

An introduction to ethical considerations for co-produced research for those new to the approach

This paper has been developed by the Brigstow Institute in response to our community reporting that conventional ethics review processes fall short of understanding ethical considerations needed in co-produced projects. This document therefore aims to provide a very brief overview of some of the particular considerations and principles researchers should use to approach the writing of their research ethics applications that use co-produced research methods to sit alongside the University's [general guidance](#). Although this list is not exhaustive and every project will have subtle nuances, we believe the best approach is to recognise the following principles represented, and to have an open conversation with those you wish to work with and the ethics review committee.

What's unique about ethics in co-produced research?

Co-produced approaches are more of an embodied mindset that centers on values and ethics of shared power, responsibility, and knowledge (Page, 2021; Thomas-Huges & McDermot, 2021). Historically conventional approaches to research tend not to factor in the researcher's own positionality, existing relational power dynamics, or consider past harms of institutions which are all important in co-produced research.

There are a number of complex partnerships formed within co-produced research, and each project will have different aims, approaches, agendas, and needs. Therefore, research using these methods needs to be adaptable and responsive to the nuances and experiences of the people involved. Outcomes are often led by the participants, and so must be responsive, reflexive, and iterative rather than following a set of pre-defined outcomes. This is what poses the biggest challenge for ethical review because frameworks for assessment often need to see clear thought into project delivery and outcomes before the project has begun.

Likewise, co-produced projects often utilise arts-based methods such as photography, collage, making, performance, and more. It can be hard for some participants to remember that they are still part of a research project when they are engaged in such activities. This can result in participants sharing information that they might not have done in a more structured data collection scenario and presents additional concerns.

All these issues tend to prevent co-produced projects from progressing through REC processes smoothly or without several reviews. However, we suggest that none of these should deter the use of co-produced research, rather they should stand as additional thought processes that will support and strengthen the development of your application. Here is a list of things you might want to consider from an ethical perspective when using co-produced research methods for the first time.

Gaining informed consent

Specific terms, processes and organisational bureaucracy can be confusing or misleading for participants, partners and co-researchers, and so consent can sometimes appear to be given without participants fully understanding what they are signing up for.

Check consent forms, and any project plan documents to see if you have:

- ▶ Provided clarity on academic terms associated with the study or produced an accessible version of the project outline.
- ▶ Left adequate space and time in your project plan for revisions, consultation or questions from partners or co-researchers on the process and any terms used;
- ▶ Provided transparency about the complexity of research administration such as payment, ethics, funding and contracting and how this might change or influence and delay the research process.
- ▶ Provided transparency about the project's aims, methods, impacts, and ethical considerations. If formal ethics approval is required, researchers need to communicate the timelines, ethics process, document expectations, how to identify potential risks and harms and address them collaboratively with

partners and ensure strategies for mitigation are developed with a plan for implementation.

- ▶ Considered forms of revisited consent/assent.

Use of data and intellectual property

Make sure you have provided clear information on how the thoughts, reflections and any other participant, partner or co-researcher input will be shared after and beyond the project. Ask yourself whether participants will be involved in any additional work that exists beyond the initial project. Likewise, have you considered who the outputs of this research belong to and how this research and its outcomes can be used by members of the project team beyond the University?

Authorship

Conventions on authorship of academic and creative works vary across disciplines and the University has guidance on this here:

[Authorship: guidance and disputes | Division of Research, Enterprise and Innovation | University of Bristol](#)

In co-produced research, it is essential that you discuss authorship with all collaborators and understand what expectations people have to be involved in publishing final outputs. Collaborators external to academia may not consider that they could be engaged as authors (and they may not wish to be), but this should be clearly understood from the outset of any project.

Participant Anonymity

Collaborators, partners and co-researchers might find research outputs useful as they carry kudos in places outside academia. For example, they might contribute to developments in an individual's artistic practice, or a portfolio of research work. This may mean that participants want their names included and attached to the work; this makes anonymisation trickier.

Make sure you have considered or consulted participants on how quotes and statements associated with participants might be presented so individuals can be

presented in ways that won't compromise their career, or personal lives. Are there plans in place to discuss these issues with participants?

Practice and safety

Co-produced methods are often used in research that focuses on emancipating individuals from systemic inequalities and can engage with emotionally complex and sensitive topics. These topics can impact not only the participants involved but the academics and facilitators involved in the study.

One way to mitigate this is to include a distress protocol within the design of the study, such as signposting to helplines or providing mental health supervision for those involved. Have you considered procedures for identifying, managing, and mitigating emotional or psychological distress during a study? See Whitney & Everard (2022) for examples of this.

Payment

A great deal of time and labour is invested in these projects and some people who are involved may not be salaried. Making sure people are adequately remunerated for this labour is important. However, there are some things to consider with remuneration:

- ▶ Understand how the payment of participants and partners might impact other income streams or welfare benefit payments they might have. Could there be another option?
- ▶ Money might not be the most useful way for individuals to be reimbursed. Have you budgeted time and money in your project to co-develop budgets to understand what form of remuneration individuals will find most useful?
- ▶ What is the scale of the work undertaken by participants? If it uses a skill or knowledge base that they would normally be financially remunerated for, this should be done.

Assent rather than consent

Assent may be a process that is more appropriate in some studies than consent, and this may need to be accepted verbally rather than in written form. If this is the case, make sure you've considered the process of attaining assent thoroughly and you have processes in place to document this.

If anyone reading this has any additions, please do get in touch at hello-brigstow@bristol.ac.uk. We'd like to thank Maca Gomez-Gutierrez, Matthew Brown, and Matimba Swana for their support in the review of this document.

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