Co-production and Impact: Challenges and Opportunities

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Biography

Brett Smith is a Professor of Disability and Physical Activity in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Durham University, UK. His research on disability, physical activity and sport is underpinned by ideas from psychology, sociology, public health, and critical disability studies. It is also often co-produced. His work has impacted on policy and practice by developing the first UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity and disability guidelines used by government. He also worked with disabled adults and disabled children to co-produce how these national guidelines are communicated and change the knowledge and behaviours of health, education, and social care practitioners. He now leads the co-produced funded project 'Moving Social Work'. Brett is the co-founder of the *International Society of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* and the Co-Editor of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*. He is also the founder and former Editor of the journal *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. Brett is proud as well to serve on multiple editorial boards, including *Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

Kerry R. McGannon is a Professor at Laurentian University, Canada. Professor McGannon's research program is grounded in the intersection of social constructionism, cultural studies, and critical psychology. The goal of this research is to produce knowledge that contributes toward creating space for people as cultural beings in physical activity contexts to improve health and well-being. This work has advanced critical qualitative methodologies (e.g., discourse analysis, narrative analysis) to understand sport and physical activity behaviour. Specific streams of this work explore the socio-cultural influences on self-

identity and critical interpretations of sport, physical activity, and the social psychological implications. Professor McGannon also studies the media and digital landscape as a cultural site of identity construction within the context of sport, physical activity participation and health. She is Co-Editor of the international journal *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health,* Associate Editor of the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* and *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*.

There has in recent years been a growth of interest in co-production (Masterson, Areskoug Josefsson, Robert, Nylander, & Kjellström, 2022). This interest is in varying degrees based on claims that co-produced research can generate better impact. What though is meant by co-production and impact? Why co-produce research and why is impact increasingly important in academia? What challenges does a turn to impact create for qualitative researchers? How does qualitative research fit into co-production and what opportunities does an impact agenda offer qualitative research? In this chapter, modest responses to these questions are offered along with opportunities and ways forward concerning co-production and impact.

Co-Production: Toward Plurality of Meanings

Outlining a precise meaning of co-production is difficult. As we have digested and reflected on much co-production literature, we have experienced uncertainty, confusion, and worry. Part of the reason for these embodied reactions is that co-production is often not defined in work. Another reason is that even when defined, the term ‘co-production’ is conceptualized differently within different disciplines and applied in various ways within and between disciplines (Masterson et al., 2022; Williams et al. 2021). To hopefully alleviate any embodied trouble, it is useful to remember then that any attempt to produce or find in the literature a clear-cut, definitive, and unanimously agreed definition of co-production is futile and unnecessary (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2021; Williams et al., 2021).

While there is little value in a quest to seek a universal or ‘true co-production’, contextually specific definitions are still needed (Masterson et al., 2022; B. Smith, Williams, Bone, and the Moving Social Work Co-production Collective, 2022). For example, definitions can serve as ontological reference points by bringing conceptual clarity necessary for informed conversations. Definitions also allow any ‘co- production’ to be evaluated against the conceptualisation from which it developed and the associated objectives (B. Smith

et al., 2022). Thus, it important to appreciate definitional heterogeneity, explore what each definition contributes, choose a definition from the variety, and clearly communicate in all outputs what definition of co-production was chosen (Williams et al., 2021). One way to facilitate this process is to consider different types of co-production (Martin, 2010; Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia, 2017; B. Smith et al., 2022; Williams et al. 2021).

One type of coproduction has been termed '*Citizen contributions to public services'* (B. Smith et al., 2022). Many refer to this type as the original conceptualization of co-production. It is often attributed to the Nobel Prize-winning work on urban governance by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues (e.g., Ostrom & Ostrom, 1977) and other economists from the 1970/80s who studied relationships between public institutions and citizens (Carr, 2018). Ostrom and colleagues highlighted that public services are typically viewed as best produced by public service staff alone. However, they argued that public services are inevitably *co-produced* because of the ways in which citizens determine the form, delivery, effectiveness, and value of these services. For instance, to explain why crime rates rose when the police changed from walking the beat to patrolling in cars, it was proposed that the relationships police fostered with people and the informal knowledge people in the local community shared with them when they 'walked the beat' (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1977). This knowledge was vital in preventing and solving crimes which showed that police service effectiveness was not solely determined by service providers but rather local people (i.e., service users) played a key role in how effective the service can/will be.

Using the foregoing new insights as a jumping off point, Ostrom (1996) went on to define co-production as the "process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not 'in' the same organization" (p. 1073). In this sense, co-production "implies that citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them" (p. 1073). The roles may be formal and sanctioned or,

as in what Stewart (2021) described as 'fugitive co-production', informal and unsanctioned. Public administration and management scholars have further developed other conceptualizations of co-production. For example, whilst Loeffler and Bovaird (2021) defined co-production as "*Public services organizations and citizens making better use of each other's assets, resources and contributions to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency*" (p. 41; emphasis in original). Despite different definitions within the public administration and management literature, that literature associated with the type of co-production termed 'Citizen contributions to public services' is less about co-producing *research* (B. Smith et al., 2022). The remaining sections will thus focus on *co-produced research*.

