

Descriptive Systematic Review of Employed Methods to Investigate Citizen Trust in Public Services Co-Production

Revisión sistemática descriptiva de los métodos empleados para investigar la confianza ciudadana en la coproducción de servicios públicos

Louis Pierre Philippe Homont. Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)

PhD Student in the Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations program of the University Complutense of Madrid, Spain.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1947-6407>

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Abstract:

From a methodological approach, the current paper explores the principal trends and gaps in the study of citizen trust, understood as relational social capital, in the co-production of public services. Through a descriptive systematic review of literature focused on citizen trust both as a cause and as an outcome of the implementation of this public sector communication strategy, this article pretends to know the methods employed by literature in the past ten years to investigate this relationship, and to identify the opportunities and limitations that each method presents. Moreover, based on the obtained results, several recommendations for future research will be proposed; firstly, the combined use of qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to analyse this relationship, and secondly, the adoption of neurosciences-related tools as a way of diversifying the currently employed research methods.

Keywords:

Citizen trust; Social capital; Co-production; Public sector communication

Resumen:

Desde una perspectiva metodológica, el presente trabajo explora las principales tendencias y brechas en el estudio de la confianza ciudadana, entendida como capital social relacional, en la coproducción de servicios públicos. Mediante una revisión sistemática descriptiva de la literatura sobre la confianza ciudadana como causa y consecuencia de la implementación de esta estrategia de comunicación del sector público, busca conocer los métodos empleados por la literatura académica en los diez últimos años para investigar dicha relación e identificar las oportunidades, así como los límites que cada método presenta. Asimismo, gracias a los resultados obtenidos,

procura plantear recomendaciones para futuras investigaciones; primero, el uso combinado de métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos para analizar esta relación y, segundo, el empleo de herramientas neurocientíficas para diversificar los métodos de investigación utilizados.

Palabras clave:

Confianza ciudadana; Capital social; Coproducción; Comunicación del sector público

1. Introduction

In the last decades, public sector communication has changed due to its competition with private sector in public services provision. In order to facilitate the management of its relationships with citizens, the use of the intangible asset concept in public sector has been advanced by literature (Luoma-aho, 2007). Although several intangible assets can be identified (Canel et al., 2017), this paper only focuses on citizen engagement.

With the purpose of achieving a higher citizens' engagement in public sector, literature proposed to employ co-production, understood as a strategy that tries to include these stakeholders in the life cycle of public services (Brandsen & Honingh, 2015). In fine, its use could enhance social capital (Jakobsen, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2013) and citizen trust levels (Verschuere, 2012). At the same time, the latter may lead to a higher citizens' participation in public issues (Ostrom & Ahn, 2003), and in public services co-production. In this sense, the relationship between citizen trust and co-production may be understood in two ways –citizen trust as a cause of public services co-production and as its outcome–, and thus be characterized as ambivalent. Although both interpretations of this relationship have been investigated, empirical evidences did not create consensus about the effects of citizen trust in this public sector strategy and vice versa.

In this frame, the current article pretends to contribute to future research by defining the main methodological practices and gaps in the study of citizen trust in public services co-production. To this end, this work aims (1) to know the methodological trends in the analysis of this relationship, and (2) to identify the opportunities and limitations of each method. To do so, a systematic descriptive review of literature is proposed since this method allows to give an account of the state of the art of a concrete issue (Xiao & Watson, 2019) and to make recommendations to investigate it.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Co-production as a public sector communication strategy

Since the 1980s, shifts in public sector management occurred due to the application of New Public Management which has promoted competition between public and private sectors in public services provision (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Given this situation, public organizations adopt new communication strategies to adequately manage their relationships with citizens via, among other elements, the introduction of intangible asset concept (Luoma-aho, 2007) understood as “a non-physical good [...] activated

through communication [strategies which] gives rise to an identifiable resource and from which both the organization and stakeholders/citizens can expect a benefit [...] in the long term” (Canel et al., 2017, p. 39).

