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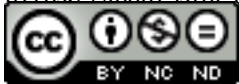Published by: UCL Press. (2025)
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Engaging with knowledge co-production: critical reflections from global doctoral researchers

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Introduction: co-producing doctoral research?

> It is precisely the particularly 'wicked' nature of the problem – urban equality – that demands an emphasis on recognising the lived experience and knowledges of a variety of actors, especially those that are often unheard, as key to uncovering structural obstacles to urban equality … Co-production offers an approach to shifting asymmetries of power through collaborative processes. This does not suggest or underestimate the complexities associated with coordination of processes and actors necessary for meaningful co-engagement. (Osuteye et al. 2019, 6)

There has been a recent shift across social science disciplines to engaging with co-production as a practical strategy for urban equality and as a guiding principle in research design (Osuteye et al. 2019), and many doctoral researchers are keen to engage with co-production in their research projects. Conventionally, doctoral programmes are designed to be time-bound, pre-defined, rigidly structured and independent, and to result in an individual piece of work. Therefore, critical aspects of co-production do not easily align with traditional doctoral programmes and there is a gap in the current literature and methodological precedents regarding the feasibility of co-production within a doctoral environment.

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In this chapter, we – a group of ten doctoral students – reflect on our experiences of engaging with co-production as a research practice within UK doctoral programmes. In January 2021, we participated in the first Knowledge in Action Towards Urban Equality (KNOW) Doctoral Training Course (also known as KNOW DTC), entitled 'Co-producing Doctoral Urban Research in the Global South', and have continued to work together to critically examine and document our experiences, which form the basis of this chapter.[1] The chapter's structure is as follows: first, a review of the literature that relates co-production to doctoral research; second, our methodological process for writing the chapter; and, third, a discussion of our critical reflections of knowledge co-production in doctoral research. Through our discussions, we draw on literature from the KNOW programme and key researchers in the fields of epistemic justice, co-production and participatory research (Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1997; Fricker 2007; Osuteye et al. 2019) to examine how their work can be applied to co-production in the context of doctoral research. Using these theoretical foundations and our considerations from the KNOW DTC, we developed a framing to organise our reflections, which comprises three overarching themes: ethical research and power; knowledges and responsibilities; and partnerships and flexibility. Our collective reflections lead us to the conclusion that while co-produced doctoral research has the potential to help tackle epistemic injustices, it is not always emancipatory, possible or sufficiently supported by current university structures.

We hope that this chapter provides a useful and thought-provoking springboard for continued discussions between doctoral students, supervisors, research partners and other players in relation to how we can adapt university structures to support more epistemically just research practices, including co-production.

The relationship between participatory research, co-production and doctoral research: a literature review

During the KNOW DTC, our discussions revolved around how we understood and grappled with co-production and related concepts, including participatory and emancipatory research methods. In this literature review, we introduce the concept of co-production and position it within broader discourses of epistemic (in)justice and decolonising knowledge, we explore the similarities and differences with participatory methods and we clarify our own definition of co-production. We believe that co-production has the potential to challenge power relations in academia

and in this literature review we will explore the theoretical foundations for this through three key sections: first, we explore the similarities and challenges of engaging with co-production and participatory methods; second, we consider the literature around co-production and epistemic justice; and, finally, we examine the literature around co-production specifically within doctoral research and present our shared understanding of knowledge co-production.

As many of our cohort members had experience of participatory research methods as a means to disrupt power relations within traditional, or extractive, research paradigms (Chambers 1997; Lobo et al. 2020), we started our literature review by exploring the similarities between the two concepts. Co-production of knowledge started trending in the last two decades in urban studies as a part of participatory research methods (Mitlin and Bartlett 2018). Though there is an emancipatory and disruptive element to co-production, which is similar to the aims of participatory research, the focus in co-production is on how different types of knowledges are brought together and the value placed on different types of knowledges (Osuteye et al. 2019; Farr et al. 2021). With co-production and participatory research designs, there is also an ethical layer to the debate, with questions arising as to our responsibility, as researchers, to engage with these research designs, especially given their potential to challenge traditional power structures and support efforts to decolonise academia (Mignolo 2007; Smith 2012).

There are numerous definitions of co-production and, much like participatory research, there is an ongoing debate on how co-production should be defined, theorised and evaluated (Fry et al. 2005; Carpentier 2016; Norström 2020). Enengel et al. (2012, 106) defined the co-production of knowledge as 'the integration of scientific and non-academic knowledge for complex problem solving', while Reed et al. (2020, 223) perceived the co-production of knowledge as a form of 'reflective practice … to relate with the different epistemic communities (e.g. academics, policymakers, the public sphere) with whom we share the space in co-producing new knowledge, social relations, and even identities'.[2] We noted that the phrase 'co-production' is used interchangeably with terms such as interdisciplinary (Tress et al. 2009; Dooling et al. 2012; Klaedtke et al. 2014), transdisciplinary (Tress et al. 2009; Enengel et al. 2012), involved research (Klaedtke et al. 2014), reflective practices, and integrative research (Tress et al. 2009).

