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The politics of co-production: risks, limits and pollution

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Co-production is a risky method of social inquiry. It is time-consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and it challenges many disciplinary norms. This is what makes it so fresh and innovative. And yet these research-related risks are rarely discussed and, as a result, risk-reduction strategies remain under-developed within training and research processes. It is for exactly this reason that this article draws upon Mary Douglas's notion of 'social pollution' in order to understand the tensions and challenges of co-production. It seeks to expose the generally hidden politics of co-production.

key words co-production • impact • politics • risk

Within the social sciences the growing importance of 'impact' has led many researchers to seek new ways of disseminating their independently produced research findings. The increasingly salient concept of 'co-production', however, builds on older ideas about 'participatory action research' (Lewin, 1946) and 'knowledge exchange' (Beal et al, 1986) in a shift towards a deeper or more complex form of impact, with practitioners and potential research users drawn into all stages of the research process (Jung et al, 2012; Burns et al, 2014). By including collaboration between researchers and users throughout the research process, co-production aims 'to dissolve the boundary between producers and users – all forms of expertise (among academics, practitioners, business and the public) are considered valuable and contribute to knowledge production' (British Academy, 2008, 43). For researchers, it is suggested the co-produced research 'ensure[s] that the research findings are subsequently taken up and exploited' (British Academy, 2008, 44). Moreover, including 'the public', 'community actors' or 'service users' in the research process may, in principle, empower them by cultivating a number of personal or civic attributes (confidence, aspiration, 'voice', and so on). Co-production promises, therefore, to be transformative not solely in research terms but in social terms: the engagement of citizens and social groups nourishes the renewal of democracy.

The central argument of this article, however, is that the *politics of co-production* has been under-acknowledged, by which we mean how a set of broader societal inequalities may have negative professional consequences for researchers or participants (*risks*), or may prevent research from achieving its desired effects of genuinely promoting egalitarian social outcomes (*limits*). Our aim in making this point is not to deny the

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value of co-production as a theory or method but simply to suggest that complex power relationships and often competing or conflicting incentives, expectations and priorities may frustrate the research process. The article is concerned with the ‘small p’ politics of control, agenda setting, language and resources and aims to forewarn potential researchers of the complex entanglements that may arise. Put differently, there is often a ‘rhetoric–reality gap’ between what is promised and delivered in self-styled ‘co-production’ endeavours, and addressing this requires a focus on some *risks and limits* involved in this type of research. While existing literature has attempted to identify barriers to effective exchange of knowledge and ethical concerns in research engaging wider society (see Brydon–Miller et al, 2003, Neuman, 2011, Bannister and Hardill, 2013), we aim to provoke a critical debate specifically on how co-production – despite its positive normative spirit – often remains little more than a buzzword. In doing so we adopt an innovative approach using Mary Douglas’s (1991) concept of *social pollution*.

Social pollution is a cultural phenomenon whereby the transgression or blending of traditionally defined roles and identities is seen as being morally ambiguous, questionable and ‘dirty’, and dubiously ‘other’ to normal social conventions (for an overview see Fardon, 1999). Existing analysis has applied Douglas’s concept to the use of ‘hard’ scientific research in the policy process (Swedlow, 2012), and more broadly the relationship between science and politics (Raman, 2005). For example, Swedlow (2007) argues that scientific elites (funding bodies) engage in a ‘political struggle for scientific authority’ by rejecting co-produced research on the grounds that it allegedly ‘pollutes’ the ‘pure’, traditionally defined notions of ‘objective science’ (see also Miller, 2001). The core point we wish to make is that the concept of social pollution captures how co-production – despite its buzzword status – rubs up against traditional social norms and roles, which may mean its potential as a radically innovative form of research encounters problems both in theory and practice. In order to make this argument we identify three risks and two limits relating to co-production that are evident from existing literature and from original research we conducted.

This article presents the findings of an interdisciplinary project that sought to map and explore the *politics of co-production* through a three-stage methodology. The first stage involved a detailed meta-analysis of existing research that adopted or deployed the concept of ‘co-production’ within the social sciences, particularly public management where it has recently become a buzzword (Ewert and Evers, 2012). This was followed by 30 semi-structured interviews with individuals and organisations that had been involved in co-produced research projects. The final phase of the research was focused around a workshop that brought together 40 participants who had been involved in either co-produced research or co-produced policy projects. This included social scientists, current and former policy makers in local and national government, researchers in think tanks and members of local civil society organisations in Sheffield, in order to explore the core findings arising out of the first two phases. In this article we utilise data from the first and third phases of the research for two reasons. Firstly, the systematic review provided evidence of the limits and risks encountered across various sub-disciplines. Secondly, the workshop generated data with an important intersubjective element to it, which provided valuable data on wider sociological risks and limits to co-productive research. Individual interviews, which shed greater perspective on the personal experiences of interviewees, are being used for a similar project on the psychology of researchers in co-productive projects.

