

Co-production of research for policy: when should we attempt it?

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- What I've been asked to do and my argument in brief
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- Definition of 'co-production'
- Rationale for 'co-production' for policy
- Assumptions underpinning 'co-production' for policy
- Practical requirements in implementing 'co-production' for policy
- Practical issues to be resolved
- Some wider considerations
- How to avoid potentially negative consequences
- When to 'co-produce' and when not to
- Conclusion

What I've been asked to do and my argument

- Stimulate critical reflection about some of our assumptions in the field of knowledge transfer and mobilization
- 'Co-production' has its place but we need to choose when and how we do it with care
- There is no guarantee that co-produced evidence will necessarily be easier to produce or use in policy than other forms

- Co-production' of knowledge often referred to as 'integrated knowledge translation' (e.g. in Canada)
- A specific approach to the wider range of activities known as 'linkage and exchange'

Definitions of 'co-production' or 'integrated knowledge translation' (IKT)

My working definition:

Where knowledge users/stakeholders of various types (principally, policy advisers, but also providers, patients and public, depending on the purpose) collaborate closely on, or are integrated into, the entire process of undertaking applied research designed to inform policy and practice (i.e. identification of priorities and research questions, design and methods, data collection, analysis and interpretation, dissemination and knowledge mobilisation).

IKT has been defined by others as:

'....collaboration between researchers and research users in the research process including the shaping of the research questions, deciding the methodology, involvement in the data collection and tools development, interpreting the findings and helping disseminating the research results.'

(Graham and Tetroe, 2009)

Another definition

' the development of a relationship between academic researchers and practitioners and/or policymakers for the purposes of collaboratively engaging in a mutually beneficial research project or program of research.'

(Kathari and Wathen, 2013)

Interesting that these definitions focus on relationships between external researchers and practitioners or policy advisers though 'co-production' could conceivably need to be engineered within, e.g. a government agency, between technical/analytical staff (e.g. statisticians, economists, social researchers) and policy advisers

Rationale for 'co-production' I

- Broad base of support for the concept of 'co-production' in the knowledge translation, transfer and mobilization fields
 - recent analysis emphasises the importance of ongoing connections between researchers and policy-makers if research is to contribute to shaping policy (Brownson et al. 2006; Cvitanovic et al. 2011; Oliver et al. 2014)
 - though few studies of 'co-production' in practice, the conditions in which it 'works' (or not) and its consequences (Cairney & Oliver 2017)
- Increasingly favoured to varying degrees by research funders
- Response to:
 - the 'two communities' view of researchers and policy-makers
 - the 'know-do gap'

Rationale for 'co-production' II

- It should have a wide range of benefits:
 - Improve mutual understanding between policy-makers and researchers by breaking down 'silos'
 - Increase the research and research use skills of policy-makers and the policy skills of researchers
 - Open up research to a wider range of participants
 - Increase the odds that findings will be seen as relevant, applicable and useful by policy-makers
 - Increase the odds that findings will be used in policy-making and will have more direct and greater impact than would otherwise be the case

Rationale for 'co-production' III

- Also an intellectual move away from independent, dispassionate forms of evaluation and research
 - Greenhalgh and Russell (2010) argue that such approaches drive evaluators to 'resist the very engagement with the issues that policy-relevant insights require.'
- Very different rationale is that it may be a way for policy agencies to gain greater legitimacy and credibility for the way they make policy
 - there is a risk that this could lead to 'tokenistic' forms of co-production

Some examples of initiatives shaped by 'co-production' thinking involving academics

NHMRC's Partnership Centres for Better Health, 2013-

English NHS' Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRCs)

English NHS' Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs)

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's state-based Prevention Research Centers

Assumptions underpinning 'co-production'

- Research findings are under-used in policy/practice decision-making
- Policy-makers and researchers working together is the solution
- Better than either 'in-house' or 'independent' research and evaluation
- Resources are available and should be spent on developing and maintaining the relationships required for 'co-production'
- Definitive, actionable findings will be produced
- The process and impacts will be seen as broadly positive by all involved
- 'Co-production' will automatically reduce or remove power imbalances between researchers and policy-makers
- 'Co-production' 'works' similarly irrespective of topic, context, etc.

