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Original Article

Re-Imagining Research Co-Production: Dramatizing a Speculative State of the Youth

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Abstract
This article proposes an innovative approach for attending to and imaginatively engaging with the *co-production* in research co-production. Research co-production is a popular approach across diverse disciplines and national contexts but there are still questions as to what it means to co-produce research. In response to this problem, I propose we attend to and imaginatively engage with the co-production agenda's neoliberalizing concerns, its histories, inheritances and functions, which relate to the neoliberalization of the state, society and the university. Drawing on the work of speculative and process approaches, especially A.N. Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, the article dramatizes a co-produced research project focused on youth loneliness. Dramatization is an approach that seeks to find new stories, resources, and imaginations from which we might find a new beginning for our research practice. Four propositions drive this process of dramatization: inspire research co-production as eventful, admit that which we resist in co-production, move from contradictions to contrasts, and imagine state-like forms for research co-production. The eventful outcome is the re-imagining of co-production in relation to a speculative state-like form that is appropriate to authorize and value the collaborative knowledge that is created in collaborative research.

Keywords
co-production, research co-production, dramatization, state, neoliberalism, speculative, event

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I have been reading about co-production and research co-production since 2009 and my skepticism and scorn have become a humble attention to this idea and its concerns. During this time, co-production has become a global public policy imaginary (Bevir, 2019) and research co-production has created an international space of generative and diverse practices and trans-disciplinary innovation. Amidst this popularity and diversity, there are questions as to whether co-production is merely a buzzword or a "good concept" (Durose et al., 2022) and whether it enables, for example, empowering research or it falls within a long-standing critique of participatory and co-produced practice as a space of control and capture (e.g., Cooke & Kothari, 2001). I argue we can address both of these challenges by focusing on what *co-production* means and makes possible in co-produced research.

In this article I am thinking with the Loneliness Connects Us youth co-research project (2016–2019) which developed through a diverse range of innovative methods to co-produce new ideas, thoughts and feelings—understood here as "events"—about loneliness. The most challenging part of the research was not working with young people to collaboratively inquire about loneliness—creating eventful knowledge—but rather working to translate and amplify this knowledge to audiences beyond the project. Specifically, we struggled to find receptive audiences for the parts of our research that unsettled the individualization of loneliness, evident in prominent methods and theories, policies and practice, which align with and justify forms of neoliberalizing self-help presented to young people (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). Unsurprisingly, within our research were less socially and politically critical claims and these found a receptive audience and greater research impact. It was in tracing the reasons for the control and capture of what is powerful and eventful in our research that I came to understand that as a professionalized and institutionalized practice anchored in the modern, neoliberalizing university, co-produced research is particularly reliant on the authority of those above, beyond and without the research encounter to begin, be valued, and continue. I argue therefore, we need to think within and beyond our collaborative encounters with non-academics to a greater emphasis on the effects of the institutional structures and practices that surround our work. A productive way forward is to imaginatively engage with the *co-production* in research co-production, its histories, inheritances, sites and functions—its *concerns*: the neoliberalization of the state, society, and academic research.

This imaginative engagement develops through the method of dramatization to find new resources and forms of imagination, new ways of staging and re-staging our research co-production practice (Stengers, 2014; Savransky, 2018). This process of telling new stories about research co-production is presented in a non-traditional format, four speculative propositions and an analysis of the effects they create. This approach does not provide a neat and linear account of the research nor a comprehensive account of the ideas presented, nor is this required (Stengers & Pignarre, 2010). The only criterion for success is whether this article achieves an event, creating new practices and approaches to co-produce research. This takes the form of an account of research co-production as profoundly entangled in the neoliberalization of the state,

society and higher education. Thus the necessity to think beyond the research encounters between academics and non-academics to co-produce "findings" to focus on understanding and transforming the institutional, professional and collective structures for knowledge co-production. Following co-production's focus on the transformation of the state, I draw on pioneering work to re-imagine *the* state (Cooper, 2017; 2020) and propose state-like forms—a state of the youth—to create a practice for thinking and feeling in relation to authorizing and valuing the eventful knowledge we co-produce. Although previous work includes new state arrangements for co-production (Durose & Richardson, 2015) and research co-production (McDermot and the Productive Margins Collective, 2020), this article proposes thinking and feeling with state-like forms as something that specifically and distinctively defines the *co-production* in research co-production and in relation to which we must engage with an imaginative project to transform research practice not just conduct research.

