Co-producing ethics

PENNESS FOR QUESTIONS

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Chics of co-production without funding for compensation A scoping exercise to map the impact of ethics procedures on collaborative research projects

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01 Introduction

With the increased emphasis on creating impact, partnering with non-academic stakeholders and wider communities has become ever more popular (Fransman, 2017; Numans et al., 2019). This has led to a growing interest in participatory approaches encompassing community-based research, practiceresearch partnerships, peer research and coproduction, especially in social sciences disciplines. While diverse, these approaches share an emphasis on destabilising conventional research hierarchies and practices of decision-making, knowledge creation, and authorship. Co-production is often "messy" and iterative (Cook, 2009; Thomas-Hughes, 2018), necessitating researchers to further attend to complex dynamics of power and participation throughout the lifecycle of their projects (Numans et al., 2019).



With changing research trends, the structures and processes which scaffold research need to evolve. Much like co-produced research, ethics are an ever-evolving process. However, institutional ethics processes are too often experienced as a hurdle to clear and a box to tick (Hammett, Jackson & Bramley, 2022). While research ethics and the related risk management are central in maintaining a culture of integrity in research, onerous processes can inadvertently come to hinder creativity, innovation and confidence in research. While bureaucratic ethics processes have served to support research integrity and rigour, these are also at times at odds with the wider goal to empower researchers and to promote inclusive and supportive research communities within and beyond the academia.

> IN RECOGNISING THESE COMPLEXITIES, OUR PROJECT EMBARKED TO MAP THE BARRIERS AND POTENTIALS OF SHAPING INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS PRACTICES TO BETTER ENABLE RESEARCHERS TO CO-CREATE AND NAVIGATE ETHICS WITH NON-ACADEMIC PARTNERS. THIS REPORT PRESENTS OUR KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, TO ENCOURAGE FURTHER DIALOGUE ON ETHICS ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY.

About the 02 project

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Interviews

Strathclyde operates a two-tier ethics approval system, were projects involving higher risk or engagement with participants in vulnerable situations are reviewed by the University Ethics Committee (UEC). Projects that don't meet this threshold are assessed at a departmental level (DEC), with each Department applying slightly different approaches to submissions and reviews. Our project sought to scope possible directions for reforming procedural ethics to better accommodate the complexities of co-production with communities, policymakers and practitioners.
During the summer term, we conducted interviews with colleagues across the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences who had utilised co-production in their work. This was followed by a half-day workshop, where we invited participants interested in co-production to reflect the emerging findings and further challenges to co-production. The workshop utilised vignettes and Ketso Kit to explore participant perceptions and experiences of navigating ethics in co-production.

Interview transcripts and notes from the workshop were thematically analysed, with key findings presented in this report. The project took place during peak annual leave season. This meant that many colleagues who expressed interest in taking part were not able to join our activities.

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Workshop participants

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03 Defining coproduction

Co-production has the characteristics of an overused and underdefined buzzword; despite its renewed popularity, there is little consensus what co-production is (Oliver, Kothari & Mays, 2019). The ambiguity and confusion surrounding the concept reflect the differing degrees of engagement and partnering that can take place during a research project. Unsurprisingly, our participants also held differing conceptualisations of co-production.

"CO-PRODUCTION IS VERY MUCH ABOUT REDISTRIBUTING POWER BUT ALSO DISMANTLING CONVENTIONAL HIERARCHIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND CONVENTIONAL FORMS OF CITATIONAL PRACTICE TO GIVE CREDIBILITY TO VARIOUS FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EVIDENCE"

Our data collection did not begin with a clear definition of co-production. In fact, while some of our participants reflected projects which may be better characterised as participatory research, we welcomed these insights as valuable for teasing out the complexities surrounding institutional ethics and meaningful involvement of people in research. In this report, we have sought to focus on the ethos and key aims which researchers pursue in utilising varying degrees of partnering and co-creation: reciprocity, trust and redistribution of power and ownership in the production of knowledge.