Co-Producing Research: Two Types

Co-produced research is a participatory approach (Banks, Hart, Pahl, & Ward, 2018). However, according to Kara (2017), it developed separately from approaches like Participatory Action Research (PAR). One type of research co-production developed in recent years is '*Integrated Knowledge Translation*' (*IKT*) (Jull, Giles & Graham, 2017; Graham, Kothari, McCutcheon, and on behalf of the Integrated Knowledge Translation Research Network Project Leads, 2018; Graham, McCutcheon & Kothari, 2019). *IKT* is defined as a collaborative process in which academic researchers work with knowledge users throughout a project to identify a problem and implement the research findings through a range of activities to achieve greatest impact (Graham et al., 2019; Leggat, Wadey, Day, Winter, & Sanders, 2021; B. Smith et al., 2022). Founded on the principles of knowledge-to-action (Graham et al., 2018), *IKT* developed out of a health funding landscape and in the 2000s within the field of knowledge translation/mobilization (Williams et al., 2021). This field is concerned with getting the right information to the 'right' people in the 'right' format at the 'right' time so that the research funding is not 'wasted', and research findings are

useful for knowledge users to use. In *IKT* historically knowledge users are primarily those who use research findings to inform decision making, such as policymakers, healthcare practitioners, and industry partners (Graham et al., 2018).

Another type of co-produced research identifiable in literature and practice is what B. Smith et al. (2022) termed '*Equitable and Experientially-informed research*'. The origins of this type of co-produced research are in grassroots activism and citizen-led, emancipatory traditions that promote egalitarianism by directly challenging traditional hierarchies of power. Grounded in this long and evolving history, *Equitable and Experientially-informed research* refers to a collaborative process in which the lived experiences of particular communities, citizens and/or service users is considered essential and their experiential knowledge valid. This type of co-production also places emphasis on forming equitable partnerships with communities, citizens and/or service users by explicitly addressing inequalities in power so that these partners with lived experience and experiential knowledge can actively influence and direct the research from the start to the end (B. Smith et al., 2020; Tembo et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020a, b). Such endeavors can also be initiated and led by communities, citizens and/or service users (B. Smith et al., 2022).

There are important similarities and differences between the types of co-production highlighted here. For example, both types of co-produced research value knowledge users working in policy, industry, and/or practice. Working with them throughout the research is often very important in both types to support the translation of knowledge into action. However, *IKT* and *Equitable and Experientially-informed research* is different when it comes to people with lived experience, such as mental health service users, cancer patients, or disabled people in the community. They *may* be included in *IKT*, but their participation is not considered *essential* (B. Smith et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). While there have been some moves in *IKT* work to include partners with lived experience in recent years, as Banner,

Bains, Carroll, Kandola, Rolfe, Wong and Graham (2019) noted, "within the IKT paradigm, these stakeholders are not systematically engaged" (p. 5). In contrast in *Equitable and Experientially-informed research* people with lived experience are *necessary* partners who *must* be included and systematically engaged with throughout the research, from the start to the end. The necessity of including partners with lived experience is captured well in the classic political moto "Nothing About Us Without Us (originally "Nihil de nobis, sine nobis") that has its roots in Central European political traditions but has since been adopted by groups advocating for co-production, like those in the disability activist movement (e.g., Charlton, 1998).

The two types of co-produced research are also different in terms of power. According to Jull et al. (2017), in *IKT* "addressing power relations between those who will use or be impacted by the knowledge is not a primary aim" (p. 6). In contrast, in *Equitable and Experientially-informed research* an intrinsic aim is the defusing of power differentials by working in equitable relationships with partners that are traditionally absent or minimally involved in research. Another difference between the two types of co-produced research relates to the emphasis placed on underlying rationales. *IKT* has been primarily informed by technocratic rationales. The conceptual evolution of *IKT* co-production research has orientated the concept to specific 'ends'/'outcomes', such as the improvement of health (Jull et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 202; Williams et al., 2021). While a technocratic rationale is important in *Equitable and Experientially-informed research*, this type of co-production is grounded in an egalitarian rationale (Williams et al., 2021). An egalitarian rationale centralizes practices and research aims related to issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Having highlighted and compared two types of co-produced research, it needs stressing that one is not inherently better than another. There is no 'gold standard'. In any given situation, and depending on the context, multiple factors will influence which type is

125 needed (Williams et al., 2020a, b, 2021). We should stress as well that that additional types of
126 co-produced are most likely present in the literature. These need delineating in the future.
127 Important moving forward also is the need to articulate the underlying and aligning principles
128 that guide the specific co-produced research practiced.

129 Despite the importance of principles for doing genuine co-produced research and
130 helping to judge the quality of it, principles are infrequently discussed and seemingly rarely
131 applied in published academic work (Masterson et al., 2022). Here then are two examples of
132 principles that have been foregrounded in work. The principles named in the examples should
133 not be considered exhaustive, universal, or prescriptive. Some or all the principles might
134 though be transferable to different co-produced research being planned or done in the future.
135 They might help with discussing and applying the most appropriate principles to guide a
136 particular case of co-produced research moving forward. Regarding *IKT*, Gainsforth et al.
137 (2021) put forward the following principles for their spinal cord injury research:

138 1) Partners develop and maintain relationships based on trust, respect, dignity, and
139 transparency
140 2) Partners share in decision-making
141 3) Partners foster open, honest, and responsive communication
142 4) Partners recognize, value, and share their diverse expertise and knowledge
143 5) Partners are flexible and receptive in tailoring the research approach to match the aims
144 and context of the project
145 6) Partners can meaningfully benefit by participating in the partnership
146 7) Partners address ethical considerations
147 8) Partners respect the practical considerations and financial constraints of all partners.

