The impacts of co-production on public professionalism: initial findings from a case study of early intervention in the mental wellbeing of children in the north of England

© Andrew Passey

PhD Candidate, Schools of Health and Community Studies, Leeds Beckett University

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Abstract

Much of the debate about public service co-production focusses on service users or citizens, rather than public service professionals. This is a gap, since professional staff have a key role in the degree and modes of co-productive service creation and delivery that might be taking place with service users. This paper discusses the impacts of service co-production on public professionals implementing a policy to support the emotional health and wellbeing of young people. It examines how service co-production is seen and understood by professional staff.

The findings are tentative since they are based only on the initial phase of the study, but two findings have emerged. First, ‘public value’ is evident in the co-creation of knowledge about public services, about the wider needs of children and their families, and in co-design of alternative services. Second, there is evidence of voluntary sector staff seeking greater recognition of their professionalism from other actors in the programme, in a form of professionalism ‘from within’. This involves self-identification of attributes that such staff consider legitimate them as professionals, some of which link with features of service co-production identified in the literature. The fuller study will look to further explore this theme.

Keywords: public professionalism, co-production, co-creation, voluntary sector, children’s emotional health and wellbeing, policy implementation
Introduction

This paper discusses the impacts of service co-production on public professionals, in contrast to much of the literature that focusses on user, client, patient, or citizen perspectives. Recent contributions to the debate about public service co-production have argued that professional roles have been understudied (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016; Osborne et al, 2016; Bovaird et al, 2017). This paper is a modest attempt to begin filling that ‘gap’. It outlines preliminary findings of a study of how children and young people’s mental health services are being informed by a policy shift towards co-production of public services, which might be impacting on understandings and enactments of professionalism. The study addresses how service co-production is seen and understood by professional staff delivering public services, and how co-production inflects existing notions of professionalism. This is the first phase of a mixed-method study of early intervention services designed to meet the mental health needs of children and young people (CYP). In the UK this service area is increasingly high-profile, and a number of major reviews have made clinical and economic cases for increased investment (Department of Health, 2015; Mental Health Taskforce, 2016; NHS England, 2016).

The approach is qualitative, and evidence is drawn from documents, observation, and interviews with local actors in the service system. Two key initial findings are discussed. First, ‘public value’ (Alford, 2002) is evident in the co-creation of knowledge about public services, about the wider needs of children and their families, and in co-design of alternative services. The voluntary sector is depicted as playing a key role in this, both normatively as a ‘voice’ for children in the programme and a conduit into hard to reach communities, and in practice as a ‘bridge’ between non-clinical and clinical services and, more abstractly, between the
community and the state. Through interaction between CYP and local voluntary organisations, previously inaccessible knowledge has become socialised, and is shown to have been influential in shaping the service offerings in the programme. These new services are community-based and hence ‘closer to home’, and are said by local actors to feel more comfortable to children. This provides evidence of ‘collective co-production’ (Pestoff, 2014) in the programme. Second, is an emerging theme that will itself warrant further exploration. This can be summarised as evidence of voluntary sector staff seeking greater recognition of their professionalism from other actors in the programme, which involves efforts to move away from what they see as the de-professionalising badge of ‘voluntary sector’. They deploy a narrative emphasising so-called ‘third-sector’ values, and stress a flexible approach to implementation. This might be seen as a form of professionalism ‘from within’ (Evetts, 2011) which, while not limited to a specific occupational group, is instead bounded by a sectoral and geographical context. It involves self-identification of attributes that such staff consider make them professionals, and is both agentic and symbolic work (Noordegraaf, 2007).

Theories of public service co-production and public professionalism

Public service co-production: unpicking a ‘woolly-word’

