

Co-Production in Youth Homelessness Research

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Co-production may be thought of as a way of answering a simple question: *Who gets a voice to decide what questions are worthy of being asked and how they will be answered?*

What is Co-Production?

Co-production is an approach to decision making where service users and service providers work together to reach agreed outcomes.¹ In research settings, this involves sharing power and responsibility for the project and the dissemination of knowledge.² In research, co-production is not a set of methods, rather it is a set of values that guide the process for meaningfully including the expertise of people who have used services, service providers, and academics into the research process.

Co-production is not limited to academic research. For example, it is widely used in designing and running services, including homelessness services.³ This article will limit the discussion of co-production to research, and provide an example of the author's ongoing PhD research looking at what enables or prevents young people who use homelessness services to end homelessness and maintain accommodation.

Why do 'co-production'?

Co-production has become popular across a number of disciplines that have wanted to move away from 'ivory-tower' research towards genuine power-sharing and inclusion of people directly affected by research. Co-production occurs for three main reasons.⁴ The first is, improving quality of research by increasing the relevance of the research to service users and improving understanding of contextual factors. It may also have greater impact where trusting relationships developed through co-production lead to a greater ability

to implement research findings. Finally, co-production can move research away from paternalism towards promoting more inclusive citizenship through empowerment, inclusion, and ownership.

What does genuine co-production look like?

Two great primers on the principles that underlie co-production are Sherry Arnstein's⁵ seminal work *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* and guidelines on co-production in research by INVOLVE.⁶

For INVOLVE, the principles of co-production are: sharing of power; including all perspectives and skills; respecting and valuing the knowledge of all those working together on the research; reciprocity; and building and maintaining relationships. These principles are enacted by establishing ground rules, ongoing dialogue between all members of the research, joint ownership of key decisions, commitment to building relationships, providing and taking advantage of opportunities for personal growth and development, flexibility in the process, reflection, and both valuing and evaluating the effect of co-production on the research process.

Arnstein goes beyond these principles to compare 'citizen control' to other ways of involving service users in decision making. Figure 1, from Arnstein's work is the seminal depiction of how citizens, or service users, are involved in projects. This gives us a great depiction of what co-production is, as well as what it is not.

Arnstein's Ladder (1969) provides a hierarchy to describe different degrees of consumer participation in decision making activities, such

as designing research. The highest degree of consumer participation are activities that are led by consumers. Below this are activities where consumers lead activities that are delegated to them, or they are involved in equal partnerships around decision making. Tokenistic degrees of participation involve processes where consumers have no real power to influence decision making either through being specially selected to provide views that are agreeable to decision makers, being outnumbered, or merely being informed or consulted in a way where they cannot influence decisions. Non-participation involves processes or activities where consumers are either coerced during decision making or their involvement in activities is considered to be a form of therapy.

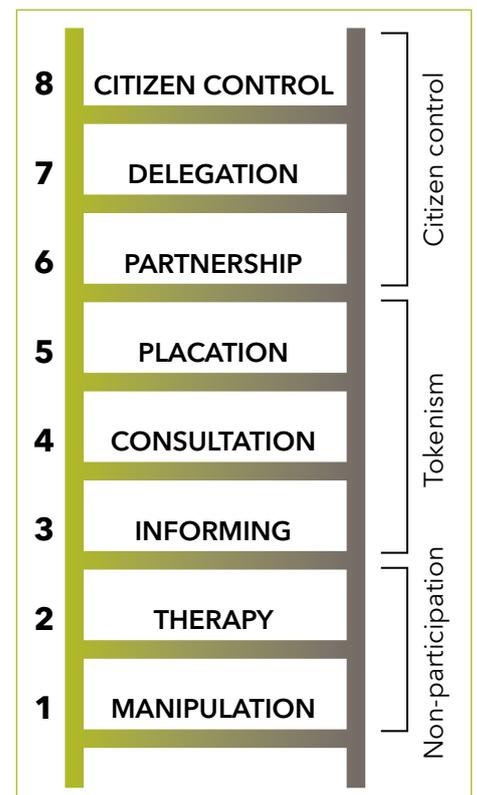


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, taken from Roper et al. (2018)⁷

So why isn't it being used more often?