We identified five critical problems in our research – three risks and two limits – that provide a deeper and evidence-based account of the challenges faced for co-production within the arts, humanities and social sciences than has hitherto been provided (see Table 2, below). These themes provide a heuristic framework and we argue that each problem is relatively systemic, and would require a more sustained change in the practices and cultures of research communities to be overcome. In order to explore the politics of co-production, in general, and the nature of each of the five strands, in particular, this article is divided into four main sections. The first section focuses on the conceptual foundations of co-production. It argues in favour of a distinction between two interrelated forms of co-production: *the co-production of policy* (Co-Pro 1) and *the co-production of knowledge* (Co-Pro 2). Although clearly interrelated these two forms of co-production are distinctive; Co-Pro 1 has been around longer and therefore provides a number of insights into the generic politics of co-production that can inform our focus on Co-Pro 2. The second section introduces the concept of ‘pollution’ in order to grasp the particular risks associated with ‘boundary work’ in Co-Pro 2. The third and most substantive section utilises the Co-Pro 1 / Co-Pro 2 distinction and the concept of ‘pollution’ in order to explore the five strands set out in Table 1, dimensions that we argue can be woven together to expose the hidden politics of co-production. The final section reflects on the broader implications of the interactions, dependencies and relationships exposed in this article.

A concept with adjectives

The notion of ‘co-production’ provides an example of what William Gallie (1956) famously described as an ‘essentially contested concept’ in the sense that the term is variously interpreted and represents a range of partnership or engagement activities but not one clear and agreed method. It is therefore – just like ‘democracy’ (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) – a concept with adjectives, and this is reflected by a great variety of associated terms (co-governance, co-management, co-partnership, co-design, co-creation, and so on). The proliferation of such terms suggests a potential danger in that what Sartori (1970) termed ‘conceptual stretching’ may both lead to terminological confusion and, more problematically, obscure some of the potential risks and limitations associated with some forms of co-production. The purpose of this section is to provide some conceptual clarity around what co-production means, drawing a distinction between what the article terms the ‘co-production of policy’ (focused on the *co-production of public policy* through community / user engagement) and the ‘co-production of knowledge’ (focused on the *co-production of academic knowledge* through community / user engagement). This distinction is important for at least two reasons. First, the ‘co-production of policy’ is not new and experiments with various forms of community engagement can be traced back for several decades, and it therefore provides glimpses, insights and examples of how the politics of co-production, when applied to the academic sphere, may frustrate or – at the very least – pose dilemmas for the research process. Secondly, it is possible to suggest that the literature on co-production remains somewhat vague and nebulous – united by the common assumption that involving ‘the public’ or potential ‘research users’ into the actual research process is by definition a ‘good thing’ – and there is an urgent need for even the most basic form of conceptual mapping and interrogation. This ‘two types’ approach is therefore an initial response to this challenge.

The co-production of policy

Table 1: Types of co-production

Type	Focus	Academic	Abbreviation
The co-production of policy	The design, implementation and evaluation of public policy through collaboration	None / peripheral	Co-Pro 1
The co-production of knowledge	The design, administration and dissemination of academic knowledge through collaboration	Central / core	Co-Pro 2

As a starting point for answering this question we adopt the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) definition of this type of co-pro as a ‘means [of] delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals and people using the service’ (see Boyle and Harris, 2009, 11). In one sense, this relates broadly to the involvement of ‘third sector’ organisations in delivering services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006, Pestoff, 2006). There are, however, a number of ‘shades’ of co-production ranging from rather thin engagement and consultation to deeper models of full embeddedness. Elinor Ostrom’s initial design of the term ‘co-production’ was clearly intended to reflect a ‘deep engagement’ emphasis, and this is captured in her argument about the design and success of community policing in Chicago, as summarised by the New Economics Foundation: ‘the police in Chicago need community as much as the community needs the police’ (NEF, 2008, 9). In adult social care, as Needham and Carr (2009, 7) suggest, ‘the service user and disability rights movements have promoted the idea of people who use services as active participants with resources rather than passive dependants with needs’. In other words, Co-Pro 1 involves a quite radical shift in *power* between service providers and service ‘users’. In developing countries, for example, co-production has been seen as way of ‘empowering’ citizens by not only involving them as ‘consultees’, but in genuinely collaborating with them in shifting resources to the local level (Mitlin, 2008), as well as creating more efficient and sustainable public services (Ackerman, 2004). An oft-cited project which seems to demonstrate the potential successes to be gained from effective co-production is the Porto Allegro participatory budgeting initiative in Brazil (Baiocchi, 2001).

As such, Co-Pro 1 is inextricably linked with concepts of community and social capital: it demands cooperation and reciprocal networks to function (Davis and Ostrom, 1991). Co-production appreciates the variation in skills, interests and experience of those within our communities and attempts to use these variations as assets to effectively deliver public services. At the heart of the concept is the belief that citizens and communities are *assets* rather than *problems to be solved*. It moves beyond the neoliberal consumer model of social policy where ‘professional systems deliver services to grateful and passive clients’ (NEF, 2008, 8), and gives value and precedence to an active role for these ‘clients’ (Leadbeater, 2004). As the New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2008, 10), states ‘it is about “broadening and deepening” public services so that they are no longer the preserve of professionals or commissioners, but a shared responsibility, both building and using a multi-faceted network of mutual support’. Co-production recognises the skills and assets in community *partners*,

who are recognised as equal stakeholders in decision making and delivery of public services. Policy makers and service providers need this input, not for legitimacy or accountability, but for effective provision of the services they offer.