"CO-PRODUCTION IS STILL QUITE RARE, DESPITE ITS MANY, MANY ADVANTAGES AND IT IS A MORE COLLABORATIVE, OPEN ETHICAL APPROACH TO DOING RESEARCH, SO WE SHOULD PROMOTE IT."

Ethics in a neoliberal 04 University

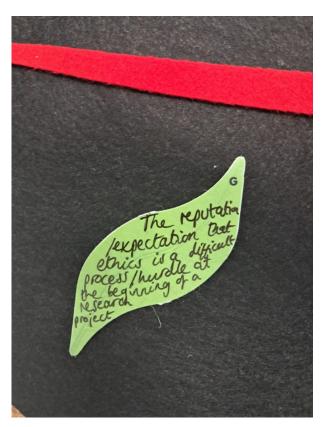


The following sections will present the key findings from our scoping work. We sought to identify areas where current ethics understandings, processes and practices may be unresponsive to the complexities of coproduced research. Crucially, the barriers and challenges we identified are not specific to coproduction; however, the distinct features of co-produced research often mean these issues are amplified for research projects striving toward meaningful engagement with people. While this report largely focuses on areas for change, many participants recognised that parts of ethics processes within the University had already improved over the years; it is crucial that such developmental work is recognised in workloading.

While our report speaks to barriers faced by research teams, our findings need to be read in their wider context. There was a strong recognition among our participants that ethics committees across the University engage in highly valuable, yet largely "hidden work". The ever evolving and increasingly interdisciplinary research landscape presents challenges to ethics reviewers, who, much like researchers themselves, feel the pressures arising from the intensification and acceleration of academic research. The volume and complexity of ethics applications adds considerable work for committees across the University.

As Chairs of a Departmental Ethics Committee, we recognise that our project has been a deeply reflective exercise. In inviting our participants to critically examine practices and processes which we ourselves enforce, we have strived to promote openness to collectively question the different ways of doing and viewing ethics institutionally.

05 Perceptions about ethics



Our participants readily recognised the importance of rigour and care in both ethical research and institutional review processes surrounding these. However, majority of the participants also shared negative experiences of seeking ethics approval. There was a sense that institutional ethics processes had become more onerous and cumbersome over time, without necessarily enabling researchers to further reflect ethics throughout the lifecycle of their projects. In some cases, the bureaucratic nature of institutional reviews was said to do the opposite, "killing the joy of thinking about ethics", as a result of bureaucracy becoming "the master rather than the servant". These views were also shared by colleagues who had recently sought ethics approval in other institutions. For some, the formality of procedural ethics contradicted the realities of every-day ethics of practice:

"QUITE OFTEN THEY [PARTICIPANTS] CAN SHARE EXPERIENCES OF, YOU KNOW, SUICIDAL IDEATION OR SUICIDAL ATTEMPTS OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR VIOLENCE IN RELATION TO SERVICES THEY WERE ENGAGED WITH, AND SO ON. YOU ARE NOT JUST RESPONDING TO THE INDIVIDUAL BUT ALSO HOW IT IMPACTS THE OTHER PEOPLE IN THE GROUP. IT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN PUT ON THE ETHICS FORM, YOU KNOW. YOU DO NEED TO HAVE THAT KIND OF ON-THE-SPOT RESPONSE TO HOW DO I DEAL WITH THIS... I THINK THERE IS AN ELEMENT OF DISCONNECT BETWEEN WHAT WE HAVE TO PUT ON THE FORM AND HOW YOU ACTUALLLY NEED TO REACT." While participants readily recognised the need for bureaucracy to ensure care in research, some participants expressed concerns about this going too far. For some participants, the ethics process had shifted its focus onto institutional protection: *"How do we protect people so they don't sue us is a different thing to how do we ensure people get the maximum from taking part in research."* In some cases, this had been evident from the differing conceptualisations of ethical principles: one colleague had been asked to refrain from referring to their proposed research activities as fun, in order not to coerce child participants. Such positions fundamentally overlook the key aim of co-production in challenging the extractive nature of research, through shared ownership and "giving back" in various ways. Colleagues hoped for further attention to centring participant wellbeing and fulfilment in research ethics.

