

**Tara Fenwick**  
**Co-production in Practice**  
**A Sociomaterial Analysis**

**Abstract:** Co-production, typically defined as services and products that are planned and delivered in full conjunction with clients, has become a popular policy discourse and prescription for professional practice across a wide range of public services. Literature tends to herald the democratic and even transformative potential of co-production, yet there is little empirical evidence of its processes and negotiations at the front lines of everyday practice. This article adopts a socio-material theoretical frame of professional knowing-in-practice to analyse these negotiations, drawing from a case study of community policing. The argument is situated in terms of implications of these co-production practices for professional learning.

**Key words:** sociomaterial theory, co-production, policing practice, professional learning, professional knowing-in-practice

An increasing emphasis in organization of public service delivery in the UK is known as ‘co-production’, defined in simple terms as professional services and products that are co-developed with clients or service users. The phenomenon is associated with a general concern that service user voice and choice needs much greater representation. It is also fast becoming a prominent policy discourse, linked explicitly to the current coalition government’s dream of a ‘Big Society’<sup>1</sup>. In public sector services such as health, policing and social care, co-production increasingly calls for active community participation whereby service users are centrally involved in designing and delivering services. Boyle and Harris (2009:12), whose white paper sets forth a rationale for co-production in all public services, explain that it goes well beyond the idea of ‘citizen engagement or ‘service user involvement’ to foster the principle of ‘equal partnership’. While these ideals of users’ active participation in service delivery may already be familiar in some Nordic contexts, they pose considerable challenges for reform in countries such as the UK and Australia (Dunston et al. 2008). In fact, Bovaird (2007) argues that a shift to public service co-production with its promises of greater democracy and active citizenship will be ‘transformative’. Co-production is conceptualized in different ways (Needham 2007), but its discussions pose important questions about the changing nature and value of professional work, expertise and knowledge. These

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Big Society’ is defined by the Cameron coalition government as including social action (a culture of voluntarism and philanthropy), public service reform, and community empowerment. (RBWM 2011).

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questions then, inevitably, have implications for understanding and supporting professional continuing education and learning.

The problem with much of the existing debate on co-production is that it has tended to be concentrated at the level of policy and prescription. Here visions of reform flourish in aspirational documents lauding the ‘revolutionary’ potential of co-productive arrangements to build social cohesion, citizen empowerment, improved services, and of course, economic efficiency (e.g. Boyle and Harris 2009; Cahn 2001). What actually happens in the concrete practices of such arrangements is less well known. Indeed, there is little research yet establishing that the co-production ideal is even possible. Dunston et al (2009) call for studies that trace attempts to adopt co-production in different professional services and that show the difficulties as well as the particular benefits. This points to a first major problem, not unfamiliar in policy for public service, where a particular prescription for reform precedes evidence demonstrating its effectiveness, feasibility, and undesirable consequences. A second problem is that, at least in UK discussions, the co-production discourse at present promotes universalised claims and ideals for all aspects of public service. While public policy to a certain extent must remain at the level of general guidance to allow diverse implementations at local sites, the spirit of the policy can be quickly eroded when it fails to acknowledge even the most basic distinctions and issues. For example, why should ‘authentic’ co-production always involve service users in the *planning* as well as the delivery of services? Is this appropriate in services requiring specialist expertise and equipment such as medical surgery or emergency medical response? Indeed, do service users even desire to be fully involved in designing and delivering *all* of the public services that they access? Is full involvement of service users appropriate in disciplinary services such as security and crime management? What happens with user involvement in services such as psychiatric and dementia care where issues of user capacity and family may be central? And what happens with accountability for professional service, and costs? Are users supposed to share these as well? The co-production discourse doesn’t tend to engage these issues, which can nuance a simplistic model of transforming all public service delivery through users’ equal partnership with professionals.

The present discussion contends that certain existing forms of professional practice, perhaps particularly in some rural community-based settings, demonstrate important aspects and diverse realizations of co-production. Accounts of these practices can help contribute to more multi-layered models of co-production, and suggest processes for developing and supporting co-production. To this end, this article examines rural policing practices which are argued to illustrate an important form of co-production. The analysis explores questions such as, How do participants in a co-produced form of professional service – both practitioners and members of the community – negotiate decision making and authority, mutual expectations, client relations and standards of practice? What sorts of conflicts, uncertainties and compromises are generated through co-production? The examples illustrate some of the processes and dilemmas of co-production. They also point to seeds of co-produced service delivery that suggest areas in existing practice that might be organically supported and extended to further develop co-production – in contrast to implementation models imposed from above. Finally this analysis holds useful insights for professional learning. When we understand better how experienced practitioners negotiate these complexities through their knowing-in-

practice, we can begin to appreciate the learning challenges confronting newly inducted practitioners as well as practitioners unused to co-productive forms of practice. Hopefully through this appreciation of learning challenges in co-production, educators are better positioned to consider pedagogical assistance for this learning, whether through pre-service education or workplace supports.

