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## **'Geographies of co-production: Learning from inclusive research approaches at the margins'**

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### **1. Introduction**

Co-productive research practices are being increasingly adopted by academic researchers, and expected by some research funders, to both better represent the voices and experiences of researched groups and ensure that research presents value for money in instigating societal change.

Debates abound about different visions of co-production: an increasing neoliberal capture and control of research production via instrumentalist concerns for valuing social research by Impact (Slater, 2012); or transformative, inclusive research, drawing upon partnerships with vulnerable groups (Pain et al., 2011; Pain, 2014). The latter term of 'inclusive research' has been defined by scholars in the learning disability arena (Walmsley and Johnson 2003; Nind, 2014) to denote research

that is both co-productive *and* emancipatory for those at the margins. Moreover, they establish some distinguishing features: the research problem is owned by those who the research is about (i.e. disabled people); it is conducted to further their interests and address issues which matter to them and ultimately lead to improved lives for them. In practice, this means that the research methods are co-designed to be accessible and meaningful to those who participate with different body subjectivities and capabilities.

While co-production is a key feature of inclusive research, its pervasiveness as a broadly-defined guiding principle in the literature nonetheless leaves some questions unresolved: the nature of the co-productive partnerships forged; whether all co-produced research is inclusive; who are valid partners of co-productions; whose voices and experiences, priorities and agendas should be listened to in forging research pathways and trajectories?

The papers in this special issue engage in co-production with disabled people, the carers of older people, and migrants; all groups who frequently have marginalised subjectivities, being located at the periphery of dominant ideas of the citizen (Turner, 2016). These groups are “paradigmatic of the stranger/outsider whose arrival is feared for the disruption it

brings to socio-cultural and legal normativities” (Shildrick, 2005). The carers of older people are situated ‘at the margins’ by the constraints on full citizenship placed on them through their caring responsibilities. As Shildrick emphasises, being in the margins can be a position of radical ‘alterity’ challenging the knowledges and practices of ‘the centre’ from a position of radical outside-ness. We hope that this special issue goes some way to challenging the centre of co-production to emphasise the political imperative of inclusive research over the concept of participation. Importantly, the idea of groups and individuals ‘at the margins’ can seem to adopt a modern, fixed and cohesive notion of identity and subjectivity in the face of post-structural challenges. Nonetheless, the subject positioning of individuals and groups ‘at the margins’ is relational and fluid, and can be challenged and transformed through a process of ‘hospitality’ (Barnett, 2005) engagement or a methodological process of ‘encounter’ (Wilson, 2017).

Engaging with voices from the margins engenders a political imperative to ensure that research challenges rather than reproduces marginalised positions in society and space, and that research is inclusive of people’s experiences and transformative in challenging the status quo. Questions of co-production, partnership, and (therefore) epistemological privilege – who knows about a specific issue, who has the right to be listened to and to forge agendas – have long been present

in geographies with groups at the margins, particularly disabled people. Central here has been an expectation that disabled people should be equal partners encapsulated in the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Gleeson, 1997; Nind, 2014). Much co-productive research has emphasized the importance of the ‘personal is political’ (Worth, 2009), as well as articulating that inclusive forms of co-production address a certain commitment to a feminist ethics and relation of care (Mason, 2015). However, research with disabled people has highlighted some of the questions and challenges of ‘co-productive research’: the dangers of hearing and responding to the clearest and loudest voices (Hall and Kearns, 2001), given that disabled people are not a homogenous group, but are connected and differentiated by a variety of axes of power – gender, class, type and degree of impairment, sexuality, race/ethnicity and so on. As noted, with co-production being so broadly defined, the key question remains around who are appropriate co-production partners – only disabled people them/ourselves, or should researchers also be working with organisations, family members and advocates, who can instigate positive change in policies towards disabled people? These questions are brought into sharp relief in critical disability research where distinction is made between charities and organizations who are *of* (comprised of, run by) disabled people and *for* (run by others for) disabled people (Goodley et al., 2012). For people with

learning disabilities who may have complex communication and cognitive differences, this binary can be less clear-cut, as non-disabled advocates and supporters often play key roles in facilitating People First self-advocacy organisations. Many researchers using inclusive approaches similarly rely on the support of non-disabled facilitators (including advocates and key workers) to mediate the research relationship (Power and Bartlett, 2018). Notwithstanding the particularities of this constituency, such concerns are also present to some extent in research with any group of people; who can represent the group or individuals who we seek to apprehend in our research, in the context of intersectionality or a politics of differences; any self-identifying group are tied by certain connections but differentiated by other aspects of their identities. Can carers speak, without reproducing the tendency to characterise the cared for as objects of care? This special edition speaks directly to these questions in relation to research with disabled people, elderly people and migrants, whose bodily subjectivities place them 'at the margins'. It also contributes to ongoing debates about the nature and purpose of co-production in its various guises including emancipatory research and participatory research in geography; bringing to light the specificities and complexities of co-production by highlighting some of the challenges implicit, but less often explicitly aired, within co-productive research.

