

MAPPING ALTERNATIVE IMPACT

Alternative approaches to impact from co-produced research



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For more details of the Centre's work, see www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/ and its Participatory Research Hub www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/prh.

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Summary

- In order to encourage and support co-produced research, RCUK, HEFCE and Universities should expand the concept of “research impact” used.
- The "donor-recipient" model of impact, where a single knowledge producer (University/academic) impacts on economy or society in a linear fashion, is not relevant to co-produced research.
- Instead, impact is a collaborative, transdisciplinary praxis, that involves collaborators from different backgrounds coming together to undertake research with a common purpose.
- This approach of participatory co-production can create additional value-added in terms of both knowledge and impact, as many research projects have successfully demonstrated.
- Institutional infrastructure, especially around research funding, research support and impact audit procedures, must shift in order to address the differences in time, openness and relationships required for this approach to reach its full potential.

Scope and Audience

This report outlines the problems that arise when co-produced/participatory research is evaluated for impact. It describes the limitations of existing concepts and evaluation of impact, and makes recommendations for changes that will better support co-produced research. The report’s main themes and recommendations also have relevance to other forms of co-production, and also to delivering impact through research that has not been co-produced.

The report is intended as a catalyst for changes in institutional practices and policies. The key audience therefore includes Universities, UK Research Councils and other research funders.

Many of the issues discussed are also relevant to parallel demands for impact that are made of the co-produced/participatory work of a range of other organisations and sectors, such as charities, the public sector, social enterprises, the creative sector and community organisations. In co-produced research, academic researchers are often working with these types of organisations. The report may also be of interest to these sectors and their funders.

A summary of this report can be found at www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/prh/impact/

Defining terms

“Impact” – by impact, we mean *the social, economic or environmental changes that result from a particular intervention* (in this case, changes that are created or influenced by research).

“Co-production” – by co-production and co-produced research, we mean *research which is conducted together by a community, organisation or group with academic researchers*. Co-production may involve many other combinations of partners; but this combination is the focus of this report.

“Participatory action research (PAR)” – by PAR, we mean a form of knowledge co-production that involves partners working together to examine a problem with the goal of improving it for the better. PAR involves *a political and ethical commitment to challenging social hierarchies – both in how research is done, and in ensuring that beneficial outcomes result for those with least power in society*. PAR undertaken with communities is not the only form of co-production, but it is the basis of much of the research that informs this report.

The problem: Impact and co-production

In the last few years, impact has become increasingly an important dimension of how research is funded and evaluated. This is the case for the UK Research Councils (RCUK, the main funders of UK academic research) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF, the main audit of UK academic research). However, the way in which impact is conceptualised and measured tends to be very narrow, and unreflective of the diverse approaches to creating knowledge and affecting change that researchers today utilise.

This mismatch has been most acute for co-produced/participatory research. Despite some signs of shifts in thinking and stated openness to these research approaches, the way in which the impact of academic research is identified and measured by RCUK and REF2014 not only does not fit, but tend to deter rather than supports, this form of knowledge production. Yet the Research Councils have all expressed a will to encourage co-production, which is widely recognised as offering potential for more innovative and relevant science and research.

The key problem can be summarised as:

*the attempt to measure “impact” as a concrete, visible phenomenon
that is fixed in time and space,
that one party does to another party...
whereas
deep co-production is a process
often involving a gradual, porous and diffuse series of changes undertaken collaboratively.*

The changes that take place during and after co-produced research may not be linear, one-way or quantifiable. The project that led to this report asked, what space can we make for diverse, big and small, wide and deep, two-way, cumulative, less immediate, less tangible impacts across different registers?

This paradox is also present in the work of many organisations outside Universities who practice co-production with communities (e.g. charities, the public sector, social enterprises, community organisations, the creative sector). Often these sectors are further ahead in thinking through alternatives, and their experience is drawn upon in this report.

Why co-produce impact?

