and playfully in the processes of concept formation and re-formation in relation to a world ‘in process’ (Duggan, 2020, p. 357). The argument here is that by provoking ‘new thoughts and feelings that create new possibilities in the world’, we are able to ‘engage with what is often hidden, missed, or dealt with superficially, yet matters’ (Duggan, 2020, p. 364). Here, co-production is positioned as a means of introducing scepticism of:

simple, one dimensional solutions to wicked problems as well as of dominant ideas, projections, predictions, forecasts and notions of truth to ensure that the future is not foreclosed and colonised by a single culture (Sardar, 2010, p. 182).

4. Comparing the three responses

We have made the case that an assessment of co-production as a concept depends what approach to conceptualisation is taken. A summary of the three approaches set out above is shown in Fig. 1. Clarification emphasises building theory, primarily in the context of academic debates. It uses a strategy of criteria-setting to reduce the meaning around a concept, valuing rigour and comparative analysis. Elucidation approaches place emphasis on revealing how power operates, primarily in the context of experience. It uses a strategy of situating to expand meaning, valuing embeddedness to achieve a goal of contextualisation. Understanding conceptualisation as provocation emphasises enabling change, primarily in the context of action. It uses a strategy of emergence, valuing

Approach	Where are concepts situated?	What are concepts for?	How are concepts defined?	Who defines concepts?	What do concepts offer?
Clarification	Ideas	Building theory	Set criteria	Scientists	Certainty
Elucidation	Experience	Revealing power	Situated knowledge	Scientists through their study of practice	Contextualisation
Provocation	Action	Enabling change	Emerge through dialogue	Scientists with practitioners	Transformation

Fig. 1. Why, how and for whom do concepts matter?.

utility to achieve a goal of transformation, to use the actual to create the possible (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020). Each of the approaches to conceptualisation may be loosely aligned with broader epistemological traditions in social science: clarification with positivism, elucidation with interpretivism, and provocation with pragmatism (May & Perry, 2022).

We have argued for the value of each perspective on its own terms. However, within social science, approaches emphasising clarification are dominant historically, and reflect an established orthodoxy for what constitutes a ‘good’ concept. Even in explaining ‘essentially contested concepts’ (Gallie, 1956) - as co-production has been labelled by some commentators (Flinders et al., 2016) - a clarification approach has been advocated to help social scientists to evaluate and reason about complex concepts (Collier et al., 2009). Elucidation and provocation approaches remain more marginal in the social science canon.

Despite their prominence, clarification perspectives more generally have been rebuked on three key grounds: their assumed or exaggerated universalism, which is perceived to neglect the linguistic or historical specificity of a concept; false objectivism that obscures the power dynamics of social analysis; and one-sidedness, the singularity and primacy of an academic perspective, ignoring other situated meanings of a concept (Schaffer, 2016). These criticisms reflect the emphasis on the boundedness of concepts within clarification approaches. In practice, this means that concepts that might be ‘amazingly productive’, such as social innovation or indeed, co-production, are delegitimised in terms of conceptual adequacy and subsequently labelled not, in fact, ‘good’ (Bjornskov and Sonderskov, 2013, p. 1226).

That scientists use concepts to ‘impose categories on the lived realities of the world in ways that make systematic analysis possible’ (Soss, 2018, p. 319) may for some, create reassuringly solid ground on which to build an analysis. For others, these ‘impositions’ are acts of epistemic ‘violence’ where ‘moral choices, ethical and analytical decisions, representational practices and personal investments of the researcher are secreted away and so are made to appear natural and innocent’ (Redwood, 2008, p. 7).

Indeed, different approaches reflect contrasting assumptions on the positionality of scientists. Whilst both clarification and elucidation approaches tend to centre the perspective of scientists on concept formation and use, elucidation approaches seek to interrogate understanding of how concepts are used in different contexts and within different social groups. Provocation approaches also seek to decentre concepts, seeing concepts as an opportunity for dialogue beyond science, including practitioners, communities and citizens, rather than focusing on the role of scientists in discerning their scientific use.