B. Smith et al. (2022) advanced the following principles for their *Equitable and Experientially-informed co-produced research* with social workers and disabled people (see also the accompanying animation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56ufdDMwNMs).

1) Co-production is adequately resourced
2) Power is shared through equitable partnerships which include those with relevant experiential knowledge, expertise, and assets
3) Different knowledge bases and contributions are respected, valued, and blended
4) Relationships are built and maintained based on mutual respect, dignity, trust, transparency, humility, and relational ethics
5) Diversity is important and supported when agonistic pluralism is practiced
6) Reciprocity and mutuality are practiced.

Whilst briefly presented, there are clearly some similarities between the above principles. Important differences are also explicit. These differences should not be viewed as meaning that one set of principles is better than another. Different principles may be needed for certain work and some principles might be more aligned to one type of co-produced research than another (see also INVOLVE, 2021; Masterson et al., 2022). For example, aligned with how *Equitable and Experientially-informed co-produced research* is conceptualized, the importance of sharing power was made explicit in the principles that guided the work of B. Smith et al. (2022). They also explicitly embedded 'agonistic plurality' (Mouffe, 2000) in the principals that guided their co-produced research.

Different to antagonism, the agonistic perspective is grounded in the assumption that agreement and conflict-free consensus are likely to neglect difference, generate a marginalization of minority positions, and feed the acritical assimilation of hegemonic values (Mouffe, 2000). This perspective thus views 'the other' as a 'friendly enemy'. That means in co-produced research partners have something in common but can also hold and express

conflicting views which need affirming and coexisting with (Monforte & Smith, 2021; Pearce, 2021). Rather than aiming to achieve consensus through methods or in panels, which is deemed a challenge to co-production (Smith, Bandola-Gill, Meer Stewart & Watermeyer, 2020, p. 89), agonistic pluralism allows diversity, different knowledges, dissent and critique to be valued and flourish. Instead of "being in a different space altogether" (Denzin & Giardina, 2016, p. 14), it could enable being and becoming different in the same space (Knowles et al., 2021). In that space more equitable partnerships may also flourish. For such reasons, and more, B. Smith et al. (2022) explicitly put practicing agonistic pluralism into the principles so that this perspective could openly guide their particular co-produced research and be a criteria for them and peers to judge it by.

Other criteria in the form of questions and as part of an ongoing list B. Smith et al. (2022) proposed for judging the quality of co-produced research included: Who decided what, when, and how co-production resources were used? Did partners feel that they received fair renumeration for their contributions? How were the research topic, aim and question(s) conceived? Did everyone feel that their contributions were genuinely engaged with and made a difference to the decisions that were made? To what extent did all partners feel confident in sharing their knowledge? How were the different knowledges used, and to what effect? How would the project partners define their relationships with each other throughout the project? How are/were different voices and experiences recognized, valued, and integrated into the research? Who is/was absent, why, and with what possible effects? Who benefited from the research, and how?

Co-Production: The Role of Qualitative Researchers and Research

Regardless of the type of co-produced research, or what principles guide it, co-production research is not inherently bounded to one method. Quantitative methods, including randomized control trials, have been employed in co-produced research (Goldsmith

et al. 2019). However, it is common in co-produced research for qualitative methods to be used. These methods have been used in mixed methods co-produced research (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2021) or as the only methods utilized. Despite the limited published insights on why qualitative methods have been extensively used in co-produced research, some possibilities can be offered.

One possibility is that there are *synergies* between qualitative methods and the goals of co-produced research (Baumbusch, Wu, Lauck, Banner, O'Shea & Achtem, 2018; Leggat et al., 2021; Rolfe, Ramsden, Banner, & Graham, 2018). For example, on a research topic around cancer and care, academic and partners (e.g., nurses/i.e., people living with cancer) might co-prioritize the need to know about what counts as quality care, what barriers there are to improving care, and how to implement research recommendations. Qualitative methods are well suited to generating such knowledge as they are often centered on understanding meaning, lived experiences, perceptions, culture, and context. The foregoing is often deemed necessary in co-production research to better ensure knowledge is meaningful, relevant, contextual, and useful. Inherent also to both qualitative methods and co-produced research is an iterative approach characterized by flexibility throughout the research. That flexibility can ensure information-rich participants and a diversity of people are included. It is useful and used to adapt questions, modify data collection methods, alter communication styles as research unfolds, support non-academics involvement in a project, facilitate relational leadership and shared-decision making, sustain partnerships, and support power sharing. Moreover, qualitative methods and co-production practices often place emphasis on engaging with people for lengthy periods of time and in different contexts. That engagement is important generate rich data and applicable experiential knowledge, whilst in co-production prolonged engagement is necessary to build and maintain equitable and trusting relationships throughout a project.