Inspired by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation that introduced the idea of levels of participation, we consider co-production not as a linear process, but rather a spectrum where reflexivity,

positionality and ongoing, shifting power relations between co-producers are central to the construction of knowledge. A high value is placed on the process rather than on measurements of power and participation. We note that shifting power dynamics and epistemic justice are unequivocally intertwined (Fricker 2007) and their relationship warrants a much more in-depth discussion than we are able to engage with here.

In this chapter, we focus on the role of co-production as a way of engaging with epistemic justice. Fricker (2007, 1, 43) defines 'epistemic injustice' as a 'distinctly epistemic type of injustice' in which someone is 'wronged in their role as a knower' and accordingly 'to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value' and suffer from injustice. The core concern of epistemic injustice is disadvantaging a speaker epistemically and/or practically (Fricker 2007), which determines 'who gets a say in how to address what socio-economic concerns' (Byskov 2020, 119). The debate on epistemic justice and knowledge co-production cannot be separated from the (de)colonial discourse and the role played by public institutions, particularly universities.

Controlling how knowledge is valued and defined is a central part of the colonial project that persists today within academic spaces (wa Thiong'o 1986; Kuokkonen 2000; Mignolo 2007; Chalmers 2017). Smith (2012) explains that in a colonial setting, the mechanisms for organising, classifying and storing new knowledge, as well as understanding the implications of findings, are unmistakably about power, domination and the hegemony of universal knowledge. University spaces and processes maintain the supposed neutrality of researchers and legitimise positivist knowledge formation through various structures, such as funding mechanisms, methodologies and internal ethics committees (Ball and Janyst 2008). This leads to a perpetuation of epistemic and hermeneutical injustices that drive many of the challenges we faced when engaging with knowledge co-production in our doctoral research (Fricker 2006).

The body of evidence on co-production in social science research is growing; however, the literature on co-production in doctoral research is still limited to a small number of publications based on surveys of small groups of researchers in specific fields (Tress et al. 2009; Dooling et al. 2012; Enengel et al. 2012; Klaedtke et al. 2014). In Fry et al.'s (2005) book, they analysed a workshop that doctoral students attended and a survey they completed, drawing on students' experiences of co-production (or interdisciplinary research). They found several challenges and make a number of recommendations. Challenges at the student level include those relating to epistemology, with the authors noting that 'the theoretical and methodological toolkit to tackle the epistemological

challenge is still very limited' (Fry et al. 2005, 8). They also noted challenges regarding organisational infrastructure and communicating and disseminating findings. Whilst the book is specific to landscape research and planning, there are many parallels to the challenges we noted in our experiences.

Klaedtke et al. (2014, 459) explored the possible contribution of research partners in specific phases of doctoral research and argued that the contribution of 'extra-academic research partners' is crucial in shaping the research topic and questions. They advocated that doctoral research should initially emerge from a 'hot debate' (Klaedtke et al. 2014, 459), where research questions are an outcome of interdisciplinary discussions. In this way, diverse voices are heard and integrated from the beginning of the research, which provides a more holistic view of the discussed topics. Enengel et al. (2012) also supported the early involvement of partners and produced a framework for a more systematic and generalisable research process by asking what type of actors contributed to what kind of knowledge in which research phase within a doctoral landscape. The authors encourage a level of flexibility and uncertainty in interdisciplinary work and to collectively define the rules of collaboration from the beginning to guide the research (Enengel et al. 2012). Even with this guidance, other factors may hinder the process. Klaedtke et al. (2014) commented that doctoral research projects are usually conducted over a (relatively) short period of time, which can be a challenge when trying to develop longer-term relationships with partners.

The limited literature around knowledge co-production within doctoral research pushed us to consider our own definition. We understand co-production in doctoral research as an iterative accountability-centred process for conceiving, conducting and disseminating research, in which various forms of knowledges are valued and centred throughout the research process. Co-produced doctoral research goes beyond the imperative of 'do no harm' regarding communities of practice to equitably engaging with communities throughout the design and execution of research. The needs, knowledges and practices of research communities are valued as more than empirical context and are involved as active forces in shaping and executing research designs. Additionally, we recognise that co-production within doctoral programmes holds researchers accountable to advocating for their community partners within institutional contexts and (when called for) pushing back against structures of epistemic injustice and oppression. Therefore, our understanding of knowledge co-production aligns with the arguments of Klaedtke et al. (2014) and Enengel et al. (2012), in which they frame extra-academic

partners as critical to and equal partners throughout the entirety of a research programme. We believe in the potential of knowledge co-production to challenge power relations within academic spaces. However, we align ourselves with the discussion above that in order for this potential to be realised, research communities and partners must be an integral part of the entire doctoral research process, moving beyond limited involvement during only certain phases of research, such as using participatory methods primarily as a form of data collection.