In western democracies, the concept of public service co-production is now widespread, with attention from policymakers, think tanks and academics alike (see for example, Stephens et al, 2008; Boyle & Harris, 2009; Horne & Shirley, 2009; Needham & Carr, 2009; NESTA, 2012; Verschuere et al, 2012; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Loeffler & Bovaird, 2016; Osborne et al, 2016; Torfing et al, 2016). At the heart of co-production is an emphasis on service users being active rather than passive, and having assets that can help to improve and reform public services (NESTA, 2012).
Some of this debate has been quite diffuse with terms being used interchangeably, leading to a sense that co-production risks becoming ‘one of a series of “woolly-words” in public policy’ (Osborne et al., 2016, p. 640). Recent conceptual work has sought to apply a ‘service-dominant logic’ to public service co-production, from which emerged four ‘ideal types’ that might lead to value co-creation in public services (Osborne et al., 2016). This framework has many attributes that make it, to borrow from Bourdieu, a useful ‘thinking tool’ for empirical research. First, it provides a significant synergy between two strands of literature. Second, it is relatively permissive in that it maintains a wide perspective on the concept of co-production. Third, within this broad framework it more tightly conceptualises different types of co-production, both in the different strands in the literature and in relation to ‘real world’ aspects of contemporary public services. Finally, it raises the need for attention on the consequences of co-production, that is the co-creation (or co-destruction) of value. Some of the current thinking focusses specifically on this element (Osborne, 2018), arguing that co-production puts public-service organisations (PSOs) in a dominant position, and that it’s logic is linear and based in product-dominance. This is contrasted with an interactive basis to co-creation, which is linked to the wider lived experience and social context of service users. Some of the discussion below suggests that user context and experience is seen by service professionals as an important element of their interaction with service users. How far that might be seen to extend to the kind of orientation proposed by Osborne (2018) is part of the ongoing study.

For the purposes of this paper, I define co-production as the involvement of public service users (with/without their families) and/or citizens, in any of the design, management, delivery and/or evaluation of public services. This is based on the definition proposed Osborne et al. (2016) but goes wider than service users to (potentially) include citizens and also, given the focus on CYP
in this study, the families of service users. It keeps open options that begin from the perspective of users rather than public service organisations and which focus specifically on interactions that might generate value within a so-called ‘public-service logic’ (Osborne, 2018).

The shifting sands of (public) professionalism

Public service co-production can be regarded as an emergent ‘contingency’ (Freidson, 2001) for professionalism, which might challenge traditional forms of professional knowledge and status. Theories of occupation-based professionalism argue that professional power and status is underpinned by monopoly, systems of learning and accreditation, self-regulation, self-direction of work, and specialised knowledge (see for example, Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Dzur, 2008; Evetts, 2009). Specialised knowledge establishes the ‘social, symbolic, and economic value’ of jobs (Freidson, 2001 p.18), which underpins the trust and privilege different jobs are accorded by wider society. It thereby takes on a kind of authorising status, which Freidson (2001) called the ‘moral authority’ of professional work. While this viewpoint has been subjected to a range of critiques (Abbott, 1988; Brint, 1994; Fournier, 1999; Larson, 1977), changes in where and how people work have also significantly challenged the occupation-based model of professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007; Adler et al, 2008; Evetts, 2009, 2011; Allsop & Saks, 2012). More people now work in large organisations, which increasingly shape professionalism from an ‘occupational value’ to one that is more of an ‘organisational logic’ (Evetts, 2011 p.406), which in the public sector has manifested in the new public management (NPM) (Evetts, 2009; Hood, 1991; Osborne, 2010). Professionals are forced into an ongoing negotiation between an ‘economy of performance’ linked with notions of effectiveness and measurement rooted in systems of audit, and ‘ecologies of practice’ based on their accumulated experience, commonly held professional beliefs, and ideologies (Stronach et al, 2002; Fisher & Owen, 2008). This raises the potential for role conflict, where
professionals struggle to balance competing values or interests (Lipsky, 1980; Tummers et al, 2014).

While ‘occupational value’ or ‘organisational logic’ professionalism are ideal-types, reality is likely to be messier. Economic drivers like neoliberalism and NPM, and wider shaping forces such as globalisation, individualism, and digitalisation have led to more mixed-up, hybrid or connective models of professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007; Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2016). These seem more open-system perspectives on professionalism, reflecting the multi-sector public service systems that have emerged over the last few decades in the UK. The activity of staff working in such contexts has been termed ‘public tasks on behalf of the common good’ (Hupe & Buffat, 2014 p.551). Client (or in this paper, user) interests are at the root of how such, typically street-level, staff identify and act as professionals (Lipsky, 1980). Frontline voluntary sector staff often work in these kinds of complex delivery systems, and in so doing they might be seen as street-level professionals (Tuurnas et al, 2016). In this paper they are conceptualised as such, with an empirical focus on how they might self-identify as professionals.

