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Special Issue: Affect and Collaboration

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Co-producing research with communities: emotions in community research

Milton Brown, sebeck19@gmail.com
University of Huddersfield, UK

Kate Pahl, k.pahl@mmu.ac.uk
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Zanib Rasool, zanib007@aol.com
University of Sheffield, UK

Paul Ward, Wardp@edgehill.ac.uk
Edge Hill University, UK

In this article we explore the ways in which universities and communities can work together drawing on our experience of a community-university co-produced project called ‘Imagine’. We reflect on our different experiences of working together and affectively co-produce the article, drawing on a conversation we held together. We locate our discussion within the projects we worked on. We look at the experiences of working across community and university and affectively explore these. We explore the following key questions:

- How do we work with complexity and difference?
- Who holds the power in research?
- What kinds of methods surface hidden voices?
- How can we co-create equitable research spaces together?
- What did working together feel like?

Our co-writing process surfaces some of these tensions and difficulties as we struggle to place our voices into an academic article. We surface more of our own tensions and voices and this has become one of the dominant experiences of doing co-produced research. We explore the mechanisms of co-production as being both a process of fusion but also its affective qualities. Our discussions show that community partners working with academics have to bear the

emotional labour; by 'standing in the gap' they are having to move between community and university. We also recognise the power of community co-writing as a form that can open up an opportunity to speak differently, outside the constraining spaces of academia.

Key words community • co-production • partnership • universities • affect • voice

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Introduction

In this article we explore the ways in which universities and communities can work together drawing on our experience of a community-university co-produced project called 'Imagine'.

'Imagine: Connecting Communities Through Research' was a five-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded large grant which had as its focus the social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement. The call for the grant explicitly encouraged communities and universities to work together to develop the grant, and required that the process of getting the grant, as well as doing the research on the grant, was co-produced. This was as part of the UK funding stream, the Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities programme, which asked that research be conducted with, not on, communities. In this article, we describe what this involved for us – two academics and two community partners.

'Imagine' was unusual in the scale of its co-production. There were four work packages, each with particular themes (social, historical, cultural and democratic). There were around 30 academics and a similar number of community organisations involved in the project across and beyond the UK.¹ Kate (Pahl) and Paul (Ward) each led a theme, with Paul also having a substantive role across the project as a historian. When Kate wrote her section of the bid, she and Zanib (Rasool, co-author) convened a meeting where the themes of the work package on culture were discussed. Ideas emerged from that meeting that became strands of the project, including a focus on the history of the British Asian community in Rotherham, an interest in poetry and the voices of girls and women, and a portrait project concerned with everyday Muslims. Each of these strands were led by particular community researchers, who, crucially, were paid at the same rate as the university researchers, and were seen as independent leaders and researchers across their strand of the project. This re-balanced how many university/community partnerships happened and made a strong contribution to the co-production.

Zanib (co-author of this article) reflects on what this experience meant for her:

'Imagine' was my first experience of working with universities and it was challenging to come out of one's comfort zone. After working 30 years in the community you hold a lot of knowledge but you wonder how valued your community knowledge will be to universities? Co-production is a term I often hear bandied about by local government officers, it has become a buzz word. Co-production happens only when power is equally shared, knowledge

is equally valued, and you start from a blank sheet. The cultural work package was not something already written like government strategies which you are merely required to comment on, that is not co-production. Kate and I on a hot summer's day sat together at my sister's house collaborated and designed part of the cultural package and we finished the project by writing a co-authored book about 'Imagine'. Everyone comes into a new partnership with different aims and my intention was to share the wealth of hidden knowledge within communities that are overlooked, community resilience and creativity. 'Imagine' was a new way of working with communities for universities and has left a legacy in some of the universities which were part of 'Imagine' who have adopted the blueprint from 'Imagine' of co-production.

When writing this article, we have been aware of the very different 'voices of co-production' and our discussion is threaded through with those voices. We affectively experience co-production through voice and through interaction and dialogic discussion. Our part of the project described here was located across Rotherham and Huddersfield in the north of England, and our work encompassed a variety of activities, mainly relating to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. We focused on the cultural context of civic engagement, with an interest in the idea of cultural as ordinary and lived ([Williams 1958](#)). Kate and Zanib worked on a project called 'Writing in the community' that involved British Asian women and girls writing poetry and exploring their heritage. Paul and Milton advised us on the historical aspect of this project. Their part of the project explored the democratic context of civic engagement, through explorations of BAME histories and their potential to transform communities ([Aslam et al, 2019](#)).

In the case of Rotherham we were working with communities who had previously been relatively unrecognised within both the local community heritage context and within academic literatures. The British Asian community has had some attention ([Werbner, 1990](#)) but historically and culturally ethnographic research conducted by those communities has been lacking ([Pente and Ward, 2018](#)). There was a particular need to historicise the experiences of those living in contemporary Northern English cities, in the context of increasing racism ([Rasool, 2018](#)). Cultural communities such as Zanib's have a rich history in art and poetry, bringing the South Asian culture with them to the mining town of Rotherham, which remains largely invisible. 'Imagine' enabled us to celebrate the hybridised culture of South Asia through the emic lens of community researchers, oral historians, artists, poets, women and young people of Pakistan heritage. 'Imagine' challenged cultural hegemony ([Gramsci, 1999\[1971\]](#)) of institutions like museums and art galleries which favour the dominant culture. We also worked in Huddersfield, where Paul, in a university setting, had been exploring ways of understanding national identities in the UK and ensuring that they represent histories of ethnic diversity, through working with community groups interested in Black history and heritage in Huddersfield. Milton had been undertaking a similar project from Kirklees Local TV, an internet television station and social enterprise that seeks to 'document our local community', and which uses film to provide audiences 'with access to people and perspectives rarely seen or heard'. Its aim is 'to provide both an exciting and interactive experience by capturing and presenting the thoughts and memories of our local communities'. 'Imagine' provided an opportunity for Milton

and Paul to work together, to think about how usable histories are made collaboratively and how they contribute to community development and civic engagement.

