Reproducing Co-Production and Upscaling Innovation: The Growth of Forums Supporting Desistance

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Online at Coproducing Desistance blog: http://www.coproducingdesistance.org.uk/reproducing-co-production-and-upscaling-innovation-the-growth-of-forums-supporting-desistance-by-hannah-graham/

This guest post offers reflexive discussion of the challenges and opportunities of reproducing and upscaling co-productive forums and ventures which support desistance. Consideration of the impact of growth and change on participants' perceptions of trust and legitimacy are threaded throughout (following on from another recent blog post on trust and legitimacy in co-producing desistance, available here). In this post, the focus is on forums and ventures which seek to support and co-produce desistance, ranging from mutual aid groups, peer mentoring and service user/peer advocacy forums, to cooperatives, time banks, creative arts initiatives, and social enterprises for people with convictions, through to big picture participative social action initiatives and awareness raising campaigns. As ground-breaking and exciting as they are, establishing these types of forums and ventures can be hard work. However, this post looks further downstream to consider what happens when an innovative initiative is successful, and its members are thinking about the opportunities and challenges of making it more widely available and mainstream.

On growing and being well known: 'growing pains' in pursuit of change

Despite the fine-grain details and start-up challenges of conceiving co-productive forums and relationships, trust and legitimacy are further tested in their reproduction. Many socially innovative initiatives achieve wonders, particularly in their start-up form. To borrow phrases from the work of Fergus McNeill and Gwen Robinson (2008, 2012, 2015), these types of forums have a tendency to act as reservoirs of 'relational legitimacy.' Changing and supporting others to change, including being a giver and receiver of reciprocity, can yield formative experiences for people desisting from crime (see Weaver, 2013, 2015). But what happens after the phase of setting up a social enterprise, mutual aid group, short film project or the like? How are relational legitimacy and networks of reciprocity sustained in processes of growth and reproduction?

Small and relational is not necessarily easy, but it is *easier* than what emerges from leaving the safe harbour of the niche pilot project or the 'early days' of one-off initiatives to navigate the ocean of opportunities and needs waiting beyond. Let me be clear: every desistance journey helped and every life changed through a co-productive forum or support mechanism (irrespective of size or stage) is important and worthwhile. But just as important is the proliferation of co-productive forums in order to yield transformative opportunities for people with convictions *en masse.* In doing so, the imperative is to inform systemic and social change, in addition to enabling personal change. A vision of co-producing desistance as the new normal is a hopeful one, but one that is not without risks or challenges in a climate of penal populism and preoccupation with public protection.

For the individuals involved in promoting the growth of desistance-focused forums and ventures, the *relational* dimension and perceptions of legitimacy and trust are influenced by the *personal* and *emotional* dimensions. This is especially the case for people who credit their involvement in a particular forum (e.g., mutual aid group, social enterprise, arts initiative) as life-changing and life-giving. For it to

then grow and change may be more deeply felt than arbitrary adjustments in other less important forums and settings that make up our lives. Some people may change their perceptions of legitimacy as a forum or venture changes and takes on a life of its own beyond the personalities (and idiosyncrasies) of those who pioneered its inception. Worst case scenario: it may feel, to some, like a poor imitation or shadow of its former self. Some may find it hard to trust when the founding pioneer leaves or the original modus operandi of the start-up stage is displaced by governance structures that inevitably eventuate from getting bigger.

Alternatively, participants' perceptions of ownership and pride may grow through upscaling, in part because of the sense of positive legacy. They may see change and reproduction in terms of "we built this ourselves – look at what it has become, look at who it has helped, and look at who we have become and how far we have come through it." The reality is that some things may be lost, and yet many other things can be gained in growing and becoming well-known. The perennial sustainability challenge is for pioneering co-productive forums and the ideas which underpin them not to become a victim of their own initial successes.

Be careful what we wish for: Counterfeit co-production and the potential for misappropriation

In the wider context, some reproductions of 'co-producing desistance' will be analogous to counterfeits that never were, in that they are 'good looking', but not necessarily morally good. These are the progeny of neoliberal descent. They may be entrepreneurial and on trend in venerating a growth agenda, but their neoliberal thrust will eventually weaken the 'social' in social venture, social capital and social networks. They are relatively rare, but they do exist. Unfortunately, against a wider backdrop of the commodification of rehabilitation and community-based supervision of 'offenders' and 'ex-offenders', 'market' conditions in some jurisdictions (e.g., England and Wales, some states in the US) are ripe for their growth. Social ventures and forums in this field cannot expect to be immune (see Curtis, 2007).

Such 'good looking' reproductions are usually highly visible, with shiny PowerPoint spiels, savvy protagonists and convincing metrics to semaphore their success and make the case for more resources. They claim to support or even to co-produce desistance but, in reality, are more interventionist and programmatic than participative and personalised, and more status quo than innovative. They may also be highly selective in who is even allowed 'a place at the table' of co-production, and may belie inequalities in the distribution of any 'mutual' benefits and opportunities. Without being grounded in a deep moral underpinning, their modus operandi will largely ignore the social, moral and practical barriers to reintegration and desistance that participants face. They certainly play the game, but in ways that perpetuate and fail to change the game itself.

