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An interpretive perspective on co-production in supporting refugee families' access to childcare in Germany

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The arrival of large numbers of refugees in Germany since 2015 has led to unprecedented levels of civic participation in service delivery. This is supported in integration policy, including through local coordination. We connect this empirical case with the conceptual debate on co-production, adopting an interpretive approach. We explore how volunteers and local coordinators interpret encounters between civic and state actors in the context of co-producing support received by refugee families in gaining access to childcare. Based on 20 interviews, we distinguish three types of experiences: *collaborating towards common aims*, where both sides value collaboration based on complementary abilities; *contesting exclusion*, where volunteers confront state actors in cases of conflict; *replacing services*, where volunteers feel obliged to perform tasks they interpret as the state's responsibility. Our findings illustrate the value and limitations of co-production in practice, including in relation to establishing adequate sharing of work between civil and state actors.

Key words co-production • civil society • civic participation • implementation • integration • refugees • early childhood education and care • Germany

Introduction

Around 2015, Germany witnessed a significant increase in efforts to help newly arriving refugees, a phenomenon referred to as *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture). Since this peak, volunteers have been continually involved in supporting the refugees' arrival and integration,[1] including helping them overcome language barriers, providing advice and accompanying them to public authorities (for example,

Karakayali and Kleist, 2016). Though their activities have been less visible, some volunteers have also been involved in dealing with early childhood education and care (ECEC), for example by facilitating access to ECEC services (Scholz, 2021). In light of a much-cited 'crisis of the administration' (Schader, 2020), public authorities have increasingly intervened 'to coordinate, enhance, support, or manage volunteering activities' (Fleischmann, 2019: 66). This included appointing so-called 'volunteer coordinators' to facilitate cooperation among volunteer and professional resources at the local level (Eckhard et al, 2021). The importance of volunteering in the context of refugee integration is now reflected in policy documents at different levels. However, what the relationship between civic and state actors entails remains contested (Hamann and Karakayali, 2016; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019).

In this article, we link the empirical interest in civic engagement in ECEC with the recent and prolific conceptual debate about the way state–society relations have shifted during policy implementation. Some studies have tried to capture the motivation, sociodemographic composition and organisational structure of these volunteers as forms of unconventional participation or new social movements (for example, Feischmidt et al, 2019). Others have scrutinised administrative change and adaptation brought about by the repercussions of 2015/16 (Schader, 2020; Eckhard et al, 2021) and how the institutionalisation of civic engagement was intended to make it governable (Fleischmann, 2019). As policy scholars we assert, however, that we lack a clear understanding of how volunteers perceive being drawn into the implementation of policies (see Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006).

We treat the direct and active contribution of individual volunteers in getting refugee families included in ECEC as a case of co-production. On the one hand, the concept has been used only to a limited extent regarding civic engagement despite its potential explanatory value in this context (Gazley, 2021), opening up an opportunity for us to contribute to the understanding of civic engagement in the phase of policy implementation. On the other hand, we share Pill's (2021: 2) conclusion that a significant research gap relates to the 'nature of co-production in practice, drawn from examination of how it is interpreted and deployed in different contexts' and aim at adding to this discussion through exploration of our empirical case.

Therefore, we aim to engage in the debate on the role of volunteers in the context of implementing integration policy and in the conceptual debate on co-production by approaching the topic from the perspective of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 1995). Consequently, we are interested in processes of meaning-making and pose the research question of how volunteers and their local coordinators in Lower Saxony interpret encounters between civic and state actors in the context of co-producing support of refugee families in accessing childcare. We draw on 20 qualitative interviews with volunteers and volunteer coordinators as well as an analysis of related policy documents carried out in the context of a larger research project concerning refugee families' access to ECEC.[2]

We start by discussing our initial understanding of co-production and describing our methodological approach, followed by the policy context. We then present our findings and finally discuss the links to the existing literature on co-production. We show that experiences of co-production vary and distinguish three types, illustrating both the value and limitations of co-production in practice:

- 'collaborating towards common aims', where civic and state actors value collaboration based on complementary abilities;
- 'contesting exclusion', where volunteers confront state actors in cases of conflict in particular relating to exclusionary practices;
- 'replacing services', where volunteers feel obliged to perform tasks they interpret as the state's responsibility, usually because state services do not fully meet refugees' needs.

