

Draft Guidance on Co-producing Research

Introduction

Co-production, it has been suggested in *Going the Extra Mile* (a strategic review of public involvement in the National Institute for Health Research), could be a means of evolving and improving patient and public involvement in research. This guidance identifies some key principles and features involved in co-producing research.

The term co-production can be a slippery concept, reflecting the wide range of disciplines from which it emerges and the often loose way it is applied. This guidance, written for public, researchers and other professionals, has a focus on co-producing research and in particular, how it relates to patient and public involvement in health and social care research. So what is co-production and what does it mean for patient and public involvement in research?

Co-producing research at its simplest means people working in partnership to design, develop and deliver research and knowledge. And 'people' includes all members of the team; public, researchers and any other professionals who may need to be involved in a piece of research. (We also recognise that people can wear more than one hat, for example the public can also be professionals and researchers).

However, when people suggest their research has been co-produced they are often simply referring to some kind of input from public members. This often means consulting the public, or the researchers deciding in which discreet aspects of the research process the public can be invited to collaborate – old wine in new bottles. But co-producing research means much more than consultation or collaboration.

Co-producing research is a way of working that requires a) a change in the power dynamics between researchers, professionals and the public so that there is an equal partnership and joint ownership of key decisions in both the research and the development of knowledge b) an emphasis on the relationships, new knowledge and outcomes that emerge from the research process.

Co-producing of research is potentially revolutionary. However it is likely that efforts at co-producing research will usually build on existing patient and public involvement frameworks in organisations. Indeed, when reading the guidance some readers will recognise principles and key features which already exist in the patient and public involvement frameworks in their own organisations or organisations with which they have worked. Sometimes these involvement frameworks will provide firm foundations for building co-produced research while at other times coproduction will be held back and thwarted by these frameworks.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a blue print or one size fits all approach to co-production – there is no single formula or method for co-production and such an approach would be counter to the innovation and flexibility that is implicit in co-produced research. And we do not want to stifle innovation. Co-producing research can include partnerships between academia and organisations representing the public as well as individual public members working with organisations, for example universities, which undertake research. It challenges how we think about and do research and the relationships between organisations, professionals and researchers and the public.

How was this guidance developed?

This guidance has been co-produced by the following: Gary Hickey (INVOLVE), Sally Brearley (Kingston University), Tina Coldham (INVOLVE Advisory Group), Simon Denegri (National Institute for Health Research), Gill Green (Research Design Service), Sophie Staniszewska (University of Warwick), Doreen Tembo (NETSCC), Katalin Torok (Central Commissioning Facility), and Kati Turner (St George's University). These people form the working group on this project.

This draft guidance was developed drawing on data from the following:

- Round table held, with working group members, to kick start the project and identify key principles and themes in 'co-producing research'
- Literature review of key text on co-production and interviews with people involved in co-produced research. (Insert link to this work)
- Workshop, with researchers and the public, to gain consensus on the key principles and key features of co-producing research.

This guidance provides links to the literature review and interviews as well as other core texts on co-production. (Links, including standards, to be inserted here.)

Principles of co-producing research

Equity of power

This is the key principle. And the one from which all others lead. The starting point is that everyone involved in a research endeavour is of equal importance. Research becomes a shared responsibility rather than the preserve of researchers and professionals. Co-producing research means that relationships and systems are horizontal rather than vertical. Often there are differentials in power between researchers and professionals on the one hand and public on the other. This inequality in power is often rooted in wider social and economic differences which need to be recognised and this inequality needs to be continually addressed in the ongoing relationships.

It should also be noted that 'equity of power' does not mean that everybody is involved in every decision and every part of the project. People working on a project will still have different roles, for example there will still be a 'leader' on a project. The approach however is more consensual and there will be joint ownership of key decisions on a project.

Respecting and valuing the knowledge of all involved in the research

Traditionally professional/research expertise carries greater value than other forms of knowledge, for example experiential knowledge. Co-producing research requires that the different knowledge bases, experiences and perspectives of all involved in the enterprise are afforded equal respect and value. There needs to be 'proper roles' for everyone with each team member holding 'real responsibility' for some element of the production of research. Everybody on the team is recognised as an asset.

Including all voices

Co-production requires a project team to ensure that all the necessary views, experiences, skills and knowledge are included. This includes the different types of expert, for example members of the public who have expertise about their own experiences of services or a condition, researchers and professionals. It also includes recognising that people can occupy multiple positions of expertise. For example members of the public can also have research or other kinds of professional expertise which may be pertinent to the partnership. Finally, it involves embracing diversity and developing structures to enable the involvement of all those people relevant to a particular project, including seldom heard voices.

Reciprocity

The contributions of people should be recognised. Everybody (public, researchers, and professionals) involved in a research project should get something back from

contributing to that project. This could take many forms – not just financial rewards. Other examples are the development of social networks, increased confidence, new knowledge and skills and access to courses and training.