In this special issue, the papers collectively and individually question more fully how co-productive research has become both an agenda and a resource for researchers. Given the increasing focus on impactful research, co-production is becoming an increasingly necessary method of generating knowledge in the academy. Those who have fostered and embraced co-productive relationships as a resource are increasingly aware of the precarity of this resource. Such relationships are being shaped by the context of resource pressured communities, growing precarity from austerity, neoliberalism, retrenchment and fragmentation in social care and welfare, and a growing individualisation of risk for ‘vulnerable’ citizens. This context has fundamentally affected people’s experiences of place, (in)visibility, care, the ‘quiet politics’ of identity, and the often unseen aspects of the self in everyday life. Researchers must therefore manage the relationships delicately with the people who they seek to involve.

The special issue brings together five papers, all of which provide frank and open discussions of the problems and potentials of co-producing research. After discussing the papers below, we conclude by reflecting upon six questions

provoked by these papers as a collection, which we suggest require future consideration.

## **2. The papers**

The first paper, by Clayton and Vickers (2017), ‘The contingent challenges of purposeful co-production: researching new migrant employment experiences in the North East of England’, details the challenges of co-producing new migrant employment experiences in the North East of England. In this paper, the authors emphasise that “co-production has tremendous potential to traverse the borders of theory and action in pursuit of positive change”. They point out that co-production takes on specific configurations in particular places, and highlight the importance of understanding that co-production is forged of relationships, which bring to the fore emotional interactions and specific challenges. The key to forging successful co-production is understanding the messy and far from linear progress of co-production, and adapting in response to practical and emotional challenges faced. Clayton and Vickers (2017) emphasise how different partners in co-production can have differing, and sometimes competing aims and priorities, but that with degrees of ‘adaption’, co-production can produce rigorous and meaningful research. The changes faced can also be structural (in particular in the context

of Austerity and the challenges faced by voluntary sector organisations) and practical.

Changing policy regimes and raising people's capacity to react to new care environments underpins the contribution by Purcal, Fisher, Robinson, Meltzer and Bevan (2018). They use a peer support model of co-production, to examine disabled people's experiences of the shift towards self-directed support in Australia. This shift in Australia is part of a broader trend in many developed capitalist countries towards rationalising, individualising care regimes, which is part of both a broader neoliberal agenda but also appears to address disabled people's calls for independent living. Purcal et al. emphasise how co-productive research can simultaneously produce data for research whilst building capacity in all groups and individuals who participate in the research, as part of a broader building of capacity to negotiate self-directed support. Their underpinning concept of co-production draws upon the philosophy and politics of 'community inclusion' developed by Milner and Kelly (2009) through their participatory research with disabled people; with Purcal et al. emphasising the importance of: "self-determination, social identity, reciprocity and valued contribution, participatory expectations, and psychological safety" in the research process.

Arguably a philosophically different although politically compatible concept of ‘rights based’ research, which seeks to challenge unequal power relationships through the research process (via enhancing research and self- advocacy skills, and outcomes, improving conditions, and challenging ableist assumptions about ‘intellectual disability’) underpins the contribution by Fudge Schormans, Wilton and Marquis (2018): ‘Building collaboration in the co-production of knowledge with people with intellectual disabilities about their everyday use of city spaces’. This paper challenges ableist preconceptions about ‘intellectual disability’, by emphasising the abilities and talents of people with a diverse range of mind-body characteristics who share this amorphous label. The theme of the messiness and complexity of co-production is raised again, as academics reflect on the constraints of ‘slow’ (Mountz et al., 2015) participatory research. A key original contribution of the paper is reflecting upon shifting relations of power between researchers at different career stages, working in various disciplinary contexts with sometimes conflicting views and priorities. With a candid honesty, openness and reflexivity, they discuss the sometimes uncomfortable emotional, embodied and visceral and awkwardly sexualised relationships between different research partners.

The theme of critiquing ableist assumptions of ‘learning disability’ is taken forward in the piece by Murray (2018), which reflects upon co-produced research about the residential geographies of people with learning disabilities. Murray emphasises that co-production critiques the binaries between ‘*us*’ (‘the researchers and the non-learning disabled’) and *them* “for whom difference is assumed”. A critical contribution of this article is attention to the detail of *how* co-production can be done in terms of methods and practices that can be used to research groups whose voices and experiences are so often marginalised, and discusses broader constraints, such as ethics committees and the practical tools. Murray’s paper provides a useful practical reference point for people wanting to engage in more inclusive forms of participatory research.