To examine these practices of co-production, it makes sense to draw from the growing field of practice theory that is proving useful in examining professionals' everyday work (e.g. Hager, Lee and Reich 2012; Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow 2003; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001). In particular, this discussion adopts a sociomaterial approach to analyse these micro-practices, adopting Gherardi's (2001) notion of knowing-in-practice. Many existing studies of professional work have tended to focus on personal and social elements of knowledge and activity. In such analyses, material dynamics tend to be ignored, underestimated or isolated as though material artefacts are separate from and subordinate to human intention and action. Yet as many have argued in recent analyses of social life, work and knowledge, materiality fundamentally shapes practice and knowledge. Texts and technologies, furniture and locks, flesh and instruments, storms and bacteria – material dynamics are interwoven with social dynamics in ways that constitute what becomes enacted as practice and knowing. In this view the material is not separated from the social as though it is distinct and inert. Instead events, routines, and relations are understood as 'sociomaterial' configurations. Sociomaterial analyses have proven useful and are becoming increasingly familiar in studies of knowledge in work (Gherardi 2001, 2009; Orlikowski 2007), education (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk 2011), and professional learning (Fenwick, Jensen and Nerland 2012).

This discussion draws from case examples produced in a study of rural community policing practices in Scotland. Like many public services that have shifted to greater emphasis on an active role for 'consumers' or 'clients' in the definition and delivery of professional service, community policing is intended to promote proactive partnerships with public citizens for problem-solving - in the policing case, to increase safety and crime prevention in local communities. In fact, the term 'co-production' was coined by economists studying the Chicago police in the 1970s, Ostrom and Baugh (1973), who concluded that successful policing depended on the close involvement of members of the public in contributing to actually produce the service. Policing provides rich examples of the complex community negotiations, multiple roles, and what we called 'inventive knowings' required in everyday practice, much of which unfolds in a space between community expectations and the strict protocols governing standards of police practice.

The article begins with a section introducing sociomaterial approaches to analyse professional knowing-in-practice, followed by a section describing the study methods and challenges. The third section analyses selected incidents narrated by police officers to explore the micropractices of co-production embedded in these instances, with particular attention to the materiality of co-production. The final section highlights the conflicts, compromises and ambiguities that become absorbed into the accepted everyday work of co-production in professional service, creating complex micropractices that are rarely acknowledged or recorded. The discussion concludes with implications for professional learning and education.

## **Sociomaterial understandings of knowing-in-practice**

Professional knowing has conventionally been treated as an individual and person-centred process, related to personal experience as well as acquisition of disciplinary and problem-solving competencies in knowing what to do, how and why (Boud and Hager 2011). Countering this individualist ‘acquisitional’ metaphor, situated and sociocultural views introduced a participational metaphor for knowing. These views emphasized the importance of environment, rules, tools, and social relations; they showed that knowing is always situated and therefore is particular to particular settings and communities (Bratton et al 2003; Evans et al 2006).

Alongside these developments, a ‘practice’ turn has been heralded in social science research concerned with practitioners’ knowing and learning in everyday activity (Mietinnen et al. 2009; Schatzki et al. 2001). Practice, both as an enactment of and a medium for learning, has been argued to weave knowing together with action, conversation, and affect in purposeful and regularized orderings of human activity. Increasingly, we see studies of learning in work rooted in Schatzki’s (2001:2) definition of practice as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized round shared practical understanding’ (e.g. see Hager et al. 2012). These studies have drawn attention to the importance of human and nonhuman inter-relations in knowing and action. They have also introduced conceptions of ‘knowing-in-practice’ as enactments performed through assemblages that are more-than-human (Gherardi 2001, 2009; Nicolini et al. 2003).

