Abstract

Coproduction has emerged as one of the key concepts in understanding knowledge-policy interactions and is associated with involvement, for example, of users of public services in their design and delivery. At a time of permacrisis, the need for transformative evidence-based policymaking is urgent and great. This is particularly important in highly distressed ‘left-behind’ communities targeted by the UK Government for Levelling Up, which constitutes an attempt to improve the infrastructural, economic, social and health of less affluent parts of the UK. Often, policymakers regard the transformative policies capable of addressing these crises as beyond the Overton Window used to describe actions consistent with public acceptability. In this article, we build on recent debates in Evidence & Policy on coproduction by outlining an embryonic approach to overcoming this Overton Window-based roadblock in evidence-based policymaking: adversarial coproduction, which involves working with opponents of evidence-based policy to develop means of persuading potential beneficiaries to support introduction. This emerging approach has been deployed in examination of public preferences with regard to welfare reform, but can be applied to a wide range of policy areas. We outline the history of coproduction, before setting out the process by which adversarial coproduction was developed. We then describe the impact of adversarial coproduction on public preferences on Universal Basic Income (UBI). This enables us to set out challenges and opportunities for those with an interest in addressing our crises, serving to stimulate genuine debate on longstanding assumptions about the limits of evidence-based policy and public opinion.

Introduction

Coproduction has been described as a social science ‘buzz-word’ (Adelle et al., 2019, 1). It has emerged as one of the key concepts in understanding knowledge-policy interactions (Bandola-Gill, Arthur & Ivor Leng 2023, 276) and is associated with involvement, for example, of users of public services in their design and delivery (Boviard, 2007). The need for improved policymaking is more important than ever, both within the UK and beyond. We now appear to be in a period of permacrisis, with the longer-term impacts of the Global Financial Crisis, a decade of austerity, geopolitical conflict and the cost-of-living crisis all compounding and being exacerbated by a climate emergency that may only get worse over time (see Turnbull 2022). The Financial Times recently described the UK as increasingly a poor country with some very rich residents (Burn-Murdoch, 2022). With high levels of disengagement and from politics (Uberoi & Johnston 2022) regarding politicians, the UK and its four national jurisdictions’ future depends on the capacity of policymakers to persuade an alienated electorate to support measures that will mitigate poverty, inequality and the climate emergency. This is particularly important in highly distressed ‘left-behind’ communities targeted for Levelling Up, which constitutes an attempt to improve the
infrastructural, economic, social and health of less affluent parts of the UK (Secretary of State for Levelling Up 2022).

There is good reason to understand the role that forms of coproduction might play in this and how it can address two issues that represent an equipoise in public policy. On the one hand, Bandala-Gill (2023) suggests that preference for technocratic legitimacy leads to presentation of quantitative evidence disconnected from the political legitimacy associated with people’s values (see also Hornikx, 2007). The rejection of apparent economic expertise by supporters of Brexit has been presented as evidence of this deficit. On the other hand, we have argued that the opposite has become true, with policymakers, in the wake of Brexit, believing that citizens of left-behind communities in particular hold fixed value-based positions that preclude the presentation and implementation of evidence-based transformative policy (Johnson, Johnson & Nettle 2022). As a consequence, politicians have elected to support conservative social and economic positions in order to appear sensitive to existing value sets, rejecting the capacity for persuasion (Johnson et al. 2022). In this regard, policymakers take people’s positions, as represented in focus groups, as fixed and they alter their public positions accordingly. Thus the evidence base they end up incorporating into policy is that of voters’ expressed positions, rather than actual evidence of impact. While this suggests elements of coproduction, it is actually deleterious to citizens themselves, since it leads necessarily, to evidence-based policy being rejected.

In this debate piece, we wish to build on recent debates in Evidence & Policy on coproduction by outlining an embryonic approach to overcoming this roadblock in evidence-based policymaking through adversarial coproduction. This is an emerging approach deployed in examination of public preferences with regard to welfare reform (Johnson, Johnson & Nettle 2023), but can be applied to a wide range of policy areas. We briefly outline the history of coproduction, before setting out the process by which adversarial coproduction was developed. We then describe the impact of adversarial coproduction on public preferences of presentation of narratives on Universal Basic Income (UBI). This enables us to set out a series of challenges and opportunities for social scientists with an interest in addressing our crises.

