



## When Methods Meet: Co-production and Participatory Research

Nick Jenkins, University of the West of Scotland, and Peter Matthews, University of Stirling, in conversation.

In this 17-minute film Nick Jenkins and Peter Matthews discuss a range of issues relating to two approaches to research that are quite often bracketed together but which are not identical. They note that co-production involves different forms of knowledge being brought together, but that participatory research aims to challenge and disrupt power relationships found in more traditional research that draws a rigid distinction between researchers and people being researched. Examples of both approaches being employed are discussed, including some of the challenges that arise, such as where academics and community partners are operating with different ideas about the sorts of outcomes that are desirable, although there is not necessarily a trade-off between academic publications and provision of resources in a neighbourhood. Emphasis is placed not only on outcomes but also on the process by which research is undertaken, and time spent building trust between different people involved in research is important in this respect. The conversation also touches on several issues relating to ethics that co-production and participatory research raise, such as consent being something to be monitored continuously, and pragmatic considerations about the right thing to do. Looking to the future, the idea is put forward that the direction of travel is towards a situation in which academic researchers play a more facilitative role as research question and agenda-setting is increasingly driven by community and other partners. These approaches are presented as less predictable but potentially more enjoyable and rewarding than conventional approaches to knowledge production.

### Transcript of conversation:

NJ Participatory research, for me I suppose, it is about trying to work as a researcher in a way that challenges and disrupts some of the more traditional distinctions between the producers of knowledge and the people that are having the information extracted out of

them. So it's about trying to challenge some of the established distinctions between the researcher and the researched.

Co-production I suppose speaks to that. But I see it as somewhat different. So participatory approach I see fundamentally as a question of challenging established power relationships. Co-production I suppose I see more in terms of, a commitment to working in partnership, to generate, to research outputs that involve generating ideas and evidence in a way that bounce off each other in a process. But I suppose the power aspect is there, but it's less in the forefront for me.

PM This comes back to quite a strong epistemological distinction, in that participatory research is coming from Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and it's a liberation process and it's about de-privileging expert forms of knowledge. Whereas co-production comes from economics, and it's not necessarily about de-privileging some knowledge, but it's about recognising the equity of all forms of knowledge and recognising that by bringing different forms of knowledge together in a production process, the outputs and outcomes will be greater because you are bringing in more knowledge to that process.

NJ It's the centrality of power maybe or the role of power and these distinctions. I mean some of the work I've done around looking at experiences of early onset dementia was drawing much more on some Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, and particularly Augusto Boal and the theatre of the oppressed approach. So really trying to translate some of those theories around power and how power works into theatrical performance. And the notion of play, you know that actually we can use play, play can be a very powerful way of challenging inequalities, social relationships.

So one of the things that I've done as part of kind of my own research and that goes back a few years ago, working with a service that provided support for families living with early onset dementia. People with a diagnosis of dementia before the age of sixty five.

But really trying to have fluid research relationships, so one based really on principles around public sociology and what Burawoy would describe as an organic public sociology, a process of mutual education between the researcher and the public that you are engaging with.

But quite early on in that process we decided to use some of that theatre of the oppressed methodology as a participatory approach for developing stories or vignettes, is one of my particular interests throughout my research career is using vignettes, we were able to bring in a theatre company. A participatory theatre company, to work with families, to say well let's use scenarios that we can start to explore together. I would see that very much as a sort of participatory form of research as opposed to I suppose co-production. Yes we produce something together, but what we are trying to produce ultimately was something that tried to highlight some of those collective experiences of discrimination. What it's like to be in a society where you live with dementia on a day to day basis.

In a sense we co-produced a set of vignettes. But for me I suppose it was characterised more by its participatory flair.