Pushing this line of enquiry still further, however, the critical dynamic that is still underestimated are materials themselves. Materials include both the organic and inorganic, embodied and remote, technological and natural, texts and artefacts: flesh and blood, forms and checklists, diagnostic machines and databases, furniture and passcodes, snowstorms and dead cell zones, and so forth. These are integral in shaping professional practice as a repertoire of routines as well as the particular knowing, decisions and actions that are enacted in any local instantiation of practice. Knowledge is sedimented and embedded in calibrating instruments, routines and manuals. Yet materials are often dismissed or ignored in analyses of professional practice and knowing. Or, they become isolated in a separation of materials from human thought and intention, where objects and nature become relegated to roles as tools subordinated to human intention and design in the received hierarchies of an anthropocentric universe.

A sociomaterial approach offers a different configuration for educational research in general and for understanding professional knowing in particular, where the material and the social are considered to be mutually implicated in bringing forth the world. Various theoretical perspectives examine the sociomaterial with their own distinct emphases and different purposes. These may include perspectives associated with actor network theory, science and technology studies, ‘after-ANT’ approaches, new materialisms, post structural geographies, complexity theories and others (see Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk 2011 for a review). Materials or what some call ‘materiality’ tend to be treated differently in each of these perspectives. Activity theory for instance examines the role of ‘mediating artefacts’ in human activity systems, whereas some versions of ANT assume ‘symmetry’ among human and nonhuman elements and examine the ways that they gather and collectively contribute to the force exercised by an assemblage or ‘actor-network’.

Given this heterogeneity, it would be impertinent to attempt an analytical synthesis or to suggest a single sociomaterial theoretical framework. The aim here is not to present an explanatory theory but to foreground the importance of tracing the enmeshment of materials in practices that are often represented solely in terms of social and personal dynamics. Orlikowski (2007: 1435) describes this as ‘the constitutive entanglement of the social and material in everyday life’. For her, all things – human, and non-human, hybrids and parts, knowledge and systems – are understood to be *effects* of connections and activity. They are performed into existence in webs of relations. There are no received categories. The point is that materials are performative and not inert; they are matter and they matter. They act together with other types of things and forces to exclude, invite, and regulate particular forms of participation in enactments, some of which we term knowing. The shift here is what Jensen (2010:7) characterizes as ‘from epistemology and representation to practical ontology and performativity’. The question of producing knowledge and learning shifts from a representational idiom, mapping and understanding a world that is out there, to a view that the world is doing things, full of agency. When we accept such a configuration, processes such as knowing and learning, identity, and practices are understood to be sociomaterial enactments. A focus on the sociomaterial therefore helps us to untangle the heterogeneous relationships holding together these larger categories, tracing their durability as well as their weaknesses. In the more radical articulations of this approach, no anterior distinctions, such as human beings or social structures, are presupposed. Boundaries and properties of elements come into being in continuous assembling processes that Bennett (2010) calls ‘vital materiality’ and Barad (2003) ‘material-discursive agency’. In this assembling and re-assembling, subjects and objects are delineated, and relations are constituted that produce force. Everything is performed into existence: ‘the agents, their dimensions and what they are and do, all depend on the morphology of the relations in which they are involved’ (Callon, 1998). With such a perspective, Barad argues, one becomes prepared to appreciate the unknown radical future possibilities that are available at every encounter.

Some contributions of sociomaterial approaches to educational research are outlined in Fenwick et al (2011). For example, these approaches show how materials are relational and distributed within webs of thought and activity, social and physical phenomena in education. They offer methods for analyzing how materializing processes are bound up with assembling and reassembling policies and practices, identities and knowledge. While very different in their points of departure and foci for analysis, these approaches analyze processes that are conventionally called learning as phenomena of emergence where materials are vitally enmeshed in what emerges and how. They show the interdependence of entities, which de-centres the knowing, agentic subject and de-couples knowing and action from a strictly human-centered socio-cultural ontology. Most important perhaps, in the work of educational analysts, these approaches have offered resources to understand and engage, both pedagogically and critically, with the unpredictability of educational processes and the mutability of what appears to be stable and powerful.

A sociomaterial approach offers a sensibility rather than a set of analytical tools. Most perspectives associated with this approach refute cause-effect logic and do not attempt to generate explanatory models of social life. Instead they tend to cultivate an attunement to the micro-practices of everyday life, tracing mundane

interactions within and among various materials (bodies, instruments, texts, weather) and intensities (ideas, desires, conversations, movement, etc). For examining professional practice, in this case co-production, this approach is just another way to trace how particular practices become instantiated and performed at different levels, what dialogues are required to negotiate the politics and connections among these material-and-social interactions, what knowing is generated in the process, and what work is required to sustain the connections.