The history of coproduction

Coproduction as an approach to policy making gained momentum during the 2008 economic crisis and period of austerity (Fotaki, 2015), aiming simultaneously to improve design and legitimacy of approaches. Coproduction has been adopted in public administration, science and technology studies and sustainability science with similar developments in the health sciences (Miller & Wyborn 2020). For Swedlow (2012), this emergence is explicable in cultural theoretical terms, with the adoption of coproduction representing a post-Global Financial Crisis change in social and political order mirroring with a shift in beliefs about human and physical nature, noting the ways in which scientists involved in struggles over land and wildlife management in North America championed cultural constructs and policies. These trends have been associated with attempts to address epistemic injustice and practical deficits by mobilising multiple knowledge, including techne and phronesis, of those subject and party to policy, including citizens and practitioners (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The implications for social scientists have been significant. A number of epistemological traditions, including feminism, have come to foreground coproduction through user engagement, presenting the method as means of social, economic and political transformation, hoping to change the world not merely to interpret it (to misquote Marx). Indeed, there is evidence to support this view: coproducing knowledge can deliver academic and wider impacts on economy and society (Adelle et al, 2019; Hardill and Baines, 2009; Hardill and Mills, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic granted renewed focus on coproduction in health (Redman et al (2021) and public service settings (Bandola-Gill et al, 2023). A recent evaluation of methods employed by research teams on UK investments supported by UKRI funding noted a number of projects on the impact of the pandemic on economic and social life undertaken during the emergency that were underpinned by the principles of coproduction (Hardill et al; 2022).

Social scientists played an important and understated role in understanding the impact of the pandemic (British Academy, 2021), which transformed many aspects of everyday life across families, communities, institutions, and civil society (Calvert & Arbuthnott, 2021; Hennessey, 2022; Kupferschmidt and Cohen, 2020). While it may be tempting to frame COVID-19 as indiscriminate, its spread laid bare existing deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities, across categories such as health, employment, and
housing (Bentley, 2020; Peirson, 2021). This has brought into focus the vital importance of collaboration across social science disciplines, paradigms, and methodological traditions (Kara, and Khoo, 2020; NCRM, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2021). To support this work, UKRI invested in almost 200 social science projects during the pandemic through the COVID-19 Rolling Call to support innovative, transformative research (ESRC 2021). Hardill et al. (2022) followed Wiles et al. (2011) in identifying innovation at one of three levels: inception, adaptation, and adoption. Hardill et al. (2022) emphasise the importance adaptation of existing methods from outside social science, specifically via collaboration and co-production with communities.

Methodological innovation and adaptation

One key emerging method in behavioural science is adversarial collaboration (Mellers, Hertwig & Kahneman 2001; Clark et al. 2022a, 2022b; Costello, Clark & Tetlock 2022; Clark & Tetlock 2022; Tetlock & Mitchell, 2009). The approach is intended to improve research via collaboration with those who hold competing hypotheses, and partly involves each side exploring what it would take to convince them of the position they currently oppose. Daniel Kahneman, the originator of Adversarial Collaboration, and subsequent proponents, most notably those involved in the Penn Arts & Sciences Adversarial Collaboration Project (Penn Arts & Science, 2022), conceive of the method as a means of improving the process underpinning protocol development, data collection and publication through the following principles:

(a) understand and articulate their opponents’ perspective so well that each side feels fairly characterized; (b) work together to design mutually agreed-upon studies that have potential to adjudicate competing hypotheses and that they agree, ex ante, could change their minds; and (c) jointly publish the results, regardless of the outcome. (Clark et al. 2022a, 6)

The approach is informed by the notion that scientists ‘are constrained by the same cognitive biases, limitations, and tradeoff calculations as mere mortals’ (Clark et al. 2022a, 3). Some of its proponents contend that behavioural science is particularly prone to the problems this perpetuates as a result of i) its having comparatively low consequences, mainly confined to embarrassment, for producing ‘inaccurate’ findings, ii) its focus on provocative, moral-political topics that may be subject to particular social desires of the researcher and/or broader society, and iii) the fact that it deals with very complex, abstract and interacting variables and social/psychological constructs that can be finessed to obtain different results (Clark et al. 2022a, 4). This has produced a range of innovative pieces of research with underpinning design on which a larger proportion of colleagues agree. It is a transformative approach at a time of paradigmatic polarisation.