It might also be said that qualitative researchers themselves have a *sensibility* toward co-production practices. For reasons noted above they hold skills in methods as well as methodologies aligned well with co-produced research (B. Smith et., 2022; H. Smith et al., 2022). Let us first be clear: We do not view qualitative researchers as the owners, sole advocates or bastions of co-produced research. Co-produced research will not be for every qualitative researcher or project. Moreover, quantitative researchers can certainly do co-production, even when they might need to grapple with possible challenges – such as to their ontological and epistemological assumptions. Our point is simply that various qualitative researchers might have a strong sensibility toward co-production.

By sensibility we mean that researchers with a history of doing qualitative research might be more predisposed to appreciate co-production, feel hailed to it as an approach, and believe they have the skills and expertise to do it well. Such an appreciation and calling may be because the principles of co-production resonate with their identities, politics, and passions that have been influenced by methods of collecting and analyzing data, and the art and politics of interpretation that can go with living and breathing various kinds of qualitative research or inquiry (Denizin & Giardina, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The bundle of skills, assumptions and practices gained by doing qualitative research are also similar to those in co-production research. Both require or benefit from experience of working reflexively and disrupting assumptions about objectivity and value-free inquiry (B. Smith et al., 2022). Thinking and acting qualitatively is moreover much like how we need to think and act when co-producing research. That involves thinking and acting analytically, realistically, symbolically, ethically, multi-, inter- or trans-disciplinary, creatively, summarily, interpretively, and/or narratively (see Saldaña, 2015). Co-production and much qualitative research involves emotional labor (B. Smith et al., 2022). Both often also require or benefit from the researcher and non-academic partners as bricoleurs (i.e., people who makes use of

the tools available to complete a task), be that as a methodological, theoretical, critical, political, and/or narrative bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Whilst qualitative methods might have a synergy with co-produced research and qualitative researchers have a sensibility to it, the qualitative literature still has much to add to research co-production. For example, co-produced research could benefit from engaging more with the wide range of qualitative methods to collect data. Rather than relying on interviews, focus groups, photovoice, and qualitative surveys, other methods can be used in combination with these or separately. These can include multisensory mobile methods, observation, arts-based methods, digital methods, narrative futuring methods, moodboards, timelining, story completion, and transgressive data.

Another specific option for data collection is the World Café (Löhr, Weinhard, & Sieber, 2020). The World Café, or what is sometimes called a Knowledge Café, is a qualitative participatory method that aims to facilitate change by hearing the ideas and opinions of as many people with lived experience/community members as possible in hospitable spaces cultivated to have ambience similar to a café. Knowledge users/stakeholders, such as health and social care professionals, may also participate. While World Cafés have primarily been used outside of academia, this method (or perhaps non-method) is being harnessed by academic researchers (Löhr et al., 2020). Part of the reason for this lies in the various strengths of a World Café. Aligned well with co-produced research, World Cafés can enable large and heterogeneous groups to engage in constructive dialogue (Löhr et al., 2020). They can allow the cross-pollination of ideas around critical questions, foster mutual learning, and recognize agonistic plurality. For example, World Cafés can be used to help co-identify what counts as useful and useable research, co-design a prototype intervention or education resources, and know how increase the chance of research impact and co-evaluating a study. World Cafés can also help build relationships and establish more

equitable relations between people. Switching tables and engaging in dialogue with different people during the café setting creates new group formations which, in turn, can affect group dynamics every round and provide different spaces to facilitate more equitable ways of communication overall. In so doing, unequal contributions may be balanced and, again aligned well with co-production, more equitable relationships built.

Why Co-Produce Research?

Qualitative researchers have played an important role in identifying and advancing various potential benefits of co-producing research. One benefit relates to the democratization of research (Tembo et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020a, 2021). According to Edwards and Brannelly (2017), the "democratization of research has been identified as one of the key methodological challenges of the 21st century" (p. 271). They go on to argue that one approach advanced to help meet this challenge, especially by qualitative researchers, is co-production. That is partly because co-producing research has the potential to disrupt the imbalances of power between researcher and researched. Like decolonizing/indigenous methodologies, emancipatory methodologies, and feminist ethics of care methodologies, Edwards and Brannelly (2017) suggest that co-production can bring insight on questions around who owns the research issues, who starts them, in whose interests the work is carried out, who controls the research, "how power relations and decisions are negotiated in creating knowledge, who the research is for, what counts as knowledge, who is transformed by it, and whose is the authorial voice?" (p. 272).

For instance, certain types of co-produced research align with the democratization of research by stipulating clearly that researchers and other non-academics/knowledge users must work with people with lived experience who have traditionally been excluded from initiating research agendas to co-identify and co-prioritize research from the start. Developing and maintaining equitable relationships throughout the research, including

through creating knowledge by co-collecting and co-analyzing qualitative data, can also engender a sense of ownership among the team (Warwick-Booth, Bagnall, & Coan, 2021). The democratization of research may moreover be facilitated through co-produced research because non-academic partners can personally benefit from the co-production process (Warwick-Booth et al., 2021). For example, partners may feel empowered, expand their own social network, and experience growth in their confidence and positive emotions. As the co-production process unfolds, partners can also gain a deeper appreciation of the strengths/assets they bring to the research. Furthermore, non-academic partners could gain new knowledge and skills that transfer into personal satisfaction, family life, community development, and/or employment (Liddiard et al., 2019).