The article develops through an explanation of Isabelle Stengers' work on dramatization, the Loneliness Connects Us study that is dramatized, the presentation of four propositions and an analysis of their effects, and a conclusion.

Isabelle Stengers and Dramatization

Forged through generative readings of Whitehead (1967, 1978) and Deleuze and Guattari (1994), Stengers' constructivist philosophy is concerned with the achievement of a new thought or feeling, described as an "event," which is the "collective thinking of something that sets something new into motion." (Stengers in Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 90). In *Capitalist Sorcery*, Stengers and Pignarre (2010) focus on a particular event, the cry "another world is possible," achieved at the anti-World Trade Organisation protests in Seattle (1999). Their aim is to find ways to nurture and protect, inherit and prolong, connect and continue what worlds became possible in *that* event. Their method is to interrogate the traps in language and thought, the words and those that speak them, the "we have tos" and infernal alternatives deployed by the minions of the capitalist state—that risk our capture. They instruct us to find words and chains of meaning that protect both ourselves and these new possibilities born of the event. This is a generative approach for research co-production, which seeks to surface new ideas previously obscured by non-participatory research. However, this process of creating and amplifying eventful forms of knowledge is troubled by the neoliberalization of the state and institutional contexts that pervade co-produced research. As Stengers (2007: 13) cautions, the state, along with capitalism and conformity to public order, are the, "Great Destroyer of practices." There is evidence, however, that Stengers' (2020) position on the state is softening, becoming an inquisitive and imaginative yet challenging engagement with the potentials and possibilities of new ways of doing the state.

The process of dramatization requires learning to tell new stories, forge new alliances with new ecologies of practices, that "situates us otherwise—not as defined by the past, but as able, perhaps, to inherit from it in another way" (Stengers, 2014, p.14).

At first, dramatization might imply spaces and practices of theatre and performance, however,

> To dramatize philosophy is to turn it into an earthly, experimental, and gripping sort of affair: an immanent and situated act of creation concerned with *whens* and *wheres* and *hows*, with abstractions and their consequences, with practices and their dreams, with events and the possibles they create. (Savransky, 2018: 6)

This dramatization develops through four propositions: inspire research co-production as eventful, admit that which we resist in co-production, move from contradictions to contrasts, and imagine state-like forms for research co-production. Rather than true facts about the world as it is, these propositions provide a "lure for feeling" the world the world in different and interesting ways (Whitehead, 1978: 86). We can say, "propositions invite possibilities, experimentation, differing rhythms and movements" (Truman & Springgay, 2015). They combine what is actual and potential, creating new ways of sorting and connecting to possibilities in a world in process. We are free to initiate speculative flights that escape the gravitational pull of traditional hierarchies of knowledge practices that esteem the scientific, empirical and objective over the imaginative, utopian, and subjective (Massumi, 2011). To begin the adventure, Whitehead proposes we alight an airplane,

> It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation (Whitehead, 1978, 5).

For Whitehead (1978, 259; 1967, 244), "it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true." Nevertheless, truth for Whitehead was not unimportant. He proposed a series of rules and constraints for processes of speculation, and sought to think the relationships between the speculative potential of propositions in relation to the actual beyond a simple binary of true/false (Shannon, 2021). Thus, through this article, I attend to multiple pulls of how the propositions create and relate the effects and what was actual and what becomes possible.

Dramatizing the Loneliness Connects Us Study

Before retelling and re-imagining possible forms of research co-production, it is necessary to attend to the specific *heres, hows,* and *nows* of situated problems and contexts. Although it is something of a caricature, we might say that there was an *actual* Loneliness Connects Us project. It was a youth co-research project (2016–2018), funded by the Coop Foundation to include the voice of young people in an emerging national and international conversation on youth loneliness. Janet Batsleer (PI) and I were commissioned to develop a project grounded in youth work, arts and creative co-produced methods to create encounters for young people to name, think and feel

loneliness in new ways so young people might find new ways to speak and navigate loneliness (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). We worked with a core group of 14 young people at 42nd Street, a youth mental health and arts organization in Manchester (UK). As researching loneliness is potentially traumatic, we felt it was ethically important to locate the research in a youth mental health organization that could achieve our concerns for a politics of space, conditions for care and conviviality throughout the project (Bell & Pahl, 2018). This included young people being able to access pastoral and counselling support within the organization and not having to endure the lengthy waiting lists for a referral for care in the UK's underfunded youth mental health system.

