

Understanding front-line practice

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Abstract

This paper interrogates concepts of street-level and 'front-line' bureaucracy/ practice/ working/ organising by reviewing a number of distinct literatures. It questions the distinction between public and private service, and argues that front-line practice involves a type of co-production, based on public encounters, building relationships, and multi-service coordination and management. It emphasises that the responsibility of front-line workers is primarily to those who pay them for what they do, and only secondarily to those they serve. Nevertheless, front-line workers have to *manage* the relationships built in the course of their practice, and this management is potentially *transformative* of service users. The literature describes various ways in which front-line workers manage these relationships, but these ways remain insufficiently explored or understood. The paper further discusses whether front-line practice strengthens or weakens democracy, and concludes with an attempt to understand why front-line practice continues to be dominated by more powerful forces.

Key words: practice, front-line, service, discretion, co-production, relationship, keyworking

Introduction: front-line practice as public service

Originally, in the work of Lipsky (1980), the term ‘street-level bureaucracy’ referred to the complex behaviour of people who are employed by public or governmental service agencies or organisations to interact with people who use those services as well as with other members of the public and other organisations and bodies. This meaning has since been extended to include employees of private and third sector organisations insofar as their work falls within the rubric of public policy (e.g. because they are contracted to provide public services).¹ Currently, therefore, street-level bureaucrats are understood to be people who work for public service organisations and whose work involves substantial interaction with members of the public – essentially, they are paid to serve the public in one form or another, and to work with other organisations to that end. In this paper, therefore, I shall refer to them as front-line workers or practitioners.

Lipsky’s work is important for a number of reasons, not least of which is that he showed how street-level bureaucrats (or front-line workers) do not merely implement public policies or follow the rules set by their paymasters but actively contribute to making, interpreting and even ignoring those policies and rules, as well as making up their own. In short, they act not only as agents of the state but also as ‘citizen-agents’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003: 20, 2012: S17).² Occasionally such a worker may refer to the rules of their

¹ Originally, street-level bureaucrats were portrayed negatively as gatekeepers, rationing services and limiting their clientele. More recently, they have been seen as more positive, dedicated to serving their clients and having due regard to their welfare (Nielsen, 2006), going beyond their traditional narrow self-serving practice (Durose, 2007) and reaching out to, enabling and fixing arrangements to meet their clients’ needs (Durose, 2011). Some scholars, however, have questioned whether street-level bureaucrat behaviour has actually become more positive (Alden, 2015), particularly in social work (Baldwin, 2000; Ellis, 2007; Sullivan, 2009) and employment activation work (Fletcher, 2011; Brodtkin and Marston, 2013 – in US, UK, Netherlands, Denmark, Australia and Germany). Nowadays, the term ‘front-line worker’ is more commonly used instead of ‘street-level bureaucrat’ (Durose, 2007; van Hulst et al, 2012: 437).

² In their research, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012: S17) found that the citizen-agent narrative was much more common among their respondents (police, teachers and counsellors), who ‘rarely, if ever, referenced policy or rules when making normative judgments’. Hoyle (2014: 192) found that nurses also acted like citizen-

organisation when placed under pressure or when the situation makes it advantageous or simply convenient to do so, but mostly they rely on their own initiative or discretion, based on their life experiences and moral judgement (what Sayer, 2005: 948, has called 'lay morality' or 'lay normativity'). Such behaviour may or may not be compatible with policy made by 'official' policy-makers. A focus on the work of such practitioners is therefore crucial for understanding policy processes (in particular how and why they 'succeed' or 'fail'), especially in view of what Osborne (2006: 380) has called the 'disappointing' results from implementation studies (see also Schofield, 2001; Hill and Hupe, 2003).

In their research, Considine and Lewis (1999) found three types of what they called 'frontline bureaucracy': procedural, market- corporate and network bureaucracy.

Procedural bureaucracy is the classic Weberian type, sometimes known as 'public administration' (Osborne, 2006), based on a unified chain of command and standardised practices of recruitment, job classification and everyday working (for a spirited defence of Weberian bureaucracy, see Du Gay, 2000). Market-corporate bureaucracy is associated with the 'New Public Management' (Hood, 1991), involving greater freedom for managers to decide what they do and how they do it, within the limits set by central strategic planning, with increasing emphasis on entrepreneurship and innovation, and the creation of 'quasi-businesses' (Considine and Lewis, 1999: 470). Network bureaucracy is then an emerging form, associated with the 'New Public Governance' (Osborne, 2006), involving networks of interdependent 'network agents', working horizontally across different organisations, interests and populations, constituting a 'service system' (Considine and Lewis, 1999: 472 – see also Meier and O'Toole, 2006; Mathur and Skelcher, 2007). It is this latter type of

agents. 'Citizen-agents' can act positively or negatively towards their clients – for this reason, clients can experience their encounters with service organisations as 'a bureaucratic lottery' (Alden, 2015: 74).

bureaucracy (if it can be called bureaucracy at all – Considine and Lewis, 2003, refer to it as ‘governance’ instead) that is said to be most characteristic of front-line working today – based on ‘trusting relationships with other agencies, high levels of practitioner autonomy, and involvement in program design’ (Considine and Lewis, 1999: 474). At the same time, however, such workers continue to be subject to the authority of their labour contracts – they work in the shadow of (bureaucratic) hierarchy (Scharpf, 1997)³, making the term ‘bureaucracy’ seem more appropriate than the more fashionable term ‘governance’.

So front-line workers are *network* bureaucrats in that, although they work for a bureau (either as employees or contractors) and have a degree of control over their work, they also play an active role in interorganisational networks. What distinguishes them from other network bureaucrats, however, is that they work directly with or for the public (‘the street’) or members of the public (typically called ‘clients’); they provide a service and those who use that service are generically known as ‘service users’. This is often taken to mean that they provide ‘welfare’ such as social and healthcare, community work and policing but it also includes ‘the planning and building of infrastructure such as roads, railways, or leisure centres’ where ‘infrastructure bureaucracies mainly produce and deliver services to collectives’ (Johansson, 2012: 1035) and even the regulating of private companies (Nielsen, 2006). Whether a service is providing ‘welfare’, ‘infrastructure’ or ‘regulation’, therefore, each service field has its own kinds of expert or professional worker and its own kinds of interaction between practitioners and public.

³ Some scholars have argued that the new public management has attempted to strengthen hierarchical control by curtailing the discretion of front-line workers, especially in social services (Lawson, 1993; Langan, 2000; Hjerne et al, 2010). These attempts, however, have proved to be only partially successful at best (Brodin, 2012), and, paradoxically, tend to increase inconsistent and discriminatory practice rather than reduce it (Fletcher, 2011; Brodin and Marston, 2013).