### **The case of rural community policing practice**

The paper is based on a qualitative, exploratory study of police practices in rural Scotland where community policing is the preferred model of practice. For police, everyday work is highly mobile and unpredictable. Environments of practice are continually changing, and encounters involve a wide range of actors and elements, both human and nonhuman. These encounters often demand fast response in action and decision, and carry the risk of serious consequences. Within these encounters, police professionals' everyday practices of coproduction demand a different analysis than is afforded through assumptions of institutionalized, regularized routines, organizational structures, or identifiable communities of practice.

The policing project was conducted in 2010-11 in one specific constabulary region with a land mass of 12,000 square miles and a population of about 30,000. The community structures here vary widely including one city, some islands, and many towns and villages of various sizes, some rather remote. There were 61 police stations of various sizes in this area, including 25 that were staffed by a single officer. Policing practice here as elsewhere is highly regulated with precise written procedures for modes of response, arrest and reporting. Supervision and enforcement of these procedures can also be strict, depending on the style of the senior officer. Thus policing responsibility is normally assumed to be rooted in an enactment of these procedures.

In this case, the confidential nature of policing practice and the restrictions governing intrusion of non-police personnel meant that ethnographic methods of tracing everyday practices were not possible. Furthermore, we desired a sampling of practices beyond the geographic sites that could be easily accessed by researchers. For these reasons, the decision was taken to use interview methods. Others working from a sociomaterial perspective have argued that narratives produced through interviews can foreground material interplays, approaching practice-based enquiry from the 'inside' through practitioners' perspectives micro-details of practice (e.g. see Mulcahy 2012; Nicolini). Obviously there are limitations in relying upon retrospective narratives to apprehend emergences of knowing and performances of practice. However, one could argue that other methods commonly used in anthropological research such as capturing video footage of practice or observational field notes equally pose the limitations of relying upon representations framed by a single interpretive viewpoint and freezing a moment in time. More important in methodology informed by a sociomaterial sensibility is the questions that are asked, and the critical attunement to material detail in analysis. At one level data of any sort, despite the usual efforts to ensure 'credibility' and triangulation, are nothing more than constructed traces, heavily mediated by the researchers who need to maintain a robust reflexivity about what is rendered absent through their interventions.

Single and group interviews were conducted over five months in 2010-2011 with 34 frontline, supervisory and senior police officers in this constabulary. Officers ranged in rank from Constable to Chief Constable, and worked in police units located in diverse geographic regions and communities throughout northern Scotland. The interviewing was conducted by a pair of researchers, one of whom was an ex-police officer familiar with the terrain and police culture. Interviewees were asked to describe their experiences in practice with community engagement, the challenges and strategies of community policing, and the effects of these policing practices on relevant dimensions of community well-being (trust, security, order, etc). They were also asked to narrate specific incidents illustrating everyday dilemmas. These incidents were probed to explore the various social and material forces at play: interviewees described their own and others' actions, the settings, rules and objects involved, their reasons for the actions they took, and the consequences. Transcripts were coded and cross-coded among three researchers and the findings validated with participants.

In this particular police constabulary in northern Scotland, there was general pride in community engagement. While they did not use the term 'co-production', many respondents referred to the 'particular style' of policing through personalized response, commitment to community well-being, and a unique culture of mutual trust between police and community members (Slade et al. 2011). However, resources are a continuing problem, with officers expected to 'cover' an average area of 151 square miles. One supervisor declared the main challenge of his work to be 'covering a 12 foot room with an 8 foot carpet'. More broadly, police budgets here and across the UK were being threatened with cuts of up to 25% at the time of the study, and some officers were concerned about their own jobs. Further, a major reorganization of the entire Scottish police force to collapse all constabularies into one, launched later in 2011, was being discussed at the time of the study. Staff in this particular rural constabulary were concerned that the planned centralization of all Scottish police services would not only reduce already scarce resources but, more fundamentally, would threaten the close linkages with community of their police services.

