Does co-creation impact public service delivery? The importance of state and governance traditions

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Co-creation in public service delivery requires partnerships between citizens and civil servants. The authors argue that whether or not these partnerships will be successful depends on state and governance traditions (for example a tradition of authority sharing or consultation). These traditions determine the extent to which co-creation can become institutionalized in a country's governance framework.

It is now widely accepted that conventional approaches to public service delivery can neither capture nor resolve the complexity of contemporary problems—for example unemployment, ageing and climate change (see Hartley *et al.*, 2013). As a result of the introduction of new public management (NPM), most policy-makers have now embraced the idea that governments should acknowledge the multi-actor environment (and its resources) in which they operate in order to meet the needs of modern society (see Hood, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999). Accordingly, governments need to find new forms of close collaboration with a broad variety of stakeholders (semi-public, private and civic) (Mulgan, 2003; Hartley, 2005) to deliver public services. We describe this as 'co-creation in social innovation'. Existing relationships between the stakeholders in public service delivery are forged over time and are heavily institutionalized (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999). Pursuing co-creation challenges these institutionalized relationships. To explain why governments do not all react in the same way to similar issues (for example economic crisis, ageing population, unemployment and a decline of legitimacy of public institutions), researchers need to examine national policy contexts—a country's state and governance traditions.

Co-creation prescribes a relationship between involved actors within the public domain. In this paper, we explain why this relationship might be a fundamental shift in the way that public services are delivered. Building on the work by Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999), we show how co-creation has changed the relationship between citizens and public organizations in four countries (Estonia, Germany, The Netherlands and the UK). In order to investigate empirically whether co-creation is really a major 'game changer', we examined an example of co-creation in each country and analysed the extent to which relationships between citizens and public organizations had changed, and whether this could be explained by the dominant state and governance traditions of each country. Our paper addresses the following questions:

- To what extent does co-creation require changes in the relationship between citizens and public organizations?
- To what extent can these changes be explained by surrounding state and governance traditions?

Theoretical framework
Co-creation in social innovation
Co-creation in social innovation involves the creation of long-lasting outcomes (Mulgan, 2009; Mair, 2010) which aim, through a process of participation and collaboration, to address societal needs by fundamentally changing the relationships (Osborne and Brown, 2011), positions and rules between the involved stakeholders (Voorberg *et al.*, 2015). Social innovation is part of the new public governance (NPG) paradigm, in which relatively autonomous, but interdependent, actors try to shape the content and results of policy programmes (Osborne, 2006). The aim is governing though networks which involve close collaboration with equal partners. Therefore, in NPG, citizens become 'co-creators' and are

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expected to deliver valuable input to the development of a public services (Stoker, 2006). We define public co-creation as 'the involvement of citizens in the initiation and/or design of public services' (Voorberg *et al.*, 2015, p. 1347). Citizens are crucial for an initiative to be successful (Scott, 1998). These partnerships and horizontal relationships between citizens and governments are fundamentally different to older paradigms such as NPM and traditional public administration (PA) (Osborne, 2006). In the old PA model, citizens were regarded as service users, with no contribution to make regarding adding value to services. NPM was based on using competition and quasi-markets to improve public services—service users were viewed as customers, not as co-creators. Co-creation is widely viewed as a game changer from these previous paradigms because it brings actors from the state, the market and civil society together (Streeck and Schmitter, 1985) in newly-formed partnerships. However, we argue in this paper that whether co-creation really is a game changer depends on the policy context in countries.

State and governance traditions as enablers of, or impediments to, game change

Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999) said that if a public sector adopts a new paradigm, there will be variations in application between different countries. They explained this by referring to specific national policy contexts (in terms of state and governance traditions). State and governance traditions can be defined as sets of institutional and cultural practices that constitute a set of expectations about behaviour (Loughlin and Peters, 1997). Differences in state and governance traditions may explain why governments respond differently to conceptually identical challenges (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999, p. 39). This results in two important considerations:

- Whether co-creation will be 'allowed' to be a game changer is dependent on the state and governance traditions already in place.
- If game change occurs, the extent to which public services are changed by will also depend on these state and governance traditions.