Canel et al. (2017) identified several intangible assets in public sector, such as citizen engagement which can be defined as the inclusion of citizens in public management that might strengthen public organizations’ legitimacy (Piqueiras, 2017). In order to achieve high levels of citizen engagement, co-production has been proposed by literature (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2020; Moon, 2018). Described by Brandsen and Honingh (2015) as “[the] relationship between a paid employee of an organization and (groups of) individual citizens that requires a direct and active contribution from these citizens to the work of the organization” (p. 431), co-production permits citizens to be involved in the design, provision and/or monitorization of public services (Nabatchi et al., 2017).

Given its ability to generate dialogue, co-production is expected to enhance mutual understanding between public servants and citizens (Ostrom, 1996) and to improve public services efficiency (Fung, 2015). Moreover, it has been mentioned as a way to strengthen social capital (Jakobsen, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2017) and to reinforce citizen trust (Verschuere et al., 2012), that is, the trust of citizens in public sector and in its components.

2.2. Citizen trust as relational social capital

Trust, understood as a co-production outcome, has been mentioned as the relational form of social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) which is comprehended as “[the] features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993, p. 36).

This psychosociological concept that can be defined as “a psychological state compromising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395) has been investigated in public sector as citizen trust or public trust, which includes trust of citizens in the administrative system, in specific public agencies and in public servants.

Trust and citizen trust has been considered as essential for the social order maintenance (Blau, 1964). In public sector, it might entail a higher public services efficiency by helping public servants to mediate social needs (Bockmeyer, 2000), and may promote citizen engagement in collective issues (Ostrom & Ahn, 2003). Therefore, citizen trust may be acknowledged as a cause of citizens’ willingness to co-produce public services.

2.3. The relationship between citizen trust and co-production

By recognising citizen trust as a cause and as an outcome of co-production, the relationship between both can be characterized as ambivalent. Nevertheless, empirical findings on the effects of each concept on the other one, and vice versa, are not consensual. For instance, while Fledderus and Honingh (2016), and Kim et al. (2017) established a positive correlation between citizen trust and co-production, Cheng (2018) and Güemes and Resina (2019) refuted this thesis. To explain these divergences, several authors examined the mediating role of psychological (Fledderus & Honingh, 2016) and

sociodemographic factors (Fledderus et al., 2014; Van Ryzin, 2011), when Fledderus (2015b) and Pestoff (2006) pointed out the lack of influence of cultural characteristics, which create the need to keep studying this relationship.

Since having a systematic knowledge of methods through which literature analysed a phenomenon is necessary for future research, the current paper aims (1) to know the methodological trends in the study of citizen trust as a cause and as an outcome of public services co-production, and (2) to identify the opportunities and limitations that each research method presents.

3. Methodology

To achieve these purposes, a descriptive systematic review of literature has been carried out since this research method (Snyder, 2019) allows to provide an account of the state of the art of a specific concern –in the current case, the research methods used to study citizen trust in public services co-production– and to identify the gaps that could be explored (Xiao & Watson, 2019, pp. 95-93).

The sampling strategy employed was selective. It was implemented via Google Scholar, identified by Norris et al. (2008) as a useful open access database for systematic literature reviewing. Although co-creation, citizen engagement, civic engagement and citizen participation are mentioned as co-production’s synonym (Gebauer et al., 2010) and that not all authors refer to citizen trust as such, ten searches were conducted through the following keywords: ‘trust’ or ‘social capital’, along with ‘co-production’, ‘co-creation’, ‘citizen engagement’, ‘civic engagement’, or ‘citizen participation’. Results were sorted by their publication date (from 2011 to 2021) and by their relevance which is established by Google Scholar according to the correspondence between the text of the academic work and the search keywords, to the work’s digital presence, to the quality of the web page where it is located, and to the number of times it has been cited (Ramírez-Vega & Meneses-Guillén, 2017, p. 15). To reach a large sample, and by taking into account that Google Scholar presents ten results per page, the first 40 pages were reviewed. In total, a sample of 4000 academic works has been obtained.