Social science is subject to a similar or greater degree of methodological contention. In particular, colleagues find themselves in disagreement over the feasibility of policy, especially where there is a critical need for intervention and a strong evidential basis for implementation. Those in public policy and politics often hold that there is an ‘Overton Window’ of policies acceptable to the public that provides parameters for action. There is belief that the public, including those who are likely to benefit most from implementation, will reject policies for value-based or cognitive reasons that evolve slowly over time and not in response to presentation of the policy itself. There is widespread belief that transformative policy of the sort needed to address chronic health and economic inequalities or the climate emergency sits outside the window, shifting policymakers’ appraisal of ‘sensible’ policies toward approaches that are inadequate or actually exacerbate harm.

This is apparent in the case of ‘nudging’, which formed a central pillar of public health mitigation and messaging during the pandemic. Nudging revolutionised debate on implementation of social policy, with Thaler and Sunstein (2008) presenting policy makers with means of avoiding ‘big state’ intervention, non-coercively influencing behaviour toward evidence-based ends. Shove’s (2010) ‘ABC model’ holds that policymakers change attitudes by informing individuals of the costs of behaviour and providing incentives for change. Their approach holds two critical deficits. First, as Dowding (2020) notes, this privatises responsibility for action and suggests that active state intervention is unjust or counter-productive, abrogating policymakers of responsibility for outcomes. Second, and more critically, there is an emerging body of evidence to suggest that nudging does not work for societally important outcomes. Maier et al. (2022) have shown that evidence in support of nudging is subject to publishing bias. When that bias is
controlled for, there is little or no evidence of efficacy across the range of outcomes that have been studied. This indicates that academics, policymakers and governments have invested many billions of pounds in an approach that is incapable of achieving the ends to which we have a shared interest. Indeed, given the emerging evidence on nudging, it is possible that belief in it may have reduced the efficacy of pandemic responses that often depended upon it. As a field, we all share a responsibility for this. Too often, belief in the Overton Window and belief that sensible can be equated with minimal has led us to endorse research, policy and practice that has had a distorting effect on public resources and people’s lives.

It sounds banal to suggest that the crises our societies face cannot be addressed by inadequate policy, but too often this position has appeared radical in ways that are historically distinctive. Human history is one of persistent change and reform in response to crises, but also by virtue of policy entrepreneurs’ persuasion. The neoliberal reforms of the past four decades, many of which have contributed to our permacrisis, represented clear, radical shifts that contemporary assumptions would present as unfeasible. There is need to remind ourselves that change is possible and to explore means of using policy to that end.

The methodological deficits identified by Clark et al. (2022a) have the potential to be amplified throughout the stages of the policy development process. Policies are often presented to the public on the basis of ‘objective’ benefits assumed by those who design them to be salient, but which may be regarded as irrelevant or less relevant by communities. The avoidance of macro-economic harm by remaining in the EU was clearly irrelevant to many voters in left behind communities who had witnessed long-term decline in living standards and who simply could not imagine their lives declining further. Policymakers face difficulty in disentangling their material interests from the interests of others and in grasping the bases of differences of opinion on policies. This, combined with the assumption that perceptions are fixed and grounded in value commitments with no clear relationship to material interest, have contributed to inertia and error in policymaking and created path dependencies that compound each crisis in turn. We need to remind ourselves that necessary change is possible.

