



WORKING TOGETHER

**Coproduction as a Tool for
Transformation in Mental Health**



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores coproduction as a collaborative approach to transformational change that brings together diverse types of expertise in equal partnership to learn from each other, generate new ideas and creatively resolve complex problems. It outlines some of the practical strategies that can support effective coproduction and addresses some common myths about coproduction practices.

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Working Together

The primary purpose of coproduction in mental health care is to ensure that services and systems effectively meet people's needs. This requires a focus on the reality of living with and recovering from mental illness, integrating lived experience knowledge into the way that every aspect of mental health care works.

If this is to become a key approach in mental health reform, we need to ensure that approaches are authentic and not just a name attached to a project. Coproduction is a different way of working. One of the first things we do when faced with difference is to try to domesticate it; to turn it into a familiar process. The purpose of transformative change can be lost as good ideas are over-simplified to box-ticking exercises and an increasing schedule of meetings (Batalden et al., 2015).

Learning how to improve the chances of success makes sense. This briefing paper identifies some of the key characteristics of coproduction as a tool for transformation and addresses some of the myths about authentic coproduction.

Transformation

Transformation: a complete or radical change in form

Even when the need for change has been well-established, we experience change as uncomfortable and threatening to our sense of stability. Introducing sustained change in health care is challenging. Existing beliefs (e.g. Travaglia et al, 2011; Stetler et al, 2006), knowledge and skill (e.g. Busetto et al, 2018), systems and organisational processes (Pronovost, Berenholtz and Needham, 2008) competing demands and limited resources (Tappen et al., 2017) combine to create barriers to sustained implementation of change in health care.

No health care service exists in isolation; they are part of a complex and dynamic system. When one part of the system changes other parts exert pressure to return to stability. Change can also ripple through systems with unexpected consequences.

This system is made up of people. Transforming a system requires relational engagement with all the people who work in it, inform it and use it (Amin, 2008). This is a collaborative and iterative approach that can look quite different to usual business practices.

To achieve transformational change, practices must support:

- Sustainable and effective relationships and networks.
- Collaboration across disciplines, sectors and organisations.
- Iterative learning based on a depth of listening to the community.
- Empathy with multiple perspectives and conflict resolution.
- Leadership that is able to challenge existing beliefs and 'business as usual.'

(Swanson, Cattaneo et al., 2012)

Defining Coproduction

Designing and delivering services and systems in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their community.

(Adapted from NEF, 2011)

One of the most commonly used definitions of coproduction in mental health focuses on the importance of engaging services users, families and communities in decision making and the delivery of services. This places coproduction squarely in the history of the consumer movement at the pinnacle of approaches to consumer participation. This definition supports the integration of lived experience workers and service users in all areas of existing health care services and systems.

Integration into existing services provides opportunities for incremental changes that sustain the existing system whilst moving towards improvement. Integration is unlikely to deliver the foundational level of change needed to transform mental health care. Transformation requires disruptive innovation which steers the service or system in new directions combined with sustaining innovation that seeks to meet service user needs within the existing services.

Transformation implies a more radical move towards something very different to existing services. To change practice, the change process must transform the beliefs, assumptions and interpersonal narratives that shape and limit people's expectations (Mezirow, 1997). This level of transformative learning requires a trusting, social context to support reflection. Achieving this type of change requires more intensive and higher risk approaches that enable learning and experimentation.

The International Association for Public Participation Australia (IAP2) identifies a collaboration level of participation that includes co-design and coproduction, grouping together approaches that share a genuine commitment to robust partnership for development (IAP2, 2014). Taking this slightly broader view of what coproduction can be is helpful to identify the most common features of transformative coproduction. The following description of collaboration highlights the functional similarities:

Collaboration involves people from diverse backgrounds working together in equal respectful partnership to:

- Solve problems that could not be resolved as effectively by any individual
- Share decision making and accountability
- Iterative learning, co-creating knowledge, vision and solutions
- Generate real and meaningful outcomes to a mutually satisfactory standard

(Cook 2006)

In this context, coproduction can be understood as a collaborative approach to transformational change that brings together diverse types of expertise in equal partnership to learn from each other, generate new ideas and creatively resolve complex problems.