"I HAVE NOT SEEN A SINGLE PERSON WHO ACTUALLY ENJOYS THE PROCESS OR FINDS IT HELPFUL. I THINK THAT'S A DISSERVICE BECAUSE IT'S NOT - AND I'VE BEEN ON AN ETHICS COMMITTEE ON A DEPARTMENT LEVEL - AND I THINK ETHICS IS IMPORTANT AND SHOULD BE SEEN AS A VERY SERIOUS PART OF THE PROCESS. BUT AT THE MOMENT IT'S JUST TURNED INTO A BUREAUCRATIC HURDLE. AND THAT'S NOT WHAT ETHICS SHOULD BE. IT SHOULD BE JUST A NATURAL PART OF, OKAY, IF WE'RE TALKING TO PEOPLE, HOW DO WE MAKE SURE THAT WE DON'T DO HARM, THAT WE'RE RESPECTFUL AND EVERYTHING"

In co-production, the line between participant and co-researcher becomes blurred, necessitating different approaches to compensation and recognition of shared contributions. The differing interpretations about incentives and coercion between researchers and committees had also caused frustration to some participants, especially where projects had sought to centre direct and indirect benefits as part of reciprocal co-production. In a few cases, the ethics committees had questioned the researchers' plans to compensate participants as excessive. This can influence relationships in co-production, which is often more time-intensive for both researchers and their collaborators. Participants' also emphasised the importance of centring ethics in wider work to strengthen research culture. Especially Early Career Colleagues associated the ethics approval process with considerable discomfort and uncertainty, describing the Ethics Committees as unknown "white elephants". Ethics reviews were said to invoke a sense of imposter syndrome among colleagues, at times deterring researchers from exploring certain topics or working with particular participant groups. In some cases, these views were said to push researchers to make changes to their projects, in order to avoid University-level ethics review. Addressing such concerns is a priority for promoting further co-production, if institutional procedures impede researchers from building further engagement with publics into their projects.

"THE ETHICS APPLICATIONS THAT WE THOUGHT WERE GOING TO COME BACK WITH LOADS OF COMMENTS WHERE WE THOUGHT THAT THIS IS WITH A MORE VULNERABLE GROUP OR WHATEVER, INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH SEEMED TO COME BACK QUITE QUICKLY AND NOT MANY THINGS POINTED OUT. BUT THEN THE ONES THAT WE HAD THOUGHT, THESE ARE A SLAM DUNK, IT'S NOT A HIGHER RISK GROUP AT ALL, THIS WILL BE BACK QUICKLY, WOULD COME BACK WITH MILLIONS OF THE MOST ARBITRARY QUESTIONS THAT REALLY CONFUSED ALL OF US."

For more established colleagues, negative perceptions about ethics were often connected with lack of clarity over expectations and timescales. While participants shared both positive and negative experiences from both Departmental and University Ethics reviews, there was no wider agreement that one committee was more helpful than the other. The process was said to be "shrouded in mystery", making it harder for researchers to navigate against time and funding pressures.

Colleagues shared experiences of review feedback which had seemed irrelevant, or which breeched the line between ethics and methodological approaches. This led to a perception of ethics as a "punitive" process. Ethics guidance was described by some participants as "overwhelming" and "unclear". Some participants had experienced multiple rounds of ethics reviews, spanning over several months before approval was granted. This to-ing and fro-ing was said to be frustrating to both researchers and committees.