In the methodology section below, we explain the background of the authors and the process for co-producing this chapter. Following this, we return to a discussion of our reflections on engaging with co-production as it relates to ethical research and power relations, the incorporation of various knowledges and responsibilities to the research process, and building meaningful, flexible partnerships with research communities.

Methodology

This diverse group of authors came together after attending the KNOW DTC, which was conducted virtually in January 2021 under the facilitation of the Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality research programme and was attended by over 20 doctoral researchers based in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia. Following the training, ten participants decided to co-produce a piece of writing and create a space to share our reflections on knowledge co-production specifically from our position as doctoral researchers. Methodologically, there are two perspectives we have balanced through this process: first, our collective experience of co-producing this chapter, which is the focus of this section; and, second, our individual experiences of our own doctoral research, which are the drivers of the reflections we explore in the subsequent discussion.

As a group of ten authors co-producing a chapter together, we were aware of our respective identities and how they could influence our relationships with each other, as well as to our research and our perspectives on co-production. We took intentional time to consider and map our identities so as to demonstrate that despite our diversities, we found common ground in unpacking what knowledge co-production means to us (see Figure 11.1).

We also asked ourselves the following question: is there an overarching research field or topic that we collectively identify with and that might influence our perspectives on co-production? We landed on

Figure 11.1   Identity mapping: An illustration of the chapter co-authors' identities and relevant information that we considered to interact with our research processes.

Source: Created with the use of information from the Authors' Internal Survey 2021 by Jhono Bennett and Albert Nyiti in March 2022

our shared interest in transformative research paradigms, which we see as tools for disruption and democratisation. However, in spite of this shared interest, our research projects span the globe, employ various research methods, partner with a diversity of actors and focus on a wide-range of research topics, which we found interesting. We created word clouds[3] to showcase both the breadth of and the cross-cohort similarities of our doctoral research (see Figure 11.2). This speaks to the range of doctoral research agendas that are intrigued by and interested in developing co-produced knowledge.

Logistically, from June 2021 to March 2022, we held multiple meetings and relied on Zoom, Google Docs, Google Forms and Miro board (https://miro.com) to work together. Miro board allowed us to collectively map our initial plans, whereas Google Docs enabled our planning, drafting and editing process. We created and used a Google Form to collate various pieces of information about our identities, research projects and critical reflections, which we refer to as the 'Authors' Internal Survey, 2021'. These reflections form the basis of the discussion section below.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the opportunities and challenges of knowledge co-production through three analytical themes: ethical research and power; knowledges and responsibilities; and partnerships and flexibility. Our reflections were grouped into themes that we felt emerged from the KNOW DTC. Each theme represents an opportunity to problematise and reflect on some fundamental considerations for engaging with knowledge co-production in doctoral research.

Reflections on ethical research and power

To effectively explore co-produced doctoral research, we ground our work in an understanding of ethical research that recognises how our multiple identities result in heterogeneous experiences of power relations within the context of our universities and our research sites. While principles underpinning institutional and procedural ethics documents were important, they were not sufficient to engage with some 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 262) of power relations during our research. Power, in this instance, comes not only from our relationships to identities including race and ethnicity, class,

Internal Survey infographic summary from Question: *How would you describe your research methods?*

Internal Survey infographic summary from Question: *Who are the actors you are working with?*

Internal Survey infographic summary from Question: *What is your research topic?*

Figure 11.2 Word clouds: A collection of three word clouds that reflect the chapter co-authors' research methods, research actors and research topics.

Source: Created with the use of information from the Authors' Internal Survey 2021 by Jhono Bennett and Albert Nyiti in March 2022

gender, sexuality or ability as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (1991), but is also constitutive of each individual contributor's relationship with knowledge – that is, how knowledge is defined, valued, collected and shared within our research processes.

In the following three sections, we outline how we understand power to manifest within our doctoral research. The three sub-categories are: power, identities and positionalities; power positions; and power as a contextual and situational process (Vallejo and Ortiz 2021).