Another way that co-production helps democratize research is by challenging traditional understandings of what counts as knowledge (B. Smith et al., 2022). What often counts most in academia and by knowledge users like policy makers is 'objective' knowledge 'found' from randomized control trials (Denzin, 2017). What counts less is 'subjective' knowledge 'generated' through qualitative methods. However, co-production research challenges these commonly held views by valuing all forms of knowledge equally and flattening associated methodological hierarchies. In so doing, co-produced research is also well placed to contribute to 'epistemic justice'. Epistemic justice entails challenging 'epistemic violence' or 'epistemic injustice' that comes with marginalizing the knowledge of particular groups by including experiential knowledge centrally and on equal terms with other kinds of knowledge (Beresford, 2020).

Another potential benefit of co-production is that practices might lead to a high standard of academic excellence (Redman et al., 2021; B. Smith et al, 2022). As Graham et al. (2018) suggested, motivations to do co-produced research include "the desire to improve the quality of research which is believed to happen with inclusion of knowledge users by

increasing researcher understanding of the issue, solutions and context, and partnering with knowledge users for political or strategic reasons" (p. 1). For example, when different knowledges are shared and blended, these knowledges can be harnessed to co-develop a high quality study design. When non-academic partners working with researchers draw on their experiential knowledge and/or professional training to co-create a series of open-ended questions for use in an interview guide, qualitative survey, or story completion task, a series of highly relevant and thought provoking questions not originally considered by the researcher can be co-created. Data analysis might also be improved through this process. As Baumbusch, et al. (2018) reflected in relation to co-production and ethnography:

> By analyzing data as a group, there was a deeper understanding and appreciation of findings, as knowledge users could provide cultural insights (insider view) and members of the research team could provide an external interpretation of data (outsider view). In this way, these two groups offered heightened perspectives to the analysis process that otherwise would not have been identified had analyses been performed individually by the research team. Knowledge users, therefore, have an integral role in shaping the research process from the time of developing research questions through data analysis and interpretation. (p. 6)

A further reason why qualitative researchers might be motivated to do co-produced research is that it has the potential capacity to increase the impact of results (Beckett, Farr, Kothari, Wye & le May, 2018; Darby, 2017; Graham et al., 2019; Redman et al., 2021; B. Smith et al., 2022). Possible reasons for this include that in co-production research priorities and questions that matter to groups and/or communities who will be impacted on by the work are identified. Partners may use their lived experience and/or expertise as a trained professional to improve the design and evaluation of a study in ways that make the research more applicable to the contexts it can act in and on. Collaborating with these partners might

improve and accelerate the active translation of research into action because trust between all has been built. They also might understand the research better, find knowledge generated credible, buy-into the project early, be experts in the barriers and facilitators to implementing findings, be geographically well placed to disseminate knowledge in contextually appropriate ways, be knowledgeable about how to exchange knowledge more widely and swiftly, and be more committed to using findings and applying influence to make change happen. In such ways, therefore, the research that is co-produced is arguably more likely to be impactful. Co-produced research has also been identified as crucial for developing and supporting a healthy impact culture in universities (Reed & Fazey, 2021). It is not surprising then that co-production has been embraced by various researchers and promoted by many universities because of its potential to improve the quality, relevance, usefulness of research and impact on society, policy and practice, for example.

Impact: Definitions and Challenges

One of the most significant changes to have taken place since the 1990s within academia across numerous countries has been the rise of the interest in research impact (Reed, Ferré, Martin-Ortega, Blanche, Lawford-Rolfe, Dallimer, & Holden, 2021; Smith et al., 2020). These countries include Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (see Reed et al., 2021; Smith et al. 2020). The increasing interest internationally (notably in high income countries) in impact has been accompanied by an increase in definitions of the term and substantial variations in how it is defined, including between disciplines (Smith et al., 2020). For example, in their systematic review of how impact is defined in public health research Alla, Hall, Whiteford, Head, and Meurk (2017) reviewed 108 research impact definitions.

Whilst there is a vast array of definitions of research impact, many of the existing definitions are problematic. Reed et al. (2021) argued that numerous definitions of impact have tended to have an anthropocentric focus on 'economy, society and/or culture' to the apparent exclusion of non-human beneficiaries. They also suggested that the most widely used definitions rarely explicitly recognize the subjectivity allied with determining who benefits from research, how, and to what extent. Research impact is 'in the eye of the beholder'. Building on such considerations, Reed et al. (2021) defined research impact as perceptible and/or demonstrable and/or benefits to groups, organizations, society and individuals "(including human and non-human entities in the present and future) that are causally linked (necessarily or sufficiently) to research" (p. 3). Another definition for consideration given its influence on researchers and developments in other countries is this from 2021 UK Research Excellence Framework 2021: impact is defined as "'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'" (Smith et al., 2020, p. 22).

