



Advocacy and Co-production by Gordon Johnston

Do advocacy principles allow an organisation to work in co-production with people with lived experience?

Co-production has raised some interesting issues in relation to the approach of advocacy organisations. Put simply, does advocacy work with a model that is different to, or indeed incompatible with co-production? Without wanting to get too technical, there is perhaps a need for some definitions here.

Co-production has been defined in several ways, generally as a model of service delivery in the public sector. It involves true partnership between service providers and those receiving the service. For example, the New Economics Foundation says that, 'Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours.' The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance defines advocacy as, 'a way to help people have a stronger voice and to have as much control as possible over their own lives'. It is also clear that independence is crucial here, and SIAA states that, 'Independent Advocacy organisations are separate from organisations that provide other types of services.'

If we look closely at these two definitions, then it is easy to see where a possible conflict of philosophies can occur. Co-production sees service providers and consumers of services working together as equal partners in a project, whereas advocacy sees consumers being given the skills to come together and manage a project themselves. The advocacy organisation provides support and back up, but it is those with lived experience who are enabled to lead and manage the project entirely in their own right.

So, the advocacy approach and co-production are clearly different. But does it actually matter? Are we simply attempting here to fit different people's ways of working into artificially created boxes with jargonistic names? Perhaps a solution to this dilemma is to look at the principles behind the two approaches.

Co-production seeks to see people as assets and to work together towards a common goal with shared values in a manner that is inclusive and respectful. Advocacy seeks to put people first, listening and understanding and enabling them to take control in meeting their goals. So clearly the value bases of the two approaches are actually very similar.

In practical terms I don't think it matters too much what we call a way of working. Maybe both co-production and the advocacy model are simply different forms of partnership that both aim to do pretty much the same thing: to enable people with lived experience of mental illness to have a stronger voice and to take control of factors affecting their lives.

So let's not get caught up in technical terms. Let's just agree that there can sometimes be more than one way to achieve the results we want!