Power, identities and positionalities

There exists an important distinction regarding our dichotomic positions as outsider-insiders which is marked by how we identify and position ourselves with respect to research subjects. This position, which is often seen on the sole basis of nationality or current residency, has detached our and others' intersecting identities in the process. The following reflections are some of the ways in which our positionalities and identities have conditioned our capacity to co-produce knowledge:

> A huge part of my research so far has been to position to what extent urban equality is included in policy and planning instruments in (country of study). So, I have constantly questioned how a regime that has oppressed citizens' liberties and considered human rights as illegal and an abomination could be portrayed as equal. Here, my identity has politicised my work, but, if I made public what I thought, I will be fired, constantly persecuted and eventually imprisoned as a political prisoner because I am questioning the power of those who have stolen that power from the people. Otherwise if I say that policies and planning have some degree of equality, won't I be endorsing and perpetuating the current inequalities? It is a question I have been asking and it hasn't come with an easy answer. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

We may identify ourselves with our subjects and partners on the basis of our identities, but also related to subjective factors such as our lived experiences and feelings, as reflected here:

> The nature of being socialised and brought up in a post-racial segregation context plays a large factor in the positional aspects of my research production, the value it has in terms of the discourse of my

subjects as well as important de-colonial questions on voice, role and output. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

I have unexpectedly ended up positioning myself as a friend really, because as I've gotten to know people through my research that is the relationship that resonates most genuinely with me. This developed naturally, but of course, there is always that uncomfortable dynamic where at some point the relationship feels extractive on my part. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

We note here that even if we share the same nationality, language or customs as our partners, this is no guarantee of a straightforward or routine path to establishing partnership. Our own reactions and emotions can also be relevant and there is interesting research about engaging with the research on an emotional level and garnering this emotion as part of the data itself (Markowitz 2019).

Power positions

Power positions in doctoral research go beyond the traditional supervisor–supervisee relationship. Power positions can include researcher–subject, researcher–gatekeeper, interviewer–interviewee, funding body–researcher and institution–researcher. Specifically, the power relation between supervisor and supervisee is critical in determining the room for manoeuvre to co-produce knowledge. But the room for manoeuvre also depends on the abilities that doctoral researchers develop to cope with an ambitious project such as co-production, which include perseverance, inventiveness, multi-tasking and entrepreneurial capacity in order to manage, for example, further applications for funding and multiple complex relationships.

A relationship, which is often forgotten, is the funding body–researcher relationship. Sometimes this relationship presents ethical considerations, especially if the political context in which the funding body operates is authoritarian. In order to preserve the funding granted, we must be careful of any criticisms made and the ways in which work is presented. Often it is required that the researcher be accompanied by a state representative, which can act as a gatekeeper. A reflection of how the power works in these political contexts is shared by one of our colleagues:

In my research … I believe there are different scales of power: 1) The power relation between the state and local communities: the

power of the state to use urban revitalization and its power to control the society's behaviour. I am trying to explore the dynamics of this power as an insider/outsider researcher. 2) The power relation between researchers and gatekeepers: the power – or maybe support – I need from state bodies to pursue my research. Because of the political situation in my case study, I cannot proceed without having a kind of support from an 'actor with power'. 3) The power relation between the funder and the student: I hold a scholarship from the local government and this somehow limits or directs my research and makes me always think how to present my work to the different involved bodies. For instance, I consider to what extent I can criticise the practices of the local government if it is the entity that is funding my research. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

A path to disentangle the power dynamics in the communities we are researching is to first understand how these dynamics work within the communities and to consider how to respectfully give a voice in our research to those who are marginalised. Geographer Stephanie Butcher reminds us of the complexity of such a task when considering how to research and write in solidarity with our research communities. Butcher (2020, 514, emphasis in original) reflects on how writing in solidarity can be nuanced and full of tension, highlighting that 'questions such as *solidarity with whom* and *how* are fundamental' in such a process.

Power as a contextual and situational process

Power dynamics are also rather contextual and situational. They differ from one project to another and are marked by social, economic, political, environmental, geographical and spatial dimensions. Researching during the COVID-19 pandemic required us to reinvent ourselves in new ways of living and certainly conducting research, as summarised in the following reflection of one of our colleagues:

Due to COVID-19 and subsequent quarantines, I have become more reliant on the field team for observations and for them to manage the relationships with the participants and myself. It has been a big shift for the team and me. Originally I wanted to focus on using participatory methods to explore (and hopefully shift) the power … the method had to change and the relationships between myself and the field team have become much more central to my PhD. The power

relations are interesting as there has been a palpable shift in power relations with the field team driving the research more than before and slowly becoming more comfortable sharing opinions or pushing back if they disagree. This is what I hoped for, and it has had a positive effect on the research … though I am aware that despite these shifts, power relations still exist and merit continued exploration. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

The pandemic and subsequent quarantines have pushed many of us to recalibrate our research methods to mitigate schedules and restrictions, and to become more reliant on our field teams and partners. Here we highlight how our partners have become even more essential and how a shift to online research may have also impacted the traditional discourse on North–South power dynamics. We emphasise that the emancipatory potential of co-production requires conscious, ongoing shifts in power and decision making, as we strive to engage in ethical and epistemically just research processes.