Several selection criteria were used in two stages to reduce this sample. In the first stage, only the works that cited in their meta-description or their summary the keywords employed for each search were selected. Posteriorly, solely articles published in scientific journals were collected as a guarantee of high academic quality. These two criteria allowed to get a sample of 1.233 papers as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Data obtained after the first selection stage

Mentioned concept	Trust	Social capital	Total
Co-production	123	8	131
Co-creation	28	52	80
Citizen engagement	162	47	209
Civic engagement	176	317	493
Citizen participation	240	80	320

Total	729	504	1233
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In the second stage, only articles in English language published between January 2011 and January 2021 –in order to have a representative sample of the research carried out in the last ten years– and whose title, summary or keywords cited together the terms used for each search (i.e., ‘social capital’ and ‘co-production’) were taken into account. In addition, those articles that analysed the indirect engagement of citizens in public services co-production or their contribution in public policies were excluded.

Thanks to these criteria, 18 research articles published between January 2011 and January 2021 in scientific journals, that studied citizen trust in public services co-production have been obtained. As indicated in Table 2, nine of them investigated citizen trust as a cause of co-production (interpretation 1), eight as its outcome (interpretation 2), and one explored its two possible interpretations. In addition, 11 analysed citizen trust in co-production, four in citizen participation and three in civic engagement.

Table 2

Data obtained after the second selection stage

Authors	Analysed concept	Interpretation of the relationship
Andrews and Brewer (2013)	Co-production	Interpretation 1
Cené et al. (2011)	Civic engagement	Interpretation 1
Den Broeder et al. (2017)	Citizen participation	Interpretation 2
Fledderus (2015a)	Co-production	Interpretation 2
Fledderus (2015b)	Co-production	Interpretation 2
Fledderus and Honingh (2015)	Co-production	Interpretation 1
Frantzeskaki and Kabisch (2016)	Co-production	Interpretation 2
Jingwei He and Ma (2020)	Citizen participation	Interpretation 2
Kang and Van Ryzin (2019)	Co-production	Interpretation 2
Lam et al. (2015)	Civic engagement	Interpretation 1
Lau and Ali (2019)	Citizen participation	Interpretation 1
Lekti and Steen (2020)	Co-production	Interpretation 1
Sudhipongpracha (2018)	Co-production	Interpretation 2
Suebvises (2018)	Citizen participation	Interpretation 1
Thijssen and Van Dooren (2016)	Co-production	Interpretation 1
Warren et al. (2014)	Civic engagement	Interpretation 2
Weaver (2018)	Co-production	Interpretation 1 and 2
Webster and Leleux (2018)	Co-production	Interpretation 1

4. Results

4.1. Research methods employed to study citizen trust in co-production

In order to study the relationship between citizen trust and public services co-production, the reviewed literature used qualitative methods 12 times and quantitative methods 14 times. As indicated in Table 3, 11 articles employed a single research method, while six utilised two and another three. To apply these methods, three articles used vignettes and another one a user test which are not considered per se as research method since they do not directly provide empirical data. Indeed, they represent means by which the researcher can use quantitative or qualitative methods that supply data.

Table 3

Summary of methods employed by each reviewed article according to their type

Authors	Qualitative methods	Quantitative methods
Andrews and Brewer (2013)		Secondary analysis
Cené et al. (2011)	Focus group Interviews	
Den Broeder et al. (2017)	Focus group Interviews	Survey
Fledderus (2015a)	Interviews	Survey
Fledderus (2015b)		(Vignettes) Survey
Fledderus and Honingh (2015)	Interviews	Survey
Frantzeskaki and Kabisch (2016)	Empirical observation	
Jingwei He and Ma (2020)		Survey
Kang and Van Ryzin (2019)		(Vignettes) Survey
Lam et al. (2015)	Interviews	(User test) Survey
Lau and Ali (2019)	Interviews	Secondary analysis
Lekti and Steen (2020)		(Vignettes) Survey
Sudhipongpracha (2018)		Survey
Suebvises (2018)		Survey
Thijssen and Van Dooren (2016)		Secondary analysis
Warren et al. (2014)	Interviews	Survey
Weaver (2018)	Interviews	
Webster and Leleux (2018)	Literature review	