This paper uses the terms collaboration, co-design and coproduction to stress that, while they are not the same thing, they function together to create the foundations for change. They all start from

the premise of working together in mutual and equal partnership to achieve something that no single person or agency could achieve alone.

The health care sector is a context that is rich in isolated clusters, such as silos and professional “tribes,” in need of connectivity. (Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite, 2013).

The first important quality of coproduction is that we do it together, bringing all stakeholders together to provide an integrating mechanism (Bovaird, 2007) for otherwise fragmented service systems. Change relationships and you can change systems. Coproduction is an investment in relationships.

The process of change will continue to benefit from the contributions of individuals and groups from Lived Experience, research, and different professions without the benefit of coproduction. These ‘light bulbs’ of innovation and leadership will inspire and inform coproduction. However, they need to be distinguished from coproduction. The value of coproduction for transformational change is in moving everyone forward together towards a future that could not have been envisaged without combined expertise.

Feeling Like a Partner

Partners rarely start as equals. Differences in strengths, resources and networks occur in all partnerships. Seeking to promote the interests of yourself, your group, your profession or your organisation, is normal human behaviour. When people from different situations come together in collaboration, power imbalance should be expected.

Coproduction occurs in the midst of the system that we are trying to change and will therefore be subject to pressures that do not fit well with the aspirations for transformation. It is common for one or more partners to assume more authority than others. Participants need to recognize and respect that some people in the team may carry more legal responsibility. For example, if one agency holds the contract for work, then they have obligations that other members of the team may not have.

Some power imbalances are less visible, embedded in history, expectations and practice norms. Lived Experience participants often bring a history of feeling disempowered by professional health services. On the other hand, health professionals may seek to protect their professional autonomy as they would if they were asked to integrate their work with that of other professional groups (McDonald, Jayasuriya and Harris, 2021).

As far as possible coproduction must have decision-making authority. Where there are limitations on that authority, the process for decision making needs to be explicit from the beginning (Cook, 2016). However, structural barriers to equality do not justify an assumption that one group should have more control over the direction of decision making, or that one group has more valuable expertise than another. Equitable contribution is the basis for coproduction and lack of respect for this level of contribution is not a sound basis from which to work together (Essabbar, Zrikem and Zolgadri, 2016).

Identifying the value of all contributors in coproduction and diagnosing any power imbalance early in the course of coproduction contributes to successful outcomes later on. An effective strategy is to

name the problem rather than the person who is seen to hold power. Working together to examine how an existing situation is a barrier is more constructive than targeting a particular group or organisation (Hunjan and Pettit, 2011). When power imbalances are not named, they undermine trust and the ability of the group to reach creative solutions.

There is a relationship between trust, understanding of each other's roles and identities, and honest, transparent communication. With increased understanding comes increased respect and trust. Establishing relationships and agreeing on the ground rules for the coproduction early in the project are key to successfully negotiating power imbalances (McDonald, Jayasuriya and Harris, 2021).

A healthy collaboration respects all contributions and has open and fair processes to adjust any power imbalance. Core collaborative practices such as developing a coproduction mindset, clarity and transparency in communication, commitment to learning together and mutual accountability all have a role in ensuring an equitable balance between coproduction partners. All of the coproduction practices discussed in this paper are designed to address the power imbalance and the preconceived ideas that people bring to new situations, freeing people to genuinely work together for change. These practices are only effective when all parties take responsibility to implement these practices.

