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'Good stories get lost in bureaucracy!' Cultural biases and information for co-production

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about evidencing the social value of co-produced public services. We use Mary Douglas's theory of cultural variation to frame conflicting assumptions about what kinds of information count as good and reliable. With its emphasis on active participation, equality and mutual decision-making, co-production fits what Douglas called an 'egalitarian' worldview. It aligns well with local, contextual, experiential forms of information such as storytelling. Yet in present-day public services, alternatives favour individual choice, hierarchical rules, or chance outcomes. It is comfortable but ineffective to share only information that meets the preferences of one worldview and fails to respond to others.

IMPACT

The idea of co-production attracts passionate advocates, many of them practitioners. To further advance co-production and counter objections, information for evidence of its value is essential but there is little consensus on what counts as legitimate information. We draw practical learning from the struggles of a social enterprise prominent in co-production to improve its information gathering and presentation. Contextualised forms of information such as stories of lived experience reflect many practitioners' understanding of co-production. Stories can be mobilised with great success but it may nevertheless be counterproductive to shun other information resources that meet the preferences of diverse stakeholders.

Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest around the world in the co-production of public services (Bovaird et al., 2019). Although the idea itself is not new, co-production is in tune with the times, embraced by governments, and demanded of public management (Brandsen et al., 2018). For example, the Care Act 2014 in England created a duty for local authorities to ensure that services are co-produced with individuals, families, friends, carers and the community. A working definition of co-production is found in the statutory guidance that accompanied the Care Act, 'when an individual influences the support and services received, or when groups of people get together to influence the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered' (Department of Health & Social Care, 2016, p. 13).

Much is expected of co-produced services but providers—especially small ones—struggle to win recognition for the value they create (Needham & Carr, 2015).

A trend towards welfare pluralism involves private, public and voluntary forms of organization, and also hybrids, including social enterprises with characteristics of more than one sector (Billis, 2010; Skelcher & Smith, 2015; Grossi et al., 2017; Powell, 2019). Alongside developments in the provider mix, over the past two decades public services in welfare have become increasingly information led (Parton, 2006; Hardey & Loader, 2009; Wastell et al., 2010): a trend set to continue with newer resourcing mechanisms (Dowling, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020). Conflict and misunderstanding about collecting and recording service information were recognized long ago (Garfinkel, 1984; Prince, 1996). The 21st-century informational turn in social care resulted in systems that seemed antithetical to professional discretion and workers have reported being distracted from the human side of their practice (Wastell et al., 2010; McLoughlin & Wilson, 2013). Charities and social enterprises delivering public services have had to become adept at processing and presenting information—tasks that can be extremely difficult for them (Wilson, Martin et al., 2011; Arvidson & Lyon, 2014).

The rationale for this paper is an unfulfilled need for attention to the constraints and dilemmas for social enterprises of utilizing information to evidence the value of co-produced public services. We confront the overlapping challenges of co-production, hybridity and informatization by posing the following questions:

•What kinds of information can be deployed to evidence the value of co-produced social care services?

•What difference (if any) is made by institutional contexts and ways of thinking?

To answer these questions we call attention to Douglas's (1970; 1992) theory of socio-cultural viability. In seeking inspiration from Douglasian cultural theory in order to crystallize thinking on a contemporary puzzle for public services, we build upon the work of scholars in public management (Hood, 1998); third sector policy (Kendall 2010; Glennon et al., 2017), and financial audit (Ferry et al. 2015; Linsley et al. 2016). The paper is informed and illustrated through the real-life example of an academic partnership with a social enterprise dedicated to helping local authorities enhance social care markets through co-production.

In the next section, we expand on what is meant by co-produced public services and recount some of the challenges of collecting and recording information for the purpose of evidencing social value. After that, a theoretical section presents grid and group cultural theory and its

applicability for service information. Then we introduce a social enterprise working at the leading edge of co-production in partnership with local authorities in the UK, and describe our action research project. There follows a section in which we present what we learned about its information practices and dilemmas and—through the lens of grid and group cultural theory—discuss ways to underpin claims about emerging kinds of co-produced care. In the concluding section, we reflect upon implications in theory and practice for co-production.

Co-production and evidencing social value

Co-production in a public service context emphasises the rights, responsibilities and contributions of people in receipt of services and their family or community support networks (Needham, 2007; Slay, 2011; Brandsen & Honingh, 2018). As Osborne et al. (2016) observe, co-production may involve transfer of funds (in the form of personal budgets) but should not be confused with entirely consumerist models. Assigning a budget does not amount in itself to co-production but it may help to achieve co-production in various ways, for example through support mechanisms, network building and the creation of new services with input from the wider community (Bracci & Chow, 2016).