There are many literatures that touch upon the issue of front-line practice. In this paper I will concentrate on three: first, a burgeoning literature on the nature of 'service'; second, more developed literatures on co-production and relationship management; and third, a somewhat tangential literature on participatory and deliberative democracy. The paper will aim to highlight both the varied character of front-line practice and the common explanation of this practice in the context of late capitalism.

I start with the concept of a public service organisation (PSO). PSOs are most simply defined by McLaughlin et al (2009: 35) as 'organizations from across the governmental, VCO [voluntary and community organizations] and business sectors that are involved in the provision of public services.' Front-line workers are usually thought of as working for PSOs, together with their managers and 'back office' workers. The meaning of 'public service', however, is contested. The term 'service' for example, evokes two entirely different traditions.

The first tradition of service, originating from the public sector, is that of procedural bureaucracy (as mentioned above), which is justified in terms of the role of the bureaucrats as public (or civil) servants, that is, people who obey their political masters while also advising and promoting to them, and otherwise advancing, what they see to be in the public interest (namely, the interests of the citizenry as a whole) as opposed to their own private interests. The term 'public service ethos' (Needham, 2006a) seems to epitomise this approach, as it contrasts public service with unethical practices of clientelism and corruption. Here service is understood as involving selflessness and public-spiritedness, even though public servants may disagree (with their political masters and with one

another) about what the public interest is and how it might best be advanced (as Rhodes and Wanna, 2007: 412, point out: ‘the public interest is endlessly contested’).

The second tradition derives from the nature of (largely private) service industries (originally domestic services such as cleaning, cooking, childcare and gardening, but now including a wide variety of other services such as retailing, hospitality, banking, insurance, transport, and leisure and recreation), which are contrasted with other industries such as manufacturing industry and so-called primary industries (agriculture, fishing, forestry and extractive industries). Here we find an entirely different literature, concerned with the marketing and management of services (Grönroos, 1978, 2000; Normann, 2002; Nankervis, 2005). A service is seen as an intangible process (that is, an activity, not an object), in which production and consumption occur simultaneously, so that the recipient or user or consumer or customer or client is also a co-producer of the service (Edvardsson et al, 2005: 108; Osborne, 2010: 2-3; and later discussion in this paper). The key point in the process is where a service user interacts with a service organisation worker, in a ‘public encounter’ (Goodsell, 1981; Bartels, 2013), so the management of such encounters is a crucial task for service organisations. Unlike other kinds of industry, therefore, service requires the establishment of a *relationship*, however fleeting, between provider and user – a relationship that involves, at its heart, encounter, dialogue and co-production. As noted above, however, there are different service fields, and ‘services are as different from each other and from products as products are from each other’ (Edvardsson et al, 2005: 118), so it may be unwise to generalise further. Vargo et al (2008), for example, argue that service is about the co-creation of value with customers, which occurs in all industries, not just service industries, but their paper is not clear about the difference between the creation of value

for the user (namely, use value) and the creation of value for the provider (namely, exchange value, which, in a typical market exchange, is expressed in terms of money). Their argument suggests that they privilege services that involve market exchange over services that do not. They define value generally in terms of 'an improvement in *system well-being*' (Vargo et al, 2008: 149), which may refer to the capitalist system as a whole, rather than specifically in terms of the benefit to service users or the general public. Nevertheless, their argument does prompt the question of how similar or different public services may be from the 'service' that they have in mind.

Arguably, the term 'public service' combines these two traditions: on the one hand advancing the interests of the public over and above private interests, while on the other hand co-creating value for whomever the service is set up to serve. As public servants, front-line workers could be both advocating the public interest (and, if serving a particular type of client, claiming that it is in the public interest to help that type of client) and working with service users to add value to the service itself. However, it is difficult to see a clear dividing line here between public and private service organisations. At one end of the spectrum, there are governmental organisations delivering services to members of the public, which are clearly public organisations, and at the other end there are private companies providing services to private individuals and organisations, which are clearly not public organisations; in between there are private companies contracted by governmental agencies to provide services to the public (which count as PSOs by McLaughlin et al's definition) and service agencies that are usually regarded as public but which are funded largely through the charges that they levy on their users (e.g. passenger transport executives, licensing authorities, the BBC, and so on), which could be argued are not PSOs because they serve

private interests only (e.g. passengers, licensees, license payers). By extension, however, it could be argued that many if not most governmental organisations are set up to serve the interests of taxpayers, and at least some of these interests could be construed as private (e.g. those of benefit claimants, students, patients, tenants, and so on). So confusion reigns on where the line can be drawn between private and public services, and once again we are obliged to conclude that this line, if it exists at all, is likely to be drawn differently in different fields.⁴ For convenience I shall define a public service as one that creates value with or for its users on any matter that is deemed to be one of public policy (that is, produced by governmental decision-making and action).⁵

When one comes to consider the different fields of front-line practice, it is striking that most if not all of them are associated with professional occupations. Brodtkin (2012: 943), for example, notes that: 'There is now a corpus of studies that investigates how public policies are shaped by street-level practices in areas as diverse as child welfare, education, prison reform, health care, workplace safety, workforce development, welfare, juvenile justice, corrections, and more'. Here what Evetts (2009: 248) calls '*occupational professionalism*' comes into play, where 'authority – not control – is based on practitioner autonomy, discretionary judgement', self-regulation, and common cultural capital, with an emphasis on relationships rather than structures (the latter being associated with traditional Weberian bureaucracy or what Evetts calls '*organisational professionalism*'). From this, it can be seen that front-line workers are, or are aspiring to be, occupational professionals – they are not

⁴ Newman and Clarke (2009) recognise the confusion that exists on this issue, which is perhaps epitomised in the hybrid expression 'citizen-consumers', but they do not succeed in resolving it. I will argue later in this paper that the confusion can only be resolved through a critique of capitalist labour, which exists just as much within public services as within private services, with the difference lying only in the distinctiveness of the political field in capitalist society.