Linking public service co-production and (public) professionalism

Although wide-ranging and relatively open in many ways, these literatures pay only limited attention to the skills and experiential knowledge of citizens or service users. This suggests they have yet to ‘catch-up’ with those in public management, which argue that public service systems increasingly show characteristics of a new public governance (NPG) logic in which ‘[c]o-production is a core element’ (Osborne, 2010 p.416). More encouragingly, it has been argued that the increased organisational role in mediating professional work, questions over the role of specialised knowledge, and the orienting of professionals into new networks
(potentially including users), reveal that current theoretical interpretations of professionals/ism are actually relatively close to co-production (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). However, despite these theoretical shifts, there has been limited explicit empirical attention on what public service co-production might mean for public professionalism. One notable exception is work from Finland (Tuurnas, 2015; Tuurnas, 2016; Tuurnas et al, 2016). These studies found that public service co-production poses a number of challenges to public professionalism (in opening up professional work), but also that public professionalism itself challenges attempts to foster service co-production (especially the ongoing influence of professional culture). Renewing professional culture would mean professionals ‘accepting and acknowledging experiential knowledge alongside their professional knowledge in the service development’ (Tuurnas, 2015 p.592), including learning from peers and other feedback routes (Tuurnas et al, 2016). Presumably that would need to include service users.

Two key strands in these literatures on service co-production and public professionalism are linked in this paper. The first asks about the positioning of users/citizens in the work of public professionals. These positions range from ‘traditional professional service provision’ in which service users passively consume public services that are planned and provided solely by professionals (Boyle & Harris, 2009 p.16) to service users being (co)-creators of value in public services through their interaction with service offerings provided by public service organisations (Osborne, 2018). The second asks about the types of knowledge that professionals accrue and deploy in doing their work, from which they might be seen to gain their ‘moral authority’ (Freidson, 2001). It has been argued that in service co-production different types of knowledge are manifested. Professionals bring ‘knowledge of the core

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1 Instead the role of, and implications for, professionals are implicit (see Gill et al, 2011; Roberts et al, 2013; Hawkins et al, 2017 in health and social care).
(primary) process of the organisation and the production of service’, while from users comes ‘situational or local knowledge’ (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016 p429). This suggests a continuum, at one end of which are the closed systems of specialised and abstract knowledge in ‘traditional’ professionalism, which emphasises standards, frameworks, evidence-based practice, and accreditation. It is socialised through specialised education, practice and experience. At the other end are more open and non-technical systems of knowledge, rooted in the indigenous experience of communities and the lived experiences of individuals. The ‘injection’ of such knowledge into public services is the co-creation of users/citizens and professionals (Dzur, 2008). Here, knowledge is heavily situated and context-dependent, but it has potential to be more widely socialised within professions, in part through changes in practice.

The case study

The national policy context

In the UK, the 2012 Health and Social Care Act included an ‘explicit recognition … that mental ill health will be given parity alongside other physical health needs’ (Glover-Thomas, 2013 p.281). Some have criticised this commitment as being rooted in a medicalised model in which mental health is viewed like other medical problems, which might lead to a focus on services rather than underlying drivers of psychological distress (Callaghan et al, 2017). Commitment to parity is the policy context for recent reviews and attempts to change mental health services for CYP2. These have emphasised more integrated services, a young-person centred and holistic approach, and improved relationships (Department of Health, 2015; Values-Based Child and Adolescent Mental Health System Commission, 2016). In particular, improved relationships are said to require non-judgemental, collaborative attitudes among professional

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2 For example, Department of Health, 2015; Mental Health Taskforce, 2016; NHS England, 2016
staff, and trust between users/families and staff (Department of Health, 2015). Reviews of existing services found such relationships to be in short supply (Anderson et al., 2017), which is a concern given they would seem prerequisites for meaningful service co-production. In 2015, the UK government launched a new ‘transformation’ programme of early intervention mental health services (Future in Mind). It called for ‘a fundamental shift in culture … [and a] whole system approach … focussing on prevention of mental ill health, early intervention and recovery’ (Department of Health, 2015 p.4), and made extra funds available (but did not ring-fence them into the programme). The ‘transformation’ badge suggests the programme is not intended to prop up business as usual. Service co-production is a strategic and operational level theme in the programme’s documentation, but tends to be used in a normative fashion, with no specificity about what it actually entails or means. While this might be considered a strength in that it enables flexibility, it might instead invoke a degree of cynicism if it is seen as simply a new word to describe old and discredited ways of working.