PM My own research which I'd describe as more co-productive, and that was with a variety of community organisations in the neighbourhood of Wester Hailes in south west Edinburgh, there were some very participatory elements to that, for example a totem pole which this is a very small version of it early on in the project, but then also in the process of co-production came to an awareness that in some elements of the research the outputs that the community partners wanted and us as academic partners wanted, would be quite

different. And so as an academic I wanted a research paper. I don't think I have to be ashamed of that as that is what you want to do as an academic, whereas the community wanted a new source to help develop community activism within the neighbourhood. And by working in a research process together, we managed to produce those two outputs separately and there was a trusting relationship to recognise that that was okay the fact that we wanted different things. But the research was still characterised by a trusting relationship of co-production. And bringing the forms of knowledge we all had around the table, enabled those outputs to be produced, to be of benefit of myself and the community partners.

NJ Establishing that trust and rapport I think is so crucial. I think some of the work I did really kind of invested weeks really before we got anywhere near talking about taking part in research, of actually just being in that environment, being in that space you know, giving an opportunity for people to get to know you as a researcher, get to understand a bit about your motives. Very much trying to suss you out you know very much trying to get a sense of is this person genuine you know when they are looking to do this sort of co-produced, and more participatory work. Is this a bit of a tick box thing?

NJ In my area of work I suppose in dementia, those are very personal experiences often you know. Very emotive things. And before we could really get anywhere that we could start really recording our data, if you like, building that mutual sense of trust and sense of belonging, a), took a lot of time, but b), was just so absolutely crucial. Did you encounter the same thing?

PM Yes I did, and our partners had their fingers burnt with some previous collaboration with academics, where community partners ended up feeling used, it was a very extractive process. So they came into these co-produced research processes very warily, but learned a lot through it.

And actually it's one of my frustrations as a researcher is that a lot of the work on participatory methods and co-production talks about the importance of trust, and particularly from an ethical perspective, that you must trust each other as partners. But actually doesn't talk very openly and honestly about practical ways to achieve that. Going to the local Asda to buy the lunch and make cups of tea for people and stuff like that really, really mundane tasks, that are not in methods text books, are really important in showing that I can work with you, you can trust me, I am not going to mess you around.

NJ Yeah, certainly from my own experience, it's very easy to feel like oh am I doing something wrong here, you know, my approach is a lot more messy, it feels more messy or it feels more uncertain. And I think talking to other people who do this sort of work as well you realise actually that's quite a common experience that you can sometimes feel maybe out of step with some of those quite polished accounts of co-production or participatory work. But it's feeling comfortable to be able to put your hand up and say actually no that's not working for me or I don't understand this or this is my, this is actually what I want to get out of this process and being quite up front and honest.

PM For me looking at it from a co-production perspective it's important that's on both sides as well. We need to be prepared to be open and honest about what we are doing. And even if it's a mis-step and you feel really cringeworthy about it, for me I go right back to by doctoral research interviewing people. But I remember a couple of the interviews where I'd sit down with these sixty year old women, community activists, and get out my own digital recorder and they'd look at me and go oh god they've shrunk over the years, and they'd been participants in research so long it was like they had gone from reel to reel tape recorders to these tiny little credit card sized. I was there feeling very nervous, not really

done many interviews, and they were very comfortable with the interview, they could make that comment about the technology, so actually they actually had more power in that setting than I did as a researcher. And whereas in most of the discussion about research ethics doesn't allow for that,

NJ A lot of my work really is trying to treat consent or particularly in the later work around dementia, as very much a continuous process and something which the methods in the literature is increasingly saying this should be on a relational basis, there should be this constant monitoring and checking regardless of whether or not someone has necessarily signed a consent form.

But I've sometimes found that quite difficult actually to render into a format which a traditional ethics committees recognise sometimes, you know particularly if that is the NHS ethics committees and obviously also being mindful of the need to show a certain governance and frameworks that participants are not being exploited, that there is notions of informed consent you know, quite legitimate concerns that ethics committees obviously need to be satisfied that procedures are in place.

I was wondering what your experiences are of navigating that formal ethical approval process and just that doing ethics you know on a day to day basis.

