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Connected Communities

Towards Co-Production in Research with Communities

Catherine Durose, Yasminah Beebeejaun,
James Rees, Jo Richardson and Liz Richardson



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Executive Summary

Co-production has emerged as a potential solution to a criticism that research conducted in communities often fails to meaningfully include communities in its design and undertaking. Co-production is now also perceived as a solution to an argued 'relevance gap' in research and to the demands of 'impact'. Co-production in research aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working 'with' communities and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience. Advocates for co-production argue that research is enhanced through including 'experiential expertise' (Collins and Evans 2007) which may highlight relevant questions otherwise neglected by 'experts' (Fischer 2000). Co-production can enhance the effectiveness of research by making it better informed by communities' preferences and needs, with communities then contributing to improved outcomes and achievable solutions (Ostrom 1996). This review takes a cross-cutting perspective, aiming to advance the theory and practice of co-production in research with communities.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Research, community, co-production, power, presence, marginalisation, authenticity, beyond-text

Aims

- To provide conceptual substantiation and practical guidance for co-producing research with communities;
- To advance the theory and practice of co-producing research with communities.

Why does co-production in research matter?

Whilst co-production now has considerable resonance in research, the reasoning behind, and suggested impact of co-production are contested. This contestation comes in part from a long-standing epistemological debate about the nature of knowledge and expertise between dominant positivist and alternative non-positivist approaches to research. For positivists, concerned with issues of 'researcher capture' and 'positive response bias', co-production in research means that knowledge is biased with a potential loss of objectivity. Other critics have focused on the achievability of co-production in research, questioning whether people can fully understand and estimate their own motivations and behaviour ; or can engage in analytical thinking on a topic merely on the basis of experience (Le Grand and Richardson 2002). Steve Martin notes some of the practical tensions in co-producing research, noting 'reluctan[ce] to engage with research... and researchers often failing to put their knowledge to practical use' (2010, 213). The timescales, pressures, politics and priorities of researchers may not be shared with communities who may be content to allow researchers to get on with 'their' job. Others argue that there are many other techniques for making the substantive content of research 'accountable' to the true complexity of participants views, which do not pose the risks inherent in participation (Wingenbach and Collins 2004). Others argue that there is little evidence or evaluation of impact in participatory research (Catalani and Minkler 2009); as Riger comments, simply 'intending to create social change is no assurance of actually doing so' (1992, 736).

That the perspectives of communities can be so easily dismissed by positivist critics is indicative of the hidden power dynamics within the research process (Redwood 2008, 7; Orr and Bennett 2009). Normative perspectives in favour of co-production argue that research should not re-produce unequal power relations. Firstly, Gaventa (2005) asserts

that participation in knowledge creation and policy development is part of the wider citizenship rights accorded by society, including the right to social justice (see also Lister and Beresford 2002). Freire (1970) felt it was critical for there to be counter-hegemonic approaches to knowledge construction in oppressed communities to challenge the dominance of majority or more powerful interests and perspectives. The second, overlapping, argument is that the ethical and political legitimacy of decisions is undermined and weakened if the voice of affected people is absent in the making of those decisions (Young 1990). Participation in research is part of a 'more open and democratic process of knowledge production' (Brock and McGee 2002).

Problematising co-production in research

Even for advocates of co-production in research, 'formidable barriers' remain (Martin 2010, 213). The academic community often privilege theoretical or abstract work over policy or practice-orientated research (Newman forthcoming). For Walker (2010) academic practices can be a refuge from engagement, with peer review acting as a form of 'epistemological protectionism' asserting monopoly rights to defining and legitimating knowledge. As Pohl et al acknowledge, 'co-production of knowledge requires that contributions from specific disciplines and social actors are not privileged over what other disciplines and social actors contribute'; 'it also requires that communication is not seen as a one-way transfer from a knowing subject to a supposedly ignorant one'(2010, 217). To realise ambitions of co-production, research should challenge the embedded knowledge hierarchies of the expert versus the layperson (Porter 2010) whilst minimising 'threats to... the integrity of the research process' (Martin 2010, 213) and producing useful outcomes.

Researchers working with policy makers and service providers have recently placed greater emphasis on engaging with so-called 'hard to reach' groups¹. Defining communities in such a way relies on constructing a dichotomy between the mainstream and the marginalised. For co-produced research, this focus brings a welcome challenge to why research may be exclusionary, but also raises the problematic definition by the relatively powerful of who is 'hard to reach' and selected for attention and the structures

¹ These tend to be defined as identifiable groups that are under-represented as service users, for example recent migrants, asylum seekers, the street homeless; groups with characteristics which may be 'hidden' or 'invisible' for example, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability; and socially excluded communities, for example ethnic minorities or the white working class

which create this distance; as well the question of why particular communities might 'choose' to be marginalised.