There is some scholarly debate about differences and overlaps between 'co-production' and the newer term 'co-creation' (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018). Voorberg et al. (2015, p.1335) define co-creation as 'active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process'. They consider, however, that in practice the two terms are used interchangeably and so adopt the format 'co-creation/co-production'. In this paper, we use 'co-production', reflecting its longer history in public services internationally (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018) as well as the language of the Department of Health and Social Care (2016) in guidance for English local authorities. Co-production is also the term preferred by our social enterprise partner.

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 imposed a duty upon public authorities in England to consider wider social value although it did not actually specify what was meant by social value (Teasdale et al., 2012). As a working definition, social value denotes '*additional* [emphasis original] value created in the delivery of a service contract which has a wider community or public benefit—this extends beyond the social value delivered as part of the primary contract activity' (Compact Voice, 2014). In other words, it represents collective, community benefits. Social value is thus distinguished from outcomes for individuals in receipt of services (Slay, 2011).

There are numerous guidelines and toolkits intended for social enterprises and charities to aid evidencing of the social value they create (NEF, 2009; Gibbon & Dey, 2011; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019). Their uses include making a business case to public sector commissioners, marketing, and internal learning (Moxham, 2010; Arvidson & Lyon, 2014). Best known is social return on investment (SROI), which uses monetary values to represent non-monetary impacts, offering evidence that appears clear and consistent in ways attractive to policy-makers, fundraisers and investors (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019). According to critics of SROI, the selection of indicators and use of proxies can be highly subjective and the results over reductive (Gibbon & Dey, 2011; Wilson & Bull, 2013). Alternative tools vary widely in complexity, expense and difficulty (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019). There have been promising experiments in co-producing service-specific measures perceived as meaningful by beneficiaries and providers (Yang & Northcott, 2019). Nevertheless, many social enterprises struggle to ascertain what 'prove and improve' options are available, or recoil from the effort and expense of using them (Wilson & Bull, 2013, Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019).

The use of cultural theory

Mary Douglas was a British social anthropologist who trained and researched as an 'Africanist' in the mid-20th century. Her early ethnographic writing on 'purity and dirt' (Douglas, 1966) is highly cited and she continued to draw upon that material throughout her long career to test the theoretical schema she later developed (6 & Richards, 2017). She was an innovative and influential social theorist with wide-ranging interests and followers from across the social sciences (Logue et al. 2016). Her grid and group cultural theory is sometimes called Neo-Durkheimian institutional theory because it was guided by Durkheim's thought on the production of shared meaning and social solidarity (6 & Richards, 2017).

Grid and group cultural theory (Douglas, 1970; 1992) proposes two basic forms of social organization and applies them to the diversity of human preferences and the institutional contexts in which they are viable. 'Grid' refers to conformity to external regulation while 'group' denotes membership attachment and collective norms. Putting grid and group together produces a cultural map in the form of a two-by-two matrix, with four possible forms of social environment which Douglas called solidarities or 'cultural biases'. The high grid and high group combination is termed 'hierarchist', with strong social cohesion and well understood rules. The 'egalitarian' way, in contrast, is present when grid is low and group high, resulting in participative decision-making and constant debate. Low grid and low group together involve 'individualism' where both collectivism and authority are rejected in favour of individual choice and bargaining. When grid is high and group low the result is isolation or 'fatalism'; distrust is

widespread, co-operation rejected and apathy the norm. This generic framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The power of grid and group to account for how people order and make sense of their world has become widely applied as a way 'to structure the complexity of public service relationships' (Simmons, 2016, p. 933). Hood (1998) used it as an overarching framework to explain contradictory recipes for the improvement of public management. His later (2010) paper focused on transparency and accountability, inspiring the extension of grid and group to the domain of financial audit (Ferry et al., 2015; Linsley et al., 2016). Bellamy et al. (2005) adapted it to the complexity of multi-agency public sector collaboration. Ney & Verweij (2015) utilize grid and group as a means to evaluate strategies for participatory local decision-making, and Simmons (2016) for considering user-provider relationships in public services. With specific reference to the interface between the third sector and public services, Kendall (2010) applied it to the history of third sector policy in England, and Glennon et al. (2017) to the responses of small charities to turbulent funding environments. When Douglas (1970) first presented grid and group it was rather a static schema but her later work (1992; 2005) stressed that the four cultural biases co-exist and interact with one another. Importantly for analysis of public services, this makes it a dynamic theoretical perspective that permits examination of responses to change (Verweij et al., 2006; Linsley et al., 2016; Glennon et al., 2017).