⁵ But of course any matter at all can be deemed to be in the public interest – the distinction between public and private service or policy therefore rests, in the end, on political and legal determination and judgment.

just network bureaucrats who happen to work directly with the public but they also have publicly recognised expertise in at least one field of work. Attempts to subject such professionals to the authority of the organisation, whether through traditional public administration or through the New Public Management, have often foundered, largely due to the organisation's reliance on these skills, especially that of discretionary judgement.⁶ These unsuccessful re-assertions of hierarchy, however, have now stimulated governments to look to broader-based networks and technologies to ensure professional compliance with governmental aims and priorities – not least by incorporating occupational professionals into managerial positions (Evetts, 2009: 251).⁷ The result is that some occupational professionals are being turned into organisational professionals (in short, managers), and hierarchy is being re-asserted in a new form. As Brodtkin (2012: 945) puts it, managers have 'new and more powerful tools' through which they can influence the behaviour of workers. A key problem here is that the use of these tools typically has unintended consequences that are often detrimental to effective working (for examples of this, see Evetts, 2009: 260). Lipsky (2010), in particular, is in no doubt that the exercise of managerial prerogative can render street-level working less effective for those whom the organisation is supposed to serve. The problem seems to be that occupational professionals are increasingly being held

⁶ Notable examples of professional resistance include 'medical practitioners and university academics in the UK' (Evetts, 2009: 260); see also Richards (2008: 136): 'while targets can be measured, control over actual delivery still remains with the street level bureaucrats.' In contrast, what might be called 'lower-level professionals' find themselves having to defer to 'higher-level' ones (as in Halliday et al's, 2009, study of criminal justice social workers in relation to criminal judges). The picture is complicated by the fact that managers do not always act as organisational professionals but also act as occupational professionals or 'practitioners' in some organisations (Evans, 2009).

⁷ This was described above as the move from New Public Management to New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006). However, professionals who are responsible for managing front-line professionals may take the side of the latter when they conflict with more senior management; that is, occupational professionals do not necessarily turn into organisational professionals when they are promoted (Evans, 2010, 2011; Alden, 2015: 67) – they do not become part of any 'new' governance structure. Consequently, although hierarchy persists, governmental strategies continue to fail, at least in their original form, and are continually modified in the light of worker resistance.

to account for their performance to their paymasters, and not directly to their clients or service users. Nevertheless, it seems clear that a distinction can be drawn between three kinds of worker here: *front-line professionals* (or aspiring professionals), who are the focus of this paper; *'lower-level practitioners'* (Brodin, 2012: 945), who also work on the front line but lack professional status and have little power to resist managerial demands (see, for example, Dias and Maynard-Moody's, 2007, study of case workers in a contracted welfare-to-work agency); and *organisational professionals*, who exercise managerial authority over (and, in some cases, in support of) those working on the front line but do not themselves work directly with or for the public.

Front-line practice as co-production

Co-production is a concept that now features in a variety of literatures, in all of which it signifies a process in which the efforts of both service users and service providers together create new value (in the service economy/society/management literature, see Fuchs, 1968; Gartner and Riessman, 1974; Gershuny and Miles, 1983; Gruner and Homburg, 2000; Alam, 2006; in the economics literature, see Ostrom, 1996; Parks et al, 1981; in the public policy/management and social policy literature, see Sharp, 1980; Whitaker, 1980; Brudney and England, 1983; Brudney, 1984; Kiser, 1984; Wirth, 1986, 1991; Moore, 1995; Alford, 1998, 2002a; Pestoff, 2006).^{8 9} There is also a separate literature on governance (co-

⁸ Co-production is distinguished from 'ancillary or auxiliary production', which refers to expected forms of citizen behaviour such as obeying the law and following regulations (Warren et al, 1982; Rosentraub and Warren, 1987; Pestoff, 2006: 507). These scholars also distinguish it from 'parallel production', which 'involves services similar to those provided by public agencies, but produced by individuals without contact or co-operation with public agencies' (Pestoff, 2006: 507). Bovaird (2007: 847), however, suggests there is no good reason for confining the meaning of co-production to co-production with state agencies.

⁹ Examples of fields of co-production include: public safety and security, education, fire protection, recreation, solid waste collection and disposal in the USA (Percy, 1984); parking, road maintenance and neighbourhood policing in the USA (Needham, 2009: 2); water supply in Brazil and primary education in Nigeria (Ostrom, 1999); use of postcodes in postal services, participation by long-term unemployed in training programmes,

governance or participatory governance or interactive governance), which will be considered in a later section of this paper. The definition of co-production is disputed in the literature but Bovaird's (2007: 847) version would appear to come closest to what the different literatures have in common: 'the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized service providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions.'¹⁰

Potentially, co-production has significant benefits, which Needham (2008: 223) classifies as therapeutic and diagnostic:

co-production can be a therapeutic tool (building trust and communication between participants, allowing bureaucrats and citizens to explain their perspective and listen to others) as well as a diagnostic one (revealing citizens' needs, identifying the main causes of delivery problems and negotiating effective means to resolve them).

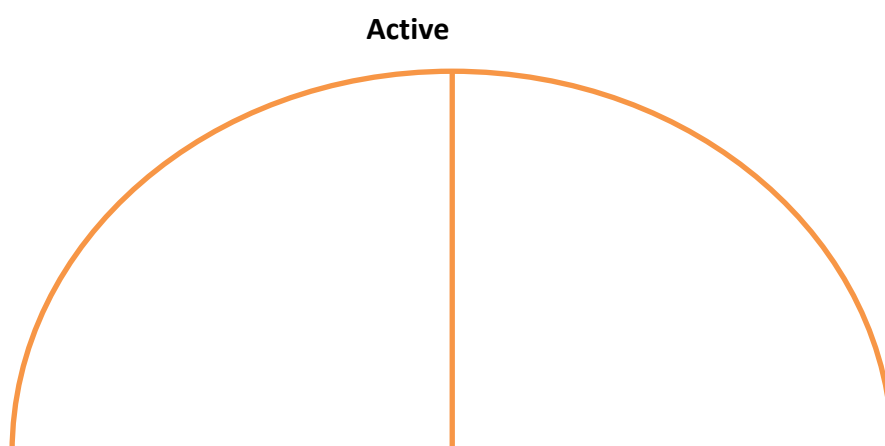
Needham (2008: 225, 229) goes on to argue that interaction, dialogue and collective deliberation and negotiation between service providers and users are necessary to realise these benefits. *Actually*, however, most policy scholars have reported that the process is

tenant maintenance activity in social housing, and taxpayer collaboration with income tax requirements in Australia (Alford, 2002a); childcare (in many countries including France, Germany, Sweden, Italy), youth sports activities and clubs, and care of older people in Sweden (Pestoff, 2006); healthcare cooperatives in Japan (Pestoff, 2006); direct payments in social care, expert patient programmes, home-school contracts, and community justice in policing in the UK (Needham, 2008: 222); street policing in the US (Skolnick and Bayley, 1988) and UK (Smith et al, 2011); social services in the US (Savas, 2002); urban regeneration and environmental protection in all Western countries (Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007).