Local planning and implementation
Future in Mind is a national policy designed to be implemented locally. Each local area was charged with developing a Local Transformation Plan (LTP), the guidance for which contained overarching principles, but no specifics about implementation. It thereby enabled local discretion and local determination over implementation. The study area is a mixed urban and rural area in northern England, with a population of around a third of a million people. Overall, life expectancy is lower than the national average. The proportion of children living in poverty is just above the national average. According to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) the area was among the 20% most deprived in England. The programme’s accountability and governance structure includes a specific project board that reports up to a main area board, and subordinate project sub-groups. It is embedded within a wider set of changes to CYP mental
health services at all levels of need, some of which are regional in footprint. These are, in sum, intended to reshape the service offer to CYP and their families by increasing accessibility to services, in organisational changes to improve links between services, and through changes to ‘culture’ to help foster a preventative approach that includes some focus on emotional distress as opposed to further medicalising issues. In these aims it is possible to see attempts to integrate services and make them more holistic.

In respect of Future in Mind specifically, one stated goal is to help reduce costlier and more complex interventions later on, an economic rationale that has been criticised nationally (Callaghan et al, 2017). The local programme aims to develop and align existing assets and services with new services funded by Future in Mind, in order to make changes sustainable. Local priorities also relate to ways of working, through empowering workers, and by involving a wide range of actors from different sectoral settings in decision-making and implementation. This is about relationships, especially between CYP and services, but also between service providers themselves. CYP were ‘consulted’ and ‘engaged’ throughout the programme’s development, either directly, indirectly through voluntary organisations, or through proxies in consultations with schools and counsellors. There is local commitment to ongoing interactions with service users, and with CYP more widely, as part of relationship-building in which the voluntary sector is seen as a central player. Co-production is referenced in the context of commissioning practice.

**Methodology: research design**

This paper reports part of a wider single case study, a research strategy that is not without its critics (Yin, 2003; Punch, 2014), some of whom have raised questions about research design,
generalisation, and case selection. The approach outlined here aims to tackle such critiques. In respect of research design, the case study is described as embedded because it involves a number of sub-cases or groups within the overall case. It will ultimately include participants from across the service programme, and analytical attention will be focussed at different levels within the case, as well as the case as a whole. Generalisation is made at a higher level of abstraction than the uniqueness of the case (Punch, 2014) through a form of analytic generalisation (Yin, 2003). In respect of case selection, the area was chosen because the local approach is, according to national partners, atypical compared with other areas they have reviewed. In this way the case might be seen as ‘extreme’ in that it is unusual, which often makes an especially rich case compared with a more normal or representative one (Yin, 2003; Danermark et al, 2001). Such richness might be further enhanced by linking the case to several disciplines, rather than constraining it within one (Flyvberg, 2006).

Data collection

Two main data sources are drawn upon in this paper. First, are six semi-structured interviews with participants in commissioning organisations, and those based in the voluntary sector who are working in the programme. Interviews have lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Second, observation of twelve meetings at different levels in the programme (national and regional reviews, board, cross-team, single team), which individually ranged from one to six hours in length. These different fora have provided opportunities to see, in an unobtrusive fashion, how the parties within the programme interact in particular settings within the case study, and see how CYP are referenced.