In conversations about co-production, an institutional legacy of social care is associated with an 'invisible asylum' that keeps people in a state of dependence (Fox, 2018). This outdated version of service delivery is characterized by 'acquiescence in the face of unreformed, debilitating rules' (Kendall, 2010, p. 247). It can be equated with fatalism and represents a paternalistic stance on the part of professional communities that was castigated in early co-production research going back to the 1970s (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). For fatalists, information can only be made sense of in hindsight (Hood, 1998), so collecting and processing it is likely to seem pointless.

In the hierarchy quadrant, the approach is both rule bound and socially cohesive. Hierarchy is extremely tenacious with many variants in the organization of public services (Hood, 1998). For Kendall (2010), writing with an emphasis on the interface between the state and third sector, it is associated with a premium on hierarchical order alongside an emphasis on civil renewal. In the context of reforms in social care, hierarchy applies when services are required to join up and to organize around the needs of clients rather than (as under fatalism) according to organizational convenience (Martin, 2002). However, the hierarchical 'vision of care truth',

according to its critics, still renders definitions of reality articulated by people who use services 'secondary to reality defined by "experts"' (Powell, 2011, p.27). Hierarchy is vulnerable when trust in authority and expertise comes to be seen as misplaced. The hierarchy quadrant relates in information terms to centrally prescribed indicators and national targets. The 'dominant informational paradigm [is] modelled on a vision of universal, comparable knowledge (for example forms that can be easily ranked in league tables) rather than information to inform local priorities' (Wilson, Cornford et al., 2011, p. 296).

Individualism is associated with autonomous choice, competition, and models of care as a market transaction that frame the individual as a customer (Richter & Cornford, 2008; Chow & Bracci, 2020). Individual initiative is highly valued, and threatened by lack of effective incentives. In the context of social care, individuals formerly known as 'beneficiaries', such as disabled people in receipt of services, are re-imagined as 'managers of the enterprise of their own lives' (Pavey, 2006, p. 227). Service recipients and professionals alike must become entrepreneurial (Chow & Bracci, 2020). This way of organizing can be vulnerable to lack of co-operation.

The bottom right egalitarian quadrant was distinguished in Douglas's (1970) conceptualization by separation from mainstream life (hence its other name 'enclave'), although she later (2005) somewhat reconsidered that aspect. In applying it to public services contexts, commentators emphasize egalitarian ideas and fairness (Linsley et al., 2016). From a third sector perspective its most significant characteristic is group self-management and co-operation, 'predominantly bound up with local empowerment' (Kendall, 2010, p. 253). This way of organizing maps clearly onto co-production (Hood, 1998; Simmons, 2016). Hood was very explicit about this— citizens who use services, in the egalitarian space, are not passive consumers of what state agencies provide but, rather, 'a crucial part of the production process' (Hood, 1998, p. 122). Ideally, 'wherever possible producers and consumers should be the same people' (ibid.). Egalitarianism can be vulnerable when no authority is accepted and endless debate results in more talk than action.

In terms of making sense of information, there is an underpinning belief (implicit or explicit) in both the low grid quadrants that knowledge is always dispersed and incomplete, and cannot be transmitted up any hierarchy (Scott, 1998). In the individualist quadrant, the consumer of services is calculating and demanding. There is a presumption of 'perfect information, competition, the role of supply and demand and purchaser choice and power' (Slay, 2011, p. 30). Consumers and providers respond to market signals and well-targeted incentives. In information terms, this is likely to imply adapting private sector discourses and associated

techniques such as customer relationship management (Richter & Cornford, 2008). It is consistent in social care with greater emphasis on competition for contracts (Arvidson & Lyon, 2014; Glennon et al., 2017). It is less easy to read off responses to information in the egalitarian quadrant. Because 'local level collective relationships' (Kendall, 2010, p. 252) matter so much, it is likely that information is highly entangled in its context (Carlson & Anderson, 2007). It may also be anticipated that information will be capable of producing what, from a community development perspective, has been called 'knowledge-in-action based on practical experience' (Ledwith, 2007, p. 8). Durose et al. (2017), Cottram (2018) and Trowbridge &Willoughby (in press) argue that storytelling is particularly important as a way to draw on the insights of the people working in co-productive ways. Figure 2 takes the generic grid and group Framework and superimposes the positions of services and information.

Figure 2 here

Grid and group is a dynamic framework, not a maturity model. A co-authored paper published towards the end of Douglas's life asserted that 'societies and policy discourses are forever in flux' (Verweij et al., 2006, p. 821). Cultural biases are resistant to change but change can be provoked by the accumulation of surprises and anomalies (Hood, 1998). Recent contributions on cultural theory in public services (Ney & Verweij, 2015; Simmons, 2016; 2018) emphasise much more strongly than did Hood the dynamic tensions associated with the co-existence of the four worldviews in the complexity of contemporary public service relationships. All this implies a wide repertoire of strategies and also, very importantly, the capacity for learning (Mamadouh, 1999; 6 & Richards, 2017).