06 Essence of coproduction

"SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO FIT YOUR SQUARE PROJECT INTO THE ROUND HOLE OF THE PAPERWORK"

Co-production is resource-intensive and time-consuming. While funders are looking for increased engagement with stakeholders, tight project timeframes and delays in the ethics process can create undue pressures on research. Procedural ethics necessitate in-depth detail and a clear plan of action, whereas co-production comes with a level of flexibility around activities and changing levels of involvement, in order to foster positive relationships of trust. In projects where non-academic stakeholders have a genuine say in feeding into project design and developments, researchers rarely know the methods of engagement from the onset of the project. This meant that some colleagues had had to submit several staged ethics applications, requiring much time and effort. In some cases, a substantial amount of time passed between the applications, leading to lack of clarity how the subsequent phases should be narrated to provide sufficient context for the committee. However, participants also noted that ethics committees had over the years developed a more in-depth understanding of co-production, making it easier for researchers to convey the element-of-unknown inherent in their projects.

"THE FORM FEELS VERY BACKWARDS IN TERMS OF THE LOGIC AND THE FLOW OF STORYTELLING. YOU ARE FORCED TO ALMOST DEFEND YOURSELF WITH THE ISSUES BEFORE YOU EVEN HAVE A CHANCE TO TELL PEOPLE ABOUT WHAT YOUR PROJECT IS AND WHAT YOUR METHOD IS"

Participants hoped for further flexibility to ethics procedures to accommodate the particularities of co-produced research. The Code of Practice and paperwork required for ethics was said to be often unsuitable for co-produced research. The changes the participants wished to see on paperwork were fairly straightforward, such as developing a clearer, more open narrative structure on the form and cutting out repetitions. Some participants also hoped for further work on the Code of Practice to examine notions around vulnerability and risk in a more nuanced way. Among the participants, there was also a lack of shared understanding of at what stage ethics were needed. Some participants said they needed ethics before initial engagement with collaborators for co-production projects. Others said they would seek ethics at a later stage, but at the same time worried how this would be received.

"A FEW YEARS AGO THE RESPONSE THAT I GOT AROUND THAT DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE WAS: THAT'S NOT RESEARCH, THAT DOESN'T NEED ETHICS. BUT AS RESEARCHERS WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'VE THOUGHT ABOUT ETHICS IN AN APPROPRIATE WAY. AND SO, THEN IT BECOMES A BIT WEIRD BECAUSE THEN YOU'LL BE JUMPING IN FOR A FORMAL APPLICATION WHEN YOU'VE GOT NINE MONTHS OF WORK BEHIND IT. THEY'RE LIKE: WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THIS NINE MONTHS OF WORK. IT'S DIFFICULT TO KNOW FIRSTLY WHEN DOES IT NOT REQUIRE, BUT WHEN DOES THE ETHICS COMMITTEE WANT TO SEE IT? AND SECONDLY, HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE AND ARTICULATE THOSE PHASED APPROACHES?"

Lack of ethics approval can cause issues for researchers intending to publish their work in academic journals. In addition to research, co-production has gained prominence in knowledge exchange. However, it was evident that many colleagues were still unclear when ethics approval was needed for evaluations and knowledge exchange projects.

Although delays in securing ethics approval compounded pressures faced by researchers, it is important to note that this did not mean colleagues necessarily wanted less oversight. While researchers felt strongly that increased bureaucracy did not go hand-in-hand with ethical rigour, there was a desire to accommodate opportunities for ethical brainstorming. Several participants hoped they could engage with the ethics committee in earlier, developmental phases of their projects, or when conducting work which did not lead to academic outputs. Nonetheless, there was a clear recognition among the participants that such engagement could not be facilitated without genuine considerations around the pressures which ethics committees were under, in dealing with the existing high levels of applications. Relationships and engagement

"THE PROCESS ITSELF DOESN'T LEND ITSELF WELL TO THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WHO CAN'T WRITE, DON'T READ VERY WELL AND WHO MIGHT FIND THE LANGUAGE REALLY DIFFICULT. NONE OF THE FORMS OR ANY OF THE LANGUAGE THAT'S ASSOCIATED WITH ETHICS IS ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE SO THAT FOR ME IS A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER FOR INCLUSION. "

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Co-production seeks to build equitable relationships with collaborators and wider communities. Such work pays heightened attention to power imbalances both within projects and the wider societal contexts in which the research takes place. Co-production often involves shared ownership of decision-making, data and outputs, leading to long-term collaborations and differing articulations of ethical practice. Some participants recalled examples where ethics committees had questioned the extent of proposed involvement as infringing on and intruding into people's lives. This can lead to difficult decisions whereby researchers need to satisfy committee's expectations whilst staying true to the essence of co-production.