Data Analysis

Data were assessed in a thematic analysis, a widely applied and flexible method for qualitative
research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al, 2012). A broadly categorising strategy (coding) was pursued in the data analysis. This was used in a flexible way by attending to connections in the data, such as hierarchical and cause-and-effect relationships (Guest et al, 2012), to help keep in focus the context of the coded data. The author transcribed the interviews, which was an important first step in the analysis. The process of transcription, and the multiple readings of the texts as they were being proofed, helped build familiarity with the interview data. Then, following the approach taken in other research (e.g. Fletcher, 2016), the transcripts were deductively coded, using initial codes derived from a review of existing theory, as well as organisational codes to help sort the data ahead of more detailed analysis (Maxwell, 2005; 2012). It was assumed this process of engaging the data would lead to these initial codes being adapted and that, ideally, it would inductively generate additional codes from the texts. Both proved to be the case. Interview data are supplemented by data from the observation of meetings at different levels in the programme.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings reported here are tentative, since they are based on a relatively small number of interviews and meeting observations, and are predominantly focused on the perspectives of one set of service providers. This section needs to be read with those caveats in mind.

**Context**

The local voluntary sector has been involved in the programme from the start, including as part of its decision-making apparatus. Voluntary sector staff are embedded in the programme, working with schools and statutory services. They use an existing framework, itself locally co-produced with CYP, to assess levels of emotional health, wellbeing and resilience among
children, and work intensively over several sessions to develop particular competences in those children deemed in need of such support. The model is ‘social’ rather than clinical. The aim is to provide children with strategies and skills to improve their resilience, and provide opportunities for them to practice such skills. The emphasis is on the lived experience and perceptions of children, nested within the specialist knowledge and skills deployed by the voluntary sector staff member who is leading the intervention. Teachers are present too, to help provide them with new skills and techniques, thereby increasing capability within the school. Children are reassessed at the end of this set of interventions to determine any change in their declared levels of competence, the results of which form part of the evidence about the impact of the voluntary sector’s work in the programme.

**Public value in knowledge co-creation**

Voluntary organisations were regularly depicted as a ‘voice’ for CYP in the programme. They were described as ‘the most important routes into the community because they, they were there, they knew the young people’. That reads as a normative perspective, although participants outlined the work that local voluntary organisations had done, and were doing, to warrant this claim. For example, parts of the consultation on programme implementation happened through ‘organisations who know children and young people and them talking to them, because the issues were so sensitive’. This process was seen to have strongly influenced the development of new, community-based services, which were ‘closer to home’ and felt more comfortable to children. What might previously have been locked-in knowledge became accessible, socialised, and to an extent influential. The product of this activity might be seen as a form of ‘public value’ (Alford, 2002), given that it co-created new knowledge about existing public services and about the ‘social needs of the wider public’ (Jarvi et al, 2018 p.65), and underpinned co-design of alternative services.
The voluntary sector was positioned, and sought to position itself, in a relational space, in terms of its existing links with ‘hard to reach’ communities and with service users, which enabled reach into often personal situations. The local programme emphasises relationships children already have with each other and with public professionals, and early intervention services that children said they wanted embedded within these relationships. Service delivery neither requires clinical experience/expertise, nor the child or young person stepping out of existing relationships. Different types of service provider can play a role, including local voluntary organisations, especially local youth groups and clubs where young people are already engaged with organisations and social settings outside of their families. There is thereby a distinction between non-clinical and clinical aspects of the programme, but part of the programme’s aim is to ensure this interface is well managed. As one participant explained, part of the voluntary sector’s role was to build the confidence of children to further engage with services if they needed them. This perspective suggests the voluntary sector is seen as a bridge between non-clinical and clinical services, or more abstractly between the community and the state. This might be seen as evidence of collective co-production (Pestoff, 2014).