About us

The authors of this article include two people who work as community activists, and as a result of 'Imagine' became doctoral students (Milton Brown and Zanib Rasool) and two people who work in universities (Kate Pahl and Paul Ward). We share different histories and come from very different backgrounds. Despite that, we share some things. Zanib and Kate both trained as community development workers. Milton and Zanib locate themselves as Black scholars and activists. We have researched together for a number of years, though Milton and Paul's collaborations were an outcome of Imagine, whereas Kate and Zanib have worked together much longer. We wrote this article drawing on a day-long conversation reflecting on our experiences on 'Imagine' over the preceding five years. The form of the article reflects this method, since the traditional academic article mutes community voices and cannot 'hold' ideas equitably, which results in exclusion. In parts, therefore, this article is dialogic, seeking to capture our ways of speaking as well as our differences. To construct an argument from citations is to leave out others (Ahmed, 2017). The politics of citation is not a level playing field – as many BAME scholars have had their voices muted by the academy. As Moses et al (2018: ix) write, 'The work of dialogue across difference is difficult work'. We *talked* through how we have researched together around the following key questions:

- How do we work with complexity and difference?
- Who holds the power in research?
- What kinds of methods surface hidden voices?
- How can we co-create equitable research spaces together?
- What did working together feel like?

We begin, here, by individually explaining our perspectives, to frame our responses to these questions, which we saw as enabling us to speak separately but collectively. They enable us to think about the tensions of working in and with universities and the liminal realities of at times being at the edge of universities, and the shifting realities and experiences of people in different positions as collaborative projects play out over time.

Zanib, as a community activist and doctoral student, reflects that she became part of the university community, which is alien, white and largely middle class. There is a sense of guilt at leaving behind your community and forever struggling with your conscience to find a middle ground, the in-between space and to take the voice of your community with you otherwise you fail your community. She does not want to fail her community who have not always been well represented in the world of academia.

Kate, as a former outreach worker turned academic, feels a sense of trying to expand universities' understandings of whose knowledge counts and why, with a particular focus on literacy practices in communities. She would like young people and community members to be able to communicate their ideas so that academics could learn from them and thereby expand their understandings of whose voices count and why.

Milton Brown is Chief Executive of Kirklees Local TV, which documents stories in Huddersfield and Newsbury and surrounding areas. He is taking a PhD at the University of Huddersfield on the experience of Afro-Caribbean people in navigating identity in post-war Britain. His thinking in this article reflects his positionality as both an insider and outsider in university research.

Paul, as a history professor, has been seeking to think about how history departments can learn from communities in the area in which the university is located, to recognise research and knowledge created by people outside of the university. This has involved research in oral history and community history, moving, with 'Imagine', to co-production of historical knowledge through collaborative analysis of historical sources. His involvement, therefore, involved a change of his practice.

Our co-writing process surfaces some of these tensions and difficulties as we struggle to place our voices into an academic article. While revising the article in response to academic peer review, we have surfaced more of our own tensions and voices and this has become one of the dominant experiences of doing co-produced research.

Co-production as a process

The process of working together is located in a history of shared practice. Zanib and Kate met while working on a previous literacy project and immediately found a shared history in their love of reading and their history as community development workers. Kate, as an academic who had a history of working in outreach adult literacy, recognised the work that Zanib did in the community and valued her perceptions and ideas as a colleague.

Zanib writes: Kate and I come from a community development background. Community development is a lived human experience that underpins the principles of social justice and equity and both of us work from the same ethos of working from the communities' strength base and for the girls and women we worked with poetry gave them the strength to articulate their position in a world that is hostile to BAME women, especially Muslim women. The most important community assets are the people, the buildings and community knowledge, the different ways of knowing and doing things and 'Imagine' brought all the elements together. In our projects we worked in a community library and in a community centre. These became safe spaces, the third space (Bhabha, 1996), which recognised the global knowledge the women and girls brought with them from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Romania, Slovakia. Some of the girls were British born and their cultural knowledge was passed on to them by their families.

Milton and Paul met while attending an academic symposium in Huddersfield on histories of Bhangra performance, a project led by a mutual friend, Hardeep Sahota.² In Huddersfield, organisations such as Kirklees Local TV, Bhangra Renaissance, Let's Go Yorkshire and Building African Caribbean Communities (BACC) among others consider that history enables community development, and their idea of what constitutes 'history' crosses disciplinary boundaries without anxiety, disrupting how many in universities see the discipline (Pahl and Ward, 2017). Milton and Paul have explored this destabilisation of history as a discipline. Explorations of the past, the town's space and places, carnival costumes, sound and sound systems readily merge in celebrations of local, regional, national and international achievement by members of the community, such as at the Black History Month Showcase, the Black Achievement

Awards and Huddersfield Carnival. Kirklees Local TV has documented such activities developing a new narrative to interact with townscapes and neighbourhoods that generate new ways of understanding, highlighting what Dolores Hayden (working in Los Angeles) explained as ‘The Power of Place’, in which ‘combining research with community activism helped identify, interpret, and expand the intersections between everyday experience and the built environment, between the past and the present’ (Meringolo, 2014: 419–20).

