

# MAPPING ALTERNATIVE IMPACT

## Alternative approaches to impact from co-produced research

### Summary

#### The problem: Impact and co-production

The way “impact” has been identified and measured by RCUK and REF2014 does not fit well with co-produced/participatory research, and can deter rather than support this important form of knowledge production. This paradox is also present for co-production in other sectors (e.g. social policy, community organisations, the arts and social enterprises).

The key problem can be summarised as:

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

This project was funded by ESRC via the N8 Research Partnership and Durham University Impact Acceleration Account. It involved a series of activities to map and evaluate the range, processes and nature of impacts that arise from co-produced research.

Further details and the full report can be found at:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/prh/impact>

### Findings

#### 1. Defining impact

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

Co-production is centrally about impact. Here impact is not a separate stage or endeavour, but built in to research processes. The communities involved are well-placed to define likely impacts.

#### 2. Scales of impact

*Bigger is not always better*

Diverse impacts from co-produced research may occur at micro as well as macro scales, from individual attitudes, to community capacity building, through to institutional or policy change.

#### 3. Impact from process

*Impacts happen all the way through co-production*

As co-produced research involves long term engagement, impacts occur during the research (from process) as well as afterwards (as outcome). Neither research nor impact is linear.

#### 4. Impact is mutual

*Working together impacts us all*

Impact is not something academic researchers ‘do’ for or ‘give’ to communities (the donor-recipient model). Co-production also impacts on academic knowledge, ideas and practice.

#### 5. Ownership of impact

*Impact is an exchange, not a commodity*

As co-produced research processes are shared, there is often no distinction in ownership of the ideas, research design or findings that lead to impact.

## 6. Serendipity of impact

*Impact can't always be planned or known*

As co-production is open and dynamic, impacts cannot be fully known in advance. Serendipity is not just about chance; there are conditions that underpin serendipity which can be fostered.

## 7. Time for impact

*Impact takes time, often the scarcest resource*

Both co-production processes and the impacts that arise need time. This time is partly front-loaded – time for development and exchange of ideas, research questions and project design.

## 8. Relationships and impact

*Co-production relies on good relationships*

Relationships facilitate trust and the ability to work together. Impact is partly produced through people being together in shared spaces (embodied connection) rather than the fact of collaboration.

## 9. Emotions and impact

*Feelings produce impacts produce feelings*

The emotional dimensions of co-production are not side-effects, but active in generating impact. Alongside positive emotions, tension and disagreement are common, requiring ongoing negotiation.

## 10. Ethics of impact

*"Nothing about us, without us"*

In co-produced research, the ethical imperative is reframed as 'doing good'. Specific ethical concerns over pursuing impact include 'over-asking' and alienation of communities, their time and resources.

## 11. Demonstrating impact

*Diverse impacts can be demonstrated in different ways*

Wider means of demonstrating impact are needed in co-produced impacts: e.g. quantitative, qualitative, participatory methods; holistic, participatory, values-based approaches to evaluation.

## 12. Logistics for impact

*Co-production also requires new infrastructure*

The everyday logistics of how institutions commission, organise and support research do not fit the needs of co-production. Funding and audit are still largely based on a traditional model of research.

## 13. Impacting the University

*To support communities with change, Universities must change*

The structures and practices through which Universities work with communities also require change, if co-production is to be fully supported and have maximum impact.

## 14. Collective impact?

*Stronger together*

There is scope and appetite for collective impact - where institutions, organisations and individuals from different sectors work together, in up-scaled co-production towards agreed outcomes.

# Recommendations

The full report details recommendations for funders, Universities and their research partners.

These centre on a number of shifts in institutional infrastructure - especially around research funding, research support and impact audit procedures - in order to recognise the differences in relationships, time and processes required for this approach to reach its full potential.

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Rachel Pain<sup>1</sup>, Kye Askins<sup>2</sup>, Sarah Banks<sup>1</sup>, Tina Cook<sup>3</sup>, Grace Crawford<sup>4</sup>, Lee Crookes<sup>5</sup>, Stella Darby<sup>6</sup>, Jill Heslop<sup>7</sup>, Adam Holden<sup>1</sup>, Maxine Houston<sup>1</sup>, Jennifer Jeffes<sup>1</sup>, Zoe Lambert<sup>8</sup>, Louise McGlen<sup>9</sup>, Clare McGlynn<sup>1</sup>, Jo Ozga<sup>10</sup>, Ruth Raynor<sup>1</sup>, Yvonne Robinson<sup>11</sup>, Sue Shaw<sup>12</sup>, Cheryl Stewart<sup>10</sup>, Dave Vanderhoven<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Durham University, <sup>2</sup>University of Glasgow, <sup>3</sup>Northumbria University, <sup>4</sup>Groundworks North East, <sup>5</sup>University of Sheffield, <sup>6</sup>Leeds University, <sup>7</sup>Open Clasp Theatre Company, <sup>8</sup>Freelance Actor, <sup>9</sup>Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service, <sup>10</sup>Scottish Womens Aid, <sup>11</sup>London South Bank University, <sup>12</sup>Independent Researcher

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