The co-production of knowledge

Although the intellectual heritage of Co-Pro 2 is more recent it is imbued with a set of values and a radical potential that resonate with those of Co-Pro 1. It also captures a distinct shift in power between a narrow professional grouping and the broader public. The extent to which this shift in power occurs in practice is a key point for discussion, but the explicit desire to bring policy makers, interest groups, think tanks and communities *within* the research process is clearly central to the theory of Co-Pro 2. This shift in power is connected to a deeper intellectual shift towards an epistemological position that values ‘knowledge as experience’ in the sense of thinking differently about how academic knowledge can be generated and used. This has been extensively theorised in Science and Technology Studies by Sheila Jasanoff, who suggests that academics

can gain explanatory power by thinking of natural social orders as being produced together... [the co-production of knowledge] is short-hand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live it... *society cannot function without knowledge any more than knowledge can exist without social supports.* (2004, 2–3)

This drive for a more expansive epistemological position rests upon, as Jasanoff (2004) emphasises, a critique of the realist ideology that persistently separates the domains of nature, facts, objectivity, reason and *policy* from that of culture, values, subjectivity, emotion and *politics*. Co-Pro 2 hence finds its origins within an epistemological and methodological concern that academics should move away from an ‘ivory tower’ approach to scholarship. It is intimately concerned with how the generation of academic knowledge shapes – and is shaped by – the social, political and policy environment in which it is situated. This, in turn, shifts the nature of intellectual relationships as a broader range of methodologies, and a broader range of actors are viewed as offering valid / credible / legitimate contributions to the research process. Scholars such as Kate Pahl (2014) therefore advocate intellectual endeavours that directly involve affected communities (such as black and ethnic minority communities or disabled communities) in designing and even carrying out the research that would in ‘traditional’ (that is, top-down) scholarship have merely studied them as ‘objects of research’.

Drawing upon the concepts and language of Transitions Theory, it is possible to suggest that the recent intellectual shift towards co-production remains very much a ‘niche regime’, in the sense that the dominant idiom of scholarly endeavour remains wedded to an epistemological hierarchy, in which those ‘scientific’ methods that emphasise notions of objectivity and distance (generally quantitative analysis) tend to be most highly regarded in terms of funding, promotion, prizes, and so on. The ‘raucous rebellion in political science’ (see Monroe, 2005) was therefore an attempt to turn the dominant methodological pyramid ‘on its side’ so that a broader range of

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more engaged and qualitative methodologies ‘would count’ as sources of legitimate scholarship. Similar intellectual tensions have been played out in a range of disciplines from economics to management and from psychology to sociology (see, for example, Pahl and Pool, 2011; Bowen et al, 2011; Antonacopoulou, 2010), but it is possible to suggest that Co-Pro 2 remains something of a ‘crack’ or a ‘wedge’ in the dominant intellectual paradigm rather than a full-blown revolution. Research programmes, such as the cross-council Connecting Communities initiative in the UK, have attempted to promote and stress-test the theory of co-production; whereas the broader emphasis on ‘relevance’, ‘impact’ and ‘engagement’ on the part of both governmental and non-governmental funders resonates with the logic and values of Co-Pro 2. However, it is possible to suggest that many academics remain cautious about engaging with this agenda due to the risks that they perceive – correctly or incorrectly – accompany this method. It is in the analysis of these risks that the hidden politics of Co-Pro 2 can be exposed and therefore potentially managed. The question then becomes – with Table 1 (above) in mind – what does the existing literature on the co-production of policy suggest about the risks and politics of engaged scholarship?

Politics = pollution

What are the risks of co-production – intellectually, socially and professionally? In what ways are these risks created, perpetuated or managed? How do these risks affect relationships within the research process, and what insights can be gained from the research on the co-production of policy? In many ways our argument is simple: co-production is a risky method of social inquiry for academics. It is time-consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and expectations, and other scholars (journals, funders, and so on) may not even recognise its outputs as representing ‘real’ research. Academics who venture into the sphere of co-production are therefore not only likely to be stepping outside their own intellectual comfort zone, but they are also likely to be challenging dominant disciplinary norms and expectations. They are taking a risk. They are putting themselves in a precarious position. This is what makes co-production so fresh and innovative, but also brings up a number of dangers. The aim of this section is to expose the hidden politics by drilling down into this notion of ‘risk’ in the research process, specifically by engaging with Mary Douglas’s (1991) concept of ‘social pollution’.