The increasing interest internationally in impact has been heavily influenced by the wider neoliberal audit and performance-based culture that has swept through universities (Denzin & Giardina, 2017). For example, interest in impact has arisen due to criticisms from governments that vast amounts of research funding are wasted. Too much research is not useful or used by policymakers. There has thus been deemed a lack of 'return on investment' from publicly funded research in universities (Smith et al., 2020). Research grant councils in numerous countries have expressed similar concerns. For instance, the Canadian Institute of Health Research, the National Science Foundation in the USA, and various UK funding councils like the Economic and Social Research Council have argued that excellent research has been accompanied by poor implementation. In response to the gap between research and action, and demands from policymakers and government for evidence of impactful research,

many national funders now encourage or demand that researchers build impact into grant proposals (Beckett et al., 2018). Grant success then depends in varying degrees on the reach and significance of impact you claim in grant applications that your research can produce.

The incentivizing, monitoring, and rewarding of research impact has been further promoted via scientometrics and some recent national assessment research frameworks. For example, in the UK researchers in British universities are assessed on the quality of their research annually. The most recent assessment, known as the Research Excellence Framework that occurred in 2021 (REF2021), placed strong emphasis on evaluating the significance and reach of the impact of research. The results not only informed the distribution of block research funding that a university receives from the UK government – known as the monetization of impact, they also influence prestige and the reputation of the university – and thus its 'market branding' (Williams & Grant, 2018).

Set against such politized, economic, and wider neo-liberal influences, it is not surprising that in many universities, notably in the Global North, the impact agenda has intensified. All this has brought challenges which cannot be ignored because the impact agenda is in many countries changing academic working practices, researcher career prospects, and the role of universities in society in ways that are not necessarily positive (Smith et al., 2020). Although there is evidence of resistance, as Smith et al. also proposed, at this stage it is unclear how feasible it for individual academics – especially early career – "to resist an agenda so closely intertwined with most institutional and research funding, in which broader public interest seems (perhaps understandably) rather limited" (p. 25).

One major challenge that the impact agenda has brought is the problem of demonstrating, attributing, and measuring impact. The impact of lengthy, uneven, and innovative research, like much qualitative research is, can be incredibly challenging to demonstrate and measure. That is partly because such research can take considerable time for

any possible impact to be realized. Complex and unpredictable research also does not align with assumptions in assessment exercises that rely on an overly linear path or straight forward relationship between publishing research and positive change (Chubb, 2017). As Smith and Hessels (2021) suggested, "quantitative data can carry a bias towards a linear model, while qualitative data, like interviews, allow (but not prescribe) non-linear views on knowledge exchange" (p. 10). Meaningfully measuring research that is context-dependent, focused on meaning, or uses transgressive data, might not be feasible, nor desirable, or an uncertain, slow, and complicated process that cannot be captured as if research impact is like a linear chain of effects that flow smoothly from academic research to wider society. The ways often advocated as the 'gold standard' for measuring impact, such as experimental and statistical methods (Reed et al, 2021), might not be useful or even applicable to certain kinds of qualitative research or inquiry. Where then does this leave such work like autoethnography, ethnography, narrative inquiry, feminist poststructuralist discourse analyses, creative non-fiction, and post-qualitative inquiry? A danger is that a narrow concept of impact is produced that arises from (post)positivist assumptions and a quantitative research perspective (Shaw et al., 2022). In so doing, as academics interviewed by Smith et al. (2020) voiced, quantitative research is valorized, reified and supported over qualitative research. All this could leave academics, funders, and/or governments with the belief, to quote from a participant in their study, that "quantitative research is the stuff that really has impact and therefore we shouldn't be investing in qualitative" (p. 134). Thus, there is the risk that certain types of research and certain types of scholars are privileged and (continue to) reap the benefits of that privilege.

Furthermore, scholars have raised concerns that the impact agenda, as it is currently configured, is a fundamental challenge to academic freedom and the autonomy of

researchers. For example, in an interview based study on impact with UK and Australian academics Chubb (2017) concluded:

> [T]wo thirds of interviewees described how an impact agenda was 'strangulating' research and used words such as 'confine', 'constrict', 'force' and 'inhibit' when describing the effects of the agenda on their freedom. This was largely attributed to a perception that government was in control of the research agenda. (p. 166)

Likewise, the impact agenda could undermine curiosity-driven/'blue skies' research as well as critical research and theoretically/philosophically orientated work (Smith et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 2019). Such work might be favored less or considered greatly inferior to research that offers 'positive and swift impact' – 'a good return in investment'. These consequences can be especially weighty when this work challenges, rather than aligns, with the thematic areas of interest, policy, practices and outcomes of government, research funders, and industry. Where might this leave certain types of qualitative research, like post-qualitative inquiry (Monforte & Smith, 2021) and critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017; Shaw et al., 2022), moving forward? Will qualitative inquiry be discouraged by universities and be under (further) threat? Could the impact agenda constrain our ability as qualitative researchers to contribute to scholarly creativity, social justice, and critical citizenship? Might the emphasis on impact move some researchers away from the critical and intellectual work they feel matters to becoming self-regulating subjects or artificial persons who tow the impact agenda line (Smith, 2013) by simply producing "more immediate, obvious, 'sellable' impacts" (Smith et al., 2020, p. 2)? Will it leave us simply rewarding 'safe' and 'quick' research that is acceptable only to people who make policy, business, and education decisions (Shaw et al., 2022)? Will it encourage more 'academentia', that is, a state of organizational insanity in which academics can no longer function as scholars (Tomaselli, 2021)?