(Adapted from Kothari and Wathen, 2013)

Practical requirements for 'co-production'

Prior conditions

- Reasonable level of mutual respect and trust
- Reasonable distribution of power

Governance and management

- Task allocation
- Protocols and rules, e.g. on decisions, dispute resolution, conflicts of interest, publication, ethics, access to information
- Incentives to take part
- Training
- Termination and exit processes

Day-to-day working

- How and how much (secondments, exchanges, f/t vs. p/t)
- Where (co-location or not)
- Who (junior, senior, analysts vs. policy advisers)

Practical issues that need to be resolved

Purpose

- Is the prime focus on processes, relationships, research 'products', or impacts?
- What is a reasonable timescale to expect change in each of these?

Level of ambition

- What counts as implementing 'co-production'?
- Does everyone have to be involved in everything, throughout, at every level?
- 'Teams' or related 'task groups'?
- Should the research produced be visibly different in some way?
- Should identities be re-shaped? If so, whose?
- Should the policy-making process be altered by 'co-production'?

Practical issues that need to be resolved

Funding and power

- Who pays for the partnership building and the research?
- If a policy agency provides the staff for 'co-production', funds the initiative and controls the policy process, what effect will this have on partnership working?

The work involved

- Who takes the prime responsibility for it?
- Should all members of the team work at building the co-producing relationships?

Some wider considerations in relation to the consequences of 'co-production'

- Will 'co-production' (further) inhibit the production, publication or mobilization of unexpected or uncomfortable (negative) findings?
- Will 'co-production' produce a narrower range of evidence of less value
 - 'policy-based evidence'?
 - a restricted range of research questions?
 - 'group think' and lack of challenge?
 - self-censorship by researchers?
- Does it risk over-emphasising the findings of 'co-produced' knowledge?
- Who among the 'knowledge users' should be involved?
- Will 'co-production' initiatives inevitably remain the exception and does this matter?
- Does 'co-production' mean that career researchers have to give parity of esteem to inexperienced policy staff?

How can we avoid some or all of the potentially negative consequences?

Response:

By taking account of context, topic, the interests at stake, the purpose of the research, who is delivering the policy/programme, the 'decision space' available, etc.

(though, increasingly, with respect to 'co-production' defined in terms of patient and public involvement, it is a non-negotiable requirement)

When to 'co-produce' and when not to

No or less emphasis when

Policy/programme is relatively well defined and the prime focus is on whether it 'works' or not

- and some scope to abandon or reverse

Policy/programme is likely to be controversial and findings likely to be contested

Conflicts of interest are likely to be hard to manage

Less concern to 'use' findings directly for policy decisions

More emphasis when

Policy/programme still needs definition & refinement, interest in feasibility, acceptability, etc.

Or main RQ is how (best) to implement the policy/programme rather than whether to proceed

Time & resources available to involve a range of interests in research process

Main goal is to use the findings and less concern about 'policy-based evidence'