Key features of state and governance traditions relevant to co-creation

The academic literature describes a variety of features as state and governance traditions (for example Lijphart, 2012). In this paper, we identify the ones that are important for co-

creation, rather than providing a comprehensive overview of all the possible state and governance traditions. Building on the works of Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999) and Loughlin and Peters (1997), we categorize these features along two dimensions. The first dimension involves the extent to which countries have a tradition of sharing authority with parties or agencies that are non-governmental. This creates a spectrum with two ideal types. At one end of the spectrum, there are 'consultative' governments. This tradition is characterized by multiple collaborative structures between government and social partners, civil society and private actors. These structures are the result of extended institutionalization processes. At the other extreme, are 'authoritative' governments that seek to develop policy in an exclusive manner and retain as much control as possible.

The second dimension refers to the culture of governance; this dimension also has a spectrum between two ideal types. Here, we use the classical distinction between 'Rechtsstaat' and 'public interest' (Pierre, 1995). In Rechtsstaat-oriented states (for example Germany and The Netherlands), state actions are aimed at the preparation and enforcement of laws. The culture of governance is characterized by an emphasis on legal correctness and legal control (the rule-of-law). At the other end of the spectrum are public interest countries (Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the UK). Here, the government is less dominant. Its position is best characterized as a 'chair' or 'referee' that safeguards the fair distribution of resources. Its decisions are based on which party (for instance among competing interest groups) would best serve the public interest. In these countries, the law is more in the background compared to Rechtsstaat-oriented countries.

Research strategy

Given the limited empirical knowledge about the relationship between state and governance traditions and co-creation, case study research is a good way forward. Since we selected cases based on an independent factor (state and governance traditions), our study is a co-variational international comparative case study (Blatter and Haverland, 2012).

Case selection

Our cases were selected using a set of eligibility criteria. The most important criterion was that cases had to be rooted in different combinations of state and governance traditions. The two-

by-two matrix in table 1 shows four possible combinations of state and governance traditions. A country's placement in a specific cell could be debated, since both dimensions are on a continuum between two ideal types. Classifications in table 1 are therefore relative to the other countries rather than absolute.

Estonia—authoritative and public interest: Estonia is a relatively young state having gained independence in 1991. Both the state and governance traditions are rooted in the old Soviet system. Consequently, the state is the central actor and is largely responsible for public service delivery. So we classified Estonia as having an authoritative structure. In terms of its governance culture, Estonian law is more in the background compared to countries with a Rechtsstaat tradition. Therefore, we characterize the governance culture as 'public interest' (Praxis, 2011; Lember and Sarapuu, 2014). However, this kind of public interest culture is quite different to that in Anglo-Saxon countries. Whereas, in the UK, the governance culture is characterized by competition between parties (including government), due to a lack of emphasis on protocols and regulations, in the former Soviet countries it enables governments to retain their dominant positions as an authoritative actor. As such, in these countries, the government is still the central actor in most policy issues.

Germany—authoritative and Rechtsstaat: Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999) classify Germany as a federal country in which authority is shared among multiple layers of government. This sharing is formalized in multiple procedures and protocols, resulting in a very hierarchical administration (Jann, 2003). These procedures and protocols make Germany an ideal-type example of a country with a Rechtsstaat governance culture. Although there is formal of consultation with other parties and government layers, Germany is authoritative in the sense that policy decisions explicitly lie with the responsible administrators. As a result, there are strong interdependencies between government levels. To illustrate, implementation of federal legislation is, in most policy areas, delegated to the state (Länder) level. However, execution is often delegated further to local authorities (Lodge and Wegrich, 2005).

The Netherlands—consultative and Rechtsstaat: The Netherlands has a consensus state tradition. The administration is characterized by the

Table 1. Categorization of selected countries.

State tradition/governance culture	Authoritative	Consultative
Rechtsstaat	Germany	The Netherlands
Public interest	Estonia	UK

involvement of social partners and various government bodies. Policy execution is based on the 'principle of subsidiarity'—meaning that it is carried out at the most decentralized level as possible. On this basis, the state tradition can be characterized as 'consensus gaining', with Dutch government bodies used to collaborating with non-governmental bodies. However, as with Germany, The Netherlands also has a Rechtsstaat culture of governance, in which there is a strong emphasis on protocols and rule following. One example of this is that in 1848 it was decided that everyone (including the monarch) would be subject to constitutional law. The combination of a tradition of consensus gaining and a Rechtsstaat culture of governance means that, just as in Germany, government actions and its related activities are institutionalized and formalized within laws and regulations (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999 p. 270).