The process of working together highlighted the complexity of co-produced work (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). Our exemplifications show how this work is complex, as communities are never stable – they are ‘places where people encounter fragmentation, differences, challenges, and affirmation, cooperation, and support’ (Defilippis and Saegert, 2012: 5). Our discussions hinge on how knowledge is produced and the ways in which knowledge is ingrained in those resistant boundaries of inequality, power, racism and white privilege (Nagar, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith et al, 2019). Co-production as a methodology has the potential to reposition and shift power from the academics to the community, but this process is complex. Drawing on our recent, co-produced books (Campbell et al, 2018; Banks et al, 2019) and work on affect and emotion in research (Ahmed, 2004; Stewart, 2007; Massumi, 2015) we explore, from our different vantage points, what it is to feel the experience of doing research together. Co-production finds its origins within an ‘epistemological and methodological concern that academics should move away from an “ivory tower” approach to scholarship. It is intimately concerned with how the generation of academic knowledge shapes – and is shaped by – the social, political and policy environment in which it is situated’ (Flinders et al, 2015: 265). It is this process that we discuss here.

Writing as a process of co-production

This article is a trace of the co-production process. Academic writing is itself a struggle around representation (Nagar, 2014: 109). Although we write as one, our voices are different. The article came about through a conversation, where we talked together for a whole day, about our practices over the years of researching together in ‘Imagine’. We subsequently revised and re-worked this paper, as we responded to peer review and changed how we wrote to suit ‘academic’ discourses. We feel as writers we are slightly at odds with practices of citation that can easily elide our voices, particularly those of women of colour (Ahmed, 2017). As this article progresses, therefore, we weave in our own voices as evidence that stands on its own, as co-production requires a valuing of knowledge that is not necessarily written, and certainly does not always get written down. We therefore aim to make this paper a dialogic experience. Our recorded voices echo here. The question of whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge gets listened to is vital within co-production (Rutherford and O’Beirne, 2018).

In this article we explore the mechanisms of co-production as being both a process of fusion but also its affective qualities. Our discussions show that community partners working with academics have to bear the emotional labour, by ‘standing in the gap’ as Milton describes the process, they are having to move between community and university. The affective dimensions of this process can be seen as political. Stewart (2007) outlines how the ‘ordinary affects’ circulating in the world can be seen to be political: ‘Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place’ (Stewart, 2007: 15). Two key

concepts emerged from our discussion. One was the idea of co-production as a moment of *fusion*, often working best when the thinking was situated away from the university, where university generated knowledge and community generated knowledge worked powerfully together, to co-create living knowledge that could transform communities (Facer and Enright, 2016). This model did, however, depend on an ability to move away from some of the more constricted ways of doing things that can be found in universities (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Our discussion problematised the idea of the university. If the university is not necessarily situated as the main site of knowing, a different dynamic emerges, one that can operate differently. Pahl (2016) described the university as an ‘imagined other’ on which ideas and processes were sometimes projected but the university as an institution also was not necessarily helpful in some situations. De-centring universities as a site of knowing is an important part of this process. This onto-epistemological shift can lever in a political impetus to change how universities themselves operate. May and Perry (2006) observed how the individualist culture of the university can mitigate against collaborative and co-productive work with communities.

What does the university mean?

We argue here that the university as an institution is not necessarily supportive of co-production, but the work took place within the relationships between us. The scale of our interactions was limited by this. We recognised the imperfection of the university and its fraught relationship to knowledge,

... as it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can (Harney and Moten, 2013: 27).

Our universities provided access to substantial resources beyond the grant, including time and space to undertake the project, but there were limitations imposed by processes and institutional cultures. As Zanib argues, some people see universities as ivory towers out of their reach where the great and the good walk through the cold corridors of knowledge and power. But when community partners actually start working with the academics, they often find they are real people with similar worries and issues. It gave Zanib hope to see academics leave the comfort zone of the university and work genuinely in a collaboration which can be difficult and challenging to undo the damage of colonialism and the oppressive way research was conducted with indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith et al, 2019). So, community partners will be on the side of caution and half trusting when they go in to research with universities for the first time.

Much of our discussion centred around the emotional labour of staying in, as well as sitting outside, the university. Producing knowledge outside universities comes with its own dangers and difficulties. Zanib and Milton talked of the experience of ‘standing in the gap’, that is, holding the community’s voice and yet also being, sometimes, not necessarily of the community or listened to by the community. ‘Standing in the gap’ is a lonely place; it involves advocating for your community who sometimes do not see your battles with oppressive systems and think you have crossed over to the other side. These two ideas permeated our discussions.

