

Co-producing research with people who have experienced severe and multiple disadvantages

Kerry Dowding, Fulfilling Lives South East/freelance non-profit

Abstract

The non-profit sector is increasingly utilising co-productive approaches to research and project work. With a focus on co-producing research with people who have experienced multiple and severe disadvantages, this research note shares learning from the sector about applying this approach in practice. Discussion includes defining levels of involvement; reflecting on assumptions about people with lived experiences; creating equal weight and value to contributions; defining success; and creating opportunities for contributors to co-productive processes to learn and reflect.

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Introduction

Co-production means working on an equal basis with people who have relevant experience of the topic being researched. It applies to all stages of the process, from design to sharing findings. Working in this way is becoming increasingly called upon as a research approach in the non-profit sector. It is an approach which is central to my current and previous work as a social researcher.

At its best, co-productive research is work which is fully understood and trusted by communities, resulting in a greater number of participants engaging meaningfully with work and connecting strongly with its outcomes. Co-produced research is also uniquely grounded in the impact and purpose of the finished product. Although aspiring to this process brings clear benefits, there is also learning to be shared about how to effectively support the process and what to expect from taking research in this direction.

My own learning about co-production was advanced when I joined a project with a focus on people who are experiencing severe and multiple disadvantages. Fulfilling Lives South East aims to improve support systems for this group, with a core aim of co-producing all evaluation and research. It is part of a wider national research project. Due to the focus of the work, people involved in planning and implementing research have experienced different combinations of offending, mental health issues, substance misuse, homelessness and domestic abuse. Although this group could be seen as particularly challenging to co-produce with, the benefits and challenges faced were commonly very similar to working with any other community group.

Most research projects aren't fully co-productive, and that's okay

Conducting research which can be defined as fully co-productive is not always possible in practice. Sometimes an external partner or funder provides parameters which cannot be altered, confidentiality issues limit involvement, or people with lived experiences would just prefer to be involved in some stages of research and not others.

It's best to focus on maximising co-productive processes where they are possible, rather than focusing on whether a project fully meets the criteria for co-production. Versions of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation have often been used as a visual guide to levels of involvement (Arnstein, 1969). The figure illustrates a version of the ladder used by Fulfilling Lives currently.

The ladder is a useful aid to reflect on where different parts of the research process have reached, and how involvement could be increased if full co-production isn't possible. No matter which communities are being focused on, the aspiration of increasing their share of the process is key.

Scrutinise your assumptions

Co-producing research can expose assumptions made by all contributors. There can be a tendency in all co-produced work for artificial polarisation of roles. People who bring lived experiences often assume researchers are expert in all methods of research and analysis, provide a purely objective viewpoint, and have no lived experiences of the research topic. This position of artificial power for the researcher can be especially prevailing in communities which have traditionally experienced a lack of power or autonomy, particularly people with experience of multiple disadvantages.

Similarly, people who bring research skills to projects sometimes assume no other contributors have any formal research training and will be unable to manage their biases. These assumptions are usually unhelpful and untrue – we all have a mixture of skills to apply to the work. It is important to discuss these assumptions at the start of a project to get a more realistic set of expectations to work with.

A second assumption researchers can make is that all lived experiences are interchangeably representative. While all experiences are important and valid, it is important to acknowledge a diversity of experiences within the same issue, intersected by gender, age and background. In the case of multiple disadvantages, they could be different issues entirely – someone with a history of offending, street homelessness and substance misuse will not have the same experiences as a person who experienced offending, mental ill health and domestic abuse, for example. No individual can 'speak for' a whole group or set of experiences, so it is important to have multiple voices which can create balance in the messages feeding into the research.

All contributions should be equally valued

The input of every contributor in co-produced research has its own value and importance, and this should be reinforced throughout the process. An example of this might be a researcher with good theoretical knowledge of the criminal justice system. Their skills are certainly valuable, but they might be at a notable disadvantage when trying to conduct work in a prison setting. From knowing the visitation processes in practice to understanding slang terms, and even removing the symbols of authority the researcher might be inadvertently projecting to participants, practical knowledge can greatly improve the quality of a research. It is equally as valuable as the skills in project management, research methods and articulating findings which researchers are more likely to contribute to a research group.



One of the most valuable assets those with experience of multiple disadvantages can bring is best practice on how to approach people in complex situations to minimise risk and maximise feelings of safety within the research process. Peer-to-peer interviewing can also create a foundation of trust and ease which is hard to replicate without lived experience. Other lived experience assets might include knowing the language of the participants, therefore allowing involvement and access for groups which would otherwise not be able to get their voices heard in the research. Whatever the specific strengths, these assets should be treated as equally beneficial to the process.

Talk about what success looks like from different perspectives

In a project with multiple stakeholders there will be multiple perspectives on what success looks like. These usually extend beyond the agreed objectives for the research or the creation of a finished article or report. Creating research with real-world impact, developing skills and knowledge, or creating visibility for an issue are all valid reasons for involvement from all parties, and are measures of success. Discussions about defining success can also be useful in unpicking personal motivations connected to potential bias. It could be that a member of the group has a pre-formed opinion which they feel will be confirmed through the work. Equally, a researcher might have a desire for positive findings to increase likelihood of publication. By discussing these issues and naming motivations, it's possible to create a framework to evaluate success and minimise bias at the start of the project.

Create opportunities for learning and reflection

Learning from other people can be a real benefit of working co-productively. Rather than extracting value from each individual role, think about how to share assets within the group. Providing training on research skills for lived experience roles is as important as thinking about how best to absorb knowledge and expertise from lived experience for future work. The act of gatekeeping specific skills may give people with lived experience the impression that their involvement is solely because of that experience and not also due to their abilities and potential. If lived experience roles leave the project feeling upskilled in research management, interview skills or analysis, it also helps to support them in moving forwards in volunteering or career pathways.

Alongside the usual mechanisms and structures that a project would have in place to support people, it is also important to create space for community researchers to think about their personal boundaries within the research project. First-hand accounts of previous experiences can be very valuable, but the act of sharing these accounts can be emotionally charged and complex. It can be helpful to ask everyone to think in advance about how much of their life experience they would like to share with others, and to plan for any elements of the work they may find triggering or upsetting.

Safety planning on how to leave situations which are challenging can also help community researchers feel more prepared going into fieldwork situations. Scheduling time for reflection might be particularly relevant if experiences are recent, such as a parent having a child removed from their care.

Summary

Researching co-productively can take a little longer than more standard research approaches, and certainly takes reflection and practice to get right with any community. However, I believe working towards co-production can result in projects which all parties consider authentic and inclusive, and which create real impact for the communities focused on. It is a process with lots of bumps along the way, but I certainly feel that my research is richer and more grounded as a result of approaching work in this way.

Reference

Arnstein, S. (1969). 'A ladder of citizen participation'. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35: 216-24.