Our approach developed out of a distinct set of intellectual and practice traditions. Janet Batsleer working from her long-standing commitments to youth work and social justice (Batsleer, 2008), whereas I was increasingly drawn to process and speculative approaches (Duggan, 2020). In brief, the project grew through 4 stages: develop and build the capacity of the core group of youth researchers through a carousel of moving methods (September 2016–February 2017); a data analysis phase leading to a co-produced youth research agenda (February 2017–June 2017), mobilise the findings into a co-designed immersive theatre performance that was toured across the UK (October 2017–December 2017); and develop a legacy phase where we started to think more deeply about the project's impact, and the "state of the youth" idea (January 2018–April 2018), which is the focus of this article. Through these stages, the research consisted of continuous processes of productive encounters between bodies, ideas, capacities and affects creating or inhibiting new possibilities, new eventful thoughts and feelings about loneliness (Duggan, 2020). These eventful processes occurred and continue to occur; during the research, writing and reading of this work.

Proposition One: Inspire Research Co-Production as Eventful

Inspired by process and speculative approaches (e.g., Whitehead, 1978; Shaviro, 2009; Stengers, 2011c; 2021), co-production in the Loneliness Connects Us research was understood as the collaborative, imaginative and speculative achievement of events and the production of novel data in a world in process (Duggan, 2020). In this approach, events are crucial but for those not used to the idea they are not easy to understand. We might imagine a body of water where each drop is a drop of experience called an actual entity or actual occasion (Whitehead, 1978). In this non-anthropocentric ontology, rather than we humans, actual entities feel or "prehend" and are felt or "prehended" through "prehensive exchange[s] of affective data" (Rousell, 2017, p. 16). Every actual entity was created in a previous event, from the diversity of existing potentials a singular, novel drop of experience was created which in turn adds to future diversity and possibility (Whitehead, 1978; Massumi, 2011). Events are pulsing and overlapping waves of creation, novelty and invention where the infinite diversity of possibility becomes singularity and the emergence of a new drop of experience, or actual entity. Within this technical language, the propositions used in this article are a, "new kind of entity. Such entities are the tales that perhaps might be told about particular actualities"

(Whitehead, 1978, p. 256). This continual eventful movement constitutes the world in process. Our task is not to make definite statements about how the world is, as it will already have changed. Instead, we are driven by "appetition," the restless appetite towards difference, differentials and the diverse data that create novelty and trans-formation (Shaviro, 2009, pp. 90–91). This account may sound abstract, but it has profoundly practical applications for co-producing research.

Co-production is fundamentally collaborative and imaginative, characterized by the rhythmic processes of bringing potentials together, achieving events, and attuning to the created potentials. Rather than focusing on values and principles of, for example, equality or democracy; an eventful co-production focuses on the collaborative de-velopment of propositions or "techniques of relations" (Manning & Massumi, 2014) that bring together diverse affects, materials, bodies and ideas to achieve events or not. These processes are cohered through the creative advance towards the verification that "It Matters!" (Stengers, 2020). Our task, therefore, as we seek to co-produce in relation to events is to "cultivate" and "awaken our imaginations" (Stengers, 2020: pp. 16–17) as we develop our "[C]apacity to answer the cry 'It Matters' . . . a transformation of the way a situation—always this situation—may challenge our modes of abstraction." (Stengers, 2020, p. 15) Speculative and process approaches, including dramatization, are acutely focused on attending to our abstractions, our concepts and ways of thinking, what they illuminate or obscure, make possible or foreclose. We must continually interrogate the effects of naming something "co-production" and the various forms of exclusion and absence, and what this abstraction makes us think and feel, what it makes possible or prevents (Duggan, 2020).