While ethics was seen as an important and essential process, there was a sense that it was essentially an exclusionary academic process. This was also encapsulated by an example of co-production project shared by a participant, where peer researchers had collaborated in designing the method, collecting and analysing the data and in delivering dissemination activities. In this project, the ethics approval process was the only part in which the peer researchers could not get involved in. Other colleagues also noted that it was particularly difficult to include non-academic stakeholders in the ethics approval process, which utilises forms that have certain expectations on academic terminology and writing ability.
The exclusion of non-academic collaborators from the ethics process goes against the very ethos of co-production, which seeks to destabilise the primacy of the researcher. Accessibility, language and genuine participation are all central consideration in democratising knowledge production and demonstrating respect for the varied skills and expertise brought into the project by different partners.



At times, researchers struggled with contradictory expectations; for example, committees had asked them to adjust the language in the participant information sheets to be more accessible, but at the same time expected a link to be added to the University Privacy Statement which contains convoluted, legal language. Issues of language and accessibility were said to be particularly exclusionary for researchers and collaborators with cognitive impairments, and for people from non-Western cultural contexts.

"THESE PROCEDURES ARE BASED ON VERY WESTERN APPROACHES TO WHAT ETHICS ACTUALLY MEANS... I CAN IMAGINE SITUATIONS WHERE RESEARCHERS MAY STRUGGLE TO TRANSLATE CULTURE REALLY AND CONCEPTS IN ETHICS FORMS, FOR EXAMPLE, TO PARTICIPANTS FROM VERY DIFFERENT CULTURES. "

Some participants had mitigated this by co-written ethics agreements with collaborators, or by undergoing separate third sector internal ethics processes which had been tailored to include service users, enabling the projects to achieve more meaningful co-production. The development of more accessible information on ethics in variety of formats including audio and video, would greatly benefit both lived experience collaborators and early career colleagues. Some participants also hoped for more innovative approaches to ethics review to promote inclusion, including opportunities to present applications verbally. Our participants shared examples of engaging collaborators by thinking about ethics through role play, comics and videos, and there is scope to find ways to share such good practice to promote co-production further.

"IF WE HAD ONLY BEEN UNDERTAKING ETHICS AT THE UNIVERSITY THEN THEY WOULD NOT HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THAT PROCESS OTHER THAN US SAYING: WE'RE GOING TO SAY THIS, IS THIS OKAY? WHICH ISN'T REAL CO-PRODUCTION."

08 Desire for dialogue

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DESIGN A PROJECT THAT IS ETHICAL AT ITS HEART? THINGS LIKE THAT WHICH I THINK IS ACTUALLY A BARRIER BECAUSE THEN THEY SEE ETHICS AS KIND OF A CHECK BOX PROCESS OR A PROCESS OF MAKING SURE I DON'T DO ANYTHING TERRIBLE RATHER THAN A REFLECTIVE PROCESS ABOUT WHAT IS IT TO DO RESEARCH ETHICALLY?"

Unlike the ongoing negotiations in co-production which are premised on building equitable relationships and dialogue, our participants felt that the to-ing and fro-ing during ethics reviews was onesided and impersonal. Lack of opportunities for ongoing dialogue with ethics committees was said to make contacting committees more intimidating, especially where data collection took unexpected turns. Some participants expressed fears that disclosing incidents would put their project at risk. Such anxieties reflect how, despite a wider aspiration to view ethics as an ongoing, supportive journey, engagement with ethics committees is still largely limited to a specific stage before data collection. Participants hoped for further opportunities for dialogue, to build ethical literacy and shared understandings.