The notion of ‘pollution’ is an emotive, unusual and arguably unnecessarily negative term to employ to characterise co-production. Co-production is rightly seen as a positive process of opening up research and policy making in a normatively desirable way with equitable, even egalitarian potential. Our argument, however, is that the normative desirability of co-production as a buzzword often crowds out a balanced assessment of the risks and limits involved when it is ‘done’ in practice. Despite its buzzword status, co-production as an innovative, ethically and normatively desirable practice often clashes with traditional views of what research or policy making ought to be, how social roles should be defined and performed, and the subtle power plays that generate an appearance of open and egalitarian collaboration while covertly reinforcing traditional methodological or sociopolitical hierarchies. To date researchers have acknowledged risks involved in similar research into the barriers to effective ‘knowledge transfer’ and ethical issues involved (Bannister and Hardill, 2013), but

not entirely the *political* nature of the risks: the embedded hierarchical social relations, cultural assumptions and professional incentive structures that mean co-production often remains little more than a buzzword. Our argument is that these risks and limits need to be characterised in stronger terms, in a way that makes those who promote co-production – funding councils for example – sit up and notice the reality of these tensions. In this spirit, we aim to provoke the research community to reflect upon the risks associated with co-production by framing our discussion using the disruptive social scientific term ‘pollution’.

In her classic book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1991, 3) argued that pollution is not an objectively defined category but instead acts as ‘analogies for expressing a general view of the social order’. ‘Pollution’ in this sense has little to do with oil spills or greenhouse gases but conveys a sense of social change, social disorder and the definition of those elements of change in pejorative terms. To label or define an organism, animal, individual, community or form of behaviour as representing a pollutant is therefore to engage in a political act. Actors use the rhetoric of ‘pollution’, including notions of ‘uncleanliness’, ‘defilement’, ‘dirt’ and moral ‘transgression’ to suggest that the crossing of conventional social boundaries poses a ‘risk’ that must be at best managed, and at worst punished. ‘Social pollution’ as a rhetorical trope is hence associated with:

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions... their main function [is] to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between, within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas, 1991, 4)

Douglas (1991, 121) argues that ‘all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered’. When such ‘margins’ are seen to have been altered, culturally defined norms of identity and structure are challenged and, potentially, these can lead to perceptions of danger or hazard that are often reacted to in ways that ‘punish’ those seen to initiated the ‘transgression’. Most critically for our purposes, Douglas argues that those who operate at or attempt to cross the ‘margins’ of different social categories are particularly susceptible to risks and can be accused of ‘pollution’:

A person accused of pollution is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone. (Douglas 1991, 113)

It might seem slightly paradoxical to suggest that ‘crossing lines’ can be seen as dangerous or ‘impure’, especially when contemporary forms of collaborative research like co-production encourage precisely this transgression in order to improve academic outputs and the relevance of findings. And yet, as Douglas intimates, crossing these ‘lines’ can lead to tensions within the broader cultural context of established norms and identities. As already mentioned, the (methodological) norms and social (identities) of social scientists currently conform to a scientific idiom that legitimates and perpetuates an objective, disconnected and top-down (that is, elitist) professional attitude.

Where the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers – like witchcraft. (Douglas 1991, 99)

To describe those brave (or foolish) souls who have embraced co-production as both a theory of knowledge and a methodological tool as practising witchcraft might be a little strong. It does, though, at least capture a sense of doing ‘something different’, a sense of ambiguity about role definition, a sense of challenge *vis-à-vis* ‘normal’ ways of behaving, and a sense of fluidity or hybridity that may well lead to accusations of polluting conventional boundaries. This is a critical point. By engaging with policy makers, politicians, pressure groups or community associations, scholars open themselves up to accusations that they have been co-opted into other agendas, or that their work lacks clarity and raises ethical dilemmas that are best avoided completely or – and this is frequently the *uber* critique – that they have been unnecessarily *politicised* (as if reaching-out beyond academe represents some form of contagion or pollutant). Pollutant and purity claims, as the work of Brendon Swedlow (2007; 2012) has illustrated, therefore create their own field of intellectual politics which is then located via the research process into a number of broader political debates and disputes (for example, concerning the funding available to charities, the framing of research findings for media consumption, or what the findings of the research actually mean in terms of either social or academic relevance). The aim of this section, however, has simply been to introduce Douglas’ concept of ‘social pollution’ and demonstrate how it can be made to ‘travel’ (*qua* Sartori, 1970) into the current debate about co-production. In this sense it ‘travels’ due to the simple fact that the boundary-spanning activities that co-production demands of academics remain a ‘non-standard’ form of scholarly endeavour and therefore create a political space in which accusations of breaking or bending ‘standard’ procedures (professionally, ethically or intellectually) are easily made. The way this occurs in practice was the focus of our research project, the results of which we now focus on.

The risks and limits of co-production

Despite broader debates about the limits to effective knowledge mobilisation (Bannister and Hardill, 2013) and ethical concerns regarding ‘participatory action research’ (Brydon-Miller et al, 2003), the risks and limits specifically associated with ‘co-production’ are rarely addressed. The work of Eriksson (2011), for example, problematises the unequal relationships involved in the co-production of policy, but does not specifically reflect on the role or position of academics or how certain tensions might be resolved. By contrast we proceed from a position of caution, but also optimism with regard to the potential of co-production and a desire to see both its intellectual and normative aims achieved. A key reference point in the existing literature and our point of departure is the work of Orr and Bennett (2012) on the ‘roles, relations and stakes’ of those involved in co-productive projects, but we take this focus further by identifying three critical ‘risks’ – expectations, power and value – and two ‘limits’ – validity and pragmatism – in the research process (Table 2, below).