In short, co-production is expensive.⁸ The need to spend more time attending to issues of power distribution in research, a greater emphasis upon open dialogue, and the need to ensure that everyone has opportunities for development require greater time and financial resources. Dialogue to address power imbalances and negotiate research agendas lead to greater personal costs through interpersonal conflict. Research arising from co-production requires additional time and resources with little guarantee that the research will be successful or the extra effort recognised. This research risks being seen as biased to particular points of view or being seen as too niche and not sufficiently contributing to the wider body of academic knowledge.

A Case Study

This case study looks at a project that is in progress at the time of writing. This project is the first phase within the author's PhD which is looking at what enables or prevents young people who use youth homelessness services to end homelessness and maintain stable accommodation. This phase of the project has brought together a small number of young people who have lived expertise in utilising youth homelessness services to identify and refine the relevant concepts and factors that are thought to enable or inhibit young people from exiting homelessness and maintaining stable accommodation. The lived experience that is brought to this phase of the project will shape the future phases of the PhD project.

The aim of this first phase is to refine the overall research questions to make them more meaningful to young people who use youth homelessness services. What is the best way of characterising the process of moving from homelessness to housed? Is it 'exiting homelessness', a term used often in academic literature or is it 'breaking the cycle?' as suggested by one participant? The initial thought from the group is that focusing upon this end-point (moving from homeless to housed) is missing a crucial part of the picture: what leads young people to identifying a need to engage with homelessness services in the first instance?



Photograph by Shannyn Higgins for Hope Street Youth and Family Services

There are significant barriers which prevent this phase from more closely aligning with co-production. The first barrier is the fact that as a PhD project, the research agenda was largely already determined prior to the group convening. This agenda means that this phase of the research needs to result in a product that can shape the future phases of the PhD. The second barrier is the limited resources that are available to conduct the overall research. Meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience requires substantial financial resources to appropriately reimburse them for providing their expertise. In order to apply for funding, the author had to outline a structure for the way that the group will be run and the aims of the research. The funding that is currently available to the project will be expended in this phase of the research with no guarantee of future funding.

Another barrier arose from the process of getting ethics approvals from relevant institutions before convening the group. This process resulted in tensions around the degree to which young people with lived experience would have decision making power over the way that this phase of the research is conducted. Young people with lived experience also had no opportunity to provide input into the design of this phase of research that was submitted for ethical approval.

Despite these barriers, this phase of the project seeks to sit within at least the 'partnership' rung of Arnstein's Ladder (see Figure 1). Recognising that many decisions were required to be made prior to the group's involvement, this phase aimed to be as close to the principles of co-production as possible. While there is an overarching structure that determines where and when the group will meet with set aims that are fully explained, the group have some flexibility to shape how

they will contribute their expertise. The group have undertaken a process to set some ground rules to ensure that power is shared equally between all of them. Each session attends to potential power imbalances between the author as researcher and young people as experts by lived expertise. They have individually and collectively had an opportunity to interrogate the author's motivations and aims for this research project.

The case study outlines the first phase of a larger project that, while not being strictly co-production, tries to utilise the principles of co-production to more meaningfully involve young people with lived experience of using homelessness services in the design of a larger research project.

In a time when there is a push for research to retain its relevance to policy and program delivery,⁹ and to demonstrate outcomes, it is even more imperative to ask ourselves: Who get a voice to decide what questions are worthy of being asked and how they will be answered?

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* The Homeless Youth Dual Diagnosis Initiative (HYDDI) is co-located at Hope Street Youth and Family Services' Youth Refuge in Brunswick.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/co-production>
2. INVOLVE 2018, *Guidance on Co-Producing a Research Project*.
3. For example: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit>
4. Oliver K et al 2019, The dark side of coproduction: do the costs outweigh the benefits for health research?, *Health Research Policy and Systems*, vol. 17, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-019-0432-3>
5. Arnstein S 1969, A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 216-224.
6. INVOLVE 2018, op cit.
7. Roper C et al 2018, *Co-production: Putting principles into practice in mental health contexts*
8. Oliver, K et al 2019, op cit.
9. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Farrugia D and Gerard J 2016, Academic Knowledge and Contemporary Poverty: The Politics of Homelessness Research, *Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 267-284.