A Tool not an Outcome

Do not confuse motion with progress. (Segun Idowu)

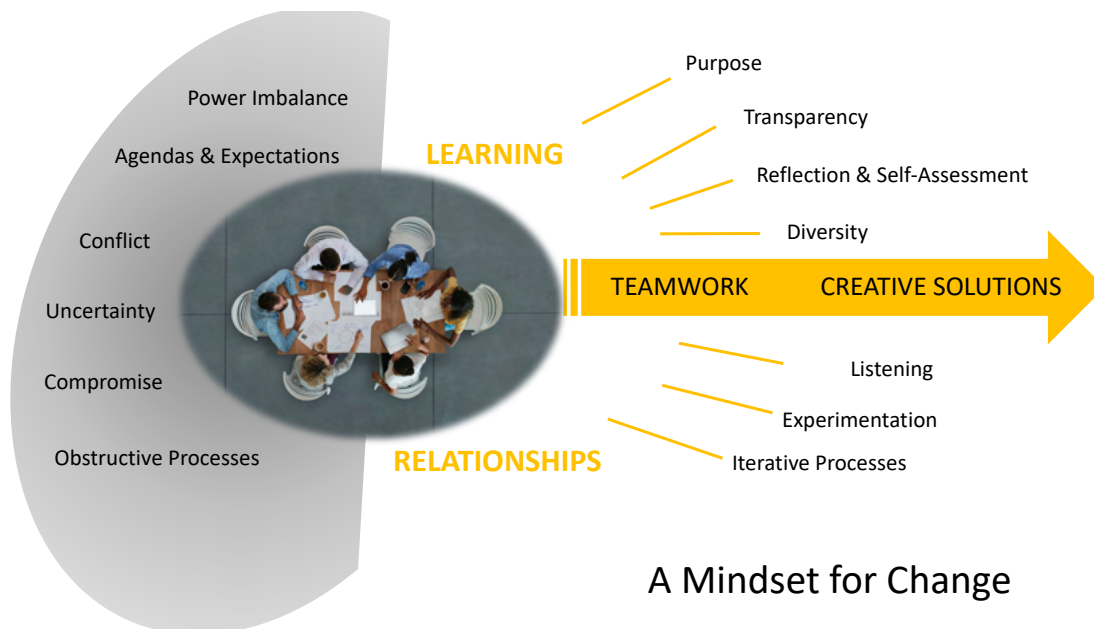
Coproduction is an approach; a tool to support transformation, rather than an end in itself. Getting coproduction on the agenda is an achievement to be celebrated. However, the real measure of success is not that something is coproduced but how satisfied all parties are with the result. If participants feel a sense of pride in the outcomes, then the purpose of coproduction has been achieved. It is possible to put good processes in place and still not actually coproduce satisfying outcomes. There is no one right way to coproduce and no agreed methods.

Every region and health service or system is a little different. Each coproduction needs to be developed for its specific context and the people who will participate. There are however some common characteristics, relevant to both sustaining and transformative coproduction activities, that are worth paying attention to:

- **Relationship building and listening** – learning to respect, trust and really hear each other is the foundation of coproduction. Respect is a pragmatic starting place for relationships where there is no pre-existing basis for trust.
- **Clarity and transparency** – shared understanding of what will happen and who is responsible for different aspects of work helps to keep a diverse group 'on the same page'.
- **Diversity** – each person's lived experience is unique. Our differences are part of the creative strength of coproduction. Transformation needs to be able to look at problems from all angles. Coproduction need '360 degree' diversity.
- **Iterative processes** – this is the design practice of creating, testing, refining, and improving, until everyone is satisfied with the result. The back and forth of iterative processes helps to merge knowledge and refine ideas, allowing time for people to learn together rather than

imposing pre-conceived ideas. We learn by getting things wrong. Iterative processes allow enough time to experiment and try again.

- **Mutual learning** - coproduction is a new way of working. It is not business as usual. Accepting this let's everyone start on the same level. Learning together can be an equalizing experience. Shared training in coproduction practices at the beginning can provide an opportunity to start the process of integrating voices.