There are numerous reasons for engaging in co-production, but the driving force is that:

it can make for better research - *it broadens the possibilities of what can be known*

- new ideas are sparked through the process of different people coming together and pooling ideas, expertise and skills.
- co-production creates more authentic and multi-faceted knowledge. It is more likely to come from and reflect lived experience, to get beyond stereotypes, and is ground-truthed and cross-checked by different people throughout the process.
- it is as valid, rigorous, reliable, and accountable, and can be more so, providing an alternative to the traditional scientific method, and also working well with it.

it can make for better impact – *impact is part of the process*

- changes to policy, practice, attitudes, orientations and so on that arise should be more relevant, well-targeted and desired by communities if they come about through the process above.
- many people who work directly with communities reject the idea of 'trickledown' benefits for communities, especially in the current period of austerity - community ownership/participation in research and recommendations leads to readier adoption and greater acceptability by policy-makers.

Impact as praxis

In this approach, impact is viewed not as an outcome of research but as a praxis (after Paulo Freire) – a collaborative process of critical reflection on reality in order to transform it. This idea means rejecting the usual separation of theory, empirical research, and social action. These three practices are interwoven together, produced in the same times and spaces, and by the same collaborators. Thinking of impact as a praxis also means rejecting the hierarchies that often exist concerning who undertakes these three practices, and how they do so.

Impact, then, is at the centre of co-produced/participatory research processes. Impact is co-defined, co-pursued and co-evaluated in collaboration (not simply by academic researchers).

Methodology

This report results from the following activities:

An example of alternative impact in practice

- Staging a play which was developed through participatory research on austerity by Ruth Raynor, a PhD researcher at Durham University, with a women's group in Gateshead. "Diehard Gateshead" was performed at three venues in July 2015.
- Bringing this play to production involved a further co-production process, as a dramaturge, a director, set production, actors and finally audience shaped the play.
- Evaluation of impacts and discussion of the co-production process, through interviews, discussion groups, audience surveys, and other measures.

Review of the concept and practice of impact

- Wider reflection on the impacts of co-produced research over several years by members of Durham's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action.
- A review of recent literature (academic and non-academic) on co-produced impact.
- A day-long conference, including a workshop where 20 participants with expertise from different fields (13 academic and 7 non-academic) came together to reflect on learning and generate recommendations.

1. Defining impact

Co-production means that we need a different understanding of impact

- Co-production is centrally about impact. Impact is not a separate stage or endeavour, but a praxis that is built in to research processes; research and impact are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable. Impact is at the core of why and how co-produced research takes place. The purpose of the research is what brings people together, it drives them and drives the twists and turns of the process.
- Who defines impact? While the current REF/RCUK model largely defines impact and what counts as impact from the vantage point of academic research, there is a strong argument that the communities involved or affected are well-placed to define it. Different communities, partner organisations, groups of participants, etc, may have different priorities for impact. They know the context. Academics may have important inputs from their particular knowledge, but impacts should not be identified in isolation and in advance of collaboration.
- The nature of impact often includes elements that can be quantified, but equally importantly elements that are more subjective and less tangible. In many cases the big/little, wide/deep, hard/soft, immediate/longer impacts are not separate, but work together.

2. Scales of impact

Bigger is not always better

- Diverse impacts from co-produced research may occur at micro as well as macro scales, from individual attitudes and learning, to community or organisational capacity building, through to institutional or policy change. These vary in significance according to context. It should not be automatically assumed that some scales of impact are more important than others.
- The impacts that are valued in co-production are diverse and co-exist at numerous scales simultaneously – including effects on individuals as well as on groups of people, or communities, or wider publics. Different impacts often do not happen in isolation, but are co-dependent.

3. Impact from process as well as outcome

Impact happens all the way through co-production, not only afterwards

- As co-produced research involves long term engagement, impacts occur during the research (from process) as well as afterwards (as outcome).
- Some of these impacts will be known in advance, but others will emerge as the parameters of engagement evolve. Both research and impact are rarely linear. To allow this to work, flexibility is a vital operating principle.

4. Impact is mutual

Working together creates 'a soup of different inspirations' and impacts on us all

- Impact is not something academics “do” or “give” to communities. This donor-recipient model, where a single

knowledge producer (University/academic) impacts on an external community or organisation, is not relevant to most situations.