Towards co-production in research with communities

The review will now explore conceptual and practical tools for substantiating and delivering co-production in research with communities.

Presence

The concept of 'presence' helps to explore some of the underlying dynamics which reinforce the instrumental and moral arguments in favour of co-production. The core idea is that presence counters power imbalances by representing minority interests, and also more fundamentally transforms the nature of research – its framing, processes, and dialogues. Hannah Pitkin's writings (1967) outline different forms of representation in political and decision-making spheres; her ideas about symbolic and descriptive forms of representation (rather than formalistic or substantive representation) lay the ground for the idea of the politics of presence (Phillips 1995). The presence of marginalised groups means that their interests and perspectives are either physically represented (descriptive representation) or are advocated for by those they consider to be their peers, or to share identities or experiences (for example in certain types of symbolic representation).

Interactive knowledge production

'Interactive knowledge production' rests on developing a shared 'thought style' (Pohl et al 2010, 271). A co-productive research process is importantly premised on creating a 'boundary space' which facilitates different social worlds, that is, academic research and community life, together. Such spaces need to have 'distinct lines of accountability to each' and 'involve participation from actors from both sides of the boundary' (Pohl et al 2010, 268). Such spaces may require facilitation capable of enhancing communicative processes, making different thought styles visible and linking them around common interests; promoting joint reflection towards a common understanding of situations and collective action; as part of a learning process based on respect, openness and deliberation (Pohl et al 2010, 271). Some participants may span boundaries between the worlds of scholarship and community activism (Wright Mills 1959, Newman forthcoming); critical to this blending is an acknowledgement of the validity of lived experiences.

Inter-disciplinary participatory research traditions

Traditions of participatory research in critical and social geography (Pain 2003, 2004), development studies (Gaventa 2005), sociology and anthropology (Falzone 2004) provide guidance (Reitbergen et al 1998, Bennett and Roberts 2004) and a useful basis for evaluating and expanding discussions of co-production. Reflecting the moral arguments in favour of co-production, the appeal of such approaches is highly normative with a value-base in democracy, social justice and human rights (Lewin 1946, Heron 1971, Heron and Reason 1997, 2001, Narayan 1999, Fishkin 2010). Such research aspires to move from the merely 'dialogical', where research seeks to establish some form of conversation between the researchers and the researched, towards 'transformative research' where the purpose is to 'both engage the researched at the problem definition stage and to actively alter the social conditions in which they find themselves' (Robinson and Tansey 2006, 152).

Public value

Public institutions have long faced an accusation of a 'democratic deficit' which parallels the challenge of the 'relevance gap' in research. Both have, in part, prompted attempts to increase participation from citizens and communities. The concept of 'public value' (Moore 1996) has emerged as a means of re-building legitimacy for public institutions by re-stating their distinct value; and recognising that public institutions now 'need to win, consent, persuade, explain, share responsibility' (Goss, 2001: 163). Moore (1996) called for a more rounded accountability where public institutions are held to account by the communities they serve. Here accountability is seen as a 'social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his conduct to some significant other' (Bovens 1998, 172). Hill and Hupe (2007) put forward the notion of 'nested' accountability which acknowledges the variety of potential action situations and so the potential accountability in various relations. Co-production of research is contingent on an assertion of the 'public value' where accountability as relational and the university is embedded in the community.

Authenticity

This shift towards 'governance' has meant thinking differently about mechanisms for (and understandings of) representation (Stoker 1998) and seeing that accountability goes beyond representation. 'Authenticity' has been proposed as a means of gleaning wider community voices in decision-making and research. Saward (2006) has proposed

exploring non-elected forms of representation to give the potential for deeper roots to the community, expertise and special credentials, and opening up to wider interests and new voices. As Chapman and Lowndes have argued, 'They [non-elected representatives] don't, for example, have to sign up to the fiction of "complete" representation, and can and do represent a multitude of specific needs, interests or wants (2009, 374).