PM I don't tend to work in health ethics committees, but I know they are particularly more rigorous but in a university level, mentioning things like you think you will be using these methods, but you will be taking a co-produced approach so therefore you will be working with partners to develop a set of methods with these safeguards in place, is enough. And it's also having that trust built up through the co-produced approach enabled me to seek support from that wider network, so particularly from community development workers who have an approach to ethics which is very pragmatic, it's like what is the right thing to do in this situation. They were really useful for me in helping me work that through and not leaving me sat at my desk worrying. I could actually reach out to them for help in working out what the right thing to do in these situations was.

NJ So there is an element as a researcher has to step out of that comfort zone a little bit and be more open and honest and saying I don't know the answer, you know, I don't know how this is going to play out in its entirety. I don't necessarily know what the best way of doing this is. So it's as much the researcher having that confidence or that ability to step back a little bit from that very controlled linear approach to research of this is how it's going to go and I am going to control for this as much as possible.

I've always found that quite an uneasy feeling I suppose you know, stepping back and saying I don't know. And when I have done that's when you tend to get some really good steps forward in your research.

PM Yeah, for me it's those moments that leave the longer lasting legacy. And to move it into the kind of contemporary discourse of modern academia, leave the greatest impact. In the last research project we were evaluating what the outcomes of those previous co-produced projects had been including the one which had produced a totem pole. And one thing that was highlighted by the community partners was that this totem pole has been erected in Wester Hailes since 2012 and it's still there. Wester Hailes is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland, it's not been vandalised or burned down, and it's made of wood. So although our formal research projects have ended in the neighbourhood, it has this much longer lasting legacy in terms of its place-making value. That messiness,

that fact that you don't know where things are going to go. For me that is what is so good about participatory and co-produced approaches to research.

NJ You are producing something which is almost by definition owned by more than just the researcher isn't it, there is an attachment to it that is more than just the researchers. What I find particularly the influence of more arts based enquiry, arts based techniques being increasingly recognised within social science, as ways of trying to disrupt some of those traditional divisions between the researcher and the researched, you know, the researcher and the participant in a sense we are all researchers and we are all participants in a process of meaning-making.

PM As soon as you move away from that idea that this is a very formal project that is structured in a certain way that will deliver certain things, your methodology and your methods become more fluid and open to new methods. They have to just because what you are doing is about a process; it's not about the outcomes it's about the process. The excitement of co-production is using that process to new ends. A good example which kind of contrasts a bit with what you were saying was in the project I co-produced with civil servants. That was really interesting because we did use interviewing techniques, but what was different there was the subject of our interviews that we were doing were academics who had tried to get academic evidence into policy making. And so it was me and a civil servant interviewing these academics, having somebody who is not an academic doing that interviewing process with me, changed those interviews completely, because they were coming into them quite ignorant of what our practices are as academics.

So in that way that the good qualitative interview is a conversation rather than something very structured, they could chip in with the extra questions that would probably never cross my mind because I'd presume I'd know the answer because I am an academic as well.

NJ One of the questions that I found myself thinking more and more was where does this process go now, certainly I think in my own field now and in dementia studies, maybe there is more opportunity for seeing people with dementia setting the questions. And researchers being involved much more as facilitators of that process rather than necessarily the directors of it. But really for the researchers taking even more of a step back I suppose and saying well how do we maybe crowd source research questions, researchers offering their more academic expertise to other communities in a way that then enables those communities to direct the research process to their own agenda, or their own ends more.

PM There is a strong social justice element of we've got these resources, we should be using these resources to the benefit of the wider partners. Even in little ways in my teaching, I am now working with the voluntary sector organisations for them to come up with well what do you want to know about? What do you need to know to do a better job rather than yeah I've got some really interesting problems going around in my mind, okay that's what I am paid to do, but are these relevant questions for organisations out there who are facing problems every day?

NJ I suppose the promise of that is in say another generation of academics for whom this is very established ways of working.