- When collaborators from different backgrounds (e.g. academics, actors, producers) come together with a common purpose, transdisciplinary effects can create additional value-added.
- Co-production impacts on academic knowledge and practices as well as on the non-academic world. It can significantly shape academics' intellectual as well as empirical work.
- Co-production impacts on the knowledge and practices of partner organisations too. For example, community groups can value the fresh perspective of a researcher, which can lead to new ideas and actions taking hold.

5. Ownership of impact

Impact is an exchange, not a commodity

- As co-produced research is shared, there is often no distinction in ownership of the ideas, design or findings that lead to impact. Again, this collaborative transdisciplinary model differs greatly to the donor-recipient model.
- This shared ownership has implications for how we promise (in funding applications, and discussions with partners), demonstrate, claim, present and fund impact.

6. Serendipity of impact

Impact can't always be planned or known

- As co-production is open and dynamic, and questions and processes often shift during the lifetime of projects, impacts and pathways to impact cannot be fully known in advance.
- Those who work in co-production often speak of serendipity – chance encounters, anecdotes, snippets of learning leading to unintended impacts. The small things – for example, an unplanned conversation over coffee – sometimes lead to large shifts.
- Serendipity is not just about chance; there are conditions that underpin serendipity which can be fostered.

7. Time for impact

Impact takes time, often the scarcest resource

- When we ask community and academic partners what is the most important condition for good co-production, their most common response is “time”. Both co-production processes and the impacts that come from them are built on relationships and trust, and these need time.
- The time needed is partly front-loaded – time for development and exchange of ideas, research questions and design.
- Academics and people in communities/other organisations are subject to time pressures. Good co-production and the impacts that follow can take more time than conventional research. At present it is the case that much co-produced research is done in unpaid time – sometimes by academics, and particularly by community partners.

This is not sustainable and can not be held up as a model of good practice.

- Different partners may also operate on different time scales. For example, it can take many months after an academic submits an RCUK bid to hear whether it has been successful, by which time the research issues in a community may have moved on, or opportunities for co-production may be lost.

8. Relationships and impact

Co-production relies on good relationships

- Interpersonal relationships are the foundation of successful co-production. They are important to facilitate trust, the ability to work together, to develop shared goals and to the achievement of impact.
- Co-production processes works best when they involve embodied connection, a state that is created when people are active together in a shared space with a common goal. This takes further the standard wisdom that relationships are important in co-production; it is the nature and collective feeling involved in those relationships, and the ways of working that result, that are important. The ways in which things get done, ideas are generated, processes develop, and outputs are generated, all take shape through people being together in a shared space - all of these are productive of impact, rather than the fact or state of collaboration.
- This does not mean that the co-production process is free of hierarchies, tensions and disagreement, which require complex negotiation.
- Good co-production is forged through relational working. This has numerous positive aspects, but challenges and difficulties can also be productive and result in stronger work. Working through differences is key, and it is an established practice, for example in community theatre and various participatory approaches to research.

9. Emotions and impact

Feelings produce impacts produce feelings

- The emotional dimensions of co-production are not as side-effects, but are active in generating impact.
- Emotions are rarely simply positive or negative. All participants have emotional responses throughout the research process (including academics) and emotions are productive at every stage of co-production. For example, anger and frustration may drive research, working relationships may stimulate care and empathy, hope or despondency may accompany the presentation of findings, and a range of impacts may take place via the emotional registers of the people who they target, including those who hold most power.
- It is important to recognise that, also, emotions can also be disruptive to co-production processes and damaging to communities. When things go wrong it can create alienation, resentment, disappointment, disillusionment, a feeling of exploitation, or divisions within the community.

10. Ethics of impact

“Nothing about us, without us”

- Rather than the standard “avoiding harm”, in co-produced participatory research the ethical imperative is reframed

as “doing good”. “Nothing about us, without us” has become an ethical commitment in co-produced research with communities. This ethical framing of participatory research leads to a range of different considerations during the research process.