A Mindset for Change

Co-design practice reflects more a way of thinking than it does a process. It can be done in a multitude of different ways, and therefore cannot be delineated in a concrete step-by-step process. This is because people, problems and contexts are always going to be variable, as will the organisations and practitioners who work with them. (VCOSS 2015)

While coproduction is not a set process there is a recognisable mindset and principles underpinning all effective coproduction. Coproduction starts from the assumption that everyone has something essential to contribute. Coproduction is an admission that no one of us – regardless of our background – holds the whole story or all the answers. Transformative solutions can only be found together. The mindset for coproduction values all forms of knowledge: experience-based, research and professional practice.

Co-production is also the principle that all opinions, perspectives, and ideas have equal weight, are respectfully considered and have equal possibility of being implemented (Cook, 2016). Attitudes and beliefs which positively contribute to coproduction include:

- Commitment to learning and change .
- Reflection - a willingness to examine our own beliefs and practices.
- Mutual respect and courtesy as the starting place for trust.

- Listening to each other – making sure that people have sufficient opportunity to voice their experience, knowledge, and their concerns
- Tolerance of uncertainty and risk taking – learning and experimental approaches require a level of tolerance of risk.

Participants have to be able to change the way they think about problems and solutions. Individuals cannot just have an ideal position then compromise until the compromises overlap and agreement is reached but with everyone equally unhappy. This change in process demands a degree of reflection and willingness to take risks with new processes...

(Cruickshank, Coupe & Hennessy, 2013)

The processes of change involved in coproduction requires courage from everyone who participates. People with all types of experience may find it hard to admit what they do not know or accept that their understanding may have to change. Identification of ‘sharing from experience’, as something that all participants in co-production do, provides the starting place for safe sharing and mutual learning (Cook, 2016).

The path to getting someone to think differently also changes you.

Mindset is not something that can be mandated. It is something that each individual must bring to the table. Coproduction is a commitment to sharing decision making with people we have not yet learned to trust and changing ourselves as well as the mental health system. The history of coproduction suggests a lack of trust based on very different experiences of the mental health system. This provides a challenging background for authentic coproduction.

Each participant in coproduction must make the commitment to treat others with respect, listen to all ideas and reflect on our own ideas, assumptions and priorities. Coproduction involves taking risks and working creatively, moving towards something new rather than promoting an established agenda.

Start with Co-Design

The way that projects are designed makes a difference to the way they are experienced and therefore to their impact. Anticipating the uncertainties of working together at the design stage provides the foundation for addressing challenges as they arise.

Design thinking is a human centred collaborative approach towards problem-solving driven by empathy, creativity and iterative learning. (Tim Brown, IDEO)

Design approaches are collaborative and creative, consistent with the character of coproduction. Effective coproduction starts from the beginning with co-design.

“At the heart of good design is a search for better solutions, practical innovations and making improvements that enhance people’s lives, address problems or open possibilities for

better lives. Innovative ideas must translate into practices that create value. Innovation requires all partners to be open to experimentation, risk taking and change. It requires us to think outside the boundaries of how things work today to see a future that looks different.”
(Cruickshank, Coupe & Hennessy, undated)

Starting to work together from the beginning ensures that the choice of project and processes is mutually understood by all participants, reducing the risk of imbalance in perceived power. Helpful practices include ensuring that everyone has adequate information and that there is a balance in representation to facilitate an equitable dialogue. Working together to produce clear statements about the purpose, goals, and processes of the project and the roles and responsibilities of participants increases confidence and provides a shared basis for future negotiation (Cook, 2016).

It is not essential to have all the people participating in coproduction together from the beginning. Having even a few people with experience-based knowledge involved from the very beginning of a project to help shape the agenda, and processes helps to ensure that the project provides a safe place for open communication (Cook, 2016).

Diversity is an Asset

It's not uncommon for the like-minded to unite

Exploring meaning, merging different viewpoints and finding the common ground is an important part of the work of coproduction (Pinfold et al., 2015). It is much easier to achieve consensus when the team is made up of people who think alike.

Coproduction starts from acceptance that to find solutions we need to look to those who think differently; those who are not currently at the decision-making table as well as those who are. The challenge is to continue to be inclusive of diversity once we have established functioning coproduction teams (Warriner, 2009). Effective coproduction teams include all the expertise required to create the solution rather than recruitment of the people who are already known and trusted.