Building and maintaining relationships

The evolving relationships between the various people involved in a research enterprise are key to co-producing research. It is the evolution of these relationships and of trust that enable co-production to happen. In order for trust to develop individuals need to reflect on the knowledge, assumptions, preconceptions and biases that they bring to a research project. Such reflection needs to be ongoing as assumptions about, for example, what kinds of knowledge are important, or about how particular social or professional groups might behave are difficult to nullify. There needs to be an acknowledgement and mindfulness of the complexity involved in 'power'.

Dialogue between all involved in the research project is crucial when co-producing research. This dialogue should begin prior to the start of the project, to help identify different types of knowledge, roles and responsibilities and establish relationships. Dialogue needs to be built into the governance of the project. The dialogue should continue throughout the project as project plans, ideas, research tools and knowledge that emerges from the project go through various iterations and are influenced and shaped by those involved.

What key features might you expect to see when co-producing research?

This section outlines some of the key features that you might expect to see in co-produced research. Each feature is followed by some suggestions as to how the key feature might be achieved; the intention is not to provide an exhaustive list but rather to provide the reader with some pointers.

Relationships beyond individual projects

Individual research projects are time limited and sometimes short-lived. Often the foundations on which co-produced projects are built can be found in the wider organisations which employ or host the research team. Embracing and embedding the principles really requires a coming together of the organisations which host research projects and the communities within which they exist. Ensuring equity of power and developing relationships, for example, is a long term process and usually requires work beyond that of a single project. Trying to create a level playing field and emphasising the development of relationships have implications for both the culture and processes and procedures of organisations – many of which will take time to implement. Co-production won't 'just happen'.

How might this be achieved?

The relationships necessary for co-producing research often require time and effort to cultivate a more 'level playing field' between public and researchers and professionals. Organisations/researchers need to shift from being not just 'doers' of research but be proactive in encouraging and facilitating public involvement and developing relationships beyond the research community.

One approach for organisations which undertake research - rather than for an individual project - would be to establish and cultivate a Patient and Public Involvement Group who are attached to the organisation undertaking research (rather than just an individual project) and who meet regularly with staff, undergo any necessary training and are regarded as an asset in the development of research ideas. This Patient and Public Involvement Group could, overtime, help shape for example the research strategy of the organisation and members of which could be involved in individual projects.

Organisations which undertake research could provide induction training to their research staff and public members on co-producing research. This would, at the very least, raise awareness of what co-producing research entails and the likely challenges.

The following four approaches could be adopted at both the organisational and project level. The first approach is to have meetings where people are asked to share information about themselves that is not project related, for example their interests. This requires people to take their 'role hat' off, for example researcher or professional or member of the public. Such an activity puts people in a different place, stepping outside of their role, changing group dynamics and communicating on a more level playing field.

The second is to encourage social interactions beyond formal work environments. For example, work meetings within a university may reinforce hierarchical relationships. Engaging in activities away from work enables the development of relationships that cross role boundaries and are on an equal footing.

A third approach is to appoint a 'guardian' of co-production whose role it is to review the extent to which an organisation or project is adhering to the principles and elements of co-producing research.

Finally, to enable the involvement of all in the development of knowledge one approach is to appoint a knowledge broker who negotiates between researchers, public and or professionals.

All of the above require time – which must be built into individual projects and/or become part of the 'way of doing things' in those organisations which undertake research.

Public being involved in the design of the project proposal

It helps to establish equity of power and joint ownership of key decisions if the public are included in developing research proposals, rather than being brought in once a project has received funding. Co-produced research is a joint venture. If there is to be joint ownership of a project then it follows that members of the public, ideally, need to be involved at the very earliest stage of project development - not invited in to give views once a proposal has been developed but to be 'around the table' at the beginning, helping to design and shape the project. And it should not be forgotten that research ideas can originate from members of the public and organisations representing the public who may want to invite researchers 'around their table.'

We recognise however that research is rarely 'perfect'. And just because the public are not involved in the development of a research project proposal does not mean that the project cannot still embrace the principles and other key features outlined in this guidance.

How might this be achieved?

Organisations which undertake research could budget for paying the public to be involved in the development of research proposals. Another option is for organisations such as universities to develop research proposals in partnership with organisations which represent the public. Finally, organisations which undertake research could have members of the public/organisations which represent the public as co-applicants on research proposals.

Joint ownership of key decisions

It is not that everyone need be involved in every decision or every aspect of a piece of research but rather that the group decide and agree who should be involved and when. It is a partnership which sees public members as partners in the management and governance of the research. Public members may also be involved in the 'doing' of the research. It is this 'joint ownership of key decisions' which helps differentiate co-producing from collaborating.

How might this be achieved?