Co-production is messy work with ethical challenges (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). When community researcher Zanib Rasool wrote that ‘I never imagined that emotions would play such a pivotal role in this research project’ (Rasool, 2018:115), she was reflecting on the ways in which collaborative work surfaces uncomfortable, ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2004) emotions, ones that remind us of the ‘ongoing vibrancy of the ordinary’ (Stewart, 2007: 21) but also lead to new and important insights about the ways in which collaborative research can create change within communities. Here we circle around the complexity and the mess that is involved when people work together across different institutional contexts.

How do we work with complexity and difference?

Working across university and community boundaries has surfaced the issue of diversity and difference (Mouffe, 2007; Ranciere, 2010). Co-production is multi-voiced, and therefore we quote from each of us as we offer an analytic discussion of the experiential and affective nature of co-production between universities and communities. We offer a series of stories, of thinking that is in lived experience, in struggle and in trauma. This discussion sometimes sits outside a modernist mode of critical thinking, but rests in objects, as we discuss below, and feelings. In writing like this, we enact affective relations. In the words of Stewart:

... affect studies offers an ethnographic method of mattering that slows to gather into an account any number of things the modernist mode of critical thinking misses: all the bodies, the lines of things on the move, the widespread joking, the sonorousness, how any line of a life vies with an unwitting ungluing, how things get started, how people try to bring things to an end, why thought as such might become an add-on or window dressing, why conceptuality might take radically different forms, or why it matters that attention sometimes slows to a halt to wait for something to take shape (Stewart, 2017: 196).

As Milton observed, ‘the research is part of your life’. Affect involves the everyday. Things, in the ordinary, carry traces of ancient power struggles, migratory histories. But also, in our discussion, we wondered about whether academics are actually supposed to feel emotion.

Academics are often taught that research is without emotion, impartial, and objective, and much of our training was about excluding the emotion from what we are doing. Paul commented that,

One of the things that happened in my work on the ‘Imagine’ project was a realisation that for community partners this was not a choice, the research is part of your life, and therefore the emotion is embedded – that comes over again and again. Yet as a university academic, I can make choices and decide what my research looks like. ‘Imagine’ was a group of people who worked together thinking about what things meant and what they felt like.

As community researchers and academics, we drew on both insider and outsider perspectives to make sense of our work (Pahl, 2016). Milton commented how he experienced this:

My autoethnographic research allows me to feel. In order to get the frame out, how you structure the research is very valuable in seeking out emotions. My auto ethnographic research is all about emotion. The emotions come and then the analysis comes with me, it is not about theory and practice, it is like my emotions are paramount, in an insider and outsider perspective.

In our work, we have looked at the way in which racism, particularly, was a backdrop to the research and an impetus to do research differently drawing on critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Zanib talked about her experience of racism:

I experienced racism in school in the 1970s and now with Brexit, together with Donald Trump's divisive politics and the Far Right insurgence, racism and prejudice is back again along with rise in Islamophobia. It is also gendered, and as a Muslim woman you feel you are under attack all the time. Statistics on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate evidence the gendered nature of incidents with over half of the victims being women (Faith Matters, 2018: 2). Women are suffering from verbal abuse on the streets and when on public transport, in the local supermarket with their children, and on social media.

We agreed that one of the biggest challenges is prejudice, which is subtle and dangerous, and often based on cultural discrimination. Those who have a strong cultural identity are ostracised, labelled and stigmatised by dominant political narratives that are based on negative images of 'the other'. Cultural racism is a process whereby people are treated in a prejudicial and discriminatory way based on identifiable characteristics (Goldberg, 1993). This type of racism is more difficult to challenge – it is bureaucratic and professionalised, and communities are silenced in fear of reprisal.

To counter this, we identified the need to work with diverse voices in history making (Pente and Ward, 2018). Here, Milton describes the intersection of emotions and the need to work with diverse ways on historical projects:

If we're talking about affect, feelings, trauma, I think some of that comes from a historical perspective. So, I can honestly say since I have been doing the Heritage Lottery-funded community project, 'Windrush: The Years After', run by Kirklees Local TV, I have been feeling more relaxed. I have purposely got a diverse group. It is a project that captures the voices of five generations of African Caribbean descendants, through interviews, artefacts and archives, navigating race, social and economic factors for 60 years. In the project, there was a big discussion about how everybody's got heritage, how everybody's got history, everybody's got culture ... And this process has really given me an acceptance that there are more similarities than differences. So, we, the African Caribbeans in the group, could be challenged respectfully about what is or isn't solely owned by the African Caribbeans. Also, we had an opportunity to see the similarities between African Caribbean culture, British Pakistanis and Indian Muslims, as well as with British and African Zimbabweans.

When we shared our personal histories, some aspects of identity became about stories and objects, about the ‘animated inhabitation of things’. (Stewart, 2007: 12–13). The grip (suitcase) and the sewing machine became symbolic tracers of power and ideologies. Below we explore the intertwining of things and emotion, drawing on two personal stories from Milton and Zanib:

The grip

Milton: My mother came over; she came with a grip. We call it grip, yeah. Jamaicans call this travel case, a grip. And it’s like a suitcase. But it’s not a suitcase. It’s a grip, and somebody says, it’s a suitcase, and somebody says, it is not, it’s a grip ... As an African Caribbean male navigating race for the majority of my life, the grip was part of my unconscious protection and I wasn’t going to call it anything else, it’s a grip.