UK—consultative and public interest: The UK has a long history of being a unitary and centralized state characterized by an authoritative state tradition (Loughlin and Peters, 1997). However, devolution heralded the promise of a more decentralized state structure (Mitchell, 2009). Nevertheless, the national government controls key areas of social and economic policy issues, most recently demonstrated in the UK's decision to leave the European Union, while Scotland and Northern Ireland showed a clear preference to remain (*Guardian*, 2016). Moreover, since the introduction of NPM, government ministers largely base their decisions on inputs from alternative sources, other than from civil servants. This form of decentralization is not based on the principle of subsidiarity. As a result, local government is less protected from central governmental interventions than countries such as Germany and The Netherlands (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999, p. 294). The governance culture in the UK can be characterized as the (Anglo-Saxon) public interest model in that, with regard to public service provision, the government acts as a referee, deciding which party best serves the public interest. As such, the government has a background role in

policy execution. Government bodies and non-government bodies operate relatively independently of each other compared to states in which there is a tradition of consensus gaining. Government bodies and non-government bodies may even be competitors in public service provision.

In addition to meeting the criteria regarding different state and governance traditions, we ensured that our cases were as similar as possible regarding other important elements:

• First, all the cases selected had to involve co-creation in which citizens took the initiative.
• Second, this co-creation had to fall within the welfare domain.
• Third, all the co-creation projects had to have been running for at least one year.

Table 2 provides a brief overview of the selected cases and their primary objectives.

As we examined only one case in each country, the external validity of our findings is potentially limited. Nevertheless, our study adds to the understanding of co-creation and the institutional context. To enhance internal validity, we operationalized the model's concepts in an interview protocol.

We interviewed 10 key actors in each case. We distinguished between citizens (people voluntarily involved in a co-creation process) and civil servants (involved on a professional basis and representing a government or public organization). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. To increase the internal validity further, we analysed relevant policy documents, published by both the co-creation projects and the involved municipalities.

Results

For each case, we assessed the extent to which co-creation had changed public service delivery, and how state traditions and governance culture influenced these changes.

Estonia—Maarja Kula: Co-creation required a fundamental change to the traditional way that public services were provided in Estonia. Co-creation aims to create outcomes that are specific to the preferences of target groups. It diverges from traditional public services in the sense that it leads to diversity in public services, rather than creating a uniform supply. However, in the 1990s at the birth of the Estonian state, there was a great willingness to conduct public services differently than in the Soviet period. So a window of opportunity opened for entrepreneurial citizens:

> *At the end of the 1990s a lot of things were still in flux and we wanted to prove to the government that we could do things in a different way* (Estonian citizen).

As a result, initiatives such as Maarja Kula were viewed favourably by the government and could count on its support. As one Estonian civil servant commented:

> *I think Maarja Küla, as an institution, was an important breaking point in that it was motivated to involve a range of stakeholders and to fill a gap that was present in Estonia.*

Table 2. Overview of the case studies.

Country: initiative	Primary objectives of the initiative
Estonia—Maarja Küla	To establish a home for 50 people with learning disabilities To make society more understanding and aware of learning disabilities
Germany—Dialogue macht Schule	To overcome cultural differences between teenagers from different backgrounds To show students different ways of participating in society To help young immigrants to get the same grades as young people born in Germany
The Netherlands—Staters4Communities	To improve work opportunities for young graduates by building up valuable experience in civil initiatives To increase the financial sustainability of civil initiatives by adding knowledge from young urban professionals
UK—Dementia Care East Dunbartonshire	To change the perceptions of older people from simply being service recipients to being seen as assets for their communities

In the Maarja Kula project, the government changed its policy on youth care provision and started to actively educate civil servants about alternative forms of youth care provision. The authoritative state traditions and the absence of a strong law orientation made it relatively easy to implement co-creation as a new paradigm. As one of the initiators put it:

> *Siiri Oviir, the then minister of social affairs, took only about 20 minutes to remove the obstacles that stood in the way of developing the village in 2003* (Estonian citizen).

So co-creation was not 'hindered' by existing institutional barriers, even though youth care professionals were somewhat reluctant to involve citizens in youth care provision. Thus, in Estonia, state traditions and the governance culture supported the implementation of co-creation projects once policy-makers were convinced of the usefulness of co-creation.

Germany—Dialogue macht Schule: Co-creation required a fundamental shift from traditional public service delivery. Given the strict and formal distribution of authority over the different government levels, the extent to which services are provided in line with the preferences of target groups very much depends on the public administration. Although policy is conducted in a consultative manner in Germany, whether stakeholders are actually invited to take part in decision-making is formalized. Co-creation clearly diverges from this way of providing services by bringing in actors from backgrounds other than those stated in the protocols.