To be effective coproduction needs to access all of the knowledge – experience based, professional and technical – that is needed to achieve the project or service's goals. It may be necessary to engage many different people in order to access the knowledge needed for the particular project. This diversity is what enriches coproduction.

To ensure this level of diverse input, consultation and other forms of participation will continue to be a vital part of coproduction activity. It is not practical to have hundreds of people sitting at a shared decision making table. It is possible to ensure that hundreds of people have an opportunity to contribute and that their voice is able to be represented by the people who are part of the coproduction decision making process.

Teams not Committees

One of the consistent activities in coproduction is meetings. Committees are good at representing different viewpoints, but they can also emphasize the different agendas that people bring to the table. Coproduction is often approached as a negotiation, that is, a decision-making process in which different parties are trying to influence outcomes in their own favour.

This is distinctly different to the open learning environment of authentic collaboration in which all parties benefit mutually by designing new ways of working. Negotiation both reflects and exacerbates power imbalances in the group. There is a need to move beyond the representative structure of committees to create teams that can engage in the frequent interaction and shared sense of responsibility of a coproduction.

Teamwork is the cooperative effort of several people each doing a part but all subordinating personal agendas to the effectiveness of the whole (adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It is this closer sense of working together that enables the creation of new vision and new solutions.

“It’s not anymore a matter of gathering and mixing expertise but of creating a collective vision... a new awareness, never experienced before: the sense of community and making together.” (Giovanna Missoni, 2015)

The characteristics of effective teams align with those of coproduction and transformative change. They all rely on our ability to form learning relationships.

- Shared understanding of our purpose and goals
- Shared understanding of each other’s roles and responsibilities
- Mutual dependence and accountability
- Informal and trusting work environment
- Open communication and listening and
- Respectful disagreement and rapid resolution
- Consensus-based decisions
- Support for innovation and risk taking
- Reflect on our performance as a team

Honest Conversations

Sadly, there are so many meetings in which no meeting takes place. (Jon Owen, 2021)

Relationship building is recognised as a cornerstone of all co-working (Dunston et al., 2009). Building diverse relationships and prioritising learning are identified as characteristics of the collaborative efforts with the highest potential to act as catalysts for broad systemic change (Zohdy, Samali, et al., 2016).

Coproduction is not possible without connection and trust between participants. Coproduction processes therefore must create a safe place in which there is time to build relationships and allow an honest conversation to develop. Having an opportunity to voice experience and be listened to

including the opportunity for expression of grief or anger over past issues, is the first and most important step in integrating diverse insights (Co-design Initiative, 2016).

Trust and respect start from the basics of “common courtesy and taking time to learn about the others around the table” (Mattessich, 2003). Respect is the pragmatic starting place for building relationships where there is no pre-existing basis for trust (Cook, 2006). Trust then builds in stages as the participants successfully negotiate joint activities (Hudson, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

Honesty and transparency in communication can go a long way to bridging gaps in understanding between groups with different experiences. There is a need to create spaces in which people can genuinely meet. Learning together can be an equalizing experience that helps to put everyone ‘on the same page’. Shared training in coproduction practices at the beginning of a project or with the formation of a new team, can provide an opportunity to start the process of integrating voices.

Managing Life’s Imperfections

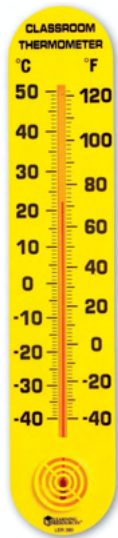
Change doesn’t happen without struggle. You must be willing to let it hurt and to make mistakes. (Cook, 2006)

Co-production is about changing the way we do things. Change brings with it uncertainty and co-production adds to this an element of loss of control. In a diverse team there will be disagreement and tension. As long-standing practices and ideas are challenged it is sometimes hard to avoid defensiveness. Discomfort is part of the creative process.