¹⁰ Confusingly, the term 'co-production' has been used also to describe relationships between public and voluntary and community sector organisations (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2004), in which users are not necessarily active (Rich, 1981). This is not compatible with the more usual understanding of co-production as defined here. The same confusion occurs in the literature on governance, especially 'network governance' (see, for example, Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007: 452, who use a catch-all term 'civil society actors', or Sørensen, 2013: 72).

typically though not invariably dominated by professional providers (for example, Barnes et al, 1990: 140; Barnes et al, 2007; Simmons et al, 2007; and see Evetts, 2009, above), often to the extent of co-opting service users into playing a pre-defined production role (Gilliatt et al, 2000: 347 – the ‘responsible consumer’), and shifting the costs and risks of a service onto its users (Ostrom, 1996: 1082; Needham, 2006b; Bovaird, 2007: 856). Nevertheless, in the service management literature, Vargo et al (2008), for example, see the service user (or customer) as king – perhaps because private service organisations are seen as competing with one another, enabling service users to choose organisations they like and exit those that they do not. Scholars in all literatures argue that the production and consumption of services cannot be separated either conceptually (Gilliatt et al, 2000: 337) or spatio-temporally (Percy, 1984). The service management literature, however, seems to ignore the fact that the movement towards getting consumers to do more for themselves is led by producers trying to reduce their costs and make their products and services cheaper. While no doubt this increases producer dependence on consumers, it does not necessarily empower or add value to the consumers. Instead, ‘the organization rather than the consumer is empowered’ by the onset of such co-production (Gilliatt et al, 2000: 347).

In a useful review of the various literatures, Jung (2010) identified co-production as one of four underlying archetypes of user involvement in services, depending on whether the involvement is active or passive, direct or indirect. Basically, where ‘the user directly shapes the service in some way’ (Jung, 2010: 441), we can talk of co-production (see Fig 1).



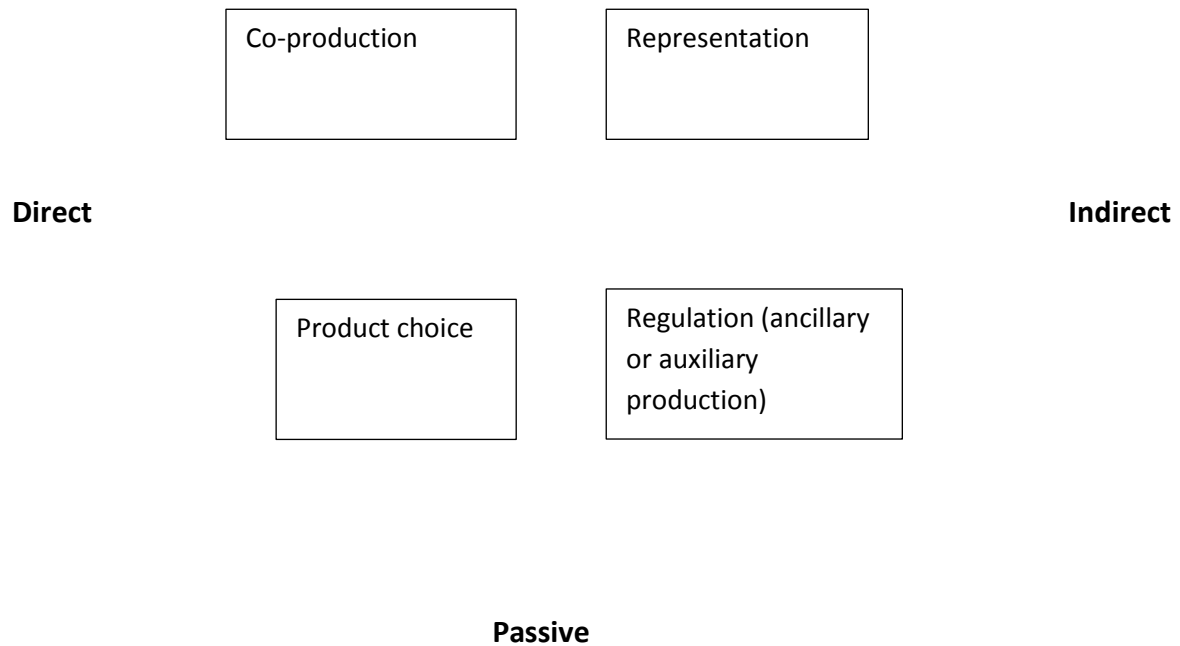


Fig 1: User involvement in services

This indicates that, insofar as they are acting autonomously (using their discretion) and working directly with service users (individually or collectively), front-line professionals are co-producing the service with the users. Front-line practice, therefore, involves a special kind of co-production, one that is concerned with public encounters and also with the connections and attachments that can both precede and follow such encounters. However, front-line working involves more than co-production and building relationships with service users - it also requires liaising with other kinds of worker both in coordinating the different services involved and in planning and formal decision-making for the service that the front-line worker provides.

Bovaird (2007) makes a further useful distinction between different kinds of co-production, namely co-delivery, co-planning and co-design of services, with a range of possible

relationships between users and providers (see Table 1).¹¹ Co-delivery, co-planning and co-design can exist in any combination, and Bovaird cites examples of each, e.g. co-delivery *with* professionally designed service (a Sure Start initiative) or *without* professional design or planning (a community regeneration partnership), full co-production (a community trust), and user sole delivery *with* professionally planned service or co-planned or co-designed service (a village shop). This serves to highlight the complex variety of options for co-production, and correspondingly the rich variety of front-line practice required. Bovaird (2007: 858) concludes by arguing for ‘a new type of public service professional’ who can advance the co-production agenda – in short, a renewed emphasis on the role of the front-line worker.

Co-production Options	<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Planning</i>	<i>Design</i>
<i>1 Traditional professional provision</i>	Sole professional (user consultation only)	Sole professional	Sole professional
<i>2</i>	Co-delivery	Sole professional	Sole professional
<i>3</i>	Co-delivery	Co-planning	Sole professional
<i>4 Full co-production</i>	Co-delivery	Co-planning	Co-design
<i>5</i>	Sole user	Co-planning	Co-design

¹¹ Apart from service delivery, planning and design, Bovaird (2007: 858) also mentions commissioning, management, monitoring and evaluation of services, indicating the possible existence of further layers of complexity for co-production and front-line practice.