Reflections on knowledges and responsibilities

As Bleiklie and Powell (2005) note, contemporary systems of higher education are undergoing major transformations as universities are no longer seen solely as producers of knowledge, but are also expected to play a variety of new local and global functions. The authors suggest that in order to understand contemporary universities 'as knowledge producers', it is imperative to evaluate 'how they are situated in a wider social and political context of changing power relationships, changing ideas about knowledge and its uses, and changing links between universities and society' (Bleiklie and Powell 2005, 2). Understanding what type of knowledge is valued within contemporary universities requires interrogating how university systems engage, perpetuate or resist broader sociopolitical and cultural movements. One such movement in the UK and abroad has been the call to decolonise the curriculum and policy within UK universities, as seen in campaigns such as 'Rhodes Must Fall', 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' and #LiberateMyDegree. These projects seek to unsettle Eurocentrism and the lack of diversity within the curriculum and faculty of UK universities (Abou El Magd 2016).

Unlike positivist or post-modernist approaches that consider knowledge as universal or indeterminate, we have observed that within our

doctoral programmes, the production of knowledge is structured as an individually produced piece of scholarship created from an individual research process. Miller et al. (2014) remind us that UK universities are, fundamentally, businesses with non-academic goals that influence every aspect of university life. This is reflected in the structures of our doctoral programmes: an individual researcher is tasked with producing a single-authored work with limited time and funding, but with the expectation that their work will elevate their respective discipline and the university as a whole. We instead seek to bring to the fore plural epistemologies and ways of knowing (Yiftachel 2006), throughout our doctoral journeys. By condemning epistemic injustices and extractive approaches, co-productive doctoral research acknowledges our responsibilities for societies, partners, knowledges and research contexts that go beyond fieldwork stages (Osuteye 2020).

However, some practical questions emerge: what does the co-production of knowledge look like in doctoral research? What are our responsibilities as researchers in relation to different ways of knowing? Using our internal survey, we began to discuss these questions by sharing our understandings of: knowledges and different ways of knowing in our disciplines, the boundaries of academic spaces and doctoral research, and responsibilities.

Knowledges and ways of knowing

We understand knowledges and different ways of knowing as the multiplicity of knowledge sources, of which many forms have long been relegated to the margins within academic spaces (Brown and Strega 2005). As highlighted by colleagues in our internal survey:

> [K]nowledge is happening constantly. It's academic, embodied, spoken and unspoken, felt, dreamed, cosmological, ancestral, etc and I think our job is to help push our programs to continue to make more space for those knowledges. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

> For me, this means opening up ways of understanding the power of knowledge production outside of the academy and thinking about tactical means of co-producing data to serve both scholarly outcomes as well as grass-roots and societal initiatives and efforts. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

In our doctoral research, we found that the ambition of co-produced knowledge is translated into efforts to challenge underlying assumptions about who is considered capable of producing academic knowledge. This means understanding various sources of knowledge and having a continuous 'commitment to uncertainty, humility and unlearning in the research process' (Jazeel and McFarlane 2010, 115). Instead of perpetuating a potential dichotomy between so-called experts and non-experts, we believe that there is a need to challenge this distinction and recognise the fluidity of identities and contributions that can exist between researchers and research partners, and the ability to occupy multiple positionalities simultaneously.

Considering the ongoing structural inequalities perpetuated within and by universities, it is essential not only to recognise previously discounted knowledge but also to allow room for manoeuvre so that different voices can emerge and influence a research project. While we work to challenge our various departmental structures to be more inclusive in terms of ways of producing doctoral research, we are cautious to not perpetuate long-standing assumptions that participating in knowledge production equates to empowerment for individuals and groups that have been marginalised. To the extent that we are able to produce co-productive doctoral research, we cannot assume that partners or research communities would become empowered as a direct result of this approach. However, using a co-productive lens means that there is potential to challenge traditional considerations of expert knowledge and the role of the researcher, as well as the doctoral research process itself and the curriculum in academia.

The boundaries of academic spaces

We believe that co-production can be integrated at all stages of a research project; nonetheless, we recognise the practical challenges for achieving this in our doctoral research experiences, as shared by one colleague: 'Ideally throughout. However, given my program constraints, I think realistically it would be during data collection primarily' (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021).