## Co-production in practice

If you dealt with a situation [here] as uniformly as may happen in Glasgow, then I think very very quickly you could be isolated as an individual, be isolated as a police officer, and then you would be isolating the police from the community and things would be going on and often would be unreported. Our ability to deal with things up here is based on the people actually coming and having a chat with us. (Inspector, rural town, northern Scotland).<sup>2</sup>

For police in rural communities, close relationships and everyday negotiation with the members of their communities – the 'service users' – appear to be a critical part of their work «*to deal with things*». That is, much of their everyday practice already exemplifies the spirit of the co-production ideals. What is

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<sup>2</sup> More specific locations and officer information are removed in order to protect anonymity of respondents.

remarkable is that this practice is largely improvised, untrained and unrecognized. It exemplifies a high degree of professional resourcefulness, ingenuity and skilled communication, and mobilizes a range of materials and knowledge sources – often working directly with community members, sometimes in unexpected ways. Yet little of this strategy is codified, and indeed, some of it ventures into a space beyond standardized protocols that interviewees often referred to as ‘discretion’. Some work literature refers to these improvisational strategies as ‘work-arounds’, because they usually arise as practitioners invent solutions when a prescribed rule or technology does not work for a given situation. This is an uncomfortable space, precisely because it is not exactly approved practice and therefore bad consequences or publicity are unprotected. It also is not under the sole control of the professionals involved, because community members are acting in this space too, in unpredictable ways. We could say that this space and the actions and solutions that comprise it emerge as enactments in particular moments and spaces of sociomaterial assemblages. This sociomaterial reading signals the nuances and messiness of policing work that are argued here to comprise important elements of ‘co-production’ in public service. It also highlights the multiplicity, the ambiguities and the tensions of this co-production at the front lines of professional practice.

### **Negotiating through community assemblages**

«One of the strengths for us, and because of the geography it can’t be any other way, is that our officers still live and work within their local community . . . we are embedded within the communities across the force area.» (Deputy chief constable, small city, Scotland).

Rural officers live with their families in the communities that they serve. Their activities as parents, consumers and citizens as well as law enforcers are tightly entwined with the various assemblages or networks holding together the community: complex social ties, cultural history, desires and commitments, landscape and isolation, tools and technology to hand and those that are not. Any action or event can have immediate and visible repercussions for other assemblages.

If you lock up somebody during the day, then a, it could be your neighbour or b, you could be standing beside them in the pub the next evening, so you really have to police with a very much community orientated style and common sense approach because it is not hit and run. (Constable, village, northern Scotland).

Experienced officers learn to balance this position as outsider-insiders in various community assemblages by ‘*playing the long game*’ in everyday moments, as one sergeant put it. Rather than leaping to action by following prescribed protocol strictly, they often negotiate to sustain a longer trusting relationship. This negotiation has practical material ends as well as social ones, for much investigative police work in the community relies on information that one’s neighbours are willing to share freely.

It’s a minor road traffic infringement and you can use your discretion and say «OK Mike, next time put your seatbelt on or get that light fixed» rather than booking him or giving him a ticket, because tomorrow that person could be a key-witness in something more serious and if you’ve got their backs up they’re



no[t] going to come you with the information. (Constable, town, northern Scotland).

The importance of materiality continually emerges in these narratives of negotiations. In one incident, a constable was called to a hit-and-run scene, where a lorry allegedly had backed into a shopkeeper's wall. Recognizing some metallic blue paint shavings left on this wall, the officer scraped them into an envelope and drove round to see the fellow he believed they belonged to. After some conversation seeking the man's assistance, the paint shavings were produced, inducing his sudden recollection of 'oh, *that* wall!', and his promise to pop round and fix the wall that afternoon. According to the officer, even the shop owner was satisfied because his wall got fixed so quickly. The entire incident was contained as an issue of some material damage needing repair, inflicted by a truck. It was neither personalized as an escalated case of injury and defense, nor labeled, disciplined and recorded as a crime. The community members involved worked with the police officer to co-produce this construction of the incident, stepping away from the conflict script of defensive perpetrator/outraged victim and taking up positions of cooperation.

The situation becomes complicated where lives are at risk. One man, now an inspector and instructor, told stories of his first postings in communities on the long undefended coastline of northwest Scotland. Here as a single officer, he and colleagues typically improvised a range of material and social resources to manage issues ranging from attempted drug smuggling to air-sea emergency rescues. In one story, he tells of being called to a scene of alleged assault. Arriving to confront a very large and physically aggressive intoxicated man, the lone officer engaged a nearby fisherman to help wrestle him to the ground, using the fisherman's ropes to secure him. Naturally, the interviewee noted, this wasn't recognized standard procedure but safety for all sometimes requires improvisation. Another described being a single officer called to a major motorway vehicular crash. To secure the scene for investigation, obtain emergency help for the injured, and ensure the safety of oncoming traffic, he needed to mobilize any tools to hand and anyone who stopped to help – while managing his own emotions and those of all involved.