6 User-controlled services	Sole user	Sole user	Sole user
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Table 1: Varieties of co-production

Front-line practice as relationship management

Arguably, at the heart of front-line working there lies relationship management. Successful front-line practice requires the worker to engage in a variety of relationships (particularly with service users but also with workers in other agencies) in order to add value to the service (see, for example, van Hulst et al's, 2012, account of 'exemplary practitioners'). The terms 'relationship capital' (Kale et al, 2000) and 'relationship value' (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2003) have come to be used in this connection, with relationship capital being defined as 'the level of mutual trust, respect and friendship that arises out of close interaction at the individual level between alliance partners' (Kale et al, 2000: 218). It is argued that such capital is key to the effectiveness of interorganisational working (McLaughlin et al, 2010: 39) and, by extension, to the effectiveness of co-production between service providers and users. McLaughlin et al (2010: 40) particularly emphasise that staff and managers in service organisations need to be able to *control* these relationships rather than be controlled by them – although 'manage' is perhaps a more appropriate word. It is important to recognise that the primary accountability of front-line workers must always be to their 'back-line' managers and paymasters, and only secondarily to those outside their organisation (whether these be service users, other providers or members of the public), and perhaps thirdly through peer review and professional self-regulation (on the issue of multiple accountabilities, see Hupe and Hill, 2007: 292). For front-line workers, therefore, the

purpose of relationship management is primarily to add value to the organisation that employs them.

Relationship capital is therefore about developing *close* relationships. Anderson and Jap (2005), for example, looked at relationships between partnering companies in the US over several years and found the prevalence of what they called 'love/hate relationships' (:76), in which each side needs the other but begrudges the contribution of the other. They noticed that relationships that were close and seemed very stable sometimes fell apart quite suddenly, and they identified the main cause of this as opportunism on the part of one or both partners – taking advantage of the high levels of trust invested in the relationship. The development of close relationships among companies therefore gave them collectively a competitive advantage (e.g. by reducing their individual transaction costs) but also made them more vulnerable to corrupt and inefficient practices – short-term benefits gave way to long-term costs. Anderson and Jap (2005) concluded that the way to manage interorganisational relationships was 'constantly to evaluate the relationship' (:79), particularly in terms of its common goals, and also to recognise that: 'a key relationship should not rest on the interpersonal relationship between two individual managers. Other individuals should be involved on both sides of the partnership on an ongoing basis' (:80). Applying this lesson to front-line workers generally, it could be argued that the organisations they work for need to be set up in such way as to ensure continuity of service not only for their users but also for their relationships with other agencies, who should be set up in the same way – individual relationships are often temporary and provisional but effective long term front-line working requires organisations to manage transitions from one worker to another.

Constant evaluation of relationships requires regular face-to-face encounters and ‘relational, situated performances’ (Bartels, 2013: 476). Following Follett (1919), Bartels (2013: 476) rejects ‘an individualist ontology in which people are seen as separate beings and “public professional” and “citizen” form fixed social positions’ and advocates a ‘relational ontology’ in which ‘people constantly and inescapably “interweave” into something different by the very *process* of meeting’. Thus, whether we are talking about encounters with customers, clients or citizens, users or consumers (or indeed, whether any of these service recipients are beneficiaries or obligatees of the service – Alford, 2002b), the relationship has to be understood as ‘a way of doing and being together’ (relational), involving situational practices of deliberation, dialogue and debate, and contingent behavioural achievements (performances) (Bartels, 2013: 477). Rather than seeing such encounters either from the point of view of ‘public professionals’ (that is, front-line professionals) as inherently valuable¹², or, from the viewpoint of their paymasters, as inherently problematic (because they can undermine political authority and democratic accountability), Bartels (2013: 478-9) argues that they need to be studied as a distinct phenomenon, using various methods such as participant observation, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis, and uncovering a variety of potential meanings and outcomes.

The term ‘*keyworker*’ has been used to describe a front-line worker who not only interacts with service users but *advocates* to other organisations on their behalf (Page and Hilbery, 2011; Cattell and Mackie, 2011), spanning the boundaries of different service agencies

¹² This criticism applies to the service management literature as much as to the public policy literature. Vargo et al (2008), for example, also see the creation of value as a single process but they see it from the point of view of a so-called ‘service science’, which broadly reflects the interests of service management professionals.

(Steadman, 1992; Williams, 2002; Williams and Sullivan, 2010: 11; Williams, 2012), and ensuring that the right kinds of service are provided at the right times. This work requires considerable 'local knowledge' ('the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience' – Yanow, 2004: S12) and involves complex mediation, which produces contradictory effects (Somerville and Steele, 1996: 155): the workers mediate their employers' policies, priorities and rules to the 'street' (or front line) but they also mediate the 'views from the street' (gathered through observations, conversations, meetings, reports, etc) to their managers. The flow of information in one direction combines with that in the reverse direction ('local knowledge' interacting with 'professional knowledge' - Wagenaar, 2007: 36), making the outcomes of policy processes of any kind inherently unpredictable and indeterminate (Brodin, 2012: 942), but also more effective than they would have been without a keyworker (Maras et al, 2008; SQW et al, 2013) and potentially transformative (e.g. van Hulst et al, 2012: 445 – graffiti sprayers transformed into graffiti artists).

On top of this, however, there is an added layer of complexity, in that the workers as keyworkers are involved with multiple agencies: there is a mutual accountability between them and their service users but they also must be able to hold other agencies to account for the services those agencies provide to those same service users. Obviously, this can make front-line working particularly difficult. Hence the need for the managers of front-line workers to provide appropriate support for them in their work – that is, to provide a service for those workers, to add value to what they do or to arrange matters so that those workers

add more value themselves.¹³ Hence also van Hulst et al's (2012: 445) observation that their 'exemplary practitioners' did not work on their own but worked closely with a 'buddy' within the 'local bureaucracy' who supported them in their work – in particular, by taking care of the local bureaucratic procedures (see also Hendriks and Tops, 2005).