Particularly for those social ventures and forums which operate within money-poor, time-poor, space-deprived criminal justice and social care contexts, everything needs to look good to justify its existence. The era of austerity and unfettered neoliberalism is a pragmatic reality faced by the 'good looking' and the morally good alike, but it is not sufficient grounds to justify short-cuts to growth which undermine the trust and perceptions of procedural justice of those involved. Motives for going mainstream need to be interrogated. The reproduction of successful and helpful forums supporting desistance needs to have integrity to their co-productive DNA, or the social benefits will be diminished. It doesn't necessarily cost anything to foster trust, rapport and processes rich in procedural justice, but it costs a lot when they are betrayed or lost.

For practitioners and other community members who co-lead some of these forums, as well as for desistance scholars who research them, the 'discovery' of desistance and its nascent evolution and wider use carries amazing potential, albeit alongside a few particular risks. As notions of supporting and co-producing desistance find increasing resonance and purchase in policy circles, instances of misinterpretation and misappropriation are almost inevitable, if not already happening. Good ideas and initiatives risk being reconfigured and reproduced as large-scale flagship policy levers which rely on means and motives barely recognisable to their forebears. Preoccupation with 'What Works' and the implicit assumption in some circles that criminology academics and criminal justice workers know best may cause shifts in how a once co-productive and egalitarian approach is reproduced and up-scaled in a more 'top down' fashion elsewhere. Supporting and co-producing desistance may increasingly appear alongside the globally popular 'reducing reoffending' in the mission statements and core business of some of the most carceral institutions on the planet, making it hard for social ventures and innovative peer-led forums to position themselves as refreshing alternatives yielding much-needed antidotes to stigma and exclusion. These challenges lead to questions of why seek to reproduce co-production and upscale innovation? What capacity do they have to help enable wider reform and change?

The litmus test of legacy: Ameliorative responses or transformative changes?

More in-depth analytic and empirical investigation needs to be invested in discerning the *legacies* of innovative initiatives and co-productive labours, as these may prove to be a litmus test of what is being co-produced. The Biblical adage, 'you shall know them by their fruit', is relevant here. In light of the present knowledge gap, this 'Co-Producing Desistance' research by Beth Weaver couldn't be timelier.

A crucial question emerges – one I've recently started to think and write about with others elsewhere (see Graham and White, 2014; Graham and White, 2015; Graham and White, forthcoming): To what extent is a forum that supports and co-produces desistance *ameliorative* or *transformative* in nature? While different, these are not necessarily dichotomous. As its name implies, an *ameliorative* forum or venture seeks to respond to the harms and pains of punishment (see Seidman, 2010) and support penal subjects; for example, a relatively 'normal' prison-based arts initiative, philosophy club or sporting scheme. When done well, such an approach may be perceived as helpful and enjoyable by prisoner participants. Its benefits may span education, health and creativity. It may also be well received by staff where it results in better behaviour, better use of prisoners' time and energy (and less use of staff time and energy), and less boredom. But, due to its nature of being responsive, it is more likely to accommodate or co-exist with, rather than challenge, the institutional and social status quo surrounding it. Its legacy does not make a dent on harmful and costly macro-processes of mass incarceration or hyper-incarceration and mass supervision, or the social supports for them; it simply (albeit importantly) supports those who are subject to them (see Graham and White, forthcoming; Seidman, 2010).

A *transformative* forum or venture seeks to enable the people involved to change, *as well as* to pursue penal reform and positively change the social relations to which they return. Two examples come to mind. The first is the successful expansion and growing influence of the peer advocacy organisation User Voice (see www.uservoice.org) on penal reform in the UK, and the appointment of its founder Mark Johnston as a Member of the British Empire and as an Ashoka Fellow (Ashoka is a global social innovation network and esteemed 'change makers' organisation). A more recently established example is the 'Distant Voices' initiative and other projects facilitated by Vox Liminis in Scotland (see www.voxliminis.co.uk). Vox Liminis engages people with convictions, their families, criminal justice and charity practitioners, criminologists, singer-songwriters, the media and members of the wider public

in arts-based activities and knowledge exchange in order to experience the transformative nature of creativity and to dream more publicly about what a just Scotland looks like.

Overall, both ameliorative and transformative approaches represent valid and legitimate rationales for supporting people with convictions. Both have the capacity to foster respect and trust among participants, and be seen as a legitimate forum of support. Yet they are different in their intent and capacity to spark and sustain long term positive change on a wider scale. Perhaps the ultimate litmus test of transformative legacy is found in seeking not only to heal the harms and reduce the negative impact of crime and criminal justice, but to also to positively alter futures through legacies of personal, penal and social change. Reversing the proliferation of punishment will, in part, mean enabling the proliferation of forums, relational networks, social goods and opportunities which support desistance. Despite the ravages of neoliberalism on the social ventures landscape and criminal justice system, it is my hope that we can expect to see the manifold growth of more transformative approaches which give people with convictions a voice and a meaningful place at the table in co-producing change.

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References available on request.