The multiple and sometimes competing ways that the concept of co-production has been deployed is evidenced in this special issue. In a departure from co-production as participatory research which is the focus of much of the special issue, Leyshon, Leyshon and Jeffries (2018) examine how ‘co-production’ has been co-opted as a new mechanism for delivering care to older people, which seems to provide individual responsibility and limited power. Within the context of broader shifts towards neoliberalism, which have become entrenched within the post-financial crisis era, care working is

increasingly privatised within the family and carers and recipients of care are expected to be co-producers in care packages (Local Government Association, 2018). Leyshon et al., examine how co-production works (or does not succeed) in the case-study of Live Well in Cornwall. Some of the themes emerging above about relationships, power and professional boundaries emerge as inhibitors to generating co-productive relationships between carers and professionals. Importantly, Leyshon et al. emphasise that, despite its potentials to transform modes of care, in their case-study, the model of co-production is limited into particular spaces and times which do little to transform ‘linear’ power-relationships of clinician, carer and care recipient. Implicitly, by focusing upon the experiences of carers, they, in common with the first paper, beg questions of *who* are the *appropriate partners of co-production*.

### **3. Concluding thoughts – more questions than answers**

The unique contribution of this special issue is to reflect upon what co-production from the margins adds to current debates about the nature and meaning of co-production. The concept of co-production has become a black box, where competing meanings are projected. Co-production has also become a panacea for questions of ‘relevance’ (Dorling and Shaw, 2002),

which have been replaced by more ‘measurable’ outcomes of ‘impact’.

Examining voices ‘from the margins’ engenders a particular political perspective on ‘co-production’, since engaging with and bringing to the fore the experiences of marginalised groups and individuals is often underpinned by the political imperative to raise consciousness and change these marginalised positions. The politics of research production are emphasised, since researchers are careful not to reproduce the marginalisation of groups and individuals ‘at the margins’ by appropriating their experiences or engaging in exploitative research. A tradition has emerged, particularly in research about disabled people’s experiences, wherein co-production means participatory or inclusive research models. These models are expected and perhaps even normative within the field, given early calls that research with disabled people and other groups frequently excluded and marginalised should be ‘with us’ not ‘about us’.

Despite this shared heritage and starting point, it is evident from the papers in this special issue that co-production raises as many questions as it opens possibilities. Six key questions are illuminated below.

First, it is evident from the papers that the level of participation taken to represent co-production can vary considerably. This suggests that debates about co-production and power have to be locally negotiated in particular contexts and with particular

groups of people leading to complex configurations of involvement, rather than progressing along a linear line from participation to co-production.

Second, questions are raised about who are valid partners for co-production, is it the marginalised groups themselves, their carers, who can also be marginalised by their caring positions, groups 'of' disabled people or migrants, or groups 'for' marginalised groups? As Vickers and Clayton emphasise, the different partners of co-production can have competing agendas and perspectives, and this can be difficult to reconcile.

Third, is co-production methodological or tied to a particular set of political and philosophical ideals, as in Purcal et al. and Fudge Schormans et al; or does it necessitate a particular and detailed set of methods and procedures designed to include a range of groups and individuals, as Murray discusses? Does co-productive research necessitate particular, shared political and philosophical approaches, or can these be subtly divergent?

Fourth, and connected, what kinds of transformative changes can be forged through co-productive research, and how is this constrained by wider structural barriers emerging from broader society (funding cuts, neoliberal models of care) and (interconnected) the academy?

Fifth, we question how we can better understand and *challenge* when co-production becomes co-opted via neoliberal

rationalisations within funding models of both research and care, and how can these then mesh with endeavours to forge empowering or inclusive (Nind, 2014) research.

Sixth, a question arises whether co-production is necessary for all types of empowering research. Should our research endeavours be framed rather by a broader political objective to forge critical social change? The empowering potential of secondary analyses (Holt, 2006; Dorling et al., 2015) to highlight structural inequalities and change and forge agendas seems to becoming sidestepped in concerns that equate co-production and participation with empowerment and impact.

To conclude, we urge scholars going forward to reflect that: co-producing research with people ‘at the margins’, raises specific questions for ‘participatory’ or ‘co-produced’ research, given a moral political responsibility to move away from exploitative modes of research that reproduce marginalised positions in broader society. We set forth a challenge for co-production and/or participatory research about all topics to take seriously how, in whichever research we conduct, the voices and experiences of people with a host of mind-body-emotional states, of various ages, and with a host of migration trajectories, and of course, other ‘axes of power-relations’ (Butler, 1990) can participate in research about the various topics we might want to co-produce. There is clearly a need to reflect critically about who are the ‘communities’ we engage with (Robinson

and Hawthorne, 2018) and ensure they are inclusive in order to ensure that the ‘voices from the margins’ are always central to our scholarly endeavours.

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