The issue of front-line worker accountability was vividly explored by Marinetto (2011) in the cases of Victoria Climbié and Baby P. He argues that these tragedies occurred not because of a lack of formal 'joined-up working' but rather as a result of 'the normal, daily and informal routines of professional workers' (Marinetto, 2011: 1164). Of particular importance here is the professionals' evaluation of their clients, that is, as 'worthy of assistance' (Marinetto, 2011: 1169) or not. Managers may attempt to minimise the discretion available but: 'The reality of the situation is that public service bureaucracies are unable to fully restrain the discretion enjoyed by street-level professionals' (Marinetto, 2011: 1171). The result is that, under pressure, front-line workers use their discretion primarily to 'manage otherwise overwhelming demands' (Ellis et al, 1999), and sometimes the greatest demands are the ones that are left till last and then dealt with cursorily.¹⁴ The mistakes that follow then go uncorrected and are amplified by the routine behaviour of other professionals ('rubber stamping' the decisions already made and referring cases to other authorities), leading to tragic deaths. Arguably, a number of lessons can be learned from this experience: first,

¹³ For example, research has found that the institution of a local multi-agency strategy group or 'steering group', taking the form of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), can ensure that continuity of service is maintained despite the inevitable changes of keyworkers and other staff, government policy and individual agencies (Brown et al, 2012; Bond-Taylor and Somerville, 2013; Somerville et al, 2015). In addition, front-line workers from different agencies working together can benefit from having their own 'project working group' – achieving multi-agency working on the front line (Bond-Taylor and Somerville, 2013). However, Bond-Taylor and Somerville (2013: 90-92) also show the tensions that can exist among front-line workers from different agencies, related to different levels of available resources and different perceptions of the quality of service provided (e.g. as facilitating independence or creating dependence).

¹⁴ As Engbersen (2006, cited in van Hulst et al, 2012: 435) says: 'the "harder" the case the less effort would often be put into it'. See also Alden (2015: 70) – where resources are scarcer, discretion is more negatively exercised, even to the extent of breaking the law; that is, traditional gatekeeping.

front-line practice (such as in child protection) needs to be reconceptualised as advocacy on behalf of the client (such as a child at risk), involving not just a 'team around the client' (child) but an individual front-line worker (a keyworker) designated with responsibility for the overall welfare of the client (child) who will have the authority to disrupt the routines of other workers within the team in order to safeguard the client (child); second, rather than trying to minimise discretion, those who have authority over the front-line workers should be ensuring that those workers have workloads appropriate for their skills and working hours, and supporting, encouraging, motivating but also challenging them to perform to the best of their ability¹⁵. It is not the exercise of discretion in itself that is problematic but the *purpose* for which discretion is used and the *context* in which it is exercised.

The issue of context deserves more attention than I am able to give it in this paper.

However, I want to mention Bourdieu's concept of *field* here (Bourdieu, 1986; Smith et al, 2011), at least to highlight the diversity of institutional environments in which front-line workers operate (Hupe and Buffat, 2014). For example, in her research on just one type of organisation (local authorities) and only eight of them at that, Needham (2006: 850) found, in order of popularity, no less than seven different terms used to refer to service users: customer, resident, user, citizen, client, stakeholder and consumer. Other common terms include patient, pupil/student, tenant, claimant, applicant, and passenger. In each case, the term could signify a distinct field (defined as 'a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions' – Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). Some front-line workers work in only one field (e.g. teachers, medical professionals, lawyers, police officers), while others are expected to work across fields (e.g. community development workers, youth

¹⁵ In short, acting towards their staff in a similar way to how keyworkers are expected to act towards their clients!

workers, politicians, citizens advice workers).¹⁶ I do not have space in this paper to describe all the different fields and how they relate to one another but I do want to pose the question of what they all might have in common.

The final point I want to make in this section concerns people who act like front-line workers but work on a voluntary basis. Bang (2005) calls these 'expert activists' or 'expert citizens'. They lack the authority, and usually also the resources, of front-line workers but, in partial compensation, they have greater freedom of manoeuvre. They seem to be what others have called 'community leaders' (Purdue, 2001) or 'active citizens' (Marinetti, 2003) or possibly political activists. The field in which they operate is the field of politics, where they play the part of front-line workers based in voluntary associations (e.g. parent-teacher associations, health user groups, trade unions, political parties), while 'everyday makers' (Bang and Sørensen, 1999; Bang, 2005) or 'ordinary citizens' take the role of (networked but relatively unorganised) service users.¹⁷ The strange thing about this, however, is that the activists do not seem to be accountable to anyone except the members of their association (Bang calls them a 'republican elite'). One would have thought that a more appropriate example of an expert activist in the political field would be an elected representative of the

¹⁶ For comparisons across fields, see Greener and Powell (2009) on housing, education and healthcare; and Fotaki (2009) on health, social care and education.

¹⁷ Confusingly, the terms 'everyday fixer', 'public entrepreneur' and even 'local hero' have all been used by Hendriks and Tops (2005) to describe individuals who seem to combine expert activism and everyday making. Various other kinds of entrepreneur have also been identified such as political (Dahl, 1961), policy (Kingdon, 1984, Mintrom and Norman, 2009), social (Leadbeater, 1997; Korosec and Berman, 2006), civic (Leadbeater and Goss, 1998; Durose, 2009: 46; Durose, 2011) and institutional entrepreneur (Lowndes, 2005; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008). Van Hulst et al (2011, 2012) have added 'exemplary practitioner', 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983), and 'deliberative practitioner' (Forester, 1999). But I have no space to review the literature on entrepreneurship here, and it seems to me that these terms risk blurring important distinctions between professionals and non-professionals, and between front-line workers and volunteers (for example, one of van Hulst et al's, 2012, exemplary practitioners is a voluntary social worker while the other is a civil servant). A front-line worker is necessarily a reflective and deliberative practitioner, and has an 'entrepreneurial way of doing' (van Hulst et al, 2012: 438), but the same cannot definitely be said of non-professionals or volunteers. There are, I am sure, all sorts of people who act in an entrepreneurial way (which I think, at its most basic, means that they exercise a certain degree of discretion), but most of these are probably not front-line workers.

people, either locally or nationally, who, at least in his or her constituency work, operates very much as a front-line worker, and is accountable to that constituency. And of course everyday makers represent only themselves. Consequently, the world of the expert activists and everyday makers takes on the appearance of a depoliticised and undemocratic politics, in which voluntary associations are transformed from social justice oriented advocates into responsibilised service providers (Ilcan and Basok, 2004).

Front-line practice as strengthening or weakening democracy

Front-line practitioners are typically public servants, working in public service organisations in accordance with policy made by elected governments. Yet, in using their discretion, they make their own policy, which can contradict that of their paymasters (this can include breaking the law – see, for example, Alden, 2015). Arguably, therefore, in doing so, they are acting undemocratically and undermining the democratic process. On the other hand, however, governmental decisions do not necessarily reflect public opinion (which is, in any case, ever-changing and difficult to identify with any degree of clarity or certainty) and typically have to be interpreted when applied at the front line. In achieving interpretations and practice that meet with public approval, therefore, front-line practitioners could be argued to be enhancing the democratic process. Even if their practice contravenes government policy in some respects, it may be that it is closer to public opinion than is the government. Front-line practitioners, therefore, can work in support of or in opposition to elected governments, and in either case they could be strengthening or weakening democracy depending upon whether or not their actions reflect public opinion.