**Recognition of voluntary staff professionalism**

Voluntary sector staff were seen to be seeking greater recognition of their professionalism. Techniques include deployment of a narrative that emphasises particular values and attributes, and efforts to move away from what is seen as a de-professionalising ‘voluntary sector’ badge. This happened at different points in the social space in which they and other professionals are operating, including the interface between clinical and non-clinical services. It is thereby relational in nature, and includes efforts to link with and distance from, at sectoral, organisational and individual levels.
Recognition at a sector level was seen to be about ‘breaking down those professional boundaries … and understanding each other’s role’. This problem was seen to manifest in different specialist languages deployed in each professional field. The voluntary sector saw its focus as being on children’s ‘emotional wellbeing and around resilience’ whereas psychologists were seen to work on mental health and ‘the language they use is very different and very medicalised’. At a programme level such distinctions were seen to be necessary, and demarked as voluntary organisations supporting young people ‘socially’, whereas a clinician would focus on a child’s ‘clinical needs’. This distinction also manifested in practice, as exemplified by a view from clinical practitioners that the clinical thresholds they use to assess the needs of children ‘can’t take away professional judgement’ because assessment was a process ‘it’s a conversation, it's the working it out, and if you’re not sure, it's about asking the questions’. Using thresholds therefore required deployment of specialist knowledge in an applied manner, which emphasised the barrier between clinical and non-clinical services and the specialised professional knowledge that they exemplify. In such ways existing differences in expertise and approach were reproduced. As one participant reflected, ‘I have to remember that we're all from different backgrounds, different knowledge and experiences, and you know, people work in different ways’, while another reflected that ‘there is a bit of probably, competition, because of the nature of everybody. We are all competitors now, aren’t we? Which is a shame’. While organisations have been seen as key arenas for professional projects including jurisdictional issues (Muzio et al, 2013), these findings suggest the same can happen at a sectoral or service level, especially when different sectors are working together in a wider programme. This will warrant further attention as the case study unfolds.
It seems that the very nature of local voluntary *organisations* helps to set them apart, and provides another level of recognition. It was claimed that they worked in the ‘most deprived communities … are based within those particular communities … often people on the board are people from the community, they own the organisations and they are developing solutions’. They pursued ‘an assets-based approach to work with children’. Voluntary organisations were portrayed as resilient, having come through times of adversity to continue working with and in particular communities. Consequently ‘it felt like they, that they had a really core purpose, they had a real reason for being there’.

Recognition was sought too at an *individual* level, inspired by what were seen as misconceptions among other staff, despite generally positive feedback about the work voluntary sector staff were doing in the programme. There was a concern that the term ‘voluntary sector’ underpinned misunderstandings at an individual level, because it suggested an image of an ‘amateur’, ‘volunteer’ or even a ‘do-gooder’, and de-professionalised voluntary sector staff. It was seen to condition the views of staff in other services, which were described as ‘perception, it’s not truth. So they [staff in other services] think the voluntary sector are amateur, they don’t think people are qualified, etc. But we are just as qualified’. There was a concern that some actors ‘don't actually recognise that we have professional qualifications and we’ve been trained. They just think that, you know, we're playing at it’. In response, they sought out a different label, arguing that for them ‘sometimes it's better to say we're from the third sector because people have a little bit of recognition and acknowledgement’, including of their professionalism.

**Conclusion**
This paper is inspired by discussion of a ‘research gap’ about the impacts of service co-production on professionals, which in part is based in limited linking of the literature about these two topics. It has been argued that, theoretically at least, contemporary interpretations of professionals/ism are actually relatively close to co-production (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). If this is the case, then some of the key challenges to occupation-based public professionalism identified in the literature might actually provide opportunities for more co-productive public services, especially if there is a more permissive policy environment. This is about how open or not frontline public professionalism is to co-production within an emerging NPG logic.

In the case study discussed here, co-production has so far been evident as a contextual feature of both national policy design and local implementation. Within that context, at a local level voluntary sector staff appeared to be using their ‘community embeddedness’ (either self-ascribed or granted by other actors), working practices, and broader values as sources of legitimacy upon which to seek greater recognition of their work, and of their professionalism in doing it. This plays out at sectoral, organisational, and individual levels, in what might be termed ‘institutional work’ (Suddaby & Viale, 2011; Currie et al, 2012; Muzio et al, 2013). It is relational in nature, since in doing it such staff are seen both to be staking out their own space in the policy programme (a form of distancing) while also seeking increased collaboration and closer links with other service organisations and staff (a form of linking).

In co-creating knowledge about communities and public services with services users and citizens, voluntary organisations potentially open-up public professionalism, and individual professionals, to new sources and types of knowledge. More concrete thoughts on how far that might extend, and how it is manifested in enactments of professionalism, will require the engagement of actors from across the service programme. It has been argued that professions
in the context of public services are sufficiently discrete from those in other parts of the economy to require a ‘distinctive theoretical perspective on professionalism and how it relates to more general issues’ (Brandsen & Honingh, 2013, p.882). Better understanding of the impacts of public service co-production on professionals and professionalism might inform part of that picture, which is one aim as the case study unfolds.

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