If there is too little tension, with everyone getting along and agreeing, then it is possible that there is insufficient diversity of expertise in the team or that the issue to be resolved does not require an investment in coproduction.

If there is too much conflict the team may be experienced as destructive and distressing. Key contributors to conflict are a lack of the essential coproduction mindset or a lack of clarity about what is expected of participants. Lack of respect undermines trust in each other and in the process of coproduction. Uncertainty increases the sense of pressure and related anxiety; this pushes open the cracks into overt conflict.

Many of the conflicts and tensions that arise in the early stages seem to stem from a desire to assert control in an intimidating environment. (Cook, 2006)



Conflict

Distressing level of disagreement

- Lack of respect or listening
- Pushing individual agendas
- Lack of open mindset

Constructive Tension

Active struggle to learn together and combine knowledge to resolve problems.

No Tension

Harmony and easy consensus

- Too little diversity in the team
- No real need for problem solving
- Over-valuation of consensus

The reality of co-production can be challenging and uncomfortable. Discomfort plays a role in enabling learning and innovation. The aim is for the middle ground where open disagreement can be used constructively to generate new knowledge. This is where the tools of coproduction, a change-oriented mindset, active respect and clarity of purpose and roles are most useful. Building into the project from the beginning basics such as clear shared understanding of purpose and process, facilitative leadership and equitable decision-making power, provides the basis for effective conflict resolution and achievement of real outcomes.

If we are to find new ways of working, then we need to be able to experiment and experimentation requires tolerance of setbacks. In co-production people need to feel confident to discuss difference with honesty but also with mutual kindness. Discomfort can push us to find new ways of working and that is what co-production is all about, provided always that the discomfort is shared by the team and not just a few people (Cook, 2016).

How do we get there together?

A team can move in the same direction without all doing the same things.

What does it mean to be a coproduction team member? It does not mean that each person must do it all. In teams, each person acts from their strengths and expertise to contribute to the whole.

As participants in coproduction, each individual takes responsibility for:

- Participation and respect for other people's participation
- Shared learning
- Resolving the current situation whatever it may be
- Moving the project forward to achieve the intended outcomes

Some tasks will be completed together while others need to be done by individuals. Some tasks must be done outside the coproduction team. Peer review of articles before publication is an example of this external involvement.

Many tasks can only be done by one person or a sub-group. In any project there are points at which the focus comes down to one or two people putting in hours of work to pull everything together. Being transparent about the things which must be done individually and what needs to be done together can help to negotiate past the tensions of coproduction. The key points when equitable coproduction is needed are contribution of knowledge and decision making about the final outputs. Coproduction opens the dialogue up again after episodes of concentrated work to ask in effect 'are we getting this right?'

This need for individual action should not deflect attention away from those things which should always be the focus of shared decision making:

- The design of the work
- Contribution of knowledge for the work
- Review of work in progress
- Final decision making when consensus is reached

As noted earlier in this paper, coproduction needs an iterative process – a conversational interaction that shifts the decision-making power from the individual or small work team to the wider knowledge group. This process requires careful facilitative leadership (Codesign Initiative, 2016).

For some people the experience of working together can be very challenging, bringing to the surface past experiences and distressing feelings. Hearing grief and pain is part of learning how to change. However, being an active participant in consensus-based decision making can be very difficult for people who are processing grief. Everyone who contributes from their experience is part of coproduction. It is not necessary for everyone to be involved in every aspect of the coproduced work.