Understanding co-production

With the reinterpretation of the role of the citizen from 'customer' in New Public Management to 'partner' in the era of public governance (Thomas, 2012), there has been an upsurge of interest in user and community co-production, although the concept has existed for some time (Ryan, 2012; Nederhand and Van Meerkerk, 2018; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2020). More recently, this has been documented by the publication of several handbooks, edited volumes (Kekez et al, 2019; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021) and a special issue on co-creation[3] in this journal (Torfing et al, 2021). Travelling from the US, the concept has been adopted in different types of welfare state and been advocated by the left and right of the political spectrum, leading to heterogeneous connotations along the way (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). In the German context, the third sector has played an important role in the delivery of services for decades. Moreover, the local level traditionally includes citizen participation (Saretzki, 2008). As opposed to this established 'local corporatism', where collaboration traditionally took place between municipalities and social organisations such as independent welfare providers, new arrangements are more open, flexible, and substantially more innovative (see Haus, 2010). Findings by Eckhard et al (2021) indicate significant changes towards more informal, ad hoc participatory relationships with volunteers that we call co-production in the practice of local administrations following the arrival of large numbers of refugees.

The increasing popularity of co-production among researchers and practitioners has led to more than a few complaining about the ambiguity of the concept and calling for more clarity (for example, Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Nabatchi et al, 2017). In this article, we regard co-production as involving services being delivered and policies implemented through networks of professional providers and individual or collective civic actors. 'Apart from the classic distinction of state and society, co-production means a productive interpenetration of both spheres, ideally in a symmetric and reciprocal way' (Grohs, 2021: 312).

Whereas the original concept of co-production tended to describe the involvement of *users* of public services in individualised service production (Ansell and Torfing, 2021), it has by now been established that co-production may also involve other actors in different roles, including users' immediate family and social networks, volunteers and local communities (Bovaird, 2007; Alford, 2009; 2014; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016). In our case, these are volunteers acting on behalf of the 'users' (refugee families with children under the age of six). While we do not wish to diminish the agency of newcomers, our focus here is on volunteers as intermediaries between previously excluded users and the organisations responsible for ECEC. We understand their activities that enable refugee families to access ECEC as a case of co-production because integration policies state ECEC uptake among refugees as a goal and assign a clear role to civic participation

for refugees in cooperation with state services, as we will show later. Considering the other side of co-production, we define *state actors* as either government employees, which in our case usually implies working for the local administration, or employees of a non-governmental entity who are engaged professionally in some kind of state-related or state-sanctioned activity (see Nabatchi et al, 2017). In our case, this entails, for example, social workers in refugee accommodation as well as ECEC providers. The latter are often operated by the municipality or receive public funding and have been conceptualised as 'street-level organisations' (Scholz, 2021).

We neither mean to evaluate the instrumental value of co-production nor do we approach co-production from the point of view of the local administration. Instead, we focus on meaning-making in the process of co-production, in a perspective that Yanow (1993: 41) calls 'implementation as interpretation and text'. Interpretive scholars have stressed how decision makers and policy-implementing actors do not necessarily have a common understanding of the meaning of policies. Since policy texts cannot be clear and unambiguous (Yanow, 2000), the meaning of a policy only emerges in context, not through the explicit words of the legislation. It is shaped by the knowledge and values that the implementers bring with them, as well as through the milieu in which the implementation takes place. We assume that interpretations are even more diverse in the field of co-production, where citizens act as de facto implementers. This holds true for substantive policy goals but also for different understandings of what co-production entails.

Methodology

We draw on constructivist grounded-theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) as a general framework for the generation and analysis of data that allows us to capture complexities and is in line with interpretivism (Wagenaar, 2011).

Data generation

Our research took place in Lower Saxony, a large federal state in north-western Germany. The German federal states have significant competencies relating to immigrant integration and education, including for example setting ECEC fees. Municipalities fulfil significant responsibilities in the policy fields we are concerned with, including the provision of ECEC services and the local framework for involving volunteers. Since 2015, all municipalities have been obliged to accept asylum seekers based on the German policy of dispersal, sometimes at short notice, posing challenges to local reception efforts (Schader, 2020). As we aimed at identifying general tendencies rather than depicting the detailed characteristics of one local context, we included nine municipalities with diverse characteristics. We thus covered both more and less remote areas as well as areas with different political leadership and experiences relating to migration.