In details, among the 12 times in which qualitative methods were employed, eight were interviews. Described by Harrel and Bradley (2009) as “discussions, usually one-on-one between and interviewer and an individual, meant to gather information on a specific topic” (p.6), interviews are a qualitative method whose types can be classified according to their structure. They refer to unstructured interviews when the interviewer does not

control the answer of the interviewee, to semi-structured interviews if a script is employed to start the conversation, and to structured interviews as long as the questions are fixed, precise and ordered by a script (pp. 25-28). At the same time, two focus groups, defined by Barrows (2000) as “a type of group interview where a small group of individuals are gathered together for the purpose of discussing one (or sometimes more) topic of interest” (p. 193), were carried out. Furthermore, one reviewed article conducted a literature review which consists in using findings or other elements of research in order to give an account of a phenomenon (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Finally, empirical observation, which is the method that allows the researcher to collect data by observing a phenomenon (Gorman & Clayton, 2005, p. 40) without participating in it, was used one time

In regard to quantitative methods, surveys, understood as a “set of questions that can be administrated by paper or pencil, as a web form, or by an interview [which] follows a strict script” (Harrel & Bradley, 2009, p. 6), were employed 11 times. When repeatedly administrated to the studied sample, they are longitudinal. Additionally, secondary analysis, which is the research method that “[use] precollected survey data in original research” (Kiecolt & Nathan, 1985, p. 75), were used three times.

Even if they are not considered as research methods that directly provide empirical data, but more as a means by which the researcher can apply research methods such as surveys, vignettes were used three times. They are defined by Hughes (1998) as “stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (p. 381). In the same way, user test, which allows “users [...] to do typical tasks with a product, or [...] to explore it freely” (Bastien, 2010, p. e19), is a mean that was simultaneously used with a survey by one reviewed paper.

4.2. The opportunities and limitations of each research method

Each reviewed article employed different research methods in order to explore citizen trust in public services co-production by taking into account their opportunities and limitations. Since not all the reviewed literature mentioned these characteristics, it has been necessary to consult other academic works.

Firstly, qualitative methods employed 12 times present a set of similarities. Although interviews allow the researcher to understand psychological phenomena (Cené et al., 2011) by providing non-verbal information (Weaver, 2018) or data related to personal feelings (Den Broeder et al., 2017), they might be harmed by the possible lack of veracity of the obtained data due to the interviewee who, by seeking to meet the social expectations he or she perceives, could give wrong answers, or to the interviewer whose discretion over the course of the interview might lead his or her theoretical standpoint to influence results (Alsaawi, 2014). Similarly, focus groups were used by Den Broeder et al. (2017) and by Cené et al. (2011) to gain information related to personal feelings in collective contexts or to social phenomena. However, the veracity of collected data might be affected by participants as interviews might be (Den Broeder et al., 2017). Empirical observation helps the researcher to obtain verbal and non-verbal data in natural and/or social situations and setting (Frantzeskaki & Kabisch, 2016), even if

individuals' behaviours may be altered by the observer's presence (Harrel & Bradley, 2009, p. 6). Lastly, systematic literature review which is useful to understand an entire subject (Webster & Leleux, 2018) may be poorly relevant when the specificity of the reviewed concern prevents the selection of numerous academic works (Webster & Leleux, 2018).

Secondly, the majority of quantitative methods employed by the reviewed literature was surveys. This method enables the study of a large sample (Kang & Van Ryzin, 2019; Warren et al., 2014), the comparison of different phenomena (Suebvises, 2018), and the analysis of their diverse facets (Jingwei He & Ma, 2020). When it is repeatedly used, that is, when it is longitudinal, this method allows the observation of a phenomenon's evolution (Fledderus, 2015a). Nevertheless, it does not provide in-depth data about the analysed subject (Sudhipongpracha, 2018) nor non-verbal information (Kang & Van Ryzin, 2019), which may limit the obtained results. In the same way, secondary analysis permits the researcher to investigate a large amount of information and facilitates its crossing (Andrews & Brewer, 2013), even if this amount can difficult the academic work of the researcher (Kiecolt & Nathan, 1985) who has no control over the way in which data were obtained by primary studies (Andrews & Brewer, 2013).