Overall, these instances demonstrate the dialogue, negotiation and consultation that Needham (2007) emphasizes to be critical elements in co-production. They show, however, that negotiation is a complex activity that transcends conversation and social relations – it is also embodied, and invokes materiality in ways that skilled practitioners can leverage. Many opportune moments for negotiation were not planned, but seemed to emerge *within* encounters involving a range of sociomaterial entanglements. Resourceful officers found ways to work effectively within and through these assemblages to interrupt, reframe, and avert problem situations in moments that may be best characterized as knowing-in-practice.

## **Negotiating visibility and boundaries**

A primary community expectation from professionals in public service continues to be response: when people are in need, they often appeal to professionals to respond to fix the problem. In policing, communities expect officers to be visible – and the policing service itself values visibility to deter crime and to build a sense of public security and trust. This poses logistical challenges in rural community

policing, where the large geographic areas to be patrolled by each officer make it impossible to patrol neighbourhoods:

There is a delusion that it's going to be some sort of Hamish McBeth lifestyle, you're going to be living in a wee village with your Scottie dog, you're going to be out on the push bike round the village saying hello to the baker and the minister, but the reality is – well it's not the reality at all. (Constable, village, north Scotland).

But officers find other means of performing visibility. One is by responding, judiciously, to appeals for assistance that would ordinarily not be considered part of policing responsibility. However, a sense of visibility can be created by responding to certain calls for assistance that wouldn't perhaps be considered to be policing responsibility. In deciding whether to respond to such calls, practitioners consider more than the immediate judgment of the call's seriousness, and its relevance to the defined remit of their professional responsibility.

Officer 1: We're like a yellow pages to a lot of people. If they don't know who else to phone they phone the police and they... And quite often we'll do what we can to help them.

Officer 2: So how many burst pipes have you fixed!?! (laughter)

Officer 1: One and two and boarded up many's a window and my colleague – I haven't personally delivered a baby, but my colleague has.

Officer 3: But I tell you, I've searched a field for an escaped guinea pig, there was a wee girl that was in tears down the front office so it was a quiet no call day, so we went out and we searched the field. (Constables, village, northern Scotland).

Police helpfulness in scenarios such as this can go far in promoting a sense of visibility. First, the call for response is material, such as fixing broken things, and easily visible long after the intervention. Frequently the call is on behalf of a community's more vulnerable members: 'a wee girl in tears'. The story of police searching a field for her lost pet creates a useful symbolic material presence in a town, helping to construct a world where police are visible, responsive, and understanding.

Beyond instances of immediate problems demanding resolution, there were narratives of police insertion in broader projects for community development and wellbeing. Officers of various ranks attended community councils, ward forums, and had regular meeting with local elected officials. These meetings served as opportunities not only to be visibly present in community affairs, but also to hear community priorities and perceptions about the police roles and performance. Police have to balance between community priorities such as parking and dog fouling on community sidewalks, and national priorities such as organized crime and drugs which the community might not immediately see as their issues. Officers often took the initiative to develop individual relationships with local directors of social work agencies, health clinics, headteachers etc. in efforts to develop collaborative responses to issues such as alcohol and drug use or mental health. However officers noted that they often needed to explain reasons for their inclusion in such initiatives. One told of a community planning meeting for building a local

college, to which he invited himself. Addressing the general surprise at police involvement, he explained how a youth bulge in community population created by a college, as well as corresponding material effects of increased traffic load, housing demands and youth activity, all create new needs for everyone's safety that police expertise can help to plan for.

These practices illustrate to some degree the imperative for co-production, according to Boyle and Harris (2009), that community members design and deliver services in equal partnership with professionals. Clearly this ideal relies upon much negotiation, even education, with community members for practitioners to prove their value sufficiently to warrant the trust of service users. Again we see that material enactments can helpfully extend beyond talk to demonstrate professionals' value and reliability, through their visibility, to those with whom they wish to co-produce services.

But what are the boundaries defining the extent of 'visibility' as an ideal of professional responsiveness? This is part of a larger question begged by an insistence on 'equal partnership' in co-production: what is a reasonable expectation of 'partnership', and what does it mean for professionals and service users to be 'equal'? In the case of these rural police, officers can feel that they are always visible in what one referred to as the 'fishbowl with no hiding place' of their constituency. They are seen to be the 'police officer' whatever they may be doing: visiting their child's teacher, stopping by the pub, or doing the grocery shopping. While this is a familiar dynamic in small communities, for professionals in public service it can blur boundaries between being on duty and off. The advantage of such heightened visibility is access to more information and linkages across the community that can be mobilized in responding to disturbances. The problem is continuous scrutiny alongside community expectations for continual accessibility: not uncommonly, people knocked on officers' homes for assistance day or night. Police families sometimes are pressed into service in this continual surveillance and performance of duty.