Our analysis was based on 20 qualitative interviews with volunteers supporting refugee families (11), coordinators of volunteers (6) and persons active in both roles (3). As a result, the focus of our analysis lies on the perspectives of those active in the context of voluntary support for refugee families. The perspectives of refugee parents as users and professional service providers other than the volunteer coordinators are beyond the scope of this article. Following the logic of theoretical sampling, we did not seek to obtain a representative sample in terms of the distribution of certain

characteristics but selected the participants in order to obtain diversity by looking for contrasting cases (Charmaz, 2014). We used various channels to gain access, including internet research, snowballing and invitations via local mailing lists, in this way increasing the likelihood of reaching interviewees from diverse contexts (see Table 1 for an overview of the characteristics of the respondents). All volunteers had accompanied one or more families in the context of accessing daycare facilities and other ECEC offers, such as playgroups. Typically, this included the search for a suitable place, registration and getting used to and understanding the ECEC system in Germany.

Table 1: Characteristics of the respondents

Personal	Female (18) and male (2); aged 28–74; employed or retired; with or without children; with and without migration experience
Organisational	– Volunteers: mentorship projects, independent voluntary initiatives, or no links to organisations
	– Coordinators: employed by municipality, welfare organisations or other organisations

The interviews focused on experiences in providing support for refugee families' access to childcare. We used an interview guide, generally starting with the same opening question and then following the experiences of the respondents, with additional questions usually building on something the respondent had already mentioned (Weiss, 1995; Charmaz, 2014). All interviews were carried out in German between November 2019 and October 2020 and were recorded and transcribed.

While our analysis builds mainly on the interviews, we also observed local practices, for example, a regional networking event for voluntary and professional stakeholders active in integration, and used these observations to complement and compare the interviews where suitable. In addition, we analysed policy documents, including federal, state and local action plans on integration. Where such documents were not available, we used alternative sources such as work programmes or municipal websites. Of the nine municipalities we studied, three had an integration plan, while the rest had descriptions of aims and priorities in work plans or on the official website.

Analysis

We systematically coded interview transcripts, observation notes and policy documents using MAXQDA. While the exact approach was tailored to each type of data, we generally followed an abductive approach and iteratively dealt with the research field, our data, and the relevant literature (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara, 2020). Our analysis of policy documents focused on segments setting aims for and attributing meaning to the involvement of civic actors in the context of supporting integration in general and access to ECEC in particular. For the interviews and observation notes, we additionally explored descriptions of 'encounters' (Bartels, 2014), understood as interactions or contacts between civil and state actors. This open term aided us in identifying segments possibly linked to co-production. We paid particular attention to the expectations the respondents had of collaboration between civic and state actors as well as the perceived dynamics and implications of such encounters.

We started with an open coding exercise, in what Charmaz refers to as 'initial coding' and moved on to 'focused coding', gradually sorting and raising initial codes to a more abstract level by comparing related segments and drawing from the literature on co-production and participation. Thus, alongside our original codes we included existing concepts in our code system as 'sensitising concepts'. Regular drafting of reflexive and analytic memos and visualisations of potential connections between different codes and categories aided this process (Charmaz, 2014). Moreover, central segments of the material were coded by two independent researchers to increase the richness of the findings.

ECEC and integration policy

This section serves to illustrate the policy context of co-production in our case, in what way ECEC uptake is an explicit goal and how volunteers are assigned a decisive role in implementing integration. Enhancing the German ECEC system is a recent policy objective, addressed inter alia by establishing a legal right to a place in ECEC for every child between one and six years of age.[4] In Lower Saxony, attending ECEC has been free of charge for children aged between three and six years since 2018.[5] In addition, there are initiatives aimed at increasing the quality of ECEC and its accessibility for immigrant and refugee families (LSMEC, no date).

Refugees' access to ECEC forms part of a wider 'integration' objective. The policy framework at federal, state and local level tends to define integration as a reciprocal process, demanding effort from all elements of society in order to ensure equal participation and diversity. This notion is reflected in the National Action Plan on Integration (NAPI) and in most regional and local documents we studied. For example, a regional integration plan emphasises that a 'modern understanding' of integration also 'encompasses the so-called host society and its institutions and organisations', in contrast to the older assimilationist discourse. Nonetheless, there are also instances where local understanding emphasises how migrants need to adapt, learn German and accept common values and norms (for example, regional website).

The demands for equal participation also relate to ECEC. For example, the NAPI asserts that all families should be able to participate in ECEC, underlining its decisive effects on children's integration trajectories. There are measures aimed at reducing barriers, for example by providing information and support or empowering parents to find their role within the German education system (for example, NAPI, integration plan of a city, integration plan of a town, integration plan of a region).