Information for co-produced social care: placement with a social enterprise

Background and context: 'Local Care CIC' and co-production

We now turn to a short project in which the authors as a university team undertook a 'placement' with the social enterprise we call by the pseudonym 'Local Care CIC'. This was an exciting opportunity for researchers to collaborate with a prominent co-production advocate and practitioner. Headquartered in the north of England, but active across the UK, our CIC is a community-interest company working to harness the talents of people and communities, and provide small-scale, local support. It also promotes the value of co-produced services at all levels. As a social enterprise in the context of public services, the CIC is a hybrid organization

(Docherty et al., 2014; Mikołajczak, 2020). It employs co-ordinators 'embedded' within partner local authorities. As well as offering advice and support directly to small-scale 'micro' providers (defined as employing fewer than five people), co-ordinators establish local associations for networking and mentoring, and negotiate with councils for support such as free safeguarding training. Most micro-providers are formally established as businesses but some offer services on a voluntary or barter basis. Local Care CIC described this group to us as 'entrepreneurial volunteers'.

The CIC frequently applies the words 'co-production' and 'co-productive' to its vision, for example in recommending 'a move to a more co-productive way of working, recognizing that people who use services and staff have many skills and assets'. It advances co-production in ways that include, but go beyond, giving practical support to micro-providers who work with individual budget holders on the co-production of care plans with social workers. Its ambitions include stimulating the power of people in receipt of services, and creating a positive social environment in the communities in which they work. Thus Local Care CIC operates at the levels identified by Osborne et al. (2016) as service and strategic.

In addressing local authorities and central government, Local Care CIC contends that, through micro-providers, people can have real choice of quality local social care services and other community resources. They also claim that micro-providers enhance both market diversity and social participation. Yet, despite their considerable success in securing contracts from local authorities to help deliver co-produced services, they experienced frustration when challenged to substantiate such claims with convincing 'hard' evidence. The placement of one of the authors (Bull) with CIC staff was intended to build a framework to help them utilize their own data to do so. It was awarded competitive external funding within a broader remit to promote knowledge exchange between higher education and the third sector.

Action research

The placement took the form of action research: intervening in the organization studied and working with members of it on matters of genuine concern to them (Badham & Sense, 2006; Huxham, 2003). This runs counter to objectivist notions of the researcher as an impartial bystander (Mackay & Marsall, 2001). Following action research principles (Huxham, 2003), we participated by invitation in naturally occurring events. These were meetings both physical and virtual convened by the CIC for their workers, associates and micro-providers. They included a half-day workshop on 'Personalization and possibilities' organized by the CIC to share information about their work with micro-providers; a Tweet chat with CIC organizers, micro-providers and service users on what micro-providers can offer users and

how the CIC can support them; the CIC's annual general meeting, which took place towards the end of the project.

In order to gain understanding of the CIC's existing data collection and recording systems we also conducted a series of meetings with key staff with a view to working collaboratively on ways these could be improved. Finally, we co-organized and facilitated with the CIC a workshop for external stakeholders from local authorities, the third sector and universities with an interest in social value and ways of evidencing it. This was called 'Demonstrating value in chaos' and addressed the challenges for social organizations operating below the radar of established 'prove and improve' tools. The researchers' hand-written notes from all the observations and meetings were later pooled for thematic analysis. Subsequently, they were re-read through the lens of grid and group cultural theory.

Results and output

Local organizers collected data from micro-providers (and potential providers who made enquiries) onto a spreadsheet supplied by the CIC. They added to it in a somewhat *ad hoc* manner with initial categories of reason for enquiry being completed first and more columns (for example about services provided, client group, staff and volunteers involved) populated during subsequent conversations. A spreadsheet is a far from ideal tool with which to record such information for purposes of analysis. A relational database would have been a more efficient way to store records and generate reports. We suggested looking at free trials of relatively inexpensive customer relations management software. However, CIC staff distrusted this approach as grounded in private sector discourses of 'consumers'. A spreadsheet was seen as the only possibility for the organization on the grounds of cost and staff skills.

There were other limitations because some information that seems important to substantiate claims about diversity and commercial viability (for example ethnicity and income earned by providers) was not collected because organizers thought it was too sensitive. With regard to the nature of services, our conversations with organizers repeatedly highlighted tensions between needs to avoid burdensome data collection and their own perception of many important and subtle distinctions in the world of social care. Such concerns were also echoed by external stakeholders in the 'demonstrating value in chaos' workshop. They worried about what they saw as a trend towards a tick-box culture, with social value objectified and rationalized to the point that the 'good stories' will be lost in the bureaucracy and control mechanisms of public institutions.