Thirdly, although they do not directly provide information to the researcher, vignettes enable the understanding of a phenomenon's effects in different situations (Lekti & Steen, 2020) and therefore, make possible the capture of the consequences of its main factors (Hughes & Huby, 2004). However, they can be limited by their specificity (Lekti & Steen, 2020). Similarly, user test does not directly supply data, but enables the study of individuals' behaviours with a product or a service through the use of research method, such as survey. Consequently, it facilitates information necessary to detect its flaws and ways of improvement (Bastien, 2010, p. e19). However, by permitting the participant to freely use the product or the service, this method does not allow researcher to have some control over the course of the test, which may affect the achieved results.

In sum, reviewed articles showed that qualitative methods permit the researcher to obtain in-depth data on a specific phenomenon, but with a reduced sample, which in fine may prevent the generalization of results (Cené et al., 2011; Jingwei He & Ma, 2020), while quantitative methods provide data from a large sample without enabling the in-depth study of a phenomenon (Kang & Van Ryzin, 2019).

5. Conclusions

Due to profound changes in its management model, Public Administration has had to adapt its communication strategy. To do so, part of the literature has urged to use public services co-production, understood as a communication strategy able to generate citizen engagement in public issues (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2020; Moon, 2018). Moreover, it might enhance social capital (Jakobsen, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2017) and citizen trust levels (i.e., Kang & Pakr, 2018; Sudhipongpracha, 2018). At the same time, some authors examined citizen trust as a cause of the citizen willingness to co-produce public services (i.e., Fledderus & Honingh, 2016; Suebvises, 2018). Therefore, the relationship between citizen trust and public services co-production may be described as ambivalent.

In order to indirectly contribute to knowledge about this relationship by giving an account of the research methods employed by literature in the past ten years to study citizen trust in public services co-production, a descriptive systematic review of literature has been employed. Although the selected sample was quite small (18 articles) given the specificity of the analysed phenomenon, this research method has permitted to meet the two aims of this paper.

Firstly, it has been verified that there are no significative differences between the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of this ambivalent relationship (1). A trend towards the utilization of surveys, which were the more employed method (11 times), followed by interviews (8 times), has been observed. Hence, a rebalancing between the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to study co-production may be noticed, since research used to focus on qualitative methods (Voorberg et al., 2015, p. 1339).

Secondly, the current descriptive systematic review has highlighted the opportunities and limits presented by each employed method (2). As mentioned by the reviewed literature, qualitative methods provide essential data for the in-depth understanding of a phenomenon but, by preventing the study of a large sample, they difficult the generalization of the achieved results; while quantitative methods allow the analysis of a large sample without collecting comprehensively data. In order to take advantage of these opportunities and to alleviate the mentioned limitations, Den Broeder et al. (2017) and Lam et al. (2015) recommended combining qualitative and quantitative methods for future research.

Finally, the current review has emphasized the poor diversity of the methods employed to study citizen trust in co-production. Indeed, it has been noticed that reviewed literature only used six different research methods, to which vignettes and user test can be added. To diversify them, the use of neuroscience-related tools that have already been employed to investigate trust from different approaches is recommended. For instance, the electroencephalogram (EEG) which measures voltage fluctuations, and thus accounts neuronal changes (Kenning & Linzmajer, 2011, p. 113), was employed by Yen and Chiang (2021) to measure consumers' trust in chatbots. Likewise, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) which quantifies the blood oxygenation in the brain and allows to know which brain regions are activated by a specific stimulus (Kenning & Linzmajer, 2011, p. 114) was used by Filkowski et al. (2016) to observe the influence of interpersonal trust in cooperative behaviours. Even if they do not enable the study of a large sample (Button et al., 2016), neuroscience-related tools, along with quantitative methods, might represent a useful mixed method to understand the ambivalent relationship between citizen trust and public services co-production.

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