

Roundtable report: Co-produced evidence and robust methodologies

Introduction

On 6 December, the Carnegie UK Trust, together with the Newcastle University's Institute for Social Renewal, hosted a roundtable aiming to raise understanding and awareness of the challenges associated with producing robust evidence appropriate to participatory policy and practice, and the need to increase investment in research seeking to test innovative methodologies. This report summarises the issues raised at our roundtable discussion and gives some suggestions of potential next steps.

Background: the role of the Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust's (CUKT) [Evidence into Policy and Practice](#) work explores how academics, third sector organisations, government and the private sector can share evidence to produce better outcomes for citizens.

The Trust's work on evidence began in 2013 with our [Evidence Exchange](#) research conducted in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and a partnership project with the Alliance for Useful Evidence. This research revealed a paradox: although people stated that they most trusted academic research, it was least used. This highlighted an opportunity to influence policy and practice more effectively. In 2016, the Trust and then Carnegie Fellow Mark Shucksmith published [InterAction: How Can Academics and the Third Sector Work Together to Influence Policy and Practice?](#), which argues that to make an impact on social policy universities must work more closely with civil society. In January 2017, the Alliance for Useful Evidence and CUKT published [The Scottish Approach to Evidence: A discussion paper](#). The report argues that policy makers, in Scotland and beyond, are increasingly focussing on participation, co-production and partnership. These approaches present a challenge to traditional concepts of quality, comparability and hierarchies of evidence and a risk that such policy developments are not rigorously evaluated nor properly represented in the academic literature.



What is co-production and how does this differ from co-produced evidence?

The most fundamental challenge facing co-produced evidence is the extent of the conceptual confusion surrounding its definition. In our background for the roundtable we identified two interlinked concepts:

1. Evidence of outcomes of co-production: evaluations and assessments of the impact of a co-production approach to service design and delivery.
2. Co-produced evidence: evidence (including research, evaluation and assessment) carried out in a co-produced way, sometimes referred to as participatory research methodologies.

These are distinct concepts but are frequently conflated. Co-production has been described in a variety of ways, in some cases very broadly, such as this example by the Scottish Co-production Network, which states:

“Co-production essentially describes a relationship between service provider and service user that draws on the knowledge, ability and resources of both to develop solutions to issues that are claimed to be successful, sustainable and cost-effective, changing the balance of power from the professional towards the service user. The approach is used in work with both individuals and communities.”¹

It is also interchangeably used with other terms, such as co-design. To compound difficulties, different sectors use this terminology in different ways: for some, it may mean working across different departments, not reaching beyond their own sector to work with other agencies. Additional controversy relates to whether co-production should involve only individuals or whether it can be used to refer to third sector organisations.²

For the purposes of this discussion, we have used co-production of evidence to mean the active involvement of organisations and individuals outwith academic institutions in research projects. The “users” in this sense are the beneficiaries, be they policymakers, practitioners or the citizens themselves. It differs from traditional research relationships as the participants share decision making power. It shares many similarities with participatory research methodologies but takes this further as the participants themselves are equal partners in the design, delivery and dissemination of the evidence. In doing so, it challenges the established practices of academic researchers and the tenets of objectivity and expertise. For this reason, we refer not to co-produced research, but co-produced evidence – a broader phrase chosen to indicate that we include a range of sources and methods that may not be easily identified as academic research.

The increasing use of co-production of service design and delivery leads to calls for more co-production of evidence. Evaluating impacts on linear research models is not easy in the development of programmes and projects where the exact problem to be solved is not established until well into the project activities, or where the aims and objectives are more flexible, to meet the needs of partners.

This poses four challenges:

1. How do we evaluate the quality of co-produced services, which by their nature do not conform to linear models?
2. What are the appropriate methodologies for co-producing evidence with beneficiaries, in the widest sense?
3. How do we assess the quality of co-produced evidence to ensure the validity of findings?
4. How do we make better use of co-produced evidence in policy making?

¹ <http://www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/about/what-is-co-production/>.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011a, Together for Better Public Services: Partnering with citizens and civil society Paris; OECD Publishing <http://browse.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/pdfs/product/4211131e.pdf>

CASE STUDY: co-production between the third sector and academia in practice

The roundtable was glad to welcome Jeremy Cripps, of Children North East, who shared an example of a co-production project that is currently being delivered at scale in the North East.