Local Care CIC co-ordinators, despite their reservations, accumulated a large amount of information about services, staff, volunteers and the basis on which providers charged. To help make the large and unwieldy datasets they were creating directly reflect the co-production agenda and the strong claims for the social value of micro-providers, we proposed forming the huge spread-sheet into sections inspired by the work of Think Local Act Personal (2011) on personalization and community-based support. There were four sections, which we colour coded for ease of use, as follows:

•'Diverse markets' evidenced by the range of different new services offered and client groups supported.
•'Sustainable business' evidenced mainly by charging criteria.
•Employment generation—evidenced by numbers of paid full-time and part-time workers.
•Social participation—evidenced by volunteer involvement and network activity.

We presented a draft version of the spreadsheet at the CIC's Annual General Meeting (AGM). During that meeting, the local organizers present took us to task for including 'older people' as a group under 'diverse markets'. A long and detailed conversation ensued about the importance of differentiating between many categories of older people using services. At the same meeting, senior management spoke enthusiastically about possibilities of evidencing money spent locally. The conversation then reverted to the reluctance of staff on the front-line to request personal financial details. As a result, the tentative idea of a fifth section on local economic spend was abandoned. Following this meeting, we created a dummy report from old data to give a flavour of what a report would look like. There was ongoing discussion and revision, which included some enthusiastic input from organizers about the look and feel of the spreadsheet and close attention to details such as use of drop-down menus. It received some very positive feedback but was not adopted into the organization's practice.

We were never informed why the tool was abandoned despite initial enthusiasm, but surmise as follows. First, it was something of an uneasy compromise. Although simpler and easier to use than existing spreadsheets, it seemed over complicated while failing to capture all the nuances of care as understood by front-line staff in day-to-day touch with micro-providers. Second, despite feeling coerced to comply with demands for more 'hard' forms of evidence, the CIC is very successful and effective in utilizing rich, evocative stories, of which many appear in its newsletters and website. Its leaders and staff are expert at communicating with powerful stakeholders, as well as local residents, through interactive mechanisms such as high profile launch days for new projects, and celebratory events. They continue to be

successful in securing public funding for their co-productive activities even in the face of austerity in English local government.

Analysis and reflection: making sense of information for social care

It is very important that action researchers should be reflexive about how change is (or is not) unfolding (Badham & Sence, 2006; Bradbury Huang, 2010). Our reflections on the failure of the knowledge exchange led us to stand back from the negotiations and setbacks to think more conceptually about ways of making sense of relationships and values within information for social care and co-production. Following earlier work by the first author with others on voluntary action (Hardill et al., 2007), we looked to grid and group as a way to frame the ideas, claims, stories, aspirations and everyday experiences we had encountered in working with the CIC on ways to use information to evidence the value of co-production.

In day-to-day communication and public statements, Local Care CIC repeatedly emphasise co-produced care arrangements that deny divisions between givers and receivers. They talk with passion of communities, self-help, and local empowerment. This is at the heart of their understanding of co-production and places their cultural bias in the egalitarian quadrant of the grid and group matrix. As writers in the tradition of cultural theory have observed, this quadrant is vulnerable to ambiguity and the need for endless dialogue, debate and negotiation (Hood, 1998; Verweij et al., 2006). In our interactions with the CIC this characteristic was illustrated again and again, for example in the AGM discussed above.

Local Care CIC sharply differentiate their values from services dominated by professional expertise and regulation. Fatalism does not feature prominently in discussion of public services although according to grid and group theory it is a viable way of life (Hood, 1998). Fatalism is however highly significant in social care, especially in conversations about co-production. CIC staff and micro-providers themselves (especially those with experience as service users and sometimes as public sector employees) tell stories about painful experiences of rigid, unresponsive services. Fatalism reflects the recent history of 'medical' models of disability, to be resisted as much as possible in the name of co-production. Local Care CIC also reject hierarchical order that imposes standardized criteria. Yet, in working with researchers to design a tool to help measure social value, the CIC was responding to a model of information situated in the hierarchy quadrant. While they sought to distance themselves from the values associated with this worldview, they felt pressure to produce data corresponding to external indicators of social value in order to communicate more effectively with public sector funders. This created a fundamental tension with their egalitarian, localized and specific approach to information.

Many of the CIC's statements to us, as well as on their website, newsletters and in public meetings, celebrate the decline of state agencies as service providers. They have enthusiastically embraced the push for the voluntary and community sector to become more enterprising in the light of public service reforms and confidently use the language of markets and individual choice, for example 'we believe that the customer should have the choice of service to meet their needs'. Micro-providers, according to the CIC's chief executive, are 'an important source of local employment and demonstrate entrepreneurialism, innovation and creativity'. Local Care CIC, at least at senior level, does not have the discomfort with market-based language that, according Arvidson & Lyon (2014), troubles many social organizations challenged to demonstrate their value.