One approach is for everyone 'around the table' to outline, at the beginning of the project, what they do know and what they don't know about a given topic area – the intention is to pool together the collective knowledge and move researchers and professionals away from the position of determining what is and isn't important knowledge. If researchers and professionals put themselves in the role of 'experts' then the inference is that others are not. This sharing and enabling everyone a voice creates a building block from which to progress.

Joint ownership of the production of knowledge

Co-producing research is not just a different way of doing research; it often involves the generation of different or new knowledge. Public involvement in research is often limited to the research process, for example having input into the development of research tools or on approaches to recruiting research participants. Co-producing research also involves members of the public having input into, and ownership of, the generation of knowledge that is a result of the research, i.e. the interpretation of the data collected, which may differ widely from conventional academically produced knowledge.

How might this be achieved?

Involving the public in the interpretation of data is necessary to ensure joint ownership of the production of knowledge. As well as any necessary training for the members of the public this also requires researchers and professionals to respect and value the different perspective that the public may bring.

Opportunities for personal growth and development

There is an emphasis on unlocking the potential of individuals to contribute to the project. In this way people are treated as assets with the skills, knowledge and experience to help develop solutions to issues rather than simply people with needs. Co-producing research should provide opportunities for personal growth and development.

How might this be achieved?

An obvious mechanism is the provision of training and support – for the public, researchers and professionals.

There often needs to be a cultural change in the research team. They need to be able and willing to relinquish power and there needs to be an acceptance of reciprocity of experience and expertise. Researchers and professionals need to be able to 'step outside' of their roles to engage with the public in an open, honest and transparent way. This necessitates a focus on interpersonal skills and developing relationships.

Researchers will need to learn how to effectively facilitate the involvement of the public and how to effectively manage the flexibility and uncertainty involved in co-produced research projects.

The public may require training and support to enable there to be equity of power and facilitate their involvement. People need to be equipped/trained with the necessary skills and knowledge to co-produce. Providing the training and support encourages an element of reciprocity which can ensure that people are more actively involved as they are being supported as required.

Valuing the outcomes derived from the research process (not just the impact of the research findings)

Co-producing research involves valuing not just the impact and outputs of research but impacts derived throughout the research process. Some of these impacts and outputs will emerge rather than be planned; new relationships, expanded social networks, increased confidence of members of the public and different modes of knowledge.

How might this be achieved?

It is always useful in any research project to keep a record of the outcomes from the research. This could simply expanded be to include reflections on the outcomes from the research process.

Flexibility

Co-production challenges the established process of research. Usually a research project has a pre-determined project plan. However, co-produced research should provide opportunities for an iterative, fluid, open ended, experimental and interactive process rather than just the neat, clear, linear one which we usually associate with research; there should be opportunity for solutions and innovations to emerge from the relationships developed.

How might this be achieved?

Devolution of decision-making power is required. Co-producing research challenges the top down approach where the research decisions tend to lie with a chief investigator; in co-produced research decision-making is devolved to those involved in the partnership.

Building into the research opportunities for discussion and reflection (see below) are important. In this way progress can be assessed and ideas discussed.

Reflection

Reflection is a process whereby research team members have the opportunity to look at and reflect on how they are working together, how they might be using their particular expertise and perspective in the project and how this might impact on the research process and findings/outcomes.

How might this be achieved?

There are many different kinds of reflective approaches and research teams should think carefully before the start of the project and agree on what approach might best fit both the type of research they are doing and the way the team is structured. For example, team members might keep individual reflective diaries pegged to each research stage or there might be team meetings held every few months with a specific reflective focus.

Using reflective approaches such as these are a helpful way for a research team to keep continually and collectively aware of how they are working together, what is working well and where there are tensions or sticking points. Creating safe and supportive spaces which enable team members to openly and honestly reflect on challenging issues such as power dynamics and inequalities is an integral part of coproduction.

This kind of reflective process should not be confused with supervision or an annual review/appraisal provided by a line manager as a part of someone's role and career development.

Ground rules

A measure that can help establish equity of power and respect for all is to establish ground rules at the beginning of a project. These ground rules would set out expectations, in terms of the behaviours of all.

How might this be achieved?

A useful starting point would be INVOLVE's values, principles and standards. Getting consensus on the values and principles will provide guidance on behaviours expected, while the standards provide more detail on how these values and principles might find expression.

Conclusion

The equity of power required for co-production has implications for the processes and procedures and cultures of organisations and their relationship with the public. Indeed, it has the potential to transform how we 'do' and think about research.

This guidance identifies some key principles and features involved in co-producing research. These principles and features are just the beginning of a pathway for those considering taking a journey on the co-production route. The extent to which research projects and organisations embrace all of the principles and the depth to which they go in embedding the principles will vary. The more principles that are adopted and embedded the stronger will be the co-production of the research. The intention is that organisations, researchers and the public can use these principles to critique their own (and others') practices and further evolve and improve public involvement in their research.

This is not the final word on co-producing research.

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