All integration plans studied emphasise the central value of civic engagement in the context of delivering services supporting integration and ECEC access. The documents attribute various functions to volunteers, acknowledging how civil society supports the aim of integration and complements professional counselling by providing practical but also emotional support, including in ECEC institutions (for example, an integration plan and related progress report of a city). Some of the documents also draw attention to the positive effects when newcomers receive support from persons who share the migration experience (integration plans and documents in several cities and regions). In addition, some documents specifically highlight the importance of collaboration between civic and state offers, for example, to realise the potential of 'valuable pools of knowledge and experience' (integration plan of a town). Various measures aim at facilitating engagement and collaboration,

Table 2: Types of experience

Experience	Meaning	Characteristics
Collaborating towards common aims	Increasing effectiveness and responsiveness based on complementary abilities	– Blend of bottom-up and invited participation
		– Reciprocal working relationship
		– Convergent interpretations of aims
		– Positive feelings of self-efficacy
Contesting exclusion	Increasing accountability based on volunteers exercising a control function	– Claimed participation
		– Volunteers with a control function
		– Divergent interpretations of aims
		– Positive or negative feelings of self-efficacy
Replacing services	Increasing effectiveness based on volunteers performing tasks they consider the state's responsibility	– 'Passively imposed' participation, through failure of the state
		– Relationship characterised by scepticism and distrust
		– Divergent interpretations of aims
		– Negative feelings of self-efficacy

including inviting and coordinating engagement, providing specialised qualification programmes, and regular exchange forums.

Interpreting encounters between civic and state actors

The central role of volunteering for implementation as emphasised in the policy framework is reflected in our interviews. We identify three co-existing experiences of encounters between volunteers and coordinators as well as volunteers and other state actors, including public officials and ECEC providers, as portrayed in Table 2. Interviewees emphasised different meanings and characteristics in relation to these experiences. Differences relate to the initiation of volunteer involvement, which we describe by building on past categorisations of bottom-up/claimed versus top-down/invited participation (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2007; van Meerkerk, 2019), the form of relationship, the understanding of aims, and the self-efficacy of volunteers.

Collaborating

In all municipalities, civic and state actors collaborated in providing support to refugee families. Concerning the initiation of support and collaboration, the respondents described a blend of bottom-up and invited participation. Both volunteers and coordinators described how around 2015, volunteers initiated and shaped support services for refugees and were able to operate faster and offer services that were not (yet) available as public services (see for example, Fleischmann, 2019). A volunteer referred to this period as 'the phase in which there was actually hardly any infrastructure and everything was basically dependent on the volunteers and the municipality was not able to catch up' (interview 12).

While several volunteers described how they approached the municipality when starting their engagement (for example, interviews 12, 14 and 20), the coordinators

acknowledged and praised the proactive nature of volunteer engagement and actively pursued contacts with volunteers, interpreting it as their task to provide options for qualification, exchange and support (interviews 1, 10, 11, 17 and 18). However, they operated with different degrees of formality. For example, a coordinator in a large city emphasised the value of structured and formalised support offers involving volunteers in closely coordinated mentorship programmes, including one dedicated to educational entry. Acknowledging the importance of self-organised volunteerism, she voiced the need for more structured offers: 'I heard from the families or also from the volunteers, that some [families] simply need more long-term and reliable help' (interview 1). The coordinator depicts her programme as ensuring reliability, including through a contract for mentorships setting out aims and conditions. By contrast, another coordinator in a small city indicated that they deliberately decided against such formalisation. She portrayed both the state–volunteer interaction and the support for refugee families as informal, interpreting a contract-based mentorship as causing inflexibility. The definition of the terms is deliberately left to the volunteers in this case, while the municipality acts as an interested and approachable contact point:

> 'We have of course established contacts [with independent groups offering refugee aid] over the years. And since we always offered "we are attending your meetings to be informed, you can ask all the questions", a good connection developed. … And [volunteers] do not… have to sign a mentorship contract, though, and… commit to accompany this family for half a year.' (Interview 10, coordinator, small city)

This also reflects how respondents emphasised the reciprocal nature of the relationship between volunteers and coordinators as well as professional service providers and the value of different actors' complementary abilities (see Fleischmann, 2019 covering the perspective of state actors). For example, a volunteer characterised collaboration with certain public officials as 'working hand in hand' (interview 8). While the volunteers were considered to have easy access and close contacts to the families, knowing their lifeworld and needs, the state actors have a more comprehensive overview of local structures and access to official information.