The first time she goes to nursery with the kids, or goes to school meetings «oh, that's the policeman's wife», not «it's Siobhan». She's part of the goldfish bowl, everything she does, everything the kids do is, is scrutinized ... they just watch you like a hawk, and they know what you do when you're off duty too. (Constable, village, northern Scotland).

Officers described community expectations that their partner would relay messages, answer the phone, and provide advice to the community. The problem of negotiating boundaries in services to community is delicate. What becomes visible is co-produced by community members as well as the professional workers, in association with a range of materials that designate surfaces that can be more or less permeable. At each of these boundaries, an othering occurs that defines a demander, and who or what is the responder. At this moment of visibility, accountabilities emerge and must be negotiated.

### **Negotiating accountabilities**

Co-production creates, as Needham (2007) points out, tensions for professionals between demands to care and demands to contain or control. This observation is

particularly pertinent to the examples of rural policing presented so far. A demand to care for an elderly citizen needing storm windows may take precedence, or a potential crime will demand containment through reframing. In situations where some are perpetrators and others suffering injury, a single officer is torn between the simultaneous needs to respond to both demands for care and for control. Beyond this tension, however, lurks a broader issue raised by the ideal of co-production: who, or what, is accountable when public services are produced through dialogue and negotiation between community members and professional practitioners? This is one of the key issues pointed out by Hyde and Davies (2004), when they suggest that co-production can problematically blur roles and authority.

Rural police officers are well aware of the difficult spaces of ‘discretion’ that they create when they are improvising negotiations with community members that slip beyond the reach of standardized protocol. One example occurred in a workshop with Scottish police, managers, and instructors (hosted by the constabulary in which the research was conducted). The researchers presented many of the examples of practice described here in context of celebrating officers’ wide ranging skills in community engagement and co-productive problem solving. But audience members were uncomfortable with nonstandard practices such as the unreported truck-and-wall incident, describing these as unprofessional rather than ingenious practices. Interviewees referred to the ‘risk’ of these improvisatory spaces, but maintained that those ultimately accountable for them needed to exercise flexibility.<sup>3</sup> «There is that risk but it’s a risk that’s measured and has to be managed to the best of the capabilities of the supervisors on the ground ...». (Sergeant, village, northern Scotland).

In some cases, accountability for a situation was temporarily delegated to the community. That is, rather than rushing in to solve a problem, in some cases police officers simply decided to wait and stay out of it, allowing community dynamics to unfold without immediate police intervention. One constable told of a newcomer to the community with two nuisance dogs who barked continuously, inciting community complaints to the police. The newcomer happened to be a new boyfriend of a young woman who had grown up in the community, who had once called the police to her home alleging that he had hit her. One day one of the dogs happened to get loose onto a local farm, where it was shot. Although naturally the officer heard what happened from various sources, the case was not officially reported. So, he chose to wait. And in a few days, the man seemed to have moved away with his dog and nothing more was heard. Another constable described one his first calls, as a young new officer, to a ‘fight’ reported in a community field between two religious groups in the community. There was only himself and a ‘special constable’, a recognized community policing volunteer who in this case, happened to be older and more experienced. The special constable suggested the best course of action would be to wait 30 minutes before driving out to the scene to intervene: ‘Let them knock out the worst of it in each other first’ rather than rushing in and possibly escalating the situation.

Personal safety of officers is one aspect of accountability in co-production that isn’t much discussed. Again because so often they are intervening alone in situ-

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<sup>3</sup> One reviewer of this article suggested that this incident may illustrate a tension between professionalism, with its understanding of discretion needed in local practice, and the more general ideology of co-production. This is indeed an interesting insight, and might be worth pursuing in future research.

ations that can be volatile and dangerous, and backup is a long way off, they need to assess the risk and balance it with a reasonable expectation of police accountability. Reading the situation is critical. Sometimes it's best to wait, sometimes to simply walk away, and sometimes to diffuse a situation through reframing, containing, or projecting conflicts onto materials and away from personalities. As one sergeant explained, «you have to learn how to use your tongue and always know that there's going to be another day».