Institutional, timetable and funding constraints play an important role in framing our doctoral research and also restricting processes of co-production. More concrete forms of co-production are often limited to data collection stages which are made possible by some participatory methods, such as Participatory Action Research (Lykes et al. 2018). While we recognise that there are ways of increasing co-production within

doctoral research and expanding the types of knowledge valued within university settings, we recognise the continued structural and procedural issues that complicate efforts towards co-produced doctoral research. As illustrated by a colleague:

> I felt discouraged from engaging with knowledge co-production from the start of my doctoral journey due to the overwhelming rigidity and impracticality of PhD timelines, review deadlines, funding constraints and ethical review boards. It wasn't as though a particular person or function discouraged me, but rather the overarching expectations of when, how and under what conditions doctoral research could (or could not) take place within my university structure. Knowing what I know now (3 years in), I could probably push those boundaries more seriously and intentionally if I were to start over. But as a new doctoral researcher coming into an unknown system, the type of collaborative, long-term, inherently flexible and ever-changing research dynamic that co-production demands felt simply out of the question. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

University requirements and structures, internal review boards, funding mechanisms and external actors constrain and shape the possibility of co-produced doctoral research. We believe that opportunities for co-production in doctoral research could be nourished by having long-term investments from universities and funding institutions as well as support from doctoral programmes and supervisory teams.

Responsibilities

> Our responsibility, as doctoral researchers and individuals, is not only to ensure that the knowledge we are trusted with is acknowledged, ethically represented and respected during data collection or when sharing the research outcomes; we believe that we are also responsible for contributing to and positively impacting the lives of those who are co-producers in our doctoral research, even after the publication of the thesis. As stated by one colleague, our responsibilities include: 'Safeguarding, being caretakers and advocates for them most probably. Also ensuring that people we work with, learn from, also have access to at least some of our research outcomes, so it is not solely for an academic audience'. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

Also, it involves reflecting on our positionality as researchers and recognising our own biases and limitations: 'I think personally it's really

important for me to recognize the limits of what I know personally in a sort of embodied, ancestral, personal knowledge and what I have learned and cannot really claim as my own but understand theoretically' (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021).

The establishment of partnerships and long-term relationships and collaboration with research partners is a crucial part of the knowledge co-production process and a potential means for giving voice to other ways of knowing as well as generating research impact. Therefore, the next section focuses on sharing our views on partnerships and flexibility based on our doctoral research experiences.

Reflections on partnerships and flexibility

As global inhabitants, residents of our own communities, and as doctoral researchers with a myriad of experiences, social positions, privileges and disadvantages; it is safe to state that we are *all* very different. We think in different ways, we have different lived experiences, and our knowledge(s) – as well as ideas around what knowledge itself is – are shaped and actioned in as many different ways. We all carry a small universe inside us that is incomprehensibly complex, so when we join paths with others to co-produce, we are required to enter this relationship with an openness to allow for the equally diverse and complex universes of those involved to shine through. Within the small universe of this group of co-authors, we asked ourselves what it means to join such paths in our doctoral work. Such approaches to research require particular skills, approaches and rationales that we hope to further interrogate in this section, particularly with regard to actioning such concepts.

The concept of working *with* rather than working *for* people in research project partnerships emerged as a core idea in the group discussions. These principles align with contemporary values of enacting knowledge co-production with diverse groups of people (Watson 2014) and provide an excellent opportunity for all involved to both learn and unlearn. With this aim in mind, the group deliberated in detail how empirical aspects of knowledge co-production require a certain degree of flexibility when engaging with a multitude of actors and partners to co-build project frameworks. While we acknowledge that there are challenges to maintaining co-productive relationships,[4] we believe the principle of flexibility highlights an important aspect towards actioning knowledge co-production partnerships. Two colleagues shared their reflections on flexibility:

Flexibility for me is not having a priori assumptions on how the research will develop and what I can exactly get from research partners, but, to be open to absorb, adopt and develop the research throughout the process. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

It means an empathetic understanding and manoeuvring of one's positionality in regards to outcomes, methods and aims of research production. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

While concerns around co-production are often discussed in extremely negative or overly optimistic tones, the messy intersectional and systemic dynamics of these challenges are extremely difficult to navigate, with the situated nature of this work remaining largely under-represented across the discourse. In relation to these polar perspectives – like a coin, having two sides – we adopted a format for this section to unpack the pluralistic nature of such approaches to knowledge co-production that carries two sides: opportunities and challenges. Accordingly, we framed this section through a series of reflective questions[5] that we see as important prompts when considering a responsible, meaningful and flexible approach to co-producing knowledge in doctoral research.

What does sharing power and control in our research engagements mean?