Our assessment concluded that relationships between citizens and civil servants were not visibly changed through the Dialogue macht Schule project. While many civil servants emphasized that the integration of migrants had become a major focus and that education could play a major role in addressing this problem, they did not necessarily see co-creation as the solution. As one German civil servant mentioned:

> *[We] are opposed to letting non-professional staff into the classroom.*

An important argument for this is that responsibilities are strictly separated in Germany:

> *…there is a clear separation between formal education that takes place in school and non-formal education, such as what Dialogue macht Schule is teaching, which should remain outside school* (German civil servant).

In addition, civil servants pointed to the fact that the school curriculum is drafted at the federal level but implemented locally and, therefore, changing it was difficult. The Rechtsstaat orientation hampered co-creation because changes in the curriculum have to be decided by multiple layers of administrative actors (in a formal consultation) and the authority to take decisions is delegated to another party. Therefore, in Germany, co-creation demands a fundamental break with how services have traditionally been provided, and a strong orientation towards laws and protocols, with a strict and formal distribution of responsibilities, makes this a difficult process. Our case study showed how co-creation can be constrained by state and governance traditions, where multiple governmental layers need to be convinced of its merits.

The Netherlands—Starters4Communities (S4C): Co-creation in The Netherlands does not require a major shift in policy. The country has a tradition of sharing authority and consulting with different stakeholders, so allowing new stakeholders (such as citizen groups) to become co-creators does not require a fundamental change from the 'Dutch way' of conducting policy. The country's decentralized structure and relatively few levels of government (compared to Germany) and the principle of subsidiarity, means that adapting a policy to favour specific target groups will often be in line with the rationale of many public administrators. However, there is also an emphasis on following rules and protocols in The Netherlands, so it can be difficult for newcomers to get a seat at the decision-making table and be accepted as partners. Problems might occur with social innovations if citizens attempt to claim formal responsibility for public services.

In the S4C case, there were distinct responses with regards to changed relationships between citizens and civil servants as a result of co-creation. On the one hand, a Dutch civil servant said that the administration took 'a step back' in order to allow citizen initiatives to flourish:

> *We don't organize anything, that's the big change from the past. We have changed from 'taking care for' to 'making sure that'. Instead of taking care for people we just facilitate [them].*

The consultative tradition to some extent paved the way for this:

> *Alliances [with social partners] were already there…they are becoming really good neighbourhoods if citizens want to invest in them* (Dutch civil servant).

Co-creation was not massively different from the past. On the other hand, citizens commented that, in the S4C projects, civil servants remained responsible:

> *The supervisors [of the project] are professionals. They know the [safety] criteria. Of course, you need to comply with the conditions. That's their [involved professionals'] job* (Dutch citizen).

So the formal relationships between actors was unchanged. This reflects a combination of both consultation and authority sharing, and the Rechtsstaat culture of The Netherlands. Collaboration with other partners is everyday practice, but the collaboration structures are institutionalized and formalized in protocols and regulations, and therefore relatively resistant to change.

Co-creation did not significantly change the relationships between citizens and civil servants. With a consultative tradition, collaboration is nothing new for Dutch civil servants. The formalized structures of how this collaboration should be governed remained intact in the case study. State and governance traditions resulted in co-creation amounting to only an incremental step in changing public service delivery. In terms of the focus of this paper—the relationships between actors—we failed to identify major changes.

UK—Dementia Care East Dunbartonshire: The UK government is aware of the potential of co-creation, for instance the former prime minister David Cameron's enthusiasm for the Big Society (Cameron, 2010). However, co-creation might be less a drastic change in public service delivery than Cameron implied. Given the UK's public interest governance culture, competition between various partners in public service delivery is an established feature in the UK administration. Co-creation is simply another step in existing trends in public service reform. Further, since public officials in the UK are not as focused on protocols as their German and Dutch counterparts, new possibilities for exploration and experimentation may occur more easily in public service delivery. Although the UK government is authoritative in nature,

it tends to stay in the background. This means that while co-creation may bring new players to the table, the government remains responsible for public service delivery. The relationships between actors in public service delivery may not change that much.