But fundamentally, the demands for professional accountability challenge co-production at the point of measuring performance against standards for best practice. This creates difficult problems for supervising and managing co-production, as Hyde and Davis (2004) noted. Supervisors somehow must allow sufficient space for the discretionary practices, the sometimes slippery negotiations and improvisations, and the opportunistic leveraging of particular material and social dynamics that emerge in specific situations that professionals need to both do their jobs well and to engage effectively with the community in co-production. According to interviewees, some supervisors seemed to know how to enable these flexible spaces while ensuring high standards of practice. However, when supervisors focused on specific standardized procedures, officers felt constrained.

This feeling of freedom to use initiative is to a certain extent constrained by what I consider to be a slightly ... too high a level of micromanagement from some supervisors and to a certain extent I find some officers are ... who'd rather do things by the book rather than use a little bit of discretion and common sense sometimes because they're concerned about what the supervisor will subsequently come back at them with afterwards, so I think to a certain extent there's a little bit of eh, "shackling" of officers . . . the supervisors have the time to know in detail what is going on at the level of micromanaging and perhaps constraints on officers. (Constable, highlands, Scotland).

## Conclusions

While it may be tempting to dismiss co-production as a policy discourse for cutting funds to public services, its ideals are being taken seriously in implementations of UK public service reform. One problem is that some current literature continues to frame co-production as a universal model for all contexts in the UK, without much in the way of specific guidance or examples. A second problem lies in the idealistic imperatives of co-production, which emphasize 'equal partnership' (Boyle and Harris 2009), where community members are full partners as both co-planners and co-deliverers with professionals in all public services. A third problem is the assumption that co-production must entail a 'transformation' of what already exists in professionals' relations with service users (Parker and Heapy 2004).

This study aimed to provide an account of co-production practices in one particular public service, tracking the everyday practices through which co-production is actually negotiated in local sites. Accounts such as this can help to nuance grand assumptions and claims of co-production, leading towards models that may be pluralistic or even based on notions of a continuum of co-production service rather than a single ideal. This particular account focused on a policing service that did not use the specific term 'co-production' to describe itself, but whose close linkages with community members were very much aligned with co-

production's principles of meaningful involvement of service users in the delivery of professional services. These policing practices show how the negotiations involved in co-production are a multi-faceted and often fraught form of practice. Negotiations in policing service delivery occur frequently and in unexpected ways, with community members enacting and even switching among roles as cooperative perpetrators, assistants, service planners, information gatherers, and sometimes as co-police.

In contrast to the insistence of some (Parker and Heapy 2006) that co-production occurs more effectively through planning than through 'chance encounters', this study shows the importance of such chance encounters in policing, and the importance of knowing how to work with all participants in these encounters to co-produce outcomes that build community well being. The study also shows how slippery can be the negotiations of co-production, and how frequently they unfold in spaces that are unregulated. What is maintained as visible, and what is best left invisible, are critical manoeuvres in some contexts of co-production. Amidst all of these negotiations, professional accountability can be difficult and ambiguous. Co-production has been described as blurring the boundaries of authority and responsibility and raises questions about who has power to make decisions in public service delivery (Needham 2006), yet professionals are ultimately accountable for ensuring consistent standards of practice. In policing practice, as we see in this study, this means sometimes negotiating outcomes, sometimes standing back, and sometimes asserting control.

Whether dealing with the challenges of accountability, visibility and boundaries, or slippery negotiations with community members, this study showed professionals' creative strategies for practicing co-production. These strategies are not rational and pre-planned, nor are they focused on the 'dialogue' advocated by co-production writers (e.g. Needham 2007). Rather they are rooted in specific materialities as well as social relations. These strategies are not person-centred within the professional police officer, but distributed, relational and enacted. They involve not just people of the community but also the local technologies, tools, and topographies. We could propose that the socio-material conditions produce particular forms of co-production involving a range of actors that extends beyond simple categories of professionals and (community) users. This conceptualization challenges some representations of co-production which tend to 'other' the 'service users' as though they are distinct and separate from professionals and precede the co-productive moment. A more sociomaterial approach to analysing co-production, such as what has been attempted in this account of policing, may help achieve what Lee and Dunston (2009) call for: tracing webs of action unfolding in concrete practices of co-production. These specific enactments help point to the existence of qualitatively different forms of co-production. While everyday work-arounds, inventive encounters and boundary negotiations may characterize co-production in distributed, community-based practice like these police, other forms of co-production may become apparent when we trace different webs of concrete micro-practices: policy formation processes, performance evaluation procedures, public-private sector partnerships, product innovation processes, and the like. Such research can help move us beyond a singular conception of co-production as simply co-development of services and products to understand a broad range of co-productive enactments and patterns at different points and environments.

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