Opportunities: By critically sharing power and control, we have the potential to open up the outcomes to more genuine results for others involved in our work. It might allow us to find new and meaningful ways to share power and offer pathways towards potentially decolonial epistemological narratives.

   Challenges: It could allow for a lack of ability to guarantee outcomes to your institutional position. The outcomes face the risk of not aligning with promised research plans and funding deliverables.

   These are quite fundamental aspects in establishing and maintaining project partnerships, with this question lying at the heart of our group's deliberation. Rather than attempting any definite answer from our shared doctoral experiences, we offer an acknowledgement of the question's underlying complexity.[6] We feel that such deliberations offer a means of thinking through which parts of a research project can be challenged, revised or adapted to allow for the redistribution of power. A colleague reflects on this relationship between flexibility and its limitations as a means to sharing power and control:

We should be able to be flexible with our partners, being aware of their current situation which could be difficult, could rather reinforce our partnership. As well as our flexibility with our partners is determined by our room for manoeuvre with regards to our timelines, our goals and the willingness of our partners to work with us knowing the boundaries we have, but finding ways to focus somehow on our partners' needs, not just being extractive, but giving and receiving. (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021)

We offer this question as a prompt for reflection at any point of the project, but acknowledge that adopting such a reflective approach is not an easy option in contemporary research work. It is a layered, vulnerable and often more uncertain route which – without sufficient institutional support – is made even more difficult. However, we feel that as doctoral researchers, we have the opportunity to support pathways to more ethical, just and decolonial approaches to partnership and knowledge co-production.

How can we responsibly unlearn while we learn?

Opportunities: Unlearning allows fundamental growth beyond measurable metrics. It offers opportunities to critically reflect on yourself and your practices, situatedness, institutions, established ways of learning and what is typically considered acceptable knowledge.

Challenges: Unlearning is traditionally not acknowledged as academic knowledge, so value is not assigned to divergent findings (as is seen in the field of urban studies). This notion is currently not widely recognised or typically encouraged and carries little precedent for research approaches.

In meaningful collaborations, we feel that these shared responsibilities of learning and unlearning are imperative in terms of questioning the dynamics of agency regarding knowledge production partnerships, and that the personal, institutional and positional centres we bring into our research work should be challenged through projects. A colleague's reflection on learning and unlearning is shared here: 'Being willing to be questioned, being willing to listen and understand when your way of doing something is wrong/doesn't work, being willing to try again and be patient when demands of day to day life affect the "ideal" research plan we've designed' (Anonymous, Authors' Internal Survey, 2021).

A positionally critical approach combined with responsibly established and maintained partnerships have the potential to support

unlearning from much of the normative positioning of 'Northern' scholarship. Moreover, such approaches offer a similar opportunity in terms of learning with local practices, indigenous knowledge systems and alongside tacit-contextual systems that have been historically devalued or not acknowledged outside of current knowledge paradigms.

How can we co-build systems of knowledge making and sharing?

Opportunities: Co-building such systems provides an opportunity to push the barriers, challenge the status quo and initiate change. This approach offers the potential to widen ideas and perspectives on knowledge and theorising about what knowledge is.

Challenges: Embarking on such a daunting task can be scary, intimidating, unusual or uncomfortable. It might place the researcher in a precarious position in order to account for the value of such work in relation to traditional academic expectations.

The group discussed in detail how co-building such approaches are valued, understood and accessed as important variables towards maintaining accountability, shared control and ownership in co-produced knowledge projects. The group recognised that such collaborative journeys are constructed via all involved bringing a different approach, skillset and modes of operation to the table. Thus, it is crucial to set a common ground at the beginning of any engagement and throughout any project. Co-building approaches are more difficult to adopt and require longer timelines and alternative measures, but have a greater potential in terms of shifting notions of de-centring and addressing power dynamics in contemporary knowledge production practices.

To conclude this section, we offer flexibility through our reflections, the questions posed, and the presentation of opportunities and challenges as a means of conceptually – and practically – approaching a co-productive research project. We call on fellow doctoral researchers to open themselves up to adopting new flexible rhythms of discomfort/ comfort, co-developing new approaches and owning the responsibility of cultivating genuine experiences that action the theories and concepts we study and believe in. Moreover, to engage in forms of responsible experimentation that may be new and potentially daunting. We draw inspiration from spatial designer Liz Ogbu (2014, 2018), who reminds us of the importance of staying with such discomfort as a way to 'make space at the table' for others who were not invited. We see this as a personable means of addressing larger societal issues through smaller, more manageable actions, but ultimately towards larger systemic change.