Persuasion is possible
During the pandemic, evidence emerged within the UK from furlough, which granted state support for wages during the pandemic, and a range of other interventions that reducing conditionality and increasing universality within the welfare system would enable policymakers to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. We were funded by the Wellcome Trust to examine the prospective impacts of one such policy, Universal Basic Income (UBI), on mental health. Our findings indicated that UBI was an economically affordable, multipurpose policy instrument capable of securing transformative impact in public health, preventing or delaying, for example, 200,000 to 550,000 cases of anxiety and depression between 2010-30 within the 14-24 year old cohort – enough to pay for 750 mental health hospital nurses annually. Even though the policy is an economic instrument, exploration of public opinion has generally been driven by consideration of fit with people’s values, rather than understanding of its material impacts (see Hamilton, Yorgun & Wright 2021). This focus on presenting UBI in terms of values and the notion that people’s values are fixed parts of people’s identities meant that there was widespread belief among policymakers concerned with political legitimacy that UBI as a transformative policy sat outside the ‘Overton Window’ (Cowan, 2020; Gopal & Issa, 2021) and was not feasible for implementation due to public opposition (see Berry 2021).

We examined debate on persuading prospective beneficiaries of policies, focusing on Fisher’s (1987) contrasting of two paradigms: rational choice – actors develop preferences by evaluating arguments according to the quality of evidence presented; and narrative - human beings are storytellers with pre-existing beliefs who identify what they see as good reasons for preferences from historically and culturally contingent stories. While Honikx (2007) and others have asserted the value of the former, Morgan et al. (2000) contend that narrative is more persuasive than statistics. We decided to explore the impact of narrative by adopting adversarial collaboration from behavioural science and adapting it as ‘adversarial co-production’ for policy development.

Our approach sought to build on and invert Greve’s (2020) evaluation of evidence of impact from narratives on perceptions of welfare policy via ‘myths’ that link people’s often genuine concerns for their material interests to often self-defeating policy appraisals. This phenomenon is apparent in the opposition of many of the poorest in society to taxing the richest (Shapiro, 2002) or with support for inequalities
justified through skill and opportunity in the ‘American Dream’ being negatively correlated with socio-economic status (SES) (Hochschild, 1995). We noted evidence of narratives’ being deployed successfully to highlight people’s genuine material interests, with impact on lower SES groups increasing support for redistributive policies that enhance resources (Piff et al., 2020). Successful narratives ‘help each other see from different perspectives’ (Stone, 2011: x), invoking interests that align with policy content.

As such, we formed a prolific.co panel (n = 858) in which participants were asked to evaluate UBI based on author-produced narrative presentation of its prospective role in pandemic public health and economic security. Overall levels of support on a 100 point scale were higher than expected (mean 71.99, s.d. 26.45), with older respondents providing higher levels of support for the health narrative and younger respondents the economic narrative. We then asked a subset (n = 20) of respondents who had stated strong (≤30 on hundred point scale) opposition to UBI to generate narratives to persuade those like them to support the policy (July 2021). These narratives were synthesised into six distinct narratives and tested (August-September 2021) in a second prolific panel, which was formed by identifying 105 strong opponents of UBI (≤30 on hundred point scale) from 677 different prolific.co members from ‘red wall’ constituencies in Wales and the North and Midlands of England. Participants were asked to rate the adversarially co-produced narratives and to rate UBI overall following presentation of all six narratives. Post-study support for UBI was significantly higher than pre-study support (mean 46.99, s.d. 28.60, compared to pre-study mean 15.56, s.d. 10.25). This represents a mean increase of 31.43 points on the 100-point scale (t = 27.07, p < 0.001). Accordingly, participants reported that their views on UBI had been substantially affected by the arguments they had read (mean 47.85, s.d. 30.43). Moreover, the more they felt their views had been affected, the greater their increase in support (r = 0.60, p < 0.001) (Johnson, Johnson and Nettle, 2023). The narratives were then deployed in a separate study on the relationship of material conditions, mental health and faith in government to perception of welfare reform (Johnson, et al. 2022). Again, the narratives demonstrated significant impacts on perception of welfare reform and illustrated specific challenges for policymakers in persuading beneficiaries of the possibility of reform. This stands at odds with any working assumptions regarding fixed values and the Overton Window (see Lehman 2010). If there is an Overton Window, it is one that can be opened, extended or broken by persuasion. Support for Brexit, which was once a fringe belief, is evidence of this.