The sewing machine

Zanib: For me it’s the opposite with a sewing machine which became an object that disempowered me. Sewing was a skill I associated with homemaking, a gendered role with getting married and all that stuff. My careers advisor at school told me you go to a sewing factory that was your lot if you were an Asian woman. The sewing machine became an object of my oppression. I did not want to be sewing machine fodder.

Milton: The sewing machine is interesting, is it because policies were designed to make people live in certain ways? Politically the sewing machine was part of your survival, for us the grip was part of our survival so political procedure and practice dictated our lifestyle and so you internalise that. Another layer, and another layer and all it takes is one incident and suddenly you are in a zone. However, I can forgive racists, as I want to know what put that in their heads – I want to know where that comes from. It’s complex.

We discussed the ways in which the politics of affect play out in these co-productive spaces. We decided that we were powerful in the way we worked but we did not pay attention to the flows of power. For example, in order to produce books coming out of the project, we held retreats, conferences, writing workshops and all sorts of other events that enabled us to develop relationships in the moment (see Cameron et al, 2019). This bonded us as a team. There was an ‘Imagine’ way of working together. We did not use affect as a conceptual frame for what we were doing, but affective relationships were central. We were changed by the experience of working together. Valdimar Halldórsson (2017: 548) has argued that ‘collaboration and other social arrangements are based in the intersubjective realm, in which people, things and events affect one another in multifarious ways’. This was certainly the case within ‘Imagine’. We didn’t necessarily agree on the knowledge we had produced and, on reflection, the work we did on ‘Imagine’ was much more focused on relationships. The ways in which the project changed the academics as well as the community researchers was an important part of that process. Part of that was the relational aspect

of the stories of who we were as human beings. We might not be ‘just’ academics, or ‘just’ community partners, but we might have wider commonalities.

Co-production happens in those spaces where you fuse the two together, the university and the community, that produces interesting work. There is strong intersectionality across these sites, and we argue here that we need to interrogate how power works within those contexts. There are specific issues within universities, and these issues need addressing if community researchers and academics are to work in equitable ways.

To conclude this section, we consider that universities still echo the racism in the culture at large, but there are moments when fusion happens, and it is possible to work together. People carry their histories and identities in with them to the university. Academics need to also allow for change and for learning, to enable diverse voices to come to the table. Our voices are held within this discussion, as contributing to this argument.

What kinds of methods surface hidden voices?

Here, we discuss some of the ways in which we have enabled co-production to happen. We agreed that co-production can feel very real in the spaces where it happens. For example, if it is in the space of the community, for example, when Kate was in a room at Kirklees Local TV talking to Milton, who is its CEO, or Paul and Kate were in Rotherham in the working groups in those spaces, everything disappeared and it was about the relationships happening inside the room as we talked and planned outputs from the research, such as the co-produced and written book *Re-imagining Contested Communities: Connecting Rotherham Through Research* (Campbell et al, 2018). In those contexts, the academics listened to the community partners. Another example was when a group of Maori scholars came to talk to the ‘Imagine’ project team at an event called ‘Doing research differently: imagining better communities in local and global contexts’ (Imagine, 2017). Three Maori scholars (Nēpia Mahuika, Ani Mikaere and Rangimarie Mahuika) spoke in Rotherham, and showed the ‘Imagine’ team that we were doing something that happens globally (Mahuika, 2008). This meant that the people in the audience from the local authority, who were often sceptical about community knowledge, saw things differently and recognised the importance of listening to community knowledge. We observed that we had to have people come from the other side of the world to support our work in Rotherham, to validate local community knowledge. Zanib, in her role as community researcher, makes sure that the voice of her community is heard over and over again, and this event connected her work to global scholarship and community funds of knowledge (Rasool, 2017). In the space in that room, everything was so clear. The problem is that we walk out of the room and all the other things come into play and we lose our sense of direction. As Paul observed, the ways in which the university was set up made it hard to work consistently on co-produced projects:

One of the things I think is that the problem for me as an academic manager [Head of Department] is that in the end my job four days a week is a job about structures of the university. The challenge is then to make all of the legacies of ‘Imagine’ feed into all the other things that I do when nobody else wants that to happen. Their priority is TEF [the Teaching Excellence

Framework] or REF [the Research Excellence Framework] or student recruitment or this that and the other. In the room I feel really empowered – if I took Milton into every meeting I went to, then things would be different. What has been personally changing to me, is I do take you into meetings because you (and other community partners) are inside my head and can tell me what I need to say and do!

We agreed that in terms of methods the key was to host the events outside the university, and to make the knowledge within communities visible, and respect that knowledge. As Zanib noted, young girls from the Roma community will not go to university unless the universities come to them. They are so determined but the barriers are so great. Sometimes, this understanding needs to be buttressed by citations, but we also think it is important to recognise that knowledge for what it is. That might mean different kinds of research methods, which listen to communities, and position them differently.

How can we co-create equitable research spaces together?

The ‘Imagine’ project was unusual in that the community co-researchers got the same amount of money in our work package (the cultural context) as the academics. This was so that the community research teams were paid properly for their work, but also that the universities did not have too many overheads that could use up the budget. The budget was tight. The academics complained that they were not paid enough to cover their teaching buy-out, but not the community researchers. This made us consider what would happen if we were to take seriously the principles of co-production and then the understandings of whose knowledge counts – how does that change academia? Our work challenged us to think differently about knowledge and then who could be paid for this. Milton reflected on this:

I came to a conference that was on the civic university. So, a civic university – for me, it navigates around the individuals – the Kates and the Pauls. It is the structures in the university that are the issue and it impacts on anyone with a humanitarian focus. It is humanitarian to look beyond your own power. What I am seeing of universities is they are not thinking beyond their position. They are just following policy and procedure and practice. It is the structures I have an issue with. I don’t see anybody in there wanting to break the structure.