This can be illustrated with the following examples. First, civic and state actors shared work in reaching and supporting refugee families. While some coordinators actively involved volunteers as 'bridges' in communicating with refugees (interview 1), volunteers appreciated it when municipalities informed them about new refugees arriving or, especially in rural areas, of needs certain families had (interviews 8 and 13). Similarly, one of the coordinators referred to a 'win–win situation' concerning refugee families' contacts with authorities, where the coordinator contributes knowledge about requirements while volunteers fill in administrative forms with families with whom they already have a relationship (interview 10). Second, respondents discussed how civic and state actors made use of each other's expertise, for instance when collectively organising information events for refugee parents or ECEC providers (interviews 7 and 19) as well as more generally in the context of state supervision and advice. A coordinator described these interactions as an exchange combining the perspectives of both groups. While it was her role as coordinator to make suggestions for aspects to watch out for, she expressed the view that the volunteers were best placed to judge

whether the suggestions suited the needs of the families (interview 1). However, while some volunteers mentioned how they received advice that was beneficial for the situation of their protégées (for example, interview 20), such support was not available or regarded as helpful by all. Some highlighted how they acquired most relevant information via self-study (interviews 14 and 17). For example, a volunteer indicated that, despite the existence of a local contact point, 'there is a lot that you have to find out on your own', as she did not always receive helpful replies (interview 14). She explained this with the complexity of refugee support, arguing that nobody can cover all related aspects alone.

Closely linked to the emphasis of complementary abilities, our respondents' accounts reflect the efforts put into building working relationships. Both coordinators and volunteers frequently mentioned the importance of establishing and maintaining contacts with different stakeholders (interviews 1, 7, 8, 17 and 18), as also emphasised in a quantitative survey with volunteers by Karakayali and Kleist (2016). Moreover, some interviewees depicted relationships as developing over time through regular cooperation. Referring to the relationship to the ECEC providers, this volunteer indicated that

> 'it has all been accumulating during many years… And trust, or how shall I say? The educators know that they are not left alone with difficult families or when they face communication barriers, the parents know exactly the same, too… So, the feeling of mutually providing support and needing each other, too.' (Interview 19, volunteer, town)

Alongside such positive implications, the interviewees also noted side-effects of co-production. For example, the division of responsibilities did not always seem clear: a volunteer explained that she felt that the local family centre withheld relevant information from her, interpreting this as a deliberate act possibly based on competing offers and conflicting institutional self-interest (interview 8). Coordinators referred to additional challenges, for example relating to volunteers overstepping refugee families' personal boundaries or their own, causing exhaustion (for example, interviews 11 and 18). Finally, one of the coordinators mentioned that the involvement of volunteers also implied risks relating to the reliability of support. She described a case where a voluntary interpreter cancelled on short notice and could not be replaced (interview 17).

Contesting

Contradicting the policy documents, most volunteers detected barriers for refugee families in accessing and using the ECEC system. This included the lack of childcare places, the modalities of registration (online registration, information only available in German), and the exclusionary behaviour of ECEC providers and authorities.

Some volunteers addressed barriers by confronting individual street-level bureaucrats. For example, one volunteer considered individual ECEC providers as reluctant to include refugee families and confronted these when searching for daycare places. She argued with ECEC providers, for example, when an international kindergarten refused a child because the family was not yet capable of communicating in German: 'And I said: "But you are an international kindergarten. I would expect at least English then.

You must be able to speak English to someone"' (interview 14). Another volunteer who accompanied several families who could not find a childcare place attributed this to the lack of offers, which in her view contradicted the legal right to childcare. Consequently, she confronted the local youth welfare office in charge of daycare places and sought the support of a lawyer to enforce the implementation of this right (interview 12). The situations described here are confrontational in nature and can be characterised as 'claimed' participation vis-à-vis individual street-level bureaucrats. Yet, other state actors may be considered as allies, as some volunteers approached, for example, the municipality to help with uncooperative ECEC providers (interview 14).