Adversarial co-production can be conceived of as in-project innovation or innovation through adaptation that meets principles of co-production with regard to collaboration and knowledge co-production (Bannister and Hardill, 2013). There is significant need, first, to understand the scope of adaptation to a social scientific fields and methodological inquiry into the effects of adversarial collaboration on individual and group perception of policy and behaviour in distinct fields, and second, to conduct meta-analysis of the impact of methodological implications of adaptation into social scientific fields.

Why does it work? The social nature of reason

One question that springs to mind is: why should adversarial collaboration, or adversarial co-production, work? Surely, people can use their reason to figure out their position on a question or policy; having done so, it is hard to see why being exposed to the reasoning for a different conclusion should make any difference. If they thought that conclusion was sound or congenial, they would have arrived at it independently. This conclusion draws on an intuitive, but outdated conception of the human capacity to reason. Traditionally, scholars imagined that the function of reasoning was intra-personal: a capacity that allows individual minds to work through complex questions and reach true conclusions. A more modern view is that the function of reasoning is primarily inter-personal or argumentative (Mercier & Sperber 2011): reasoning works dialogically, through persuasion, to allow multiple individuals, whose interests may differ, to coordinate on joint action.

In accordance with the inter-personal view, people tend to produce very weak arguments for beliefs they already hold, until they are challenged through dialogue by others who hold different positions (Trouche, Johansson, Hall & Mercier 2016). When challenged, they either produce better arguments, to persuade their interlocuteurs, or change their minds when it becomes clear that there are grounds for the network to settle on a different course. This research demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of human rationality. When individuals have comfortable or intuitive positions to hand, their reasoning is
often me-sided and superficial. Through argumentative processes, lay people can create jointly deep and nuanced rationales for courses of action (Trouche, Sander & Mercier 2014). Experts and non-experts alike grossly underestimate the extent to which discussion in groups can improve the quality of reasoning (Mercier et al. 2015). This psychological research provides the foundations for contemporary experiments with deliberative democracy (Mercier & Landemore 2012).

**What is needed?: experimental engagement with all? citizens**

Working with adversaries raises an important ethical question: should climate change sceptics or eugenicists have a voice in policy presentation? It is perfectly possible that those with extreme levels of opposition to evidence-based policies have an identitarian interest in their rejection. Moreover, there are various extremist groups who have an interest in advancing policy that actively discriminates against others and exacerbates crisis. It is precisely this phenomenon that motivates our interest in adversarial coproduction. There is recognised need to overcome ‘echo chambers’ that provide potentially misleading understandings of people’s positions. There is an emerging body of evidence that people who hold positions that are at odds with evidence can be persuaded to alter their thinking by those who present immanent critique in terms that they recognise. It is not that the adversarial coproduction proposes to advance policies supported by climate change deniers or eugenicists, but that there is critical need to engage with those who oppose policies to identify salient constituent parts of the evidence and the prospective policy impact to persuade others who hold similar positions. This is a crucial means of engaging citizens who are currently alienated from the technocratic approach criticised by Bandala-Gill and need persuading that the policies are not elite abstractions or impositions, but of genuine importance to their interests. This is crucially important for left-behind communities, whose voices are silent or go unacknowledged and unheard, and who are most in need of intervention and demonstrates genuine reflexivity advanced by Bandola-Gill, Grek, and Tichenor (2023).

Embryonic adversarial co-production offers potential impact in a number of social policy areas. Pilot work above on UBI and electoral patterns ought to serve as encouragement for colleagues. There is urgent need to examine the issues of critical importance both to mitigating our crises and revitalising and rehabilitating our field. In particular, there is considerable need to grasp the reality that transformative policy, though expensive, is considerably cheaper than the alternative: mass social disintegration and climate-based extinction. As our forebears in 1945 recognised, sometimes the most expensive policies, such as the creation of the NHS, are so essential that we cannot afford not to implement them. The cost of pursuing policies that seem sensible by virtue of their being minimal and uncontroversial, but which are wholly ineffective, is far greater.

**References**


Burn-Murdoch, J. (2022) ‘Britain and the US are poor societies with some very rich people’, Financial Times, 16 September. https://www.ft.com/content/ef265420-45e8-497b-b308-c951bba68945


Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Levelling up the United Kingdom. Westminster: HM Government.