In talking about democracy, it is first necessary to ask: who are the people? Front-line workers encounter the people primarily as *stakeholders* (Sørensen, 2013: 74) – that is, as

people who have a 'stake' or are materially affected by the service that the practitioner provides. Arguably, a citizen is just one kind of stakeholder, whose stake is in a particular political system and derives from their membership of a democratically governed territorial community. The question here, however, is whether this traditional concept of citizenship (based on free and equal participation of citizens in, or in elections to, territorial assemblies) is sufficiently democratic or whether it needs to be supplemented by other kinds of stakeholding, in other kinds of arena (see in particular Dryzek, 2007).¹⁸

The traditional view is cogently expressed by Barrett (2009). For him, the environments in which public servants work are all political environments, and so 'I do not see any point in describing the public focus as being other than on *citizens*. Other terminology that suggests an alternative, such as *consumer*, *customer*, or *client*, is a distraction that only creates an apparent difference for its own sake' (Barrett, 2009: 83). The only problem with this is that, in many fields of encounter between public servants and the citizens they serve, the citizens do not present themselves as citizens but as patients, students, claimants, residents, applicants, and so on. This is not to ignore or deny people's citizenship but only to argue for due political recognition of the many other roles that they are called upon to perform.

The alternative view is propounded by Stephen Osborne. His 'new public governance' posits 'a *pluralist* state, where multiple processes inform the policy making system' (Osborne, 2006: 384, 2009: 6) (Hoppe, 2011: 168, calls this 'plural democracy'; Barnes et al, 2007: 204, call it a 'plural polity'). It is not entirely clear what Osborne or Hoppe or Barnes et al mean by these phrases (in one sense it is obvious that the political policy process will be informed

¹⁸ The traditional system of representative democracy and bureaucratic government has been criticised for alienating citizens from their government and disconnecting public professionals from society (Stivers, 1990; Oldfield, 1990; King and Stivers, 1998; Box, 1998; Fung and Wright, 2003; Bartels, 2013: 474).

by many other processes) but I take them to be arguing that there is no longer just one policy process in contemporary political systems but many different types of processes (presumably in different arenas) through which policy is made. This idea of new forms of interaction between political actors and stakeholders seems to be what is now generally known as 'interactive governance' (Sørensen, 2013).

If people are represented in the political system as stakeholders and not just as citizens, what does this mean for front-line practice? The literature on citizen participation and governance (interactive, network or participatory) shows that front-line workers are key to making it work, as they are the ones who organise and participate in the various arenas involved (for detailed case studies, see Barnes et al, 2007). Indeed, co-governance can be understood as a form of co-production more or less equivalent to co-design as mentioned earlier in this paper (Bovaird, 2007), since decisions on designing a public service sound like political ones.

Evidence on citizen participation generally, whether as stakeholders or not, suggests that it can have a number of benefits to participants - educational, socially integrative, engaging, and increasing mutual understanding and professionals' responsiveness to citizens' problems (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004: 56-7; Wagenaar, 2007: 29; Michels and de Graaf, 2010: 480, 489; Hoppe, 2011: 164; Bartels, 2013: 475) but also incurs a number of costs (especially of time and resources – Irvin and Stansbury, 2004: 58) and risks (Delli Carpini et al, 2004: 328), and has strictly limited effects on policy (Michels and de Graaf, 2010: 485), rarely going beyond consultation. As Michels and de Graaf (2010: 485) found in their study of citizen participation in Eindhoven and Groningen, 'the decisive actors in the policy making process are the civil servants', with 'representatives from professional organisations' and

entrepreneurs playing a secondary role (seeing themselves as ‘co-producers of policy making’ (: 484), and citizens ‘only a minor role’ (: 485). A general finding from the literature is that citizens who are more knowledgeable, more powerful and more organised, such as highly educated people, businesses¹⁹ and representatives of large organisations, participate disproportionately more in policy making, and with disproportionately more effect, while those who are less knowledgeable, less powerful and less organised, such as young people and minority groups, participate disproportionately less, and with disproportionately less effect (Verba and Nie, 1972; Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Kweit and Kweit, 1981; Verba et al, 1987; Jennings et al, 1989; Parry et al, 1992; Verba et al, 1993; Verba et al, 1995; Hero, 1998; Roberts, 2004; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004: 59; Skidmore et al, 2006; Michels and de Graaf, 2010: 488; Stout, 2010; Bartels, 2013: 475). The literature affords few examples of where poorer people have participated at least equally with richer ones.²⁰

It is significant that citizen participation takes the form of participation in *projects* that are mainly state-sponsored (Wagenaar, 2007: 44; Barnes et al, 2007) but peripheral to the main process of political decision-making (Wagenaar, 2007; Michels and de Graaf, 2010; Hope, 2011; Davidson and Elstub, 2014), and politicians ‘barely become involved in the projects’ (Michels and de Graaf, 2010: 484). This helps to explain why such participation appears to have little effect on the policy process (Barnes et al, 2007: 190), and serves to support Hoppe’s (2011) conclusion that these projects are ‘a mere symbolic ornament to the representative and neocorporatist modes of governance’, a diversion from ‘genuine public

¹⁹ Hoppe (2011: 170) acknowledges that: ‘In capitalist societies, business stakeholders enjoy special privileges’ in their relationships with government, referencing Lindblom (1977) and Flyvbjerg (1998).

²⁰ These examples include participatory budgeting in Brazil (Gret and Sintomer, 2005), and bodies whose membership has been selected at random (such as citizens’ juries or deliberative polls), or purposively selected on the basis of having lower income or minority status (John, 2009: 500) – and even in these cases the process tends to be dominated by public officials (Barnes et al, 2007: 190).

debate in agonistic political settings of political mobilisation and agenda building’, ‘just one more instrument for depoliticisation and agenda control’, and ‘public relations machines for manipulating public opinion’ (Hoppe, 2011: 180; see also Edelman, 1988; Davies, 2011). In short, citizen participation projects are little more than a smokescreen for ‘business as usual’ in capitalist states (for more detail on how capitalist states work, see Harman, 2009).