Paul as an academic also questioned the ways in which universities operated:

One of the universities we worked with are turning a building on a former industrial site on campus into an art gallery and café to be used by the community – these are great things, so it is making the right noises, but there is that thing about why it is doing it. These are really fantastic developments, but the trouble is, the closer you get up to it the more cynical you see them as. I suspect it is part of an impact strategy for the REF, rather than altruism. How do you live with that cynicism? Do we just say here is a university that is providing us with structures with which we can work whatever its

motives are. Should we use the impact agenda to push it to its limits? Part of me thinks that leaving (my former university) was in some ways an act of cowardice – about not staying to challenge and use its agendas to share its resources in the community meaningfully.

Paul also reflected on the ways in which academic writing could create ways of thinking differently about his position within a university:

When Milton and I were writing an article for *Research for All* on how we worked together within ‘Imagine’, I felt very defensive (Brown and Ward, 2018). Milton and I were discussing how universities more often than not emphasise their own interests rather than those of the community organisations with whom they work. Universities are white institutions, so when we work with ethnic minority organisations, there is a double power imbalance. Yet when Milton challenged this, I felt that I should speak up for some of the positive things about universities. There were different power relationships in ‘Imagine’ and power was diffused in the parts where it was designed in. There were limits, of course, but there was some attempt to rebalance authority. I focused at the time on the structure and my role within it, at the expense of thinking about what it meant at a deeper level to me.

Co-creating equitable research spaces and changing structures is not just confined to universities. Communities work with all sorts of institutions. Zanib reflected that,

That structure described could be applied to local government, people just sitting there waiting to retire. People are unable to speak up within those contexts; the bureaucratic structures suck the life blood out of committed people who work in those ivory towers. In any statutory sector, including universities, the structures are like that, unfortunately. How do you change that?

Milton reflected on how much we need to work to make this change happen.

There is this force called the university structure. When I look to universities, I look for somebody who is empathic to what we are trying to do, it is operational staff. When I work with Kirklees council it is operational staff. There is not enough done on leadership to understand its effect. If you go from bottom to top, from communities to universities it’s one story, and another story is the top to bottom from universities to communities and then there is a space somewhere in the middle – you two [Kate and Paul] are different as academics. The African Caribbean community are relying on professionals to make those links from inside.

I wrote a programme for Black leadership and I came to a professor who works in Black leadership. I came to him, but he didn’t like the title and he said he won’t pass it. I was shocked – this man is a professor; he is at the top of his game – he should be kicking down doors for me. I am looking at him as a Black professor to open doors for me – but that’s not fair – as I wouldn’t ask my white professor to do that. I think we give our Black professors or professionals a harder time.

In the 'Imagine' project we had the opportunity to create a research agenda that offered a different vision of what research could be. However, it also needed to create a process that shifted the power dynamics within communities as well. Zanib reflected on this:

I find local authorities are so powerful and the only voice they want to hear is their own and sometimes you feel like you are there as a tokenistic gesture. Until we shift the power dynamics communities will always be on the margins.

At the moment for my doctoral thesis I am reading the work of Michel Foucault which has enabled me to look more closely at power structures when I go to meetings. Now I am getting more challenging – they say, what has happened to you? Foucault in his 1984 interview argues that in power relations there has to be 'the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance, of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation-there would be no relations of power' (Fornet-Betancourt et al, 1987: 123) so we have to keep chipping away the structures of power.

Within the UK, the places where we work can be endemic with racism, as Milton describes here:

I can't get a meeting with my local councillor, but I am an honorary citizen of Kampala, Uganda. When I found out who I was, it was 6000 miles away. I was in a place where Black people were looking at me as different. You would still have discrimination or unconscious bias. I would have diverse universities, with a cultural literacy underneath it. An enriched cultural narrative around the other, so you could walk anywhere, so Paul came to the Kurdish community with me, you had food, etc. I saw the different diverse communities you were going into. Paul became what is called 'Edgewalker' – you are academic – you are the same in an Asian community and the Black community, and you don't change, I don't think there are enough of the Pauls and the Kates who can do that.

We agreed that co-creating equitable structures needs to be done and relies on the university having structural processes and procedures that allow continuity, or otherwise co-production relies on individual academics. The structure of the university operates to silence the voices of the community, and our job is to enable the structures that fuse the two both together. This involves making sure that the voice of our communities is heard over and over again; it is about similar forces happening around the world. The challenge is then to make all of the legacy of 'Imagine' feed through the other things that we do, when virtually no one else wants that to happen – it is not their priority. In the end the process has to be embedded in systems:

Milton: It's got to be operational staff who have access to finance – when I work with the police it is with the divisional commander because their structures are very, very different. So it's the structures that matter. It's that thing about what we do it for, what's the point of it all, you know,

because if the point of it all, is just to make sure that the university just fulfils its core requirements, if it looks ethnically and gender equal, that's all great. But if it's not, if it's just to keep society the way it is, then all those people are excluded will probably stay exactly where we are now.