There are other problems that go with the impact agenda as it is currently expressed through neoliberal discourses and audit practices. For example, it might be the perfect storm for what Derrick, Faria, Benneworth, Budtz-Petersen and Sivertsen (2018) termed 'grimpacts'. These are negative impacts, like ethically dubious impacts or research with negative social consequences. The impact agenda moreover might incentivize forms of individualistic and non-collegial behavior among researchers desperate to be an 'impact hero' or gain the prestige and rewards that can come with delivering highly impactful research (Smith et al., 2020). It might compel researchers to overstate or embellish impacts to tell 'fairy tales' of academic achievements (Smith et al., 2020). It might move us to be silent about how chance or luck played in producing impact. Last, but by no means least, the impact agenda can be "an expensive monster system" (Miettinen, Tuunainen, & Esko, 2015, p. 270). Will the more financially powerful universities, which mostly are based in high-income, European and North-American countries, become the main beneficiaries of the impact industry? What will happen to those universities across the world who are less privileged? These are important matters for the future of our universities across the globe.

Impact: Opportunities and Ways Forward

Notwithstanding such challenges and pockets of resistance, as Smith et al. (2020) found in their qualitative study exploring impact, there are academics who welcome and indeed, are enthusiastic about impact. Although many voices in that work were critical of specific aspects of the impact agenda, such as around measurement, they also suggested that researchers often 'want to make a difference'. Further, it was recognized that impact brings challenges but also opportunities. For example, the idea that research should be, in some way, beneficial to society and our non-human environments has opened up funding, employment, and intellectual opportunities for those whose research can make a difference. Moreover, the impact agenda and attempts to support an impact culture in universities might provide a

much-needed corrective to the inward-focusing pressure for individuals or teams to simply engage in 'publishing, publishing, publishing and publishing more academic work in top journals' – often behind paywalls.

The impact agenda also provides unique opportunities for qualitative researchers and those interested in co-produced research. For instance, scholars (Pain, Kesby, & Askins, 2011; Smith et al., 2020) have suggested the research agenda is an opportunity to reflect more on the power vested in academic researchers, power relations between universities and local communities, and how universities can be a more socially accountable. The agenda has endowed co-production with greater legitimacy and stimulated more interest. Of course, these consequences can be dangerous. Co-produced research might end up being another a meaningless buzzword, a tokenistic practice, and an opportunity to simply enhance the academic career. That said, if co-produced research can produce significant impact, and because impact is valued by many universities right now, the impact agenda also provides a good opportunity to develop and justify co-production. Such a focus though must be accompanied by the need to hold co-produced research, like all research, to high and difficult, perhaps even utopian (see Bell & Pahl, 2018) standards – such as those highlighted earlier when talking about criteria.

In addition, qualitative researchers are well placed to highlight that impact "evaluation methods are not passive instruments but actively steer what counts as good, real, and relevant research" (Smit & Hessels, 2021, p. 2). We can also bring to light how impact practices, and public engagement in particular, are infused with ableist, raced and gendered norms and expectations. For example, drawing on interview data with female academics and applying a feminist poststructuralist analysis, Savigny (2020) highlighted the gendered online hostility and violence females faced when engaging the public via the media or seeking to

519 make research impact. Savigny then proposed we need moving forward a politics of ethics
520 which acknowledges the intersectional nature of this engagement and impact agenda.
521 Another way qualitative research and researchers can contribute uniquely to research
522 impact as well as dissemination and public engagement is through the art of representation.
523 That is, qualitative research representational practices can enable researchers to improve the
524 communication of research. Research in journals or reports are often inaccessible,
525 unintelligible and/or uninteresting to publics. However, qualitative researchers have advanced
526 multiple options that can help meet these challenges. They have arguably been at the
527 forefront in academia for some time in transforming their research into forms of
528 representation that can be widely disseminated and publicly engaging. As numerous
529 examples in journals like *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies,*
530 *and Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* testify, qualitative research or
531 inquiry has been communicated by engaging and highly evocative, multisensorial, critical,
532 time-length appropriate, and aesthetically satisfying ways through, for example,
533 autoethnographies, body map storytelling, vignettes, narrative inquiry, collages, photographs,
534 gaming, poetry, music, mobile technology, video, photography, social media, comics,
535 ethnodrama social theater, mystories, and creative non-fiction stories for many years. Such
536 qualitative scholarship, under the broad umbrella of 'creative analytical practices' or 'arts-
537 based research', holds great potential to disseminate research (including co-produced
538 research) and engage publics (Smith, Tomasone, Latimer-Cheung & Martin Ginis, 2015) as it
539 is highly accessible and creates opportunities for a two-way process involving interaction and
540 listening. When that happens, pathways to impact expand and the likelihood of research
541 impact may be increased.
542 Furthermore, qualitative research can be useful for meaningfully demonstrating and
543 assessing impacts, and reconceptualizing the meaning(s) of impact. According to Reed et al