The summer holiday project brought together Northumbria University, Big Lottery, North East Child Poverty Trust and Children North East to develop and deliver 16 holiday projects to nearly 600 children at over 7,000 attendances, supporting them by providing 69 trips and over 8,000 breakfasts, lunches and snacks. Multiple partners were involved in both design and delivery stages, with the help of 27 partners by the end of the project.

Each group had varying aims at the beginning of the project, with some focusing on the issue of holiday hunger or isolation in schoolchildren during the holidays, by providing good quality food and activities for the children, and to see if engaging activities through the summer would help with tackle the issue of learning loss, an issue raised anecdotally by teachers as something they often encountered when children returned from school holidays.

Each partner worked collaboratively and openly, providing their own set of skills and knowledge – ranging from local groups responsible for community engagement, universities providing desk-based research, a charity providing project management and a funder providing the investment to ensure the scheme was possible – to achieve their own specific aim. Costs were slightly higher than in other, similar, projects but the children benefited greatly by being fed good quality food and learnings from the project will be developed to support future projects. As part of this, the team is producing guides for other project delivery hopefuls, and a full report will be published in 2018 by Northumbria University. It is hoped that the learning about what worked and what did not can be shared nationally as well as locally across the network.

Discussions

The roundtable discussions were wide-ranging, considering issues ranging from the practical process of producing robust evidence through co-production, to the broader societal benefits of involving communities and local actors in project design and delivery.



Nothing about us, without us: the Enabling State and co-production

The starting point for the roundtable discussion was locating co-production within the context of an identified need to find solutions for difficult, or wicked, social problems in less technocratic and more inclusive ways. CUKT's work on the Enabling State has demonstrated that modern service design is more successful when considered in a democratic, local system. There is a need for multifaceted solutions developed through dialogue with different organisations, bringing as many people as possible to the conversation and treating their ideas with respect.

The principles of co-production are:

- Recognising people as assets.
- Building on people's existing capabilities.
- Mutuality and reciprocity.
- Peer support networks.
- Blurring distinctions.
- Facilitating rather than delivering³

It is generally agreed that if these principles work together successfully, co-production leads to improved outcomes for communities, however this view is not necessarily informed by a body of evidence.⁴

It follows that the evidence of such outcomes should also be co-produced. In terms of increasing the use of evidence, it must be noted that there is no evidence that co-producing evidence has an impact on this.⁵ However, this need not cause alarm: it is considered that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence and as some interventions have proven very effective, more research in this area is required.⁶

Whether considering the process of co-production for service design and delivery, or research carried out in a co-produced way, many participants expressed the hope that these methods could both lead to greater engagement within, and with, communities. Sharing co-produced evidence could be incredibly important, because it might lead to further community buy-in, greater confidence that their voices will be heard, and a move towards more "bottom-up" policy-making. As community is embedded in the principles

of co-production, most participants considered this as a tool for affecting deeper, lasting social change. Initially respecting lived experience as of equal value to other sources of evidence, and sharing information across sectors might inspire and guide local communities to become more actively involved. The role of an agency (for example a charity supporting those individuals, or organisations representing their interests) in this context is more facilitative, but important to ensure the appropriate level of engagement with evidence. Most important of all, an agency may be the party who can ensure that there is space to have honest and open conversations, so that the real issues can be identified.

The discussion then moved on to consider barriers or enablers to allow people to access and use co-produced evidence more effectively.

Barriers: the challenges for co-production

Participants at the roundtable were asked to consider barriers and challenges that discouraged people from using co-produced evidence. Their responses could be roughly grouped into three main concerns: practicalities, power, and attitudes to evidence.

Firstly, the resource implications were seen as key **practical** barriers for generating co-produced evidence. As is often the case, a lack of time was seen by participants as a serious concern. Time affected multiple areas of the process. For example, it takes time to develop the relationships necessary for co-production to take place. In addition, project delivery timescales may need more flexibility in recognition that working with people from different sectors can be challenging.

In addition, carefully formed relationships can be harmed in the case of staff turnover. In particular, loss of committed leadership can jeopardise a project. Staff turnover may be due to funding issues, another key concern for participants.

³ https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/right_here_right_now.pdf

⁴ A systematic review of co-creation and co-production: embarking on the social innovation journey, W.H. Voorberg, V.J.J.M. Bekkers & L.G. Tummers, Erasmus University Rotterdam

⁵ Using Evidence: What Works? A Discussion Paper, Alliance for Useful Evidence, April 2016

⁶ Ibid

Co-production was seen as potentially expensive. For the organisations facilitating contact with citizens, additional staff time is needed to actively participate in research with universities (for example, in identifying participants, supporting their engagement and reporting on impacts) and there is often no recompense for this.⁷

Another concern raised focused on the relationships themselves. There was disagreement about whose role is it to identify communities, and to “bridge” the gap between expert and local knowledge to bring together co-produced evidence, whether this should lie with the community being more proactive or other agencies making more attempts to approach communities.