Responding to a perceived lack of conceptual clarity may lead to ‘the substitution of precision for validity’ (Kirk & Kutchins, 1994 cited in Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 24). For example, there are many warnings against quantification as a solution to conceptual confusion, on the grounds that quantification has exacerbated ‘conceptual stretching’, by ‘switching from “what is” questions to “how much” questions’ (Sartori, 1970, p. 1036, 1039). Precision aside, one consequence of substituting quantification for debates over meaning or values has been that the normative debate is partially erased. One may get ever more precise knowledge, but at the expense of the conceptual integrity of radical concepts (Westman & Castán Broto, 2022), and ‘without having resolved deeper questions’ (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 24).

These debates about validity and values are reflected in the contestation around co-production between Locock and Boaz (2019) and Williams et al. (2020), both writing in the context of patient involvement in health research. The former colleagues consider efforts to bring greater clarity to debates on co-production as an ‘unhelpful guarding of territory’, which ‘wastes time’ and is tantamount to seeking to draw ‘straight lines along blurred boundaries (Locock & Boaz, 2019, p. 411, 418). Williams et al. (2020) have retorted that ‘while standardisation would deny this complexity, lack of standardisation does not legitimise labelling any or all forms of collaboration as “co-production”’. There is an attendant irony in claims that elucidation should be able to see from the actor’s point of view, whilst recognising the inherent limits of the perspectives of specific actors in specific contexts (Schaffer, 2018, p. 331).

The emphasis on situatedness within elucidation approaches is, in part, a response to these perceived limitations of clarification approaches. Whilst both clarification and elucidation approaches seek to clarify, they do so in different ways, either by reducing meaning or expanding meaning. However, perhaps unsurprisingly elucidation approaches have also opened up new points of contention. Both elucidation and provocation approaches reflect a view that social science ought to ‘turn a critical eye towards inherited concepts’, on their boundaries, framings, and ‘smuggled social assumptions and normative commitments [...], paving the ways for new acts of sociological imagination’ (Soss, 2018, p. 319). However, these approaches differ given elucidation’s focus on uncovering the political as an analytical exercise, perhaps without concrete consequences for actions, in contrast to the emphasis in provocation approaches on political action discussed in more depth below.

Indeed, co-production is not only conceptualised in an elucidatory way, but also as a way to elucidate. For science and technology studies scholars such as Jasanoff (2004), co-production ‘is short-hand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world’ are inseparable from ‘the ways in which we choose to live it’. Thinking differently about how academic knowledge is generated and used, shifts the ‘explanatory power’ generated (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 2–3). For others, such as Bevir et al. (2018) the work of decentring co-production needs to go further, with scholars maintaining a critical self-reflexivity (May & Perry, 2017). Similarly, Harman (2017), for example, reflecting on the co-production of a narrative feature film between an academic, film crew and women from rural Tanzania, recognises that exploring rather than ignoring the inherent politics of co-production has the potential to open up new ways of thinking.

In recognising the multiple contexts in which concepts form and take root, this elucidating approach may however, be perceived to normalise the ‘messiness’ of co-production. Whilst Schaffer is at pains to emphasise that the elucidating approach should not be taken to the point where the ability to abstract or generalise is lost (2016, p. 70–72), how to negotiate this balance remains a central question (Büthe, 2016, p. 41).

Elucidatory approaches have been criticised for risking privileging description over explanatory power, whilst not fundamentally shifting the ‘centre of gravity’ of conceptualisation from the focus on the researcher entering the field (Soss, 2018). As implied, concept elucidation is perceived to offer less insight into how researchers can pursue ‘conceptual work in the opposite direction’: putting

‘experience near’ concepts and local practices into dialogue with various experience distant concepts of academic debate. One example is using ideal types to aid interpretation of meaningful social practice (high salience for provocation), or identifying useful comparisons or offer analytical generalisations (of prime value in clarification) (Soss, 2018, p. 322).

Many scholars working with clarification and elucidation approaches have a commitment to public understandings of, or public engagement with, science, for pursuing the relevance of their work beyond academia. In these approaches, such commitments do not necessarily imply that social science should take a view on how the world ought to be different. Provocation approaches however, see conceptualisation as part of a wider project of the role of academic work in generating social change. Indeed, some have argued that the purpose and practice of co-production in research ought to be social justice and the democratisation of the academy (Ersoy, 2017), or the creation of ‘utopian’ spaces for creativity and remaking the world through imagination (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 1996, Raeksted & Gradin, 2020).