The political claims made for citizen participation, therefore, seem to have been grossly exaggerated, and the real sources of political power seem to have been ignored.²¹

Nevertheless, the question remains concerning how stakeholding other than citizenship can and should be represented in democratic politics. Here I want to argue only that, whatever the institutional forms this representation might take²², front-line workers must be crucial to making these forms work, e.g. as ‘analyst/organisers’ (Hoppe, 2011: 178) within ‘an evolving community of practice’ (Hoppe, 2011: 177).²³ Contrary to the view of Dryzek (2000: 129), the argument for enhancing democracy needs to be applied within the apparatus of government itself. In the traditional so-called ‘Westminster’ model (Thompson, 1983), elected politicians are front-line workers, interacting with citizens as their constituents, with high levels of discretion – yet, at the same time, they are involved in the design of policies such as new legislation (in parliamentary systems), in which capacity they act as sole designers. Those of them who are government ministers (or cabinet councillors or

²¹ Davidson and Elstub (2014: 373) have referred to this as ‘the triumph of rhetoric over substance’.

²² Hoppe (2011: 172-3), for example, talks about devolving power to electorates in referendums, electronic voting, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, citizens’ advisory panels, public inquiries, mini-publics of stakeholders, collaborative forums, knowledge centres, citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, and so on. But the problem with all of these, as Hoppe (2011: 173) himself recognises, is that they are ‘an alien element in a representative democracy.’ More precisely, they all take the form of *projects*, which are essentially peripheral to mainstream policy making. They feed into governmental decision-making but they are outside of it.

²³ Possible roles for this fantasy superhero include facilitator, process manager, project manager, director of the show, counsellor to all parties, interpreter between all parties, change agent for the commissioner of the project, and servant for empowerment of the weaker parties (Hoppe, 2011: 178).

committee chairs in local government), however, also have control of departmental bureaucracies, in which capacity they act as senior managers, not as front-line practitioners, though they can be publicly held to account to those practitioners (namely, to parliament) for what they do. Senior civil servants within those bureaucracies also act as senior managers, responsible for the effective implementation of government policy by those at the front line of their departments. In this model, therefore, there are two kinds of front-line worker: elected politicians, who interact with members of the public (individually or collectively) as citizens, and officials, who interact with members of the public (individually or collectively) as stakeholders of the types constructed by their particular department. These two kinds of front-line worker are institutionally far removed from one another – one in a political community and the other in a community of practice. In the new interactive governance model, however (which seems to operate only at local level), these two kinds of front-line worker are supposed to be brought together, in a variety of ways, in order to increase mutual understanding, two-way democratic accountability and legitimacy, and so on. The problem with this is that, insofar as it occurs at all, this encounter is situated at the periphery of both kinds of community to which the front-line workers belong, and consequently achieves little change in either community. Various scholars have recognised the need for ‘institutionalisation’ here (Hoppe, 2011: 180; Sørensen, 2013: 80; Davidson and Elstub, 2014: 381) but none has suggested any concrete way forward. There is a need to look more deeply at what is wrong with the traditional political system and specifically at the role of front-line practitioners (as well as citizens) in putting it right, which so far seems to have been neglected in current discussions and debates.

Conclusion: front-line practice as a form of capitalist labour

Front-line practice can be understood, first and foremost, in Bourdieu's (1977, 1990, 1998, 2000) sense, as people's deployment of different kinds and amounts of resources in specific fields. Fundamentally, front-line practice is a kind of *work*, which in capitalist society takes the form of capitalist labour. Front-line workers work in a labour market, which (increasingly, perhaps) cuts across boundaries between public and private sectors. They hire out their labour in exchange for payment (either as employees or as contractors), and are set to work to produce value that is greater than the cost of their hire (hence their labour is said to be exploited). The nature of this value varies from one field to another but the tendency within capitalism is for it to be expressed in terms of money. The sustainability of capitalism depends upon the investment of money in labour processes that produce more money – a system known as the cycle of capital (understood as self-expanding value). Under capitalism, therefore, front-line workers are under constant pressure to do more with less and to provide ever-greater 'value for money'. They have to struggle to maintain and if possible enhance their status and pay within the system, and the 'hierarchy' to which they are subordinated is simply the institutionalised expression of their exploitation and domination. More powerful front-line workers' organisations are more able to resist this subordination but, in response, senior managers as their exploiters have found new ways to keep them in their place (hence New Public Management).

This explanation in terms of the capitalist labour process and class struggle between labour and capital can be extended to co-production. In the service management literature, the world is turned upside down: instead of value being produced by those who produce it, it is produced primarily by those who consume it. This patent absurdity is made plausible only because of what Marx called the fetishism of commodities, according to which commodities

(such as services) are seen as having value in themselves rather than being just a stage in the movement of capital (e.g. from money-capital to production capital to commodity capital to money-capital). The value of the workers' labour is thus diminished, and they become the mere servants of capital. At the same time, service users become increasingly co-opted into the production process, making their own contribution to the value of the service. They too, therefore, become exploited by capital, and this is the underlying significance of what is called 'consumerism'. Co-production requires service users to make 'substantial resource contributions' (Bovaird, 2007: 847) but what they get in return is not made clear in the literature. Instead, what the research overwhelmingly shows is that service users gain little value or power from co-production, and this is what one would expect given the nature of capitalist production processes. At the same time, however, co-production enlarges the role of the front-line worker, potentially increasing their autonomy and the value of their work, and this runs counter to the tendency under capitalism to control and devalue their work. Much but by no means all of the literature continues to promulgate the myth of the front-line worker as hero and systematically ignores the massive but mundane evidence of the front-line worker as 'cog in the machine' or 'jobsworth' – someone who is working primarily just to earn a living.

Marxist explanation only goes so far, however. In order to explain how front-line practice strengthens or weakens democracy (or both) I have found it necessary to introduce the concept of stakeholder. Here the literature presents a rather confused picture but it is possible to conclude that, as with co-production more generally, the involvement of 'citizens' in the political or policy process is dominated by front-line workers and makes little difference to policy outcomes. It is not clear whether the net value to citizens themselves of

such involvement is positive or negative but it is clear that whatever net value does exist is distributed unequally and unfairly among the citizenry. All this suggests that front-line practice as a whole makes little difference to democracy, though the potential for it to make a substantial positive contribution remains. It appears that significant constitutional reform in many countries is required to realise this potential, bringing together two separate communities of front-line workers (politicians and officials) in new kinds of decision-making forums. This will involve new kinds of politicisation and devolution, which run counter to the depoliticising and centralising tendencies of capitalist states in recent years. For example, as a start, and breaking the traditional relationship between capital and labour, multi-stakeholder co-operatives could be formed in different fields (e.g. education, health and social care, housing, etc), in which front-line workers and politicians, along with service users, are all represented, and each of these co-operatives could be given responsibility for making decisions in its particular field. This would mean a democratisation of government itself, which could add value to and reinvigorate traditional democratic politics.

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