Reflexivity

Kevin Ward has commented that 'we need to acknowledge that casting ourselves, or being cast as, "experts" is only one way of participating in dialogues with the public... Mutual and reciprocated learning must also be valued' (2006, 500). A key barrier to co-production is where academics see themselves as not representative except of themselves and their own work. An important building block towards co-production then, is the researcher's reflexivity. Orr and Bennett (2009) have stressed the need to recognise that in social research there is a dynamic relationship between researchers and subjects, who inevitably influence each other in manifold ways; research is 'a social and human practice that embodies institutional, personal and political factors that influence its design, impact and acceptability... Reflexivity enables us to highlight the political dynamics of our endeavours, attention to which would otherwise tend to be absent from the representation of our project' (2009, 85-87).

Beyond-text

Research tools are critical in facilitating co-production in research and widening potential audiences for research findings. Whilst text is a dominant part of academic research - vital for the production, measurement and dissemination of research findings and unavoidable in ensuring critical debate, validation and accountability - extensive research has suggested that a reliance on text can exacerbate the exclusion felt by communities in research process (Ravensbergen and Van der Plaat 2010).

'Beyond-text' tools are emerging across academic disciplines and include story-telling, performance, art and photography (Purcell 2009). Recent research that has used these methods emphasises their empowering potential (Boeck and Thomas 2010). 'Beyond-text methods facilitated greater reflection on the lived experience of those involved (Jones 2006); and so have potential for greater reach and inclusivity (Killion and Wang 2000). Beyond-text approaches are a useful complement to established and 'new text'

forms of communication – including social media and blogging (Harrison 2002, Xenitidou and Gilbert 2009, Searce 2011). Such methods are relevant, not only in dissemination but throughout the research process: as a way of visualising the field of study; as a research tool during fieldwork (Bexley and Fijn 2007); and as a method of analysing findings.

Conclusions: Co-producing research with communities

Whilst co-production in research is an admirable and currently resonant subject of debate, researchers should not be complacent about its use and about the significant changes it demands about research with communities. This review echoes Robinson and Tansey who note ‘overriding’ importance of learning ‘how to negotiate the boundaries and terms of engagement between the research and partner communities’ (2006, 159). Saward describes ‘*representation as a practice*’ (2006, 316); co-production presents researchers with the challenge of ‘how they represent’ within their research. Table 1 highlights potential models for research which require researchers to fulfill some form of accountability to communities.

Table 1: Roles, accountability and representation in different modes of research

| Mode of research | Role of researcher | Representation of community | Accountability to communities |
|-------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Traditional | Reflective scientist | Informers | None/ minimal |
| | Reflective scientist | Endorsers, recipients, users | Joint: weak |
| | Reflective scientist | Commissioners, mandaters | Joint: strong |
| Co-production | Lead researcher, initiate and design research | Co-researchers involved in under-taking and dissemination | Joint: strong |
| | Co-producers Involvement throughout research | Co-producers Involvement throughout research process | Joint: strong |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|----------|
| | Activist-academic, shared lived experience | Activist-academic, shared lived experience | Inherent |
|--|--|--|----------|

Co-produced research inherently re-conceptualises the role of the researcher in working with communities. However, 'what works best will vary according to context and there is a need to continue to experiment with and to monitor effectiveness of different forms of co-production' (Martin 2010, 217).

Additional outputs

Workshops

- *Co-production in community research: what role for the activist academic?*, Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago, 8 September 2011
- *Academic-activists and activist-academics: making it work for communities and knowledge*, UK National Communities Resource Centre, 20 September 2011

Conference and academic papers²

- 'Why governance researchers should practice what they preach' Methodological Challenges in Participation Research, Instituto de Estudios Sociales Avanzados, Cordoba, Spain, November 2011
- 'Beyond-text: developing methods for co-productive research with communities' (to be submitted to *Community Development Journal*)
- 'Co-producing research with communities: building blocks for researchers' (to be submitted to *Public Money and Management*)
- 'What role for the activist-academic' (to be submitted to *Area*)

Recommendations for Future Research

- Piloting of co-production of research with communities, including community involvement in determining research funding priorities;

² Durose, C., Beebeejaun, Y. Rees, J., Richardson, J. and Richardson, L.

- Development of training for researchers to facilitate collective learning;
- Feminist epistemological contributions to co-production of research;
- Developing 'public value' and the model of the 'community university' through an engaged dialogue with stakeholders ;Developing principles for accountability of research to communities;
- Exploring 'beyond-text' methods as a means of improving research-community connectivities

AHRC Connected Communities follow-on funding: Pilot Demonstrator application -
Setting new research agendas: using 'beyond-text' methods with marginalised groups.

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

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