Table 2: A typology of limits and risks in co-production

	Limitations	Risks
Problem	Institutional incentives that place boundaries on achieving the egalitarian aims of co-production	Potential negative consequences of co-production projects for researchers or partners
Expectations		Research participants are implicated in relationships they are told will be equal, but which turn out to be unequal, thus creating an 'expectations gap' between rhetoric and reality.
Power		Hierarchical structures can paradoxically be reinforced in co-production, because what is taken as good 'local knowledge' and who gets to decide what results are communicated, is determined by those in powerful positions.
Value		Different research partners have different aims and goals for project outputs and standards of knowledge (epistemologies), with the effect of participants talking past each other and emergent professional tensions and frustrations.
Validity	The validity of research findings may be limited by pressures from research funders (particularly in the private sphere) and by the researcher's own biased interpretation of the research findings themselves	
Pragmatism	Systematic involvement of all partners equally may simply not be feasible given basic constraints and disconnections between practitioner, public and academic languages / timescales / resources / incentives, and so on.	

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Expectations

Firstly, a key risk related to co-production is 'its excessive elasticity, evident in the various ways in which it has been defined and interpreted' (Needham and Carr, 2009, 4), which generates an *expectations problem* or what might be termed an 'expectations gap'. As suggested above, policy makers, academics and commentators using the term 'co-production' generally incorporate a positive value judgement, associating the term with ideals of engaged scholarship, efficiency, citizen empowerment and democratic values. These normative connotations create high expectations about the potential outcomes of projects that have self-consciously 'co-productive' elements to them; expectations that may be unrealistic. As a 'slippery concept' (Corburn, 2007, 151) transportable to just about any context (from health policy to museum management), co-production can be used in very general and imprecise ways to generate 'motherhood and apple pie' associations with genuinely equal and collaborative relationships, that may not materialise practically. Lövbrand (2011, 226) notes specifically a slippage between co-production as a 'descriptive' term 'that helps us to examine how knowledge about the world enables certain ways of being in it'

(more closely related to Co-Pro 2) and co-production as ‘prescriptive... framework for improved science–society relations’ (Co-Pro 1). One practitioner workshop participant expressed this slippage from descriptive to normative term particularly well:

Maybe it’s a shift in thinking from public policy makers sitting in offices in the town hall writing public policy... It’s something more than just a small elite group of people deciding how things should look. Co-production is a goal, it’s something to aim towards. (Workshop Participant 2)

This slippage, in the case of one co-productive partnership in European climate policy making, resulted in ‘a restricted policy community’s interpretations of useful knowledge’ and a lack of ‘space for critical engagement with the ontological claims that underpin contemporary policy making’ (Lövbrand, 2011, 234). Hence, as Eriksson (2011; 2012) points out, co-production can impose systems of ‘self-rule’ whereby participants are implicated in relationships they are told will be equal, but which turn out to be anything but. This creates the danger of co-production as a form of ‘governmentality’, whereby the beliefs of those involved in co-productive projects are held ‘in suspense’, and their perceptions of empowerment are not realised. This danger has also been noted in relation to ‘co-creation’ in the realm of marketing (Zwick et al, 2008) and collaboration between museums and policymakers (Graham, 2012).

In light of this ‘expectations risk’, one key question for co-production, as Flinders and Dommett (2013) note in relation to participatory governance initiatives, is whether *expectations management* may help to reduce this risk. Managing expectations has been noted in relation to Co-Pro 1 by Needham and Carr (2009, 3):

Advocates of co-production warn against its capacity to respond to all aspects of public service reform – some public services may be more amenable than others to co-productive solutions. Although co-production has much in common with initiatives to encourage user involvement, it is not the same as consultation or the types of tokenistic participation of people who use services and their carers which do not result in meaningful power-sharing or change.

In Co-Pro 2 expectations management can also be seen as important, although it has been emphasised less in the existing literature. While in Co-pro 1 this relates to a ‘gap’ between the expectations of policy makers and service users, and how this gap is ‘managed’ by policy makers, in Co-Pro 2 this relates to a gap between the expectations of researchers and those of funders or ‘research users’, around the expected outcomes of research, and how this gap is managed by academics. Often, as our workshop made clear, policy makers expect academics to be able to give them ‘the answer’ to ‘what works’ in a particular policy area and, as several participants noted, it is important for academics (particularly social scientists) to be upfront about the limits of their research in order to manage this expectation. Pahl et al (2010, 277) argue for a clearer delineation of the role of academics in co-production, distinguishing between academics’ roles as ‘providing knowledge’, to promoting ‘openness and deliberation’ and ‘making thought styles more visible’. Similarly, Armstrong and Alsop (2010, 210) argue that ‘we must ensure that the critical independence of the research that we support is not compromised by co-production, by encouraging clarity from

the outset', while Nutley (2010, 265) restates the importance of 'boundary clarity'. It could therefore be argued that expectations management, in the form of clarity over what is meant by co-production, what that entails from all actors in co-produced research (the resources contributed, roles played, and so on) is critical for preventing the emergence of an insidious governmentality or *faux tokenism* that raises expectations whilst failing to deliver.