PM I think as we do more of this then the organisations we are working with will gain greater capacity to be able to work with universities in an effective way and get what they need out of universities. Going back to that sort of core principles of co-production, it's about both partners, in the co-production process, learning and transforming through that process of working together.

NJ And the shift much more towards a sort of more public engaged, public scholarship, public knowledge production, public academic work.

PM Doing impact properly.

NJ I suppose when we started that discussion about what does participatory research mean or co-production mean? And these are often, you know the danger is they become buzz words to pin on something to give it an element of either excitement or to give it a sort of trendiness or an acceptability, whereas the doing it is the important thing. And that comes I suppose from that commitment to the process, or the importance of that reflexivity comes in doesn't it. You are being mindful of your own practice and how your own practice shapes and is shaped by the wider context in which you work.

PM The way studentships are now structured you are expected to do much more than just that core project. And I think it's up to supervision teams to ensure that the research process has that time built into it. It's not an add on, it's actually no this is what research now looks like, we are training you to be the next generation of scholars, so as we shape your project and work out the project plan you should have time within it to do these activities.

NJ Yes, I think that notion that this can be embedded within the PhD process itself is really important. So we've been very much looking at how do we mobilise this knowledge, you know, maybe there is knowledge that has been generated through a particular set of research activities, but then how does that translate into something like a resource. But rather than this being the end product, actually how is this actually just another part, a cycle within a cycle and really trying to embed that output as not tangential to the PhD but an integral part of the PhD.

PM With co-production being much more a process, and participatory research is very much a normative commitment to being at that end of the process as quickly as possible where your participants really are leading it. Whereas co-production for me is being on a journey towards getting there in the future hopefully, I'd hope that all PhD's and particularly if they are on a policy focussed area, have some element of co-production in them, you are actually, you are not just there to extract data out of the people you are working with.

NJ And I think just having an impact on one individual as well, one participant, you know in a research project who speaks to you as a researcher in research, I really enjoyed this process and I really feel like I've learned something or engaged in that process for me. You know that level of impact as well can be sort of immensely valuable, just as if not more rewarding as a researcher than writing academic papers, as rewarding as that is as well.

#### Contributors:

Dr Nicholas Jenkins is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology & Social Policy at the University of the West of Scotland (webpage: <http://www.uws.ac.uk/staff-profiles/mcs/nicholas-jenkins/>)

Dr Peter Matthews is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Stirling. (webpage: <http://www.stir.ac.uk/people/27268>).



References and further reading:

Beebeejaun, Y., Durose, C., Rees, J., Richardson, J. and Richardson, L., 2014, "Beyond text": exploring ethos and method in co-producing research with communities, *Community Development Journal*, 49, 1, 37-53

Burawoy M (2005a) The critical turn to public sociology. *Critical Sociology* 31(3): 313–326.

Burawoy M (2005b) For public sociology. *American Sociological Review* 70(1): 4–28.

Jenkins, N., Strange, L., Keyes, S (2016). Creating vignettes of early-onset dementia: An exercise in public sociology. *Sociology* 50(1): 77-92

Matthews, P., 2016, Social media, community development and social capital, *Community Development Journal*, 51, 3, 419-435

Matthews, P., Connelly, S., O'Brien, D., Astbury, J., Brown, J. and Brown, L., 2015, *Doing and Evaluating Community Research: A process and outcomes approach for communities and researchers*, Stirling: University of Stirling

Scottish Dementia Working Group Research Sub-Group (2014) *Core Principles for Involving People with Dementia in Research*. URL: <http://dementiavoices.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Involving-people-with-dementia-in-research1.pdf>

Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

What do co-production and participatory research have in common and what distinguishes them?

Why are rapport and trust between everyone involved in the research process so important in these approaches?

What sorts of things help to build rapport and trust?

Is it in the nature of participatory research to be particularly unpredictable?

How easy is it for people with conventional academic training to step back from setting research questions and research agendas?

Are co-production and participatory research appropriate for use with all social groups?