Research can only be done with active cooperation of local implementers

When to 'co-produce' and when not to

No or less emphasis when

Research is less dependent on cooperation of local implementers

End users value findings from 'expert', scientific, dispassionate activity

More emphasis when

Access to expertise in partnership working

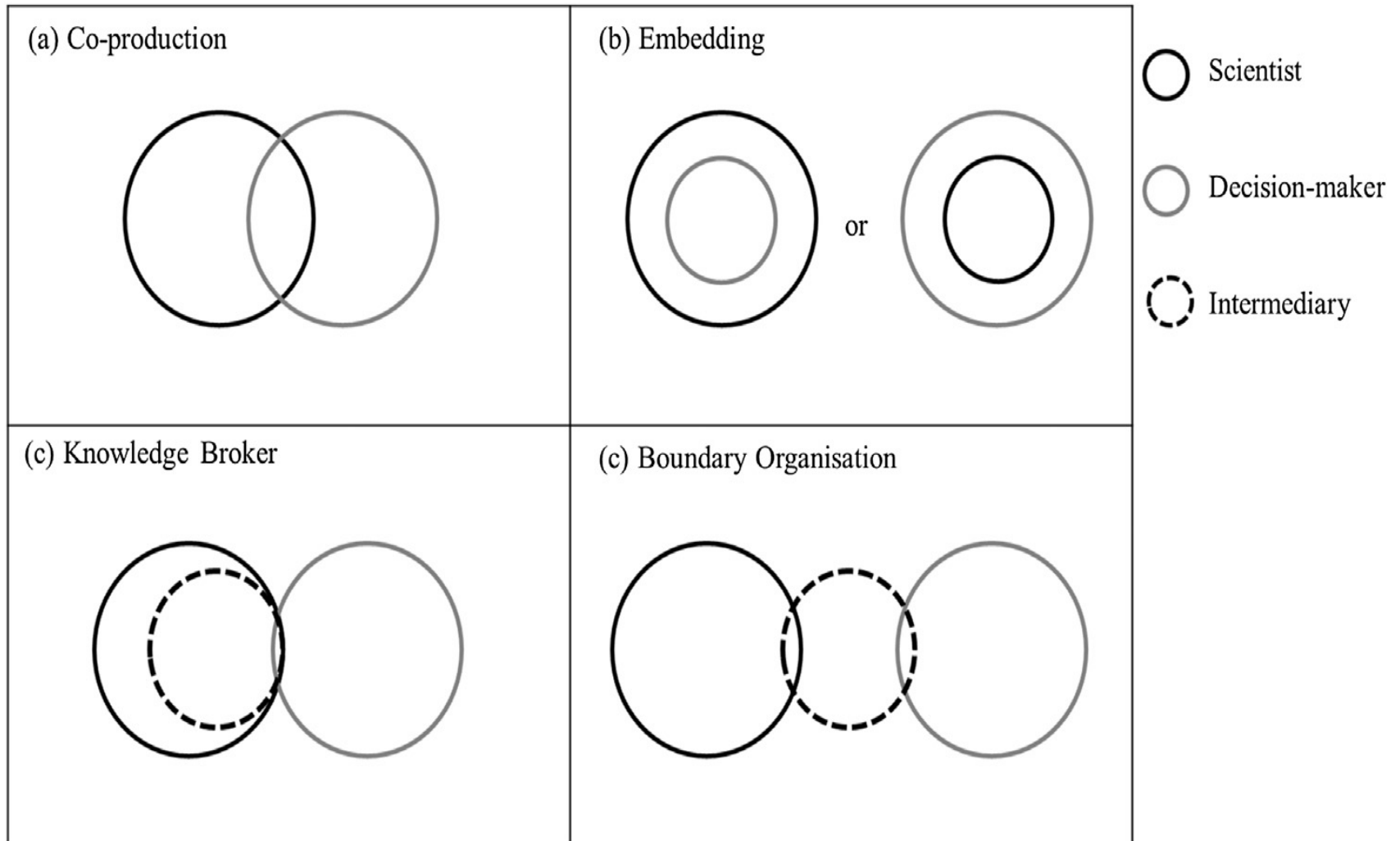
Policy makers are not directly responsible for delivery of a poliicy/programme

Need to increase mutual awareness between researchers and policy-makers

Conclusion

- 'Co-production' has its place but we need to choose when and how we do it
- There is no guarantee that co-produced evidence will necessarily be easier to produce or use in policy than other forms since the basic problem of the 'know-do gap' and 'two worlds' is an over-simplification at best
- It may make more sense to involve service users and (local) implementers more than policy-makers though this could place researchers in an awkward spot between implementers and policy-makers!
- There is a place for other approaches including 'independent', 'external' policy-relevant research, especially if there are already good informal links between researchers and policy advisers
- Van Egmond et al. (2011) identified the value of a "*close distance*" between policy makers and researchers which maintained distinct roles for researchers and policy officials, protecting the credibility of the research

Other approaches are available



Source: Cvitanovic et al., 2015

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