Zanib: I would say mine and Milton's knowledge is experiential, it is intuitive, it is emotional and subjective, it is the lived knowledge of Black communities, a different way of knowing and seeing the world. It is contextualised and situated in the everyday existence 'as it unfolds to an actor' (Stokerson, 2009: 2). I would say it is new knowledge, evolving knowledge that attracts academics to communities. This knowledge is held by people who 'know' (Mathews and Ross, 2010: 24) and academics have to come and talk to the 'knowers' but this time recognising their contribution to academic research and working in a more ethical way and sharing the power.

To co-create equitable spaces, then, requires a shift in power and trust and an understanding of systems and how they work. Co-production does not just happen, it has to be built up and developed – we have identified that it happened in these ways described above, but these were very located and specific to our projects.

What did working together feel like?

Within the Rotherham work lay complex histories and stories (Rasool, 2018). One of the aspects of co-production we had to grapple with was the way we did not agree. Looking back, we realised that we missed some of the key insights under our eyes and our struggles in representing community voices led to fractures and fissures in the writing that we did. Here, we reproduce the conversation between the four of us about working together. This creates a space for us to be 'in conversation' and offers a more dialogic model of knowledge production practices in action (Banks Armstrong et al, 2014). We drew out the idea of a fusion of knowledge, and that this provided possibilities for change. Kate said, 'I think we need to think in that fusion, what is the co-productive space, if we were hopeful, what would we be asking for. However, this experience of fusion is still ridden with endemic systemic stuff.' Milton responded that, 'It would change things to invest in a community education building that has a direct link to universities.' He continued that 'Affect is political' – it combines how we feel with what change we can affect. It combines feelings and actions.

Kate: My colleague talks about social haunting in the mining areas (Gordon, 1997). When we started, we began with the stories of our lives. They came through all the way through. There was something about us doing that in the affective space. We re-did them in the 'Imagine' space.

Paul: It is how you grasp that and re-do it. We think it was valuable in the moment while we are critical of its big legacies. How can we do something that makes a difference to the way the research is done? The research is about change and hope. It has to be sustainable and be about how you do it again in future.

Kate: It is about thinking about the realities of co-production in these different places. In the Rotherham project we sat in the spaces – of racism,

inequality, and wrote from those spaces. People were situated in the way that – they didn't shy away from the hard stuff, they described it in different ways.

Milton: Do we even know what the 'Imagine' impact has had?

Paul: For me, 'Imagine' was life changing. It changed my practice as a historian completely. The idea of my being a lone scholarly researcher disappeared. My attitude to the social, to memory and history changed completely – to an affective relationship with the past (Tolia-Kelly et al, 2017: 1). Thinking about how you take that forward matters. The legacy would be – now we know how to do this stuff, how do we re-use our knowledge, doing something again, how would we do things differently.

Milton: It would be interesting to see who benefited from the project. Did it work for you [Zanib] as a community of Asian women writing?

Zanib: I did benefit from 'Imagine', had I not met Kate I would never have looked at doing the doctorate, two of the girls in my writing group are also heading to university.

Paul: It is interesting that there were other people with whom I worked who were far less involved in 'Imagine' but benefited from it. The possibilities of what people could do was changed by the 'Imagine' project. One of the people I worked with briefly on 'Imagine' learned how to work with universities and then continued to work with 4–5 other universities in a similar way, thus remaining in control of what she was doing. That is co-production at its finest when a community group goes to a university and does what it wants, without the university saying you need to do that differently.

Milton: In that context, they worked alongside it, not in it so she cherry-picked what they wanted. Can we say that was co-production? I fully immersed myself in it, but I don't think my community benefited. My organisation benefited and my learning benefited. As a PhD student I wanted to be as close to the university as possible and learn the language. Other community organisations can come, grab and go, but for me, I immerse myself in it, and I felt, why are we doing this, why are we doing that. Being outside 'Imagine' works for other organisations, being inside 'Imagine' works for others. The 'Imagine' process has been a fantastic process and it is the start of something we can build on. I asked, why weren't the community involved in the writing of the bid?

Kate: We did that in our work package [as described earlier]. Paul was late to the writing of the bid [due to joining the project later in the review process, when the funders suggested the involvement of a historian].

Paul: I am now in a position where I could co-write with community groups. I actually needed 'Imagine' as apprenticeship for that.

Kate: I have applied the 'Imagine' structures to other projects. I am seeing how the structures of co-production can be applied across contexts such as young people, arts projects, and that thing of having those meetings in a space and nobody owns it and you are hospitable and share food, that structure I learned from 'Imagine', trusting that structure, that works. Seeding meetings where you just listen, and that listening is what I learned. With those meetings, we just sat in a room together and learned together.

I see that as work whereas somebody would think that was peripheral. 'Imagine' made me see what the work is, this is the work.