The interpretations of public institutions as exclusionary contrast with the political aim of ensuring concerted efforts by all sections of society. We identified varying explanations for uncooperative behaviour, including racist attitudes and fear, as well as lack of understanding and/or ability by street-level bureaucrats. Conflicts were often connected to diverging ideas of how to implement integration. For example, a volunteer indicated that the need of refugee children to receive additional aid in educational institutions is sometimes questioned (interview 19). This relates to the meaning of equal treatment and whether positive discrimination is justifiable to accommodate for disadvantages. Other questions include the extent to which the needs of refugee families should be considered in the distribution of places (interview 8) or how authorities fail to adjust their communication to the knowledge and language skills of refugee parents. A volunteer explained such shortcomings as the result of the limited diversity among staff in public institutions and identified their inability to understand the situation of migrants as endangering successful integration:

> 'there are these fears of contact and this not being able to emphasise at all, which efforts immigrants make. And… if the majority society is standing there, saying "Well, let's see how you find your way here," then it will not work.' (Interview 12, volunteer, town)

By contrast, a coordinator explained difficulties by referring to the ambivalent understanding of the term 'integration' (see Scherr and Inan, 2018). The interviewee noted that ideas on integration range from 'preserving newcomers' culture' to 'assimilation', and that this led to uncertainty: 'So nobody knows what exactly we want now' (interview 10).

Several volunteers voiced frustration when discussing situations in which they unsuccessfully tried to raise awareness. Based on repeated encounters of this kind, some characterised this as a 'fight' against such attitudes (interviews 8, 12 and 20): 'real help on the ground has only been forthcoming when I nag the authorities' (interview 8). Moreover, some of the respondents maintain that the contacts with uncooperative authorities or the amount of work associated with accompanying refugees could also lead to demotivation of volunteers: 'whoever accompanied refugees once… says: "no, I won't do that again." It's really a lot of work and lots of barriers, a lot of paperwork, a lot of [uncooperative] authorities… that are making all of this somehow difficult' (interview 18). Others tried to address the political level (interviews 2, 8, 12 and 19). For example, a volunteer explained how she sought to raise awareness of the lack of childcare places because she knew of several refugee families that were unsuccessfully looking for one, while the municipality had not

become aware of the problem. She described her participation in town hall meetings as 'that's where volunteering also blends with politics', attributing a control function to civil society (interview 12).

Replacing

Some volunteers questioned the extent to which they may be taking over state responsibilities, in particular because they considered public services to not fully meet refugees' needs. For example, some volunteers felt that they still had to accompany refugee parents in spite of existing German skills, because authorities were less than accommodating (for example, interviews 12 and 18). One volunteer gave examples of how the local youth welfare office failed refugee families:

> 'Well that ranged from, let's say, "a customer service mindset unknown" as an example, to overwhelming refugees with input. Not helping them with filling in the applications either… Well, and I would say the most basic task of a youth welfare office would be to say "you missed ticking a box here or there."' (Interview 12, volunteer, town)

Similarly, another volunteer felt that she was viewed as the 'go-to problem solver' in her town and took on the role of a de facto public integration officer, after unsuccessfully arguing for the official establishment of such an office. This meant that she took care of the needs of many refugees in the town, supporting their contacts with authorities and ECEC providers and in this sense compensating exclusionary structures such as inaccessible online registration (interview 8).

Questions relating to the sharing of responsibility between civic and state actors have been raised previously in connection with the reception of refugees around 2015. While some argued that volunteer engagement may have allowed the government to avoid its responsibilities (Hamann and Karakayali, 2016; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019), the majority of volunteers surveyed at that time did not feel that their activities fell within the responsibilities of the state (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016). Our case points to a change of the volunteers' attitude over time. Some volunteers had expected to be temporarily filling a gap but, in the meantime, had come to realise that the state continued to rely on them (for example, interviews 8 and 12). They blamed this on shifting political priorities. Some felt that at the political level most refugees were expected to 'be integrated' by now, leading to a decrease in political commitment and lower budget allocations (interviews 1, 8, 12, 17 and 19). Against this background, we characterise civic participation as passively imposed, as volunteers feel that they have no choice but to act. The following volunteer voiced her frustration, questioning the purpose of such engagement:

> 'it's all being shut down now. "[The refugees] have been here for five years…, now we don't have to take care anymore, the volunteers can absorb it." And sometimes I ask myself, am I supporting a flawed system? Shouldn't one say "no more volunteering, that's the end of it?" Because it's all moving in the wrong direction.' (Interview 19, volunteer, town)

Discussion

In the previous section we showed how volunteers and their coordinators interpreted encounters between civic and state actors taking place while facilitating ECEC access and use by refugee families. In this empirical case, their engagement entailed the provision of information, accompanying refugee parents, supporting with administrative documents, sharing expertise, supporting street-level bureaucrats in reaching target groups and communicating with ECEC providers. It became clear that the interpretations of these activities vary based on the actors involved, the situation and timing. We now discuss how these findings relate to existing literature on co-production, clarifying the relation to earlier conceptualisations and discussing the meaning and perceived characteristics depicted in Table 2.