Such opportunities should be viewed as a two-way stream, where researchers have opportunities to develop better understandings of ethics expectations and where committees could also benefit from the specialist expertise held by different Departments. Participants wished for more personal, relational approach to institutional ethics, to build a network for dialogue and shared learning.

"HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE TO COMMITTEES ABOUT THE REALITIES OF EVERYDAY PRACTICE? HOW DO WE EVEN TRAIN UP COMMITTEE MEMBERS? HOW DOES THE COMMITTEE COMMUNICATE TO RESEARCHERS AND STUDENTS ABOUT WHAT TO COMMUNICATE AND HOW TO COMMUNICATE AND WHAT TO CONSIDER AND ALL OF THAT? IT JUST FEELS LIKE THERE'S NO TIME FOR IT, AND YET THAT'S SO FUNDAMENTAL AND IMPORTANT. EVEN AT THE STUDENT LEVEL, THAT SHOULD BE A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF THAT DEVELOPMENT INTO POTENTIALLY A RESEARCHER OR AN ACADEMIC, IT IS A VALID USE OF OUR TIME." Despite the critical tone of some of our findings, it is important to recognise that many of our participants also had positive experiences of procedural ethics, describing committees as very supportive and helpful. Those who said that the process had been smooth and easy readily recognised that their connections with existing and previous ethics reviewers had been a key to navigating the process. These connections, which had enabled researchers to discuss ethics and make sense of the process, were highly valued. Colleagues wished for more training, and opportunities to have informal conversations on ethics. During the workshop, it became clear that many participants were unaware that the ethics committees could act as a sounding board, or that they could contact ethics committees to seek advice on particular issues. Lack of training and understanding were identified as key reasons, why some workshop participants had been dissuaded from utilising participatory approaches in research in the past.

"I WROTE AN ETHICS APPLICATION WHERE I WAS ASKING FOR PERMISSION TO DO THINGS THAT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THOSE THINGS WERE GOING TO BE... I WAS ABLE TO WRITE IT IN A PARTICULAR WAY BECAUSE I KNEW THE PEOPLE WHO WERE GOING TO BE READING IT."



09 Recommendations

1) DEVELOPMENTAL WORK: RECOGNISING DEVELOPMENTAL WORK IN ETHICS WORKLOADING, TO PROMOTE POSSIBILITIES FOR STRENGTHENING PRACTICE AND GUIDANCE

2) STREAMLINING ETHICS FORMS: BY REMOVING DUPLICATION, REVISITING THE LANGUAGE AND BY CREATING A LOGICAL NARRATIVE

3) ETHICS GUIDANCE: EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES FOR PROVIDING ETHICS RESOURCES IN VARIETY OF FORMATS, INCLUDING AUDIO AND VIDEO, TO ENCOURAGE RESEARCHERS TO INVOLVE NON-ACADEMIC COLLABORATORS IN THE PROCESS

4) IMPROVING STAFF AWARENESS: PROMOTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE WITH ETHICS COMMITTEES

5) TRAINING ON ETHICS: ENSURING SUFFICIENT TRAINING ON ETHICS FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

6) GOOD PRACTICE: SHARING EXAMPLES OF ETHICS IN CO-PRODUCTION, ESPECIALLY ON METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT, PRACTICES OF SHARED OWNERSHIP AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPANT-FACING RESOURCES, TO PROMOTE COLLEAGUES TO BUILD FURTHER ENGAGEMENT INTO THEIR STUDIES

7) FURTHERING COLLABORATION: EXAMINE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN ETHICS COMMITTEES, TO SHARE RESEARCH EXPERTISE AND GOOD PRACTICE

8) DEVELOPING A GUIDE: PROVIDING RESEARCHERS GUIDANCE ON HOW ETHICS COMMITTEES APPROACH APPLICATIONS INVOLVING ITERATIVE CO-PRODUCTION

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