Secondly, participants considered the balance of **power** in co-production activities. This was most immediately obvious when considering cultural differences in different sectors. As there is likely to be differing expectations of project delivery role, the aims of the research need to be clearly agreed from the outset. Leadership was seen as a key issue when considering the balance of power. To be effective, co-production is difficult to manage and requires a leader who is committed and experienced in managing projects with multiple partners. Leadership was identified as both an enabler and a barrier.

There may be a lack of trust within a relationship due to tensions about power sharing and different cultures. This imbalance of power could be harmful to co-production projects, unless it is addressed in the early stages of relationship building, to give everyone clear roles in the project.

The final group of concerns related to **attitudes** to evidence. These concerns can be broadly concerned with evidence use as a whole, such as the language of evidence, which can be off-putting and confusing. People unfamiliar with working with evidence find it difficult to judge which type of evidence best suits their needs.

Also, perceptions that some types of evidence are less valid than others need to be tackled. Non-traditional research methods are often overlooked by some journals which conform to a narrow perception of high quality research. For example, the Journal of Child and Family Studies has recently announced its intention to only publish quantitative studies from 2018 onwards. Participants at the roundtable shared the view that you should choose the evidence type which best suits your project or your question to get the best results.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue that was raised by participants is that many, despite being supportive of the principles of co-production, were not clear what robust co-produced evidence would look like, as there are very few examples. This appeared to form the most basic barrier to encourage the uptake of co-produced evidence. Many participants stressed the need for quality controls to be developed that could apply to co-produced evidence.

Despite these tensions, barriers and difficulties, there is a growing appetite across many sectors for more co-production of evidence, and early findings from our research indicates that it is being completed across our networks.



⁷ Collaborating with Academics, An Evidence for Success supplementary guide, March 2016

Enablers: a growing appetite for co-produced evidence

As a contrast to the key barriers relating to lack of confidence or understanding regarding evidence use, a key enabler identified by participants was that, as a starting point, the problem could be most effectively tackled by increasing the use of evidence as a whole. It is necessary that research is widely used by decision makers to enable them to make well-informed decisions. Evidence can form an important component in social policy and practice decision-making, alongside a strong understanding of the context, knowledge of stakeholders' preferences and professional experience and judgement. Work by The Alliance for Useful Evidence has suggested that there are challenges encouraging practitioners and policy makers to use research.⁸ This suggests that a social or professional norm is required, where evidence use is the right thing to do.⁹ However, these challenges are arguably increasing as some claim we are living in the era of “post-truth” politics and “experts” have been heavily criticised, most notably during the Brexit debates, so we need to look for new and different solutions or strategies.¹⁰

This ambition broadly considers evidence as a whole, but specifically considering co-produced evidence in this way has benefits too. This accessibility is balanced with support from other sectors; while communities should be given an opportunity to participate in local projects, it is necessary to remember that sometimes their views may be partial. There are parts of the world that they may not see, so there is space in a partnership to share ideas, while respecting the skills and knowledge of others.

This is most effectively achieved by encouraging supportive leadership and trust to develop the necessary skills exchange across research projects.

Strong leadership is crucial; while these qualities have been highlighted as enabling benefits, some participants pointed out that the opposite was true: a lack of these factors, or leadership with entrenched views unwilling to try other research methods, could be equally damaging. With a growing appetite, demonstrated by examples of co-production discussed at the roundtable, and firm belief in positive benefit for the community, there is clear value to continuing to raise awareness of co-produced evidence. The challenge is spreading the message and overcoming the barriers inherent in all cross-sectoral projects.

Evidence Exchange 2017

CUKT ran a survey of 241 public policy professionals and practitioners between October 2017 and January 2018. The survey asked a range of new questions about co-production. These findings are not intended to be representative of the wider population, but provide a valuable snapshot of views of those interested in social policy evidence across the UK.

The survey responses stated that 67% of respondents have participated in some form of co-production activity between academia and other partners. 68% of respondents said that they are likely to participate in activities between academia and other partners in the future.