Relation to co-production

While definitions of co-production highlight cooperation and reciprocity, as outlined previously, these aspects are mostly reflected in our category 'collaborating' and less in the categories 'contesting' and 'replacing'. Under 'contesting', we described confrontational encounters distinguishing between interactions with individual street-level bureaucrats and activities at the political level. The former are among the tasks volunteers take over in accompanying refugee parents to authorities and ECEC providers, which is specifically encouraged by coordinators, as well as some local projects. While the literature on co-production tends to stress collaboration, we argue that the concept does not preclude conflict (see Richardson et al, 2018) and consider these situations part of co-production. Activities at the political level, however, are of a different nature and can better be termed 'advocacy', which requires different skills and knowledge (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). Our case illuminates the close intersections between the two, or 'blending' as one of our volunteers termed it, as co-production enables volunteers to note and act on larger shortcomings.

Respondents' feeling of taking over state responsibilities under 'replacing' leads us to consider demarcations of co-production from self-help or self-organisation (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2020) and 'parallel production', which involves citizens producing public services independently, without interacting with public agencies (Pestoff, 2006). We argue that the experiences under 'replacing' can still be considered co-production. First, the overall context has not changed – the volunteers are still contributing to policy goals and are collaborating with certain state actors in this context. Second, they complement existing professional tasks relating to access to childcare. Responsibility for the relevant activities for refugee families' use of childcare, the registration and the pedagogical offer, still lies with the professionals in the relevant authorities and ECEC providers, with volunteers acting as intermediaries to complement their activities (see Pestoff, 2006: 514, applying similar reasoning). However, the volunteers interpret such involvement as stepping in based on the state's failure to fully meet the needs of refugees. This raises questions concerning the limitations of co-production and the adequate division of work in such constellations, linked to the risk of using volunteers to replace paid employees (see Verschuere et al, 2012; Pill, 2021).

Meaning

We paid particular attention to the meaning attributed to co-production by the respondents. Based on the literature, we expected attributions related to the quality of services, efficiency and the democratic value of citizen engagement (Bovaird, 2007; Verschuere et al, 2012; Voorberg et al, 2014). In our material, service quality was clearly most visible as respondents highlighted that the support offered by volunteers responded to the needs of refugee parents and could enhance the effectiveness of achieving the goal of including these families in ECEC services. However, our findings also demonstrated that the central role of volunteers in complementing public service delivery in this field places reliability of such services at some risk as a result of individual behaviour as well as generally decreasing numbers of volunteers. This was mentioned in the literature as potentially leading to scepticism by state actors (Voorberg et al, 2014). By contrast, efficiency as a value played a minor role in our account which focused on volunteers and coordinators. This aspect was more prominent in research covering the state perspective (Pill, 2021).

While the emphasis on democratic values in co-production was not very prominent in line with earlier research (Voorberg et al, 2014; Nederhand and Meerkerk, 2018), questions relating to accountability were addressed. The literature draws attention on the one hand to the risk of blurring public accountability as a result of co-production, and on the other hand to the potential for increased accountability (Bovaird, 2007; Verschuere et al, 2012; Tuurnas et al, 2016; Grohs, 2021). In addition, Pill (2021) expressed concern that co-production could help the state to escape responsibilities and scale back its provision of services. Our account reflects this ambivalent picture. While accountability is increased, as volunteers hold the administration accountable for barriers they encounter under 'contesting', the interpretations portrayed under 'replacing' point to the perceived risk of the state withdrawing from responsibilities.

Characteristics

Considering the dynamics of participation, we see a mixture of bottom–up and top–down approaches, echoing the close connections between these types (see Richardson et al, 2018; van Meerkerk, 2019). While support structures often originated in civic participation, the municipalities usually encouraged and supported volunteering. They provided coordination, supervision and additional projects for supervised volunteer work, thus moving from a bottom–up to an invited approach. While some projects entail closer oversight, other coordinators rather act as a contact point and deliberately leave the conditions open. This varies from other forms of 'invited' participation, where 'parameters and terms of engagement are defined by state actors' (Bua, 2019: 285). This demonstrates how the organisation of co-production can take different forms depending on situation and context (Alford, 2014). Dynamics varied in relation to particular state actors and situations. The situations discussed under 'contesting' display elements of asserted participation as volunteers confronted individual street-level bureaucrats in 'negotiating clashing values' in the phase of implementation (Boswell, 2016: 728). Moreover, we characterise civic participation as described under 'replacing' as passively imposed. This links up with discussions concerning the extent to which co-production automatically implies voluntary participation or whether it can also include participation that is either inherent in the service or an act of compliance

(Alford, 2009; Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). In our case, volunteers more subtly perceive their actions as 'non-voluntary' because they feel they have no choice but to counter the failure of the state.