Effects: Resisting Control and Capture

The eventful approach to co-producing research was liberating in the Loneliness Connects Us study. The project was relatively large and complex, lasting 18 months, working with a changing group of 14 youth co-researchers, including over 230 young people, and taking place in numerous sites. It was challenging to think about my practice in relation to these diverse spatial and time scales, as research co-production is often defined by achieving forms of equality or democracy throughout a research project, from planning to dissemination (e.g., Liddiard, et al., 2019). Applying this idea of co-production felt problematic as it might bias against young people that are unable to make stable, regular and long-term contributions to a project. Whereas, including the experience and knowledge of such groups ought to be a priority for research. The shift to thinking in terms of speculative and process approaches orientated towards the event created resources for practice that enabled us to attend to the movement between people, places, and contexts, and so value young people's transitory engagements with the project.

The research progressed through a "carousel of moving methods" where expansive encounters with diverse media, relationships, spaces and practices aimed to co-produce new ways of thinking, feeling and naming loneliness (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020; Duggan, 2020).

We staged and restaged our encounters with ideas, experiences and feelings of loneliness through different methods (e.g., community philosophy, ludic walks, and co-producing radio programmes), different media and modalities (e.g., film, comics, text, words, sounds, and film), in a range of contexts (e.g., youth club space, urban street, theatre, restaurant, and tour bus). It was through these diverse encounters we worked to attune to loneliness in the pulsing waves of events, walking from the safe and inclusive youthwork space to a restaurant with the (perhaps) pressures to socialize in *that* moment, *there*, *then*. Resisting any sense of finality in our findings or a division between research and impact phases of the project, the expansive—or "appetitive"—drive of the research meant we continued to stage and restage the processes of proposition, encounter and imaginative attuning to what was created. Insights from a workshop with the young people fed into the design of an immersive theatre performance which was toured around the British Isles, and then turned into an online game.

Naming an event, something new in a world in process, when it is an achievement in one's own research feels awkward. For the sake of this analysis, the research achieved an event that unsettled discourses that individualize loneliness in research and policy (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1981; DCMS, 2021). Working with a range of young people across diverse contexts, especially contexts shaped by poverty, and utilizing creative methods helped us expand ideas of loneliness to locate it within young people's everyday experience, and so entangled in relationships of poverty, inequality, precarity, and forms of structural oppression (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). The challenge of the research was not so much working with young people to surface accounts of isolation and vulnerability but rather how we might do justice to these young people and their lived experience by inheriting, nurturing, seeking to expand, and amplify these eventful findings we co-produced with them. However, whenever we sought to translate our findings against the individualisation of loneliness, we encountered resistance, control and capture, and the pull to make different accounts of our research—which is the focus of the next proposition.

Proposition Two: Admit that Which We Resist in Co-Production

Research co-production is often presented in relation to neoliberalism (e.g., Bell & Pahl, 2018) but I argue that based on the conjuncture in which co-production emerged it is profoundly entangled in neoliberalism(s) and so it is necessary to imaginatively engage with co-production's concerns in-and-through our research practice. As I advance this proposition, I recognize that as stated above co-production and research co-production are both international fields of practice (Bevir, 2019) but the dramatization approach emphasizes to specific contexts, the heres, nows and hows of the singularities of our practice, which in this case is the United Kingdom. So, I hope international readers will excuse the parochialism of this account.

Co-production was first identified in analyses of community agency in delivering public goods such as law and order in America (Ostrom, et al., 1978). Although a feature in research and practice in international development and developing contexts (Ostrom, 1996; Joshi & Moore, 2004), and there were previous examples of research in developed contexts (e.g. Fountain, 1993; Bennett, 2003); interest in co-production intensified in the UK around the Global Financial Crisis (2008). Leading "think tanks" (e.g., NESTA and nef) promoted co-production as a humane alternative to austerity politics, and a progressive engagement with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Co-alition's short-lived "Big Society" agenda (Boyle, et al., 2010). Co-production was presented as wide-ranging critique of markets, centralized bureaucracies and the passivity of service users in consumer models of public service delivery (Stephens et al., 2008). The scope was society wide, including health, housing, policing, social care, and education (e.g., Nesta, 2012). We can of course locate co-production within a broader context of the succession of managerializing and neoliberalizing public sector transformation approaches, such as, partnership working (Clarke & Glendinning, 2002) and joined-up government and policy (Bogdanor, 2005). Co-production's apparent advantage is explicitly emphasizing the transformation of obligations, duties and re-sources between the state and service provision and individuals, families and com-munities. This locates co-production's concerns in specific spaces, the changing relations between public and private, service providers and service users, professionals and clients, academics and non-academics as part of processes of neoliberalisation.