In summary, with its uneasy mix of different 'cultural biases', Local Care CIC staff found it difficult to determine what they wanted from a tool to evidence social value. Their commitment to co-production meant that they were entirely comfortable with relying on 'good stories' to convey the complex, messy information associated with the egalitarian quadrant of the grid. They found it difficult to put aside their deeply-ingrained values of mutuality and participation in order to develop a data collection tool that would respond effectively to policy and funding imperatives associated with hierarchy. Despite enthusiasm for enterprise and choice, they were also resistant to customer relations solutions. The passion and energy of CIC staff, as well as their dedication to co-production, seem to be the antithesis of fatalism. It is the one cultural bias that appeared to be absent. Yet on rereading our observations and reflection from the ultimately unsuccessful action research, there seems to be a district element of fatalism in their responses to information. Information is seen as excessively difficult to manage, an imposition by external structures and rules that make little sense in the light of day-to-day experience.

In answer to the first research question posed in the introduction to this paper, many kinds of information can potentially help to demonstrate the value of co-production. Individual demographics, costing, sales, network activity, customer feedback, performance indicators and personal narratives could, in principle, be mapped quite neatly onto policy declarations relating to co-production. In answer to the second question, ways of thinking (framed in Douglasian terms as cultural biases) make a difference. It is clear that principles of co-production (the 'egalitarian' cultural bias) resonate most strongly with local, contextualized, experiential forms information, although that perspective was not entirely pervasive within the CIC. Local Care CIC is a hybrid organization in which ways of thinking from different sectors coexist, not always easily. The hybridity of social enterprises, according to Docherty et al. (2014), Skelcher & Smith (2015) and Mikołajczak (2020) is related to the conflicting

'institutional logics' they carry. Institutional logics determine 'what counts as problems and solutions' (Ferry et al., 2019, p. 102). Their relevance in the context of social enterprises as public service providers is in surfacing conflict as a result of cutting across the boundaries of the private, public and non-profit sectors (Docherty et al., 2014).

Discussion and conclusions

Co-production has become 'one of cornerstones of public policy reform' (Osborne et al., 2016, p. 639). Drawing for inspiration on the practice of a social enterprise strongly committed to co-production, this paper offers a novel reflection on ways to underpin claims about emerging kinds of co-produced services in the increasingly 'informational' context of the social care sector. Others have noted that the hybridity of social enterprises can contain various ways of thinking, sometimes in alignment, sometimes in conflict (Docherty et al., 2014). Hybridity in relation to organizational missions and the acquisition of financial resources is quite well rehearsed in third sector literature (Mikołajczak, 2020). In this paper, we have brought into view the much less investigated theme of information resources and the implications of hybridity. In working with the Local Care CIC, we surfaced deep internal as well as external tensions and contradictions in recognizing some forms of information and shunning others. We have co-opted grid and group to reduce 'failure to understand the relationships and values that organizations, managers, practitioners and citizens have and potentially *have with* and *put within* information' (Wilson, Cornford et al., 2011, p. 298, emphasis original).

Interest in co-production extends across the full range of public services (Fox et al., 2013; Brandsen et al., 2018). There has also been a turn to co-production of knowledge in academia (Bell & Phal, 2018): a theme that chimes with our action research approach and deserves further investigation beyond the scope of this paper. Co-production in public services has become an orthodoxy (Osborne et al., 2016) and committed adherents view its further advance as inevitable. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (2020), for example, declared co-production more crucial than ever in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet grid and group cultural theory reminds us that struggles for legitimacy are unending (Hood, 1998). Cultural biases try to uphold their pattern of social relations and may succeed temporarily in closing off debate but they are interdependent in the sense that each needs the alternatives to define itself against (Linsley et al. 2016; Simmons, 2016). They can never agree but there is 'something to be harnessed through constructive communication' (Verweij et al., 2006, p. 821).

Co-production sits most easily with forms of information and evidence ('good stories') that meet the preferences of the egalitarian cultural bias. In Douglas's original (1970) schema, the 'egalitarian' was distinguished by fierce enforcement of external boundaries—although that is

an aspect largely underplayed or overlooked in versions relating to public management and the third sector. Linsley et al. (2016) are unusual and insightful in flagging not only equality and fairness (as all commentators do) but also a tendency to claim the moral high ground and loathe outsiders. This may seriously impede capacity to enter into dialogue in multi-agency public service environments where all biases are likely to be present, all have questions to ask, and all need to be heard and responded to by the others (Verweij et al., 2006). Although the social enterprise in our example did not follow through on changing its information practices, it seems unlikely that advocates of co-production more generally will advance their case and rebut objectors if they share only forms of information that meet the preferences of their own cultural bias.