Some civil servants saw co-creation as just another step on a path that was initiated with the introduction of NPM. One UK civil servant commented:

> *…the co-production stuff gave us a pattern, if you like, of how—OK, we've got good relations, this could be better maybe—but how can we get everybody else on board or get more people on board.*

Therefore, the fresh political attention given to involving citizens created a renewed window of opportunity for co-creation (i.e. the involvement of citizens and their organizations):

> *I think the joint improvement team approached East Dunbartonshire and said: 'Look, we'd be interested to work with you', and they worked closely with Governance International who are earmarking co-production with the joint improvement team* (UK civil servant).

However, other civil servants stressed that, at least in dementia care, co-creation could be traced back to before the NPM era and had always been part of elderly care:

> *That is the view we work with. This is not a new dawn. We do work with people and not to them. I think what co-production is trying to push more, is that we use this idea that people have, to be more involved in leading what they want to do. Which is great…* (UK civil servant).

Co-creation in the UK is not a fundamental 'game-changing' revolution in terms of the relationships between citizens and civil servants. At least in our case, it fits with contemporary views on how public services should be delivered and had been part of elderly care for quite some time. From the theoretical perspective of state and governance traditions, the reason for this may be related to the reforms that the UK administration underwent during the Thatcher regime. During this time, early forms of collaboration were implemented top-down, thus paving the way for other stakeholders to become involved in public service delivery (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1999). As such, the current attention to co-creation can be thought of as just the next step on this path.

Conclusions

Co-creation is gaining momentum as a new paradigm for public service delivery and has been heralded as a game changer. However, whether and how co-creation is a real game changer depends on the traditions and governance culture that characterize the public sector in a particular country. We examined four co-creation endeavours (in Estonia, Germany, The Netherlands and the UK) to determine whether the relationships between citizens and public officials really changed as fundamentally as the supporters of co-creation claim.

Our case study in Estonia revealed that relationships between public officials and citizens had been drastically changed. The traditionally authoritative state helped to implement co-creation as part of the new paradigm. In Germany, co-creation required a similar fundamental shift, but our study showed that this was only marginally realized. Due to Germany's authoritative state tradition and Rechtsstaat culture, reforms have to be agreed by multiple layers of administration with shared and formalized authorities. In The Netherlands, such a fundamental shift could not be identified. With its consultative tradition, co-creation was not very different from how public services were already being delivered in The Netherlands. In the UK, co-creation also failed to create a ground-breaking change in relationships between citizens and public officials. However, given that in the UK, NPM was introduced in the 1990s, co-creation amounted to a natural next step in partnerships between citizens and public organizations.

Based on this analysis, we can draw some theoretical implications. First, we conclude that, state traditions and governance culture could explain why fundamental change in policy has occurred (or not). We found that a specific set of state and governance traditions could stimulate co-creation (in Estonia) but equally hamper co-creation (in Germany). The Dutch case showed that state and governance traditions can pave the way for co-creation in the form of an incremental innovation. In the UK case, previous major changes in public service delivery (NPM) had changed the state and governance traditions such that co-creation fitted with contemporary ideas of public service provision. As such, our research empirically illustrates the claim of Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999) that state and governance traditions can explain why governments respond differently to similar challenges. Our research suggests that country specifics might have important value in explaining whether, why and how co-creation is adopted. So researchers should apply an ecological perspective and consider the context in which adoption is being attempted (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Walker, 2008).

Our research has a few limitations that should be acknowledged. External validity is limited since we examined only one case in each country. There is thus a risk that the differences we identified are specific to the individual case rather than being representative of the entire country. However, the paper made plausible assumptions about how state and governance traditions might affect changes in public service delivery. We suggest that, in order to understand why co-creation is embraced as a strategy in public service delivery, we need to consider this wider macro-level context.

Further research, extending our theoretical and empirical approach to other state and governance traditions (for example African and Asian countries), is required to ascertain the role of state and governance traditions in facilitating co-creation in a more robust way. A quantitative study would be the best way to provide the necessary external validity for the initial observations we have made based on our qualitative case studies. We hope our early results will encourage public management scholars to explore the nexus of state tradition and co-creation capacity in more detail.

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IMPACT

This paper shows that co-creation between citizens and public officials requires different adaptations in different policy contexts. To understand why co-creation did or did not work depends on the policy context. For instance, the paper suggests that an authoritative strategy can be very useful to implement co-creation smoothly and rapidly. Authority shared with multiple actors, however, creates multiple decision points. Practitioners interested in co-creation must be aware of their institutional context to understand what kind of strategy the co-creation initiative they should pursue to succeed in the long term.