(2021), arts-based inquiry as well as more traditional textual and qualitative methods, like testimonials or focus groups, have several key advantages for reflecting impact from both quantitative and qualitative projects (see also Miettinen et al. 2015). Regarding demonstrating and assessing impacts, such work can be used to build a case that attributes impacts to research by helping to explain and contextualize a project's results. In turn, a thick picture of the likely impacts is created, including one that incorporates the political, economic, institutional and socio-cultural factors that shape and are shaped by it. In fact, Reed et al. (2021) argued, "compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods lead in some cases to a greater depth of understanding of how and why a research project was or was not effective and how it might be adapted in future to make it more effective" (p. 8). The benefits of evaluating research – both quantitative and qualitative – through qualitative methods and forms of inquiry also extends well to co-production. As Reed et al. (2021) suggested, such methods and forms of inquiry can engage partners with lived experience, knowledge users and "stakeholders in the evaluation itself, enabling these groups to engage and shape the evaluation, which then has the potential to further enhance impact" (p. 8). This potential is important to capture given that the evidence-base for the impact of co-produced research is still scarce. To support that base later, qualitative meta-syntheses (see Williams & Shaw, 2016) could be particularly valuable.

Similar to, and adding the aforementioned points, Shaw et al. (2022) advanced a framework for conceptualizing the impact of critical qualitative research. The framework highlighted that critical qualitative research (including we might add co-produced research) can potentially not only impact *on policy and practice* by challenging mainstream policy, empowering resistance, platforming voices, nurturing new critical publics, and envisioning alternatives, which could enable groups to develop imaginaries that were alternative to the status quo. It highlighted that critical qualitative research can impact at the *institutional level*

on *science* by challenging the hegemony of scientism in the policies, procedures, and routines of the university environment, educating future generations of qualitative researchers, marshalling resources for critical qualitative research, and organizing the scholarly community, including through developing activism. Again fitting with various understandings of co-produced research, the framework Shaw et al. (2022) developed also drew attention to the impact on *science* at a *practice level*. That included by informing new beginning for research, advancing alternative logics for study design and the role of critical reflexivity, and generating improved communication/representational strategies.

Conclusions

Not all research should be co-produced. Co-production is also not for everyone. Whilst co-production is not without challenging or problems, for those interested in doing co-produced research we hope this chapter is a useful resource to mitigate against 'cobiquity'. This is a phenomenon that refers to the conflation of the various 'co' words associated with participatory research (Williams et al., 2020a, b). Mislabeling research as co-produced or not clearly specifying what type of co-produced research was really done might be a genuine mistake. But it can lead to co-production becoming a meaningless buzzword that fails to deliver on its radical potential to meaningfully meet the principles associated with the type chosen (Williams et al., 2020a, b). Accordingly, alike Bovaird and Loeffler (2021) and B. Smith et al. (2022), we suggest that research studies will be more productive if they accept one clearly set out definition, chosen from a range of current definitions of coproduction, explore different ways of achieving coproduced research according to that definition, specify the type of co-production chosen and why in outputs, and throw light on the results.

Whilst interest in co-producing research and impact is growing, there is still much to do. For example, generally university structures and academic norms tend not to facilitate co-production processes (B. Smith et al., 2022; H. Smith et al., 2022). Change is therefore

needed in terms of university structures, governance, policies and academic practices to genuinely support co-produced research. Researchers need to better record and represent, such as through confessional tales, collaborative autoethnographies or group biographies, the process of doing co-produced research. More needs to be known about when, where, and how co-production can be used most effectively, and when not to do it. Does it also really produce impact? What are the benefits of co-produced research? Additionally, many more opportunities for people with lived experience of the issues being researched to influence the impact agenda need creating. We need to keep critically questioning the assumptions underpinning the impact agenda, including around measurement, short-termism, academentia, and what counts as good, real, and relevant research. We need to also foreground qualitative research and inquiry positively much more in terms of what each can offer regarding impact. We need to show what qualitative work can do more; protect and promote more collegial spaces for critical, theoretical, and curiosity-driven academic scholarship that may have no obvious impacts but has other values; defend and promote academic autonomy; reward impactful environments instead of individual achievements; widen how we might evaluate impact; develop a conversation about the ethics of impact; take more seriously dissemination and public engagement; and laugh more at absurdities in current university life whilst ensuring we enjoy research (Smit & Hessels, 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Sparkes, 2021).

We hope that this chapter stirs people's imagination about co-produced research. Concerning co-produced research *and* beyond, it is hoped too that it amplifies meanings, practices, and different conceptualizations of impact in ways that enable our qualitative research communities to further flourish.

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Discussion Questions for Teaching Purposes

1. Why is it important for researchers in research outputs to define what they mean by co-production, outline how it was put to use, and what the implications or outcomes are?

2. What are the strengths of doing co-produced research and how would you negotiate the challenges, from the various positions/vantages (e.g., researcher, community, participants) in the co-production process?
3. How might you go about practically doing a co-produced study?
4. Critically discuss the following statement: ‘The impact agenda is a good thing for researchers.’
5. How can research teams plan and evidence the impact of their work?

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