76% of respondents believe that co-produced evidence makes research more influential for policy. 82% think that co-produced evidence would make research more influential for practice. But less than a third of respondents (28%) believe that there are sufficient opportunities to work with others to co-produce evidence.

These views are in keeping with opinions provided at the Roundtable discussion and will form part of our ongoing work.

⁸ Using Evidence: What Works? A Discussion Paper, Alliance for Useful Evidence, April 2016

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Evidence in an Era of Post Truth Politics <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/publication/evidence-in-an-era-of-post-truth-politics-september-2016/>



Rethinking research hierarchies

Presentations from the roundtable provided ideas for how to approach the provision of appropriate evidence which could meet the principles of co-production.

Dr Toby Lowe, Senior Research Associate at Newcastle University, provided a summary of complexity theory as an alternative framework permitting co-produced evidence. Complexity theory starts from the recognition that life is complex and that many different factors are at play at any given time. By measuring only a narrow range of outputs, it is not possible to predict all the potential consequences and it is not possible to demonstrate causality.

Dr Lowe's argument rested on the prevalence of hierarchies of evidence, particularly those which assess on a ladder-type hierarchy, arguing that these create a misleading impression of "good" and "bad" when applied in non-linear examples. One example of many is the NESTA Standards of Evidence, which measures the impact of investments. Although this style of quality measurement can clearly grade effectiveness and impact of an intervention against a scale or level,

they do not fit well with complex systems, such as co-produced evidence. Dr Lowe argued that these hierarchies are incompatible with co-production and it is therefore necessary to reject these hierarchies. By instead applying the principles of complexity theory to service design, this could produce a more human, systemic approach to social sciences research, with wider impact for funding and commissioning.¹¹

In response to this presentation, participants stressed that the hierarchy of evidence system was not universally applied so this is not always a relevant concern. Furthermore, many participants felt that it was more important to have appropriate, robust evidence which met the needs of the research project.

Rethinking the scope of co-production

The majority of the discussion focused on coproduction of an entire research project – from inception to design to delivery and then dissemination.

Pippa Coutts, The Alliance for Useful Evidence and Carnegie Associate, suggested focusing instead on co-assessment as a potential research process that could produce evidence which complied with the principles of co-production.

Co-assessment seeks the input of community members who have local knowledge and can provide context, but build upon existing knowledge expert knowledge in a potentially cheaper and more accessible way. As it focuses on making use of existing evidence rather than generating new primary data, this approach can sit alongside more traditional models of research but ensures greater efficiency and effectiveness of the evidence base. It also addresses barriers to the creation of co-produced evidence, such as cultural clashes and changing power dynamics. Participants raised some concerns about the

¹¹ A Whole New World: Funding and Commissioning in Complexity, Newcastle University & Collaborate, Annabel Davidson Knight, Toby Lowe, Marion Brossard, Julie Wilson, 2017

method in which this information was shared within the communities but agreed with her points about increasing the use of existing evidence.

Conclusion and next steps

The roundtable provided an opportunity to bring together key voices from across many sectors to consider the role of co-produced evidence. Co-production is clearly an attractive proposition, embedding principles of inclusivity, sharing decision making power and mutual respect. A move away from a rigid understanding of what evidence should look like could empower communities and see an increase in use of co-produced evidence.

However, in terms of how robust this may be and how it fits into established ways of assessing the quality of evidence there is a clear need for further exploration. A framework for assessing the quality of co-produced evidence could support the development of the practice.

After this roundtable, the Carnegie UK Trust will be consulting with stakeholders on next steps for co-producing evidence. For further information please contact Jennifer Wallace (jennifer@carnegieuk.org).

Newcastle Roundtable Attendees

1. Sarah Campbell, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
2. Emma Stone, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
3. Jeremy Cripps, Children North East
4. Simon Hanson, Federation of Small Businesses
5. Jane Hartley, VONNE
6. Geraldine Smith, Tees Valley Combined Authority
7. Steve Wyler, Better Way Network/Carnegie UK Trust Associate
8. Pippa Coutts, Carnegie UK Trust Associate
9. Mark Shucksmith, University of Newcastle/Carnegie UK Trust Trustee
10. Toby Lowe, University of Newcastle
11. Simin Davoudi, University of Newcastle
12. Simon McKerrell, University of Newcastle
13. Liz Todd, University of Newcastle
14. Jennifer Wallace, Carnegie UK Trust
15. Lauren Pennycook, Carnegie UK Trust
16. Natalie Hancox, Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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