- These considerations also apply to the definition, consideration and construction of impact. Impacts that are co-produced, directly informed by the communities affected, are arguably more likely to be a relevant and effective way of putting research findings to use.
- However, there are specific ethical concerns over pursuing impact with communities – especially concerning “over-asking” of community time and resources without adequate funding or clear benefits for the community discussed.
- The ways in which Universities pursued and demonstrated research impact in REF2014 led to a range of ethical concerns where research is co-produced. At worst, these processes may damage trust and existing relationships with communities, and alienate community partners. In particular, one way in which Impact Case Studies in REF2014 were problematic was the claiming of impact by the academic researcher and the linear connection made to academic-owned research and ideas. Non-academic partners were asked to give positive testimony about these academic-owned ideas and influence – and yet financial rewards from Impact Case Studies came to Universities not to community partners. This belies the nature of collaboration, where it is underpinned by a democratic ideal of participation (above). Pressures of funding, hopes for future collaboration, and so on, mean that this can be an ethical minefield.

11. Demonstrating impact

Diverse impacts can be demonstrated in different ways

- Co-produced research may throw up impacts iteratively, on different timeframes, at different scales, and of a more or less tangible nature. The issue of demonstrating these impacts presents challenges. The quantitative measures and predictable pathways and mechanisms that are commonly used at present are unlikely to reveal more than a partial picture of impact. This is a key concern for a range of organisations who use co-production in research or in other activities – e.g. the creative sector, charities, service providers, community development and youth workers - as well as for Universities and their funders.
- Common impacts of co-produced research include changes brought about by the research process – e.g. to institutional/staff practice; to participants’ confidence, belonging and skills; training/capacity building; leveraging funding and other resources; shifts in the researcher and the intellectual programme; as well as changes brought about the dissemination of findings at the end of the project.
- Evidencing impact is important to communities and organisations well as to researchers and funders.
- Diverse impacts call for different measures and means of demonstration that are context-specific and jointly agreed.
- Approaches that address these priorities include:
 - > holistic evaluation, conducted throughout a co-production process. This allows for flexibility of process, and change in aims/objectives and direction through the process. It allows the ongoing evaluation of impacts to shape the project as it progresses.
 - > community-led or participatory evaluation; this is rare, even in the voluntary sector. However, when those involved and affected by research are involved not only in setting the terms for and goals of impact, but also in evaluation of it, impacts may be more numerous and relevant.

- > a values-based approach, which challenges the economic growth model that underpins most audits of impact, and makes for impacts that are more relevant to all of the partners in co-production.
- Demonstrating a wide range of impacts at different scales calls for a raft of potential methods. Certain impacts can be demonstrated using quantitative methods where this is appropriate to what is being measured. Qualitative methods (e.g. observation, interviews, discussion groups, participatory diagramming) are of value in their own right, deepening understanding of impacts and their pathways, as well as which impacts are most valued and relevant. Qualitative methods are also useful in generating categories and concepts from which to design quantitative surveys, making the latter relevant and context-based. There is also great scope to use new technologies to capture impact.
 - There is no blueprint, rather a range of options needs to be developed, as the demonstration of impact will not always call for the same approaches/methods. Overall, more advanced understanding of how different methods can answer certain types of question about impact is required. Research should be commissioned for a full review of possibilities, rather than researchers, organisations and communities continually reinventing practice.
 - The sustainability of impacts is currently unknown, and also requires further research. Do impacts remain? Do they disappear? If so, which ones? Do they change, shift and reappear in different times and places? What of unanticipated impacts, how do we know and capture them? Neither researchers nor communities usually have resources to track impact in the longer term, although many express great interest in doing so. Longer term partnerships and infrastructure which facilitate ongoing evaluation (see below) would be one step in enabling this.