Power

This focus on expectations provides a clear link to the issue of power and the (re) distribution of different resources. Co-productive processes have been widely applauded as a method by which top-down and elitist structures within policy making and academia may be overcome. They have been hailed as an empowering process by which the service users have an equal say in policy or research alongside those in traditional positions of power and influence. One academic at our workshop argued:

Lots of people use the term in different ways. I guess I'm coming at it from co-production between the public and the private – it's about strengthening democracy. Co-production is about more than interactions between public and private sectors – but about power and influence. (Workshop Participant 8)

However, some have argued that participatory practice actually reinforces top-down planning systems in terms of what is accepted as 'local knowledge' (Mosse, 2001, 17) and what is read or presented as 'local knowledge' is a construct of the planning context itself. The agendas of policy makers or academics are not entirely passive within the contexts of collecting local knowledge: they shape and direct these processes. As Mosse (2001, 20) argues, 'projects clearly influence the way in which people construct their "needs": these "needs" become shaped by what the project may be able to deliver'. Could it be that it is the local participants who learn what can be gained from the project, rather than the researchers gaining an idea of local knowledge?

Moreover, participatory projects also often make the mistake of assimilating 'local knowledge' as one, homogeneous data set, however much of the information is dictated and offered by dominant groups within the community in question. Exactly who are 'the public' and on what basis do various 'community leaders' have a legitimate basis to make such claims? Levels of political literacy vary between and within groups, resources matter and the views of hard-to-reach groups might be defined as 'illegitimate' by dominant intellectual gatekeepers within the community. As such, Kothari (2001, 142) argues that participatory practice can 'encourage a reassertion of control and power by dominant individuals and groups' who possess the skills to engage with the project, or those whose contributions fit in with any preconceived ideas of the 'right' responses will be highlighted over those who 'lack the skills to perform as required'. This is a common problem within many initiatives which involve self-selection of any kind, the problem of the 'usual suspects' who distort the generalisability of responses and understandings. It is a great risk to accept the social understandings of dominant groups (and what they choose to disclose or conceal) as unchallenged 'local knowledge'. It is 'their' knowledge, as a local community group member at our workshop noted:

Expertise is really only ever relevant when you're in your area of expertise, once you're out of your area it's... This thing we think of as 'the public' is always plural and in those shifting publics – for example if you wanted to create a policy for Sheffield you'd have to a look at several local publics in Sheffield. (Workshop Participant 13)

Just as 'big P' political processes tend to be controlled by those who set the agenda, so too in the research process are matters of decision making and *non decision making* equally significant. More often than not the choices of what information is used and which policy recommendations are actually implemented rests with the project initiators: the researchers, NGOs or policy makers (Mitton et al, 2007, 758). Priorities are influenced by a project's wider institutional setting (party policy, funding restraints, output requirements, etc.). As one academic in our workshop noted:

On our table co-production was defined as a joint endeavour. It's joint in the sense that there's an equal entitlement to act – or a right to respond – there's an equality suggested by 'joint'. But within that term there's differentials in power – so it's very nuanced and it's multi-layered... there can be gatekeepers who can either let you in or stop you from reaching certain knowledge or opportunities. (Workshop Participant 6)

This raises an interesting tension within the current 'impact agenda' in the sense that funders increasingly demand user engagement (throughout the research process as with Co-Pro 2), and yet at the same time there is a demand for clarity in relation to research questions, processes and outcomes. As noted above, Co-Pro 2 is 'messy', a point restated by one policy maker in our workshop:

I do feel we have to find a way to do co-production which bears scrutiny – that we can be proud of it. But it does feel too messy right now. (Workshop Participant 10)

It takes time to build-up meaningful relationships but the pressure for clarity and demonstrable forms of impact placed on researchers by funders may (paradoxically) undermine the research process.

To think of power is also to highlight a strange co-dependency that can evolve between researchers and partners. This can be an almost parasitical relationship, in which the partner is dependent on the financial resources that may accompany engagement, and the academic is dependent on the engagement of the partner for the successful completion of the project. Future projects (and therefore funding) must also not be put at risk and this may have a conforming effect that risks muting critical voices. A related point focuses attention on the difference between paid and voluntary research partners and how this affects weightings of legitimacy, independence, credibility, control and ownership. Mosse (2001, 26), for example, illustrates this shift in boundaries / relationships within Co-Pro 2 when he notes:

who paid who?: one community organiser noted that when he began to pay wages the honorary suffix to his name used by tribal leaders changed from *bhai* (brother) to *sahib* (sir).

