



# Involving rural older people in service co-production: Is there an untapped pool of potential participants?



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## A B S T R A C T

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Co-production is currently promoted by governments as a response to public service reform in conditions of austerity and, within a neoliberal ideology, to compel individual and collective responsibility. While co-production is intuitively attractive in its appeal to community collectivism and provision of locally appropriate services, there is a lack of reflection on the actual capacity of rural communities to become co-producers. This study considers co-production as a form of participation requiring attributes of volunteering and social involvement. It applies a model of formal participation with 5 levels from attendance at community events to organising new services, in order to assess the potential for service co-production by rural older people in 6 Scottish settlements. We find that rural older people are already heavily participating in community activities but with lower numbers taking part in the activities that require higher levels of commitment. It is the most well 'resourced' in terms of personal characteristics such as education that are most likely to participate. There are few older people who are willing to help their community that are not already involved in formal participation. Overall, findings suggest there is a very small potential pool of non-involved rural older residents who are willing to participate at high levels of commitment (co-production). Further research is now needed to build on these findings, and particularly to explore what it is that will encourage those already involved at some level to step up to co-production.

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## 1. Introduction

Co-production is currently promoted by governments as a facet of public service reform in conditions of austerity and, within a neoliberal ideology, to encourage individual and collective responsibility (Needham, 2007; Scott, 2010). Co-production means service users and practitioners/providers working together "in equal partnership" (Boyle and Harris, 2009: 3) or as Bovaird and Loeffler (2012: 1121) suggest in an "equal and reciprocal relationship". This ranges from partnerships in service design to partnerships in provision (Boyle and Harris, 2009; Marschall, 2004). Co-production tends to be associated with community capacity-building in conditions of urban decay and the need to promote public good services, such as crime prevention (Marschall, 2004) and social housing (Needham, 2007). It also has potential for rural

and remote places where services are problematical to provide due to lack of economies of scale (Burholt and Dobbs, 2012) and is often organised within a social enterprise organisational model (Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb, 2012).

Resilience is highlighted as important for communities to thrive, and is variously depicted as local collaborative responses where communities 'take responsibility' (Scottish Government, 2013) and have 'independence' (NHS Scotland, 2007:11), through to adaptive capacity (OECD, 2010:104) and capability to 'bounce back' from challenges (SAC, 2010: 45). The implication that rural communities may be capable of resilience is likely predicated on evidence about strong social capital (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998), high rates of volunteering (Woolvin and Rutherford, 2013: 15) and notions of rural stoicism (Bell, 2007). At the Scottish Government level, policy encouraging community resilience sits in a stream that has promoted an "enterprising" Third Sector (the spectrum of non-governmental and non-profit-making organisations from charities, voluntary and community groups to social enterprise) for at least a decade (for example, Scottish Executive, 2003, 2004) inviting individuals and communities to develop socially

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entrepreneurial organisations to help provide needed services and a gateway to employment. Social enterprise is an organisational model that draws on the principles of business management in order to generate social value (Scottish Government, 2008). Thus, policy support for services co-production tends to conceptualise a Third Sector peopled with social entrepreneurs, rather than as a space of volunteering. As we will demonstrate below, however, the notion of service co-production inevitably involves elements of 'voluntary' work and effort from citizen co-producers and, as Woolvin and Rutherford (2013:4) highlight, volunteering has a key role in public sector reform.

Supporting the potential for rural co-production, there is evidence that rural volunteering is often a substitute for, rather than an addition to, service provision (Woolvin, 2012). While co-production is intuitively attractive in its appeal to community collectivism and provision of locally appropriate services, there is a lack of reflection on the actual capacity of rural communities to co-produce. Community members may be dealing with multiple stressors, including depleting economic and human capital and climate change effects. Skinner and Joseph (2011) in Canada, highlight rural people's desire to co-produce to ensure the very viability of their rural communities, but the often unbearable burden of stress this brings. Woolvin and Hardill (2013) note issues of community capacity to undertake greater involvement in service delivery and whether this may be "inappropriate or unsustainable" in rural areas (Woolvin and Rutherford, 2013). Challenges including reliance on a core group of particularly active volunteers are highlighted in community development literature (e.g. Shortall, 2008). Implications are raised for how policies that promote co-production of services by non-state organisations will play out in remote and rural areas.