The relationship between civic and state actors varied. All volunteers had allies with whom they developed reciprocal working relationships, including coordinators, equality or integration officers, and those facilitating refugee families' ECEC access professionally. In this context, both sides sought contact and displayed openness to collaborate, which was mentioned as a factor in earlier research (Voorberg et al, 2014). However, volunteers regarded other state actors as hindering their aims, as described under 'contesting' and 'replacing'. One decisive factor, also noted as relevant by Verschuere et al (2012), was the interpretation of policy aims. The questions surrounding the aims of integration reflect the complexity and political nature of civic engagement for refugees. Trust is another key factor. The literature considers increased trust as a potential outcome of co-production (Fledderus, 2015) but at the same time views trust as a precondition (Verschuere et al, 2012; van Meerkerk, 2019). While our interviews show how trust can deepen over time and enable collaboration, they also illustrate the risk of decreasing trust in (certain) state actors over differing views on policy objectives.

Such differences may influence the self-efficacy of volunteers, known from research on co-production to explain different levels of engagement (Thomsen, 2017). This connects well with the accounts of volunteers quitting because of barriers persisting. Respondents' perseverance despite frustration corresponds to findings on the role of intrinsic motivation and the feeling of contributing to important social values in civic engagement (Verschuere et al, 2012; Nabatchi et al, 2017).

Conclusion

We explored the way volunteers and their local coordinators interpret encounters between civic and state actors in the context of helping refugee families secure ECEC services. Our account offers an interpretive perspective on this empirical case, illustrating the meaning and dynamics of co-production in practice, its value and limitations. We engage in the theoretical discussion of how the concept of co-production can be demarcated, showing how experiences of co-production may contradict previous understandings of the concept. More specifically, we proposed a classification of experiences which we regard as different manifestations of co-production.

First, instances of *collaborating* reflected the assumption that the integration of refugees could best be achieved by civic and state actors working together, based on their complementary abilities. However, volunteers regard some of the rules of the ECEC system, as well as the behaviour of individual street-level bureaucrats, as obstructing policy objectives. This led to volunteers *contesting exclusion* by proactively defending the interests of refugees against individual street-level bureaucrats as part of co-production or by engaging in advocacy. Finally, some volunteers regarded certain activities as falling within the responsibility of the state, leading to the question of whether volunteers are *replacing public services*. As a result, they feel obliged to participate in these contexts (passively imposed participation), leading to a high degree of frustration and even questioning the purpose of such engagement.

Future research could more closely explore our finding that experiences of co-production may develop over time. In addition, our article highlights the way divergent ideas about integration policy lead to conflicts, and it would be interesting to explore local processes of meaning-making further, including from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats and relating to their role in implementing sustainable integration measures. Finally, few research findings give insight into the increasing presence of refugees and migrant organisations in this context.

Notes

[1] We use the term 'integration' in contrast to terms such as 'inclusion' because it is most common in German discourse and practice. We use the terms 'refugee' and 'volunteer' in a broad sense, based on the understanding of our interviewees. A 'refugee' is any person having applied or planning to apply for asylum. A 'volunteer' is anybody supporting refugees voluntarily, without seeking monetary gain.

[2] 'Integration through Trust. How refugee parents of 0–5-year-olds build trust in ECEC services in Lower Saxony', see: www.leuphana.de/idv.

[3] We treat 'co-production' and 'co-creation' as synonyms; however, see, for example, Torfing et al (2021), who draw a distinction between the co-production of predefined public services and the co-creation of more innovative outcomes.

[4] §§ 6 and 24 of the Social Security Statute Book, Eighth Book: Child and Youth Welfare. Article 1 of the Law of June 26, 1990, BGBl. I, p. 1163.

[5] § 21 of the Law on Daycare Centres for Children, Nds. GVBl. 2002, p. 57.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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