12. Logistics for impact

Co-production also requires new infrastructure

- The everyday logistics of how institutions commission, organise and support research do not fit with the needs of co-production.
- Funders are widely viewed as treating research projects as short term (and yet having a long and drawn out funding review process), being risk averse, requiring pre-determined outcomes – in other words, having a traditional view of academic research that is based on a scientific/medical model from a previous era. Despite the stated commitment to participation and engagement, many academics involved in co-production believe that RCUK has not kept pace with advances in co-production.
- Senior managers and academics within Universities are largely understood to hold the same traditional view of research. “Doing” is positioned below “knowing” and publishing in the academic hierarchy. But as “knowing” must necessarily also involve “doing” when it comes to co-production, those who have experience from “doing” are often not those who take up research management roles.
- In co-produced research, academic institutions meet other sorts of organisations which can be very different; the challenge then is ‘figuring out the way in which these two very different industries work’ (comment from theatre director).
- Finance was highlighted as an especially challenging issue. A key principle is that non-academic partners should be paid in full for their time. University payment systems are not flexible, are slow and often backdate payments. Research Councils do not have robust systems for realistic payments for the time and expertise of other organisations or individuals who are non-academic research partners.

13. Impacting the University

To support communities with change, the University needs to change

- The structures that govern University-community relations also require change, if co-production is to be fully supported and have maximum impact. There are many examples of Centres and Units around the world that provide infrastructure for co-production, such as the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University, although many do not have central institutional support or core funding.
- The barriers are not only institutional but about people in institutions, their commitment to co-production and their willingness to push boundaries, be creative, and take risks. For example, a current concern in some Universities is “not raising expectations” among the community (i.e. by dangling the prospect of co-working and impact), but this may reflect more their own sense of caution and discomfort than any sense of unrealistic hope among people outside the University.

14. Collective impact?

Stronger together

- This project also provided the opportunity to consider the recent idea of collective impact - when institutions, organisations and individuals from different sectors work together and pool resources, skills and expertise for an agreed common purpose. While beyond the remit of our project, it was clear from all participants that there is scope and appetite for upscaled research/community collaborations, working together in different ways but with a common agenda. For example, through our small drama research project, other people who are interested in community theatre became aware of the possibilities of collaborating with academic researchers, more academics have become aware of the potential of theatre as method and vehicle for impact, and all were interested in how such collaboration may challenge austerity in the North East region. Building forwards from individual co-produced projects in this way may produce further impact.
- Consolidation of these common interests may be achieved through networking, discussions, and the development of a shared agenda bridging individual projects.
- Collective impact would also require challenging the ‘silos’ of academic research – that keep it separate from its wider community, and that separate units within Universities. Infrastructure that spans universities and their communities (above) is needed, to support co-produced research and impact and disseminate learning, if collective impact is to be achieved.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations arise from this project. These come from consultation and reflection on practice among academics and community partners who undertake co-produced research together. Underpinning these is an overarching recommendation:

- **In order to encourage and support co-produced research, RCUK, HEFCE and Universities should expand the concept of “research impact” used.**
- The "donor-recipient" model of impact, where a single knowledge producer (University/academic) impacts on economy or society in a linear fashion, is not relevant to co-produced research.
- Instead, impact is a collaborative, transdisciplinary praxis, that involves collaborators from different backgrounds coming together to undertake research with a common purpose.
- This approach of participatory co-production can create additional value-added in terms of both knowledge and impact, as many research projects have successfully demonstrated.
- Institutional infrastructure - especially around research funding, research support and impact audit procedures, must shift in order to address the differences in time, openness and relationships required for this approach to reach its full potential.

Recommendation 1 - Defining impact

(i) Mechanisms for defining and assessing impact should include representatives of community partners typical of those who collaborate with academics on co-production projects. At present “research users” involved in reviewing grants and impact tend to be from larger, high-level organisations which are not representative, and who are more likely to reflect the orientations, traditions and practices of senior academic managers.

(ii) Those who are likely to be impacted by a research project – a community group, an organisation, etc – should take part in defining what impacts might be expected from the research. For example, they may be involved in producing pathway-to-impact statements.

Recommendation 2 - Counting impact

(i) Impacts from the process of research must be recognised and valued alongside impacts from the findings of research.

(ii) Different models of social change should be built in to procedures for recognising and valuing impact. In particular, the tendency to attribute higher value to larger scales of impact – e.g. to ‘national’ over ‘local’, ‘wide reach’ over ‘deep’, ‘institutional’ over ‘personal’ – legitimises some social changes rather than others, and overall tends to discourage participatory community-based research collaborations. An alternative approach, that focuses on the identification and development of a ‘suite of impacts’ relevant to the immediate context and questions of each project, should be considered.