The existence of high proportions of older people, including early retirees, in rural areas can make them seem attractive for co-production because of the apparent under-deployed economic resource coupled with a desire to keep older people active for health purposes (Davis et al., 2012; Heley and Jones, 2013; Hodgkin, 2012; Liu and Besser, 2003). However, as Marschall (2004: 232) suggests, co-production requires both suitably resourced and available citizens "and the existence of meaningful opportunities and arrangements for their participation". Given rural communities' service delivery challenges, co-production can appear as a way to collectively "help ourselves" using the pool of relatively healthy older residents. However, little is known about the match between the willingness and skills of older rural people and the demands of volunteering in co-production.

The findings presented here form a part of the Older People for Older People (O4O) study (Farmer et al., 2012). It developed at a particular nexus in Scottish and European policy discussion. The ideas for the study drew on Scottish Government promotion of social enterprise to improve community capacity (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2004), international policy promoting localism and resilience for rural sustainability (OECD, 2010) and Scottish Government interest in the growing proportions of older people in rural Scotland (e.g. Philip et al., 2003). O4O aimed to address gaps in knowledge raised by this policy nexus by investigating the extent to which older rural people could move into basic service co-production, thus perhaps both sustaining community capacity and deriving wellbeing benefits.

This paper describes findings from a questionnaire survey of six rural Scottish settlements in 2009–10, in which we sought to assess rural older people's capacity for participating in co-production. Co-production is conceptualised here as a higher level type of formal participation in community activity, drawing on a conceptual model of civic engagement and user involvement (Arnstein, 1969). We focus on a hierarchical formal participation model, with five

levels from attendance at community events to organising new services, to assess the potential for service co-production by rural older people.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Co-production to provide rural services

As discussed above, within Scotland, co-production has been promoted within an 'enterprising' Third Sector Discourse. It has also been advocated in other parts of the UK through the notion of The Big Society (Hudson, 2011), with the philosophy of requesting communities to transform public services delivery by taking an active role in planning and delivering services (Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2010b; Conservative Party, 2010).

Public sector reforms that variously employ notions of service co-production, can be seen in other European countries and to varying extents in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The public sector increasingly sees added value in contracting out services to Third Sector organisations such as social enterprises (Scottish Government, 2011c), partly related to a perception that these will bring co-production. Social enterprises range from hybrid voluntary organisations to the innovative new companies of social entrepreneurs or socially entrepreneurial communities. Surpluses generated from social enterprise activity are reinvested in social ventures and community activities (DTI, 2002). Many social enterprises are targeted at work and social integration (e.g. Vidal, 2005), while some focus on partner arrangements between the social economy and the state (Addari et al., 2008). Williams found that rural communities had a greater propensity to social rather than commercial enterprise, when compared with urban communities (Williams, 2007). Scottish studies showed enthusiasm for rural social enterprises (Farmer et al., 2008) and 35% of Scottish social enterprises, in one study, were located in rural areas (Small Business Service, 2005).

The devolved state of Scotland, the site of this paper, contains varying rural contexts and its government policy embraces community empowerment and involvement of communities in public service provision (Scottish Government, 2011a, 2012a). With around 5.3 million people and 79,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Scotland's population mainly resides within a central belt around the major cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Scottish rural areas are classified as: accessible rural (less than 3000 residents and within 30 min drive to a settlement of 10,000 or more); remote rural (population as previous but a drive time over 30 min) and very remote rural (drive time over 60 min). These areas may also contain towns (3000–10,000 population) that are accessible (30 min drive from an urban area of 10,000 or more), remote small towns (over 30 min drive time) and very remote small towns (over 60 min drive time) (Scottish Government, 2012c). The combination of rural geography and co-production policy context make rural Scotland a relevant case study location in which to explore older peoples' capacity for services co-production.

Scottish government policy links the sustainability of rural communities with building community strength through volunteering and social enterprise (Scottish Government, 2011b). This reflects an approach acknowledging the nuances of the rural service landscape, targeted less at collective action to 'heal society' as in urban models, and more focused on a resilience narrative (Scottish Government, 2008; Skerratt, 2013).

Scottish rural communities, as in many other countries, face challenges, for example, relating to the delivery of essential community, health and care services for their ageing populations (King and Farmer, 2009; Farmer et al., 2010). Service provision, including for older people, is transitioning to encourage participation of

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