Concept development as provocation goes beyond the recognition that concepts take root in parallel contexts, to emphasise the value of dialogue across social worlds. From a provocation perspective, conceptual adequacy is designated according to societal implications and the potential for change. Yet as Orr and Bennett (2009, p. 202) observe, reflecting on a co-produced evaluation about organisational learning, this provocative stance has ‘potential for creative coalitions but also the possibility of the clash of civilizations’. Flinders et al. (2016) apply Mary Douglas’ notion of ‘social pollution’ to co-production, to highlight the potential risks and limits for academic researchers in this kind of boundary-spanning work, which may be seen to ‘pollut[e] conventional boundaries’ of social science research. Trans-disciplinary and other co-productive work may be perceived to have the potential to open up accusations of breaking, bending or undermining professional, ethical and intellectual standards of research (Martin, 2010), and threaten the perception of research credibility or independence (Oliver et al., 2019). Harnessing co-production to advance a political agenda may also risk its capture (Ersoy, 2017; Duggan, 2020), and conversely serve to depoliticise co-production (Williams et al., 2020; Westman & Castán Broto, 2022).

Provocation is not the only approach that can claim a political agenda. For instance, clarification can be used as a tool to tie concepts to particular agendas by defining what is in and out of scope and elucidation seeks to uncover the political within concept formation and use. Whilst it is true that concepts can be instrumentalised by a logic of clarification that seeks to co-opt dominant agendas, clearer definitions can build a stronger case, and inform action, for social change.

5. Conclusion

Our paper engages with a crucial aspect of futures studies concerning the values and means of enriching participation and diversifying expertise as a response to a post-normal context. Whilst co-production is held up as a useful means to negotiate radical uncertainty, its conceptual definition is often mired in difficulties, and its framing can belie the messy realities of practice. We took this puzzle as our starting point for this paper: How can we understand co-production as a ‘good’ concept in light of its widely acknowledged sprawl and messiness? What conceptual value should we give to its diverse appeal as a mobilising narrative? How should this value be weighed from the perspective of pre-eminent approaches to conceptualisation in social science?

We undertook an integrative literature review of concept formation and co-production and identified three different approaches to conceptualisation that underpin the co-production literature: clarification, elucidation and provocation. If one was to use the approaches as a ‘scorecard’, then our tentative conclusion, would be that co-production is recognised to largely fail as a ‘good’ concept from a clarification perspective, has achieved many insights but with room for improvement from an elucidation perspective, and has shown potential but is still constrained from a provocation perspective. However, the core contribution of this paper is not in the assessments per se, but rather to establish the basis on which they are made.

By highlighting distinctive and common threads that connect how we think about and value social scientific concepts, we have shown that these different approaches to conceptualisation are able to offer different ways to interrogate a contested concept like co-production. When thinking about what constitutes a ‘good’ concept, whether that be co-production, or one of the many other buzzwords, our analysis suggests the value of holding these approaches in tension, rather than privileging one over another. Surfacing and comparing these different treatments has allowed us to recognise both their limits and strengths.

Our focus on co-production also demonstrates that different conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ social science concept are in play concurrently, and that individuals may recognise the value of more than one approach. Indeed, each is not always mutually exclusive. One could, for example, want more clarity and less sprawl, whilst recognising that contested and open concepts are good for debate and advancing disciplines. In this sense, as researchers we may see ourselves as working in the context of multiple frames of meaning, and acknowledge difference but recognise the potential for learning across boundaries. Such a stance can yield valuable critical insight into co-production, and across other essentially contested concepts in social science.

Our approach offers the potential to avoid a ‘flatland’ where the concept evades critical scrutiny, and instead open up new conceptual imaginaries for co-production. Doing so may contribute not only to realising its claimed potential, but also its pre-figurative value within futures studies. Our contribution to futures knowledge lies in our demonstration of the value of holding different approaches to conceptualisation in tension, as a means of developing a richer and more contingent understanding of co-production, rather than abandoning particular concepts due to their conceptual messiness. In making this argument, we reflect an increasing need to develop more pluralistic modes of knowing that recognise the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to producing social scientific knowledge for the 21st century.

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