(iii) The impacts of collaboration on academic ideas and practices should become part of the evaluation of impact.

Recommendation 3 - Demonstrating impact

(i) A wider range of methods and measures for demonstrating impact should be used, including quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods. At present, demonstration measures lag behind wider expertise in context- and question-sensitive methodologies in the social sciences.

(ii) A wider range of approaches to demonstrating impact should be used. At present, a linear and limited approach to pathways and impacts is the norm, regardless of the research context. Alternative approaches such as holistic evaluation, participatory evaluation and values-based evaluation may also be appropriate.

(iii) A further review of research is required that establishes how different methods can answer certain types of question about impact. Research should be commissioned for a full review of possibilities, rather than researchers and communities continually reinventing practice. Such research might also investigate the sustainability of impacts.

Recommendation 4 - Funding impact

i) A new programme of specific funding for co-produced research should be considered, across RCUK.

ii) Such a programme might include early developmental grants for developing collaborations in order to frame research questions, devise research processes and identify potential impacts jointly.

iii) Such a programme requires a clear pathway for collaborations that are successful at this stage to apply for larger grants.

iv) For co-produced research, funding applications require a significantly faster turnaround. Co-production projects that are focused on current social, political and environmental crises or controversies can offer especial value in terms of research impact – but the moment can easily be lost if there are delays.

v) As part of a new programme, funds might be ring-fenced for innovative projects that focus on urgent contemporary issues and are acknowledged to involve some element of risk, and involve light touch review (e.g. as was the case in ESRC's Transformative Research Call launched in 2012).

vi) The criteria for funding co-produced research and impact should include:

- The degree to which applications (questions, processes and potential impacts) have been devised collaboratively,
- A problem-solving orientation,
- The degree to which applications have openness and flexibility built in,
- Demonstration that the expertise, skills and capacity exist within the partnership to allow effective response to in-project change,
- Continuous evaluation of impacts arising from process as well as from eventual findings.

vii) The pool of peer reviewers, and grant panels, should include both academics and non-academics with specific knowledge of co-production and impact, especially community-led approaches such as participatory action research. It is important that non-academic reviewers are paid for this work.

i) For sustainable co-production and impact to be achieved more widely, the time, skills and input of community partners on funded research projects must also be realistically resourced.

Recommendation 5 - Creating conditions for impact

i) Universities can do a considerable amount to create conditions for more and stronger co-produced research, including the impacts that arise from it. Infrastructure that supports and fosters co-produced research includes the provision of training, networking, matching, mentoring and other forms of support and sharing resources, that are open to academics, students and community partners who are interested in working this way. Strengthening of University/community relationships generally (for

example, through sharing resources such as rooms and libraries, opening up academic events to the wider public, developing outreach and undergraduate placements) helps to build trust and relationships, through both the formal introductions and the serendipitous moments from which collaborations may grow. Universities require a clearly identified portal/interface so that interested non-academic groups know where to make the first contact (and to be sure these will receive a positive response) – Durham University’s Participatory Research Hub is one example. Proper resourcing of this infrastructure is required, based on the understanding that it enriches research, impact, teaching, student experience and the reputation of the University.

ii) Further research should be commissioned on alternative infrastructures – what logistical arrangements would support long term co-production? How can research be reoriented to meet the needs of communities in practical terms? – based on international examples of good practice.

iii) Funding Councils and Universities should explore further the idea of ‘collective impact’: ways in which institutions and bodies seeking collaborative learning on key social issues can be joined up and scaled up for maximum effect. Such an approach would involve the development of shared goals, working practices and accountability.



Further Reading and Resources

Co-produced and participatory research: general resources and underpinning concepts

A range of toolkits and other resources to support participatory and co-produced research can be found at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/prh/resources/toolkits/>

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The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities Programme features a range of projects that have developed co-produced research with communities - see www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/crosscouncilprogrammes/connectedcommunities/visionandoverview/

Collective impact

Kania J and Kramer K (2011) Collective impact. *Stanford Social innovation Review*, 9, 1, 36-41