Milton: Learning the code, isn't it? Learning the code of co-production. Anyone who says they know what co-production is, is lying. Because you learn every time, it's like a chess match, it's never going to be the same. You may start with the same opening, but the dynamics will change, they will always change. It is important to understand the structures I am working with, I go and learn what is the structure of this place, before I start. I did this to learn more so I can go back and empower my own community but doing this I realised I'm standing in the gap. And I can say this, right. There are quite a number of Black academics that I used to give a hard time to, they are saying that we lost most of our leaders to academia ... I always have still work with my community, but it would appear that the community holistically often doesn't want to work with me because it's too challenging. We almost become like the white professors in the university and the white doctors because we speak in a language that perhaps people don't understand. When communicating with my community peers, I try not to be over articulate. I try and break it down, but they still get challenged about things. I think where it is for me is a sense of being exasperated as well as carrying all the hidden insecurities that I have and the community of both self and others and then it all is projected on you because you're the one who was different.

Our discussion was able to hold the uncomfortable nature of co-production. Being both within and without the academy produced what Du Bois called 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1903). The complexity of working within as well as beyond communities was highlighted by both Milton and Zanib. This could be described as a 'cramped space' (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Kate and Paul, meanwhile, described ambivalence about institutional demands and the inexorable management structures of universities.

Who holds the power in research?

Recognition of institutional demands led us to talk about power; we thought through how policies, ideologies and affect work through particular structures of power.

Milton: There's a politics to difference in itself, the difference of danger, the difference of habit and diversity, the difference of everything that matters, I think what I'm interested in is the ways in which these play out in co-productive spaces. That's how, in our 'Imagine' project, we started with a lot of things, we were really powerful in the way we did our project. But I sort of feel like looking back, we didn't pay attention to some of the flows of power and maybe, I don't know, if we want to go back over some of that. I don't know what you think, you know, we never sat down and decided what it is we're intending to do. Because we came together bit by bit in a variety of different ways. And so, we said there was no structure, the power was about the relationships as we discussed things and did things and I think that had quite a major effect

on how we operated. The co-production that I saw through 'Imagine' did empower us because we are in the business of learning and we are determined to get our PhDs. But when I look at who's empowered, the legacy, what is left behind, it's minuscule with regard to the amount of projects it allegedly impacted on. What's the legacy of that? And I think that's when you start to look at power. I push for empowerment, I want to leave skills behind. I want to be redundant when I work with my community. That's real power. Give people those skills to walk into any environment and articulate how they feel. So, I would have loved to have said that co-production is about empowering community groups. But it is also about the resources within universities. I need to learn how I can use them so I can mobilise my community, so I can apply for grant funding when this is gone, so I can set up my own project and continue this work. I don't think we gave community groups that skill. We have said the structures of universities are oppressive and problematic.

Zanib: Because we have been colonised for centuries we not supposed to challenge the empire, we were not supposed to ask questions, we were not supposed to challenge professionals, your GP, your school head teacher, anybody like that. By not challenging, asking questions these roles become more powerful, almost God-like and mirror the institutions they represent, cold and compassionate. The community kind of distanced itself from that radical voice. The professionals decide who gets on the list, because you're a troublemaker and you get off the list of invites. So even if it's something like domestic violence, the group that should be invited would be a [name of group] but they would probably invite me even though I don't work in domestic violence. But if it was just me it would be tokenistic but then if I ask questions, they will kick me off the list!

Kate: We started with the legacies of our lives and they came all the way through the 'Imagine' project, and there was something about us meeting, mingling, and redoing those things in the fusion space. What was it like to be in that space of re-imagining? I think it's thinking about the realities of co-production in these different spaces, and maybe I feel like we're grasping a new language.

Milton: I stay in my community because that's what where I feel I want to work but certainly its complex. So you're right, it's a lonely place, you've got to be so strong.

Paul: Co-production can overtake your life as an academic activist, somebody who wants to see change. You can't back off from it, so in 'Imagine' the community activity was empowering, inspiring and enriching and all those things but I was also doing other things, fighting battles within the university and it was exhausting. Perhaps one solution lies in Daniel White's suggestion that while 'theorists of affect share an affinity in the courageous claim that there is much to be learned (and much yet undiscovered) about motivation experienced not as a story – as, for example, a goal, a personal pep talk, a collective call to arms – but rather as momentum and force' (White, 2017: 178). This means that collaborative activity, even when based on difference, provides a way of researching that adds strength to individuals' endeavours.

Conclusion

In this conversation we have discussed the affective dimensions of co-production. Much of our discussion centred around the university structures being the problem. We also acknowledged that this was relational – successful co-production was about knowing specific people. The sites and spaces of co-production also became very important. In affective terms, co-production is a relational process, and is dependent on people's own willingness to step outside, to 'stand in the gap' and work in that space of fusion. However, there are many structures within universities that make that difficult, and likewise within communities, certain voices are heard over others. We offer this discussion as an illustration of the complexity of the process.

This article has drawn on a dialogic model of knowledge production in reproducing much of our ideas as a conversation (Banks et al, 2014). In doing so, we are presenting an argument about form, about the need to recognise that the academic article cannot 'hold' ideas equitably. We therefore retained the voices of us as authors within this article. We also recognise the power of community co-writing as a form that can open up an opportunity to speak differently, outside the constraining spaces of academia. As Stewart (2017: 196) observes, the affective encompasses 'why conceptuality might take radically different forms', and here the form is the thing, it is the affective space of discussion, disagreement, dialogue and dissensus. Only by making these spaces more open can co-production happen. Our work has often been co-written to enable this diversity to flourish, and here in this article our affective engagement with co-production has been enacted through words, through dialogue, and through silence.

Notes

¹ See www.imaginecommunity.org.uk

² www.virsa.info

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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