Value

Power and value are interlinked, but we would argue distinct. By 'value', we mean the value placed on various aims or outcomes (social, economic, intellectual, and so on) of the project – or what kind of knowledge formation is valued by social scientists. The binary divide between the 'powerful' and 'powerless' locates the existence of shades of grey behind a zero-sum approach to power which, in itself, veils the existence of dialectical relationships. And yet the variation in values and priorities between research partners is one of the defining challenges within the co-production process. 'The timescales, pressures, politics and priorities of researchers', Catherine Durose et al (2013, 4) suggest, 'may not be shared with communities'. This can be problematic for both Co-Pro 1 and Co-Pro 2 in that the various partners may be subtly working towards different outputs due to the existence of differing values and incentive structures. Whereas academics generally value intellectual esteem and academic publications, third-sector organisations may emphasise community engagement and income generation, whereas politicians are likely to emphasise re-election and the delivery of evidence-based policy that supports that goal. One policy maker noted the tension between different participants:

I don't think that academics do come in with this neutral, honest broker way ever and I, like you, have worked in the Home Office and we've had evidence-based practice forever and actually what the Home Office did was got all these clever kids from Oxford and Cambridge and they came into – 'these are the research results we want to shape the future of the probation service and we're not really interested in much else'. (Workshop Participant 10)

There is also potential for conflict within the value placed on dichotomous epistemological approaches: the value of knowledge derived through research as opposed to knowledge derived through experience. The 'co-production of knowledge requires', Pahl et al (2010) argue, 'that contributions from specific disciplines and social actors are not privileged over what other disciplines and social actors contribute'. This egalitarian epistemology, however, frequently breaks when crashed upon the Procrustean bed of research reality, and to turn this point around there is little – if any – detailed analysis of how such principles can be realised. On what basis are the views or arguments of community groups viewed as any more legitimate than those of the street-level bureaucrat (the teacher, doctor, police officer, and so on) or the scholar who may have been studying the subject for several decades? How do we know 'who knows best'? Frustrations expressed at our workshop about the very basis of this article and challenges to our 'authority' of social scientists led us to reflect at length on this point. We received several informal comments that questioned why we didn't just make a list of key 'take home' points, instead of an academic article with apparently 'technical' referencing and other academic practices. Responding with exasperation about our apparently overly 'academic' approach, one policy maker viewed co-production simply from an instrumental point of view:

In some ways – like in a previous session, there was a feeling that there was this term and I'd got it wrong. Like it was a term for academics and I

was being a bit dim. But then I thought ‘no, maybe we keep it as a flexible term – like a statement of intent and you have to apply it differently in different circumstances. It’s moving beyond academics sitting in their offices. (Workshop Participant 2)

This argument led us to reflect upon how the social sciences seem to be viewed externally to the academy, as on the one hand claiming ‘scientific’ legitimacy but on the other hand viewed with suspicion as overly technical and abstracted. On the one hand we would want to be honest and not claim the social sciences can provide ‘value-free’ knowledge (indeed this would express the very values co-productive research seeks to express). The problem with honesty, however, is that academics may be forced to over-inflate the expectations of potential partners in order to secure their engagement within the research process. If the emphasis on academic outputs or the unlikelihood of generating significant social change were made clear at the research planning stage, might potential collaborating partners be less likely to commit? Could this be the root of the risk – the social pollution – that we seek to expose? While more empirical research is required to back this up, in our opinion academics are almost forced to create and nurture high hopes and great expectations only for these to be dashed after the funding has been secured, just like pre-election promises and the reality of government. Solving such risks would appear complex and difficult to achieve, particularly so as we also identified two limits to doing so – validity and pragmatism.

Validity

What do we mean when we say that a fact or opinion is ‘true’ or ‘valid’? How do we ensure that what partners provide is an accurate insight into their views on an issue and not what they think you want to hear? How is ‘lived experience’ translated into ‘academic knowledge’ and what – more importantly – might be lost in translation? It is in response to questions such as these that Mosse (2001) argues that the project or research questions themselves shape and define *how* participants respond. Answers are not so much given as made to ‘fit’. Assumptions of likely impact are also likely to structure the data gathered. Elderly patients engaging in a project on the service offered by the National Health Service might, for example, focus on those secondary issues they feel can be easily rectified (signage, staff levels, and so on), rather than on those deeper and primary social issues (the ageing population, loneliness, and so on) that seem intractable and therefore beyond the realistic boundaries of research. Academics might try and tear down these self-limiting boundaries on the part of participants, but this emphasis on ‘thinking big’ must be carefully balanced against the need not to create unrealistic expectations.

Another way in which co-productive practice could be limited in terms of validity of research or policy results is the objectivity of the researchers and partners involved. The interests of the various partners can affect the questions asked and the information deemed valuable or interesting. This is highlighted in the writing of Orr and Bennett (2012), and specifically their questioning of the overall purpose of co-produced scholarship. Is it to broaden understandings or to act as an advocate? Jung et al (2012, 9) take this further by noting that:

Where commissioners / funders saw research as a positioning tool – whether their aims were political influence, enhanced reputation or stronger market position – the research relationship was likely to become strained and fraught.