Boundary Spanners

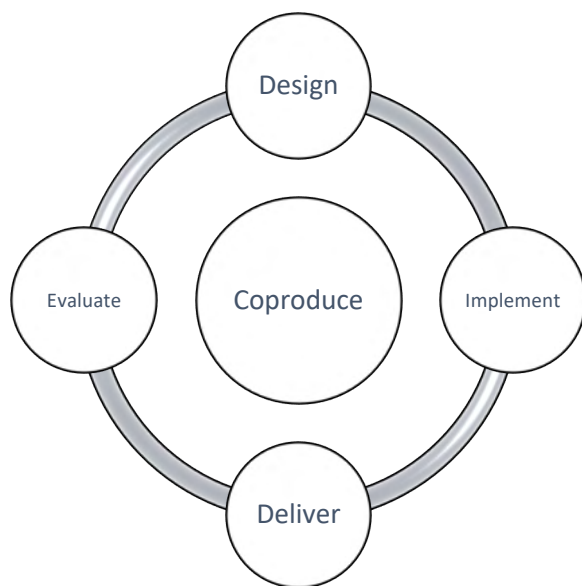
Coproduction needs to be led, preferably by people who can span across the perceived boundaries between other team members.

Boundary spanners are people who can work from multiple perspectives bridging the gaps in understanding between coproduction partners.

To achieve transformational change, practices must support leadership that is able to challenge existing beliefs and 'business as usual'. (Swanson, Cattaneo et al., 2012)

- Engaging skilled coproduction facilitators in the early stages of coproduction
- Providing shared capacity building training in coproduction for new coproduction teams
- Ensuring effective project management at all stages to ensure appropriate progress and sense of achievement.

Incremental Change



Coproduct refers to all the stages in the development and delivery of services. There is a myth that once the design is in place, the right things will start to happen.

Decisions are made at every stage. The architect's plans may look quite different after the builder has interpreted them. Coproduction reflects the need to be involved at all the points at which decisions are made.

This paper frequently refers to coproduction 'projects' which may seem at odds with the intention to introduce coproduction as a new way of working across mental health care. Coproduction as a tool for transformation is powerful, but it is also time consuming and resource intensive. There is a need to be selective, identifying when it is essential and when individual action will suffice.

Transforming systems is a long-term process measured in decades not months. People need to see progress to encourage and sustain the investment in a process of change. While the big picture is sector wide transformation, at a personal level, we need to see the achievements of briefer projects.

Coproduct is of greatest value when applied in complex situations where there has previously been resistance to change or lack of direction for change. It is also useful when you can identify the leverage points or pinch-points – the bit of the system that can trigger a ripple of change throughout the system.

However, the ability to coproduce grows incrementally. There is also value in trying coproduction on smaller projects where everyone can learn together and experience quick success before you tackle the knotty problems.

Some areas of activity provide shorter term project opportunities with the potential to have long term transformative impact. Prioritising transformative coproduction activity in the planning and learning spheres of activity can impact across the spectrum of service delivery.

At a personal level, it is important for coproduction participants to be selective about the projects they spend their resources on and to frame realistic expectations of what the project is likely to achieve.

Getting started

“Don’t over think it” (Symposia feedback; Co-Design Initiative, 2016)

It is possible to become paralysed by the prospect of change, by perceived differences and the complexity of working together. A focus on ‘correct’ procedures can trap projects in inertia. Risk aversion may silence the very voices that need to be heard in coproduction.

The best measures of effective coproduction can be summed up in two simple questions:

1. Are we mutually satisfied with the outcomes of our work?
2. Do we feel confident to work together again?

The Codesign Initiative (2016) suggests some basic steps to get started: *start the conversation, listen to each other, document what you learn and then build on it to improve the next iteration of coproduction.*

The following checklist summarises key principles introduced in this paper. Together they provide a framework to help the mental health sector move forward with coproduction. They provide a checklist to help those who design, participate in or evaluate coproduction to identify authentic practice.

Checklist: Recognising Co-production

- ✓ A genuine problem to resolve and a commitment to change
- ✓ Start from the beginning with co-design
- ✓ Inclusive partnership with all expertise and people affected by the decisions
- ✓ Learning to coproduce together
- ✓ Mutual respect and listening
- ✓ Commitment to generating new knowledge
- ✓ Skilled facilitation
- ✓ Clarity of purpose and transparent processes
- ✓ Constructive tension in which assumptions and power imbalances can safely be challenged
- ✓ Mutually satisfactory outcomes which are meaningful to service users

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