

Sofia Kjellström
Jönköping University

Co-Production in PhD Education: A Longitudinal Study on PhD Students' Collaborative Projects

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PhD education is a process that involves learning the skills of a researcher. While many skills remain fundamental and relatively stable over time, new skills are continually added. Co-production refers to the active participation of service users in designing, implementing, and evaluating the services they will use (Alford, 2013). Over the past decade, interest in co-production has surged (Masterson et al., 2022). Notably, discussions around co-production often occur at a collective level—within organizations or research studies. This implies an increased demand for PhD students to incorporate participatory research methods and include service users and other relevant actors in the research process.

Longitudinal qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 PhD students - on five occasions between 2020 to 2024 - who have closely collaborated with diverse actors. This provides a unique opportunity to explore how their understanding of co-production evolves over time. The study is part of Samskapa - a large-scale Swedish-British interactive research program dedicated to co-production within the health and social care sector (Kjellström et al., 2019). Our approach involves a rich tapestry of methods and analyses across four distinct studies.

This presentation will primarily focus on the first study, which is based upon baseline interviews with a focus on PhDs' program theories (Nordin et al., submitted). Program theories are an essential element in complex interventions (Skivington et al., 2021). They provide an overview of the logical relationships between the central concepts of actors, the programs' activities, expected outcomes, and the assumptions on how the activities lead to the outcomes (Davidoff et al., 2015). Results show that the doctoral students had implicit program

theories on how different actors could be integrated from different system levels. They seem to imply a view where the use of co-production evolves over time and a kind of complex system view, including equifinality.

When entering a new area of knowledge, most people are at a novice stage. The Dreyfus model describes the progress during a learning journey in five steps, culminating in becoming an expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). When entering a new field of research, the doctoral students in this study had no rules or instructions to learn from, suggesting that their skill development was likely more implicit.

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