In conclusion

We have reflected on our experiences of co-producing knowledge within doctoral research and hope to have contributed to the gap in the academic literature on the subject. We explored the literature, presented our methodology of co-producing this chapter and shared our critical reflections. We would also like to acknowledge the limitations of our process, namely that we are a collective of doctoral researchers with mixed backgrounds, from particular higher education institutes, most of which are situated in the Global North whilst discussing contexts in the Global South.

Through our discussions, we often returned to the point that there is no certainty that knowledge co-production ensures equality, justice or emancipation, as doctoral programmes are typically structured in ways that tend to reproduce the hierarchies and inequalities within academic structures and knowledge production systems. However, we do believe in the potential of knowledge co-production to be a useful and effective tool when grappling with such concepts, especially when doctoral researchers are supported and encouraged to engage with such complexities from within university structures.

Our three identified themes for reflection involve high degrees of uncertainty, but they can be approached constructively. Regarding ethical research and power, we call for continually considering how power, positionalities and identities interact through our research processes. We acknowledge our positionality within existing power relations and our limits, whilst thinking about ways to engage with such power dynamics. When considering knowledges and responsibilities, we question the position of our institutions, our own positions within them and our potential role in democratising knowledge production in higher education spaces. Lastly, we endorse the notion of flexibility as a provider of space for dealing with, co-developing and building on partnerships and the potential to adopt additional lenses through meaningful, long-term partnership in research.

Our examination of epistemic justice and its relationship to co-produced knowledge has caused us to rethink our roles as doctoral researchers, our identities and the type of scholars we wish to become. This has left us disturbed about the claims, positions and assumptions we make about our work, its purpose, and the roles we play in furthering hegemonic or counter-hegemonic epistemologies. There is an inherent contradiction in co-producing doctoral research, which entails resolving

tensions between producing a significant contribution to knowledge as a disciplinary mandate and the many complexities of contributing to and doing transformative research, as we have noted in this chapter. Despite its challenges, the co-production of doctoral research helpfully enables us to assume a position outside the institutionalised structure of knowledge production to view the social and the people who inhabit it as equal partners in the meaning-making process of creating knowledge.

As the introduction to this book claims, co-production occurs in a variety of ways and ultimately depends on the knowledge creators and holders to democratise the process of learning, decision making and meaning making through research. This allows space for alternative perspectives to be incorporated and realised, which is inherently more equal than gatekeeping and excluding during knowledge-creation processes. We hope for a future where doctoral research and researchers can more easily contribute to this radical shift within social sciences.

Current doctoral research methods often struggle with the tyranny of the now, where having the time needed to build relationships and engage deeply with matters of power relations and epistemic justice is a challenge. We believe that co-production empowers researchers and necessitates deep immersion, prolonged engagement and open-minded attentiveness, which fosters a gradual transformation of perspectives that evolves over time and bridges fieldwork locations, individuals and academia. In order for doctoral researchers to engage with knowledge co-production, it will be imperative to push the boundaries from within university structures themselves. Therefore, academics (that is, doctoral supervisors) who practise co-production in their own work should take a particularly engaged and enthusiastic position in supporting their doctoral researchers to embark on and succeed in co-productive doctoral journeys.

Through our individual doctoral experiences, as well as through the process of co-producing this chapter, we learnt that co-production is a long-term process rather than just an end goal. The co-production process requires learning and unlearning, humility, transparency, rigour, meaningful engagement and a coordination of support from academic supervisors, funders and local actors. Therefore, it may be hard, take a little longer and require academic/co-production practitioners and university structures to be flexible and push through difficult moments, but it will be worth it in order to equip the next generation of co-production practitioners with the mindset and skills needed to support democratising knowledge co-production processes more broadly.

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Notes

1. As you read this, you may notice sections have slightly different writing styles or approaches. We discussed how to balance our collectivity and individual contributions, and ultimately agreed to keep some distinctions. We hope this is not distracting and that you will see it as a collectively written piece of work that comes together and flows well, while maintaining the diversity of our individual choices as well.
2. Reflective practice is a methodology for linking theory to practice in urban planning and is based upon Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action* (1983).
3. Word clouds formulaically analyse the amount of words from an input to generate an infographic that depicts both the hierarchy of the words that are commonly used (larger font) as well as the breadth of the input words (smaller font).
4. Such as systemic power dynamics, the discrepancy in expectations between various stakeholders and other complex factors.
5. This chapter does not aim to provide definitive answers to these questions, but rather to offer them as mechanisms for iterative reflection.
6. This question was underpinned by further questions: can we truly share power in an equal or just manner in research engagements? Can we co-develop projects where no one has jeopardised their values and ethics and desired outcomes? Can these projects fulfil the purposes that are different for each participating partner? Can the doctoral student fulfil/stay on topic of their doctoral research, whilst protecting the values and approaches of the collaborating partner(s)?

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