Fraught because – as many academics who have accepted private research funding will attest – funding comes with an implicit expectation that ‘the right’ results will be delivered. One of our academic workshop participants noted this tension:

I’m still not entirely sure what the difference is between co-production and commissioned research – whether it’s just commissioned research by another name or it’s really something radically different involving whoever ‘the public’ is. (Workshop Participant 9)

In this context Co-Pro 2 can become a Faustian bargain. The pressure to ‘frame’ or ‘interpret’ the research findings in a certain way can be significant and, as Eriksson (2011) suggests, co-production can often leave little room for the criticism of one’s partners. The politics dictates that you are all tied together; you sink or swim collectively; and there are few incentives to ‘rock the boat’. This may well explain the dearth of external evaluations of co-productive projects and, as Durose et al (2013) note, the fact that the great majority of the relatively small number of evaluations that do exist generally advocate co-production and praise the project at hand.

Pragmatism

From grand debates concerning epistemological politics and the existence of competing incentive structures it is also necessary to highlight a set of more mundane but no less important limits. Our argument here is simple: all research projects exist within basic limitations, and these to some extent define what might be termed the real ‘co-production capacity’. Pragmatic politics therefore needs to be acknowledged. Let us call these additional difficulties ‘gaps’: the temporal dimension, for example, between the long-term relationships needed to build high-trust low-blame research capacities between partners, and the relatively short time frames of funders and electoral politics. The use of language provides another gap, as the frequently impenetrable dialect of academe, and the equally opaque language of contemporary politics, can form significant obstacles to boundary spanning. Commitments wane, staff move on, new priorities arise, institutions impose new pressures, fashions change, communities refuse to engage in sufficient numbers... it gets messy. These are some of the potential disconnections that arise, and as a result the researcher is generally required to dilute (pollute) high ideals and instead focus on what Herbert Simon (1959) defined as ‘satisficing’ (in the sense of making sensible adjustments so that a realistic threshold is met). One academic put the whole use of ‘co-production’ and its ambiguity as a concept down to simple pragmatism:

Maybe this is why there is such a problem around the definition – because of funding and because of money and groups and their usages – so everyone’s got this one word with all these different meanings because we’re all from different backgrounds – but you’re all being squished into using this one word. (Workshop Participant 11)

We are – once again – back to the Procrustean bed of reality. With Simon's arguments in mind the 'theory-reality gap' arguably becomes slightly clearer, as the theory of co-production emphasises 'optimal decision making' through collaboration whereas, in reality, the existence of practical limits (cognitive, intellectual, professional, and so on) demand compromise and the acceptance of sub-optimal decisions. This is the 'hidden politics' of co-production. The bigger challenge, however, is to step back and reflect upon the 'so what?' and 'who cares?' about the hidden politics of co-production; to reflect upon the broader implications of the interactions, dependencies and relationships exposed in this article.

Conclusion

The co-production model of knowledge creation has recently attracted huge attention within and beyond academe for its vaunted 'transformative' potential. This forms one element of a broader focus on how organisations and professions can exploit knowledge, skills and creativity. For the arts, humanities and social sciences, co-production is widely viewed as a key way of demonstrating the social and cultural value of these fields of inquiry. And yet it also involves a shift in the nature of academe, a shift in the role of academics, and also a shift in the dominant idiom of 'legitimate' knowledge. Advocates of co-production who make loose statements about engaging with 'the public' frequently fail to grasp how complex and fragmented 'the public' tends to be, let alone be aware that the public may not want to engage. The key argument of this article is that co-production is too often viewed as 'a good thing' without sufficient focus on the deeper politics of the shifts that such a social role for academe entails. This is not merely a matter of the barriers to effective knowledge transfer (see Mitton et al, 2007), or issues surrounding ethical research (Khanlou and Peter, 2005) but the broader professional tensions experienced by academics and reinforced to some extent by societal power structures. The fact that academics, practitioners, community groups, politicians and policy makers exist – to a greater or lesser extent – in different social and professional worlds with different languages, different needs, different resources and different incentive structures can, without careful planning, lead to tension and disorder. These potential challenges have generally remained hidden within the growing literature on co-production, and the aim of this article has therefore been to provoke debate by exposing *the politics of co-production*.

To conclude we would emphasise that the risks and limits we have identified in this article are relatively systemic, and that without addressing them thoroughly through reform of the internal governance of research processes, co-production is likely to remain in many cases little more than a buzzword. Our aim here is not to suggest what needs to be done, but to provoke debate about what might be done in light of these systemic risks and limits. This takes us back to Douglas' (1991) focus on 'pollution', and her argument that clarity over boundaries and roles is vital if problems within and between professions are to be avoided. This is a critical point. Co-production represents a shift in roles and boundaries across a number of levels. Academics are expected to talk 'to multiple publics in multiple ways' (Burawoy, 2005) or as Stegmaier (2009, 115) suggests, 'to find at least some shared languages, which would allow them to mediate between distinct worlds of knowledge and practice'. But the mediation between distinct worlds raises exactly those risks of pollution, those

challenges of boundary-crossing, that Douglas' work and this article have attempted to bring to the fore.

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