A limitation of our use of grid and group cultural theory was that we applied it retrospectively for analysis after the action research—not prospectively as part of it. With hindsight, this looks like a missed opportunity. There have been recent developments in ways of adapting grid and group to support learning and to generate creative institutional dialogue in public services (Simmons, 2016; 2018). This is a particularly attractive prospect for co-production, where Osborne et al. (2016) observe that insufficient attention has been paid to learning.

In foregrounding information in relation to co-production, this paper is timely because forms of information that are regarded as legitimate look set to become more contested and uncertain. It will be salient for future researchers to reflect on significant contemporary trends related to information in public services that may push against co-production. One example is growing interest in adopting Big Data techniques from commerce into the public sector (McLoughlin & Wilson, 2013; Löfgren & Webster, 2020). This is likely, according to some analysis, to privilege government and corporate entities at the expense of individuals and local groups (Richards & King, 2013). Another set of pertinent reforms is commissioning for outcomes with payment-by-results and associated innovations in financing such as social impact bonds (Wilson et al., 2020). These commissioning models put information more firmly than ever at the heart of delivering services (Jamieson et al., 2020). They are politically-contested interventions that, for some, seem capable or working along with co-production (Broccardo & Mazzuca, 2019). Others counter that they advance marketization and exacerbate uneven power relationships (Sinclair et al., 2014; Joy & Shields, 2020). It goes beyond the scope of this paper to address the case for and against such emerging developments, or to disentangle how they may interact with coproduction. Our contribution is to highlight grid and group cultural theory as a means of framing the dynamics of disagreement that can enable mapping information practices and the ways of thinking that underpin them. In this way, it has potential to guide attention to relevant

questions and problems in rapidly moving policy contexts for the expansion—or alternatively the stifling—of co-production.

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strong

Grid (social regulation)

weak

Fatalist Rule bound and lacking social ties	**Hierarchist** Rule bound and socially cohesive
Individualist Individual self-interest	**Egalitarian** Mutuality and participation

weak   *strong*

Group (social cohesion)

Figure 1. Grid and group generic cultural model.

Regulation

Integration

Top-left quadrant:
Descriptor: Rule bound with weak social ties

Services: Designed for providers not users

Information: Only made sense of in hindsight

Top-right quadrant:
Descriptor: Rule bound and socially cohesive

Services: Joined up holistic services; trust in professionals and experts

Information: Audits, statistics, national indicators

Bottom-left quadrant:
Descriptor: Individual self-interest; rational; calculating customers

Services: market competition and choice

Information: Market signals; targeted incentives

Bottom-right quadrant:
Descriptor: Mutuality and participation

Services: challenge professional; users as experts; co-production

Information: local, specific, 'entangled'
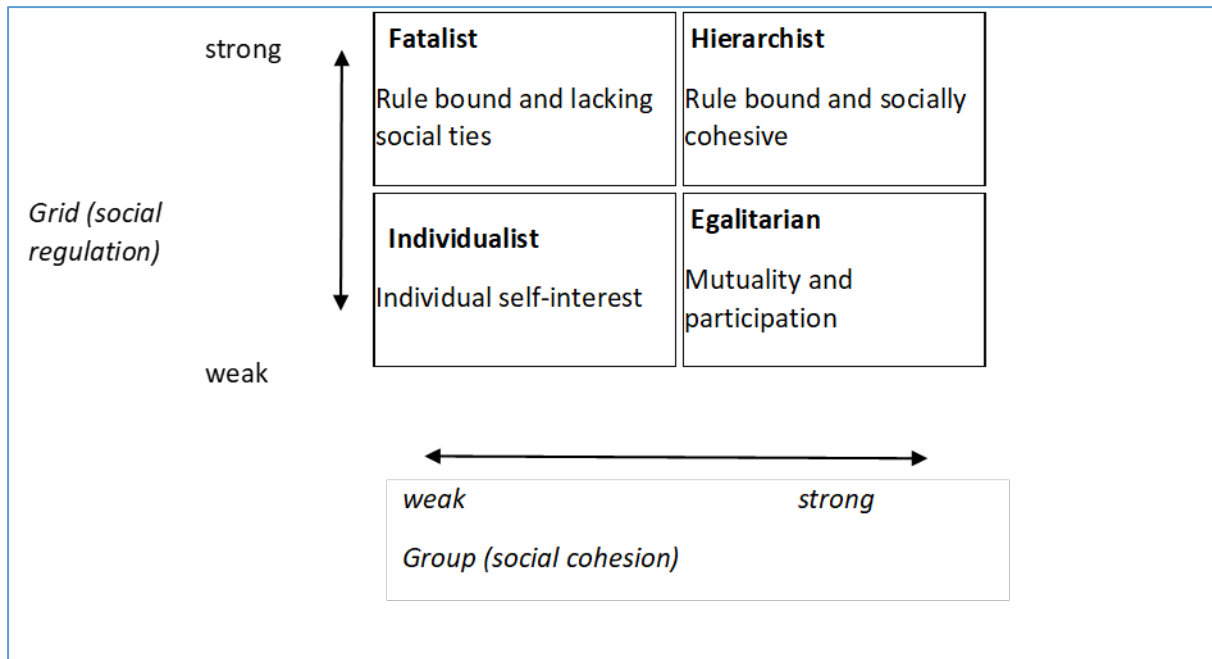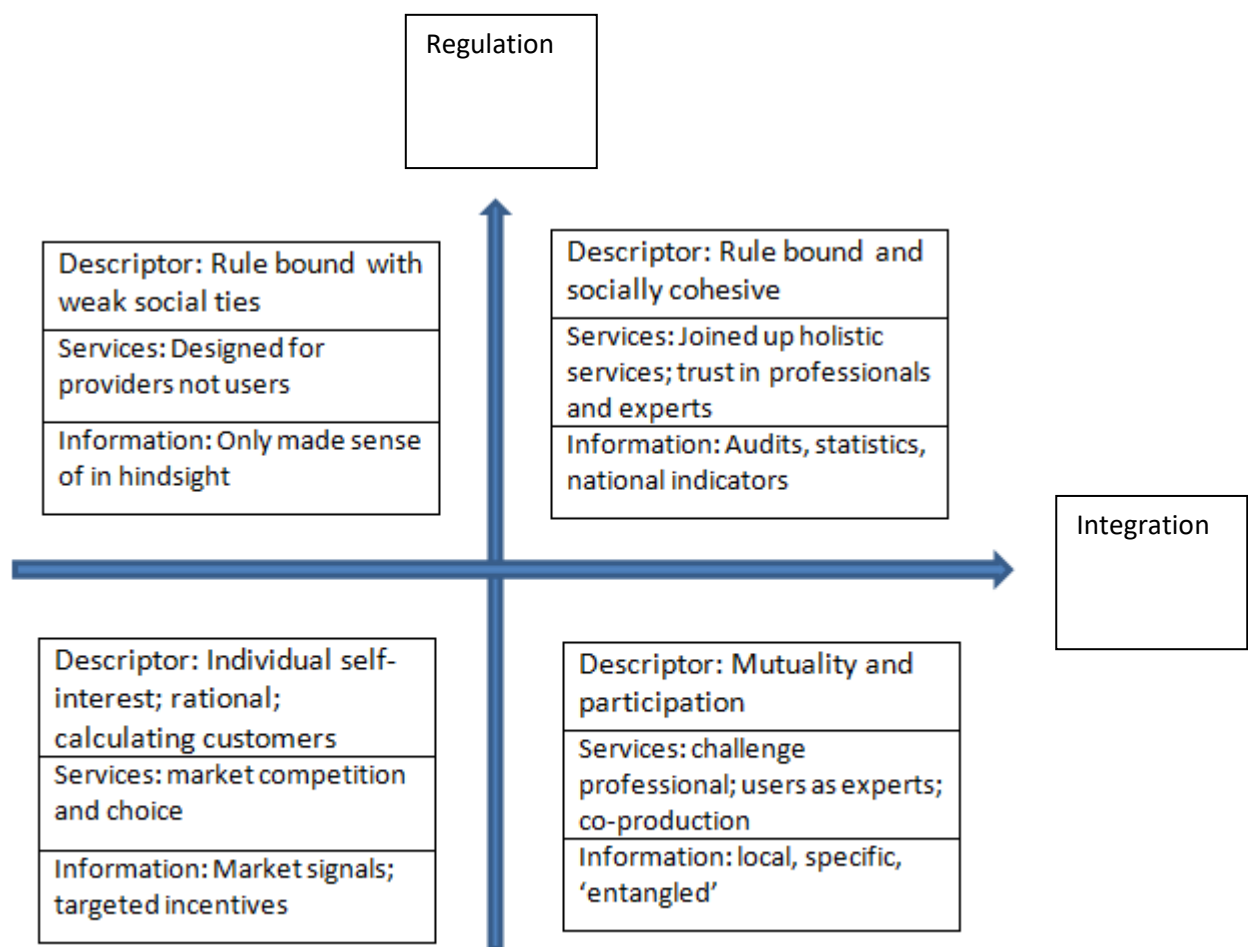
Figure 2. Grid and group with the positions of services and information