The intensification of research co-production was catalyzed by the Arts and Hu-manities Research Council's (AHRC) Connected Communities program, which in-cluded the co-production of research as one of the its key priorities. As with the think tanks that promoted co-production as the humane alternative to austerity, the Connected Communities program was presented as a way of providing intellectual engagement with the aforementioned "Big Society" program, even if as a critique of existing policy approaches and ideas (O'Brien & Matthews, 2016: 2–3). This relationship between Connected Communities, the Big Society and research co-production created an anxiety amongst some academics that to co-produce was to be complicit in the ne-oliberalization agenda (e.g., Walkerdine, 2016). Although reluctant to claim credit for co-production's popularity (Facer & Enright, 2016), Connected Communities funded over 300 projects, including many leading co-production academics (e.g., Beth Perry, Catherine Durose, Keri Facer, Angie Hart, Morag McDermot, Kate Pahl, and Liz Richardson).

How to interpret the connections between co-production and neoliberalism(s) is an open question, but I argue for the necessary engagement with co-production's neo-liberalizing concerns. This approach helps to reconcile a series of existing limitations in the field. Facer and Enright (2016, pp.15–19) refuse the vague, imprecise and binary thinking of university *and* community partners and recommend we stop using the label co-production and employ a series of functional categories (e.g., Catalyser, Integrator, Designer, Broker). Although clunky, the binary in research co-production is useful because it is an artefact of co-production's histories, sites and spaces—its

neoliberalizing concerns. A more productive orientation begins with Pahl's (2016) call for us to invert our perspective when co-producing research so the university, not the community becomes the "imagined Other". However, as we dramatize research co-production, making subtle changes in our ways of telling and retelling stories to re-generate our imaginations, we might wonder if this goes far enough? As academics locate young people in a complex system of structures, processes, and experiences relating to neoliberalism(s) we must allow for the young person to look out and find the university as but one star in a constellation of sites, processes and practices of knowledge production and co-production. The young people we work with might be invited, cajoled and coerced to consult, co-produce, co-design or co-create their mental health, visit to the museum or process of finding work. Academic research rightly critiques the rhetoric of public service projects and programs that claim to empower but in actuality extend technologies of control (e.g. McLaughlin, 2015). Understanding research co-production as a sector-specific example of the wider co-production agenda, part of neoliberalizing projects; we might admit the false coin in which words such as democracy, justice and equality are minted in late capitalism, when we make claims that *our* projects empower or enact democracy. This lineage does not negate the possibility of co-producing research in different ways (Bell & Pahl, 2018) but raises questions as to the forms of constraint, capture, and control of collaborative work within and at the margins of neoliberalizing institutions.

Effects: Naming the Problem "Neoliberalism"

This move to understand co-production in relation to neoliberalism might appear counterproductive. Neoliberalism is often understood in terms of the expansion or imposition of market rationalities such as competition and entrepreneurialism throughout society (Davies, 2016; Springer, 2016), as a classed project of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), and making political alternatives, such as socialism and communism, impossible and unthinkable (Fisher, 2018). But there are concerns that neoliberalism is so pervasive and endlessly applied in academic research, and so the profusion of meetings and lack of clarity as to what is and is not neoliberalism in research co-production risks leaving us merely feeling confused and defeated. Nevertheless, readings of neoliberalism help to name and locate many of the various barriers we encountered in academia, the media and other contexts that worked to control and capture our eventful research.

As I explained above, our research event was to challenge the individualization of loneliness in research and policy, which risked turning sensible advice for helping oneself into discourses and practices of neoliberalizing self-help and resilience (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020). Yet, we struggled to nurture, adapt and restage this event beyond the research. While we engaged in a number of activities to communicate and disseminate the research, including writing reports, policy briefs, a book, and an article; we co-produced radio shows; hosted youth and community summits; developed and toured and immersive theatre experience, which was turned into an online game.

Building on the research, our funder invested in the inspiring national campaign Lonely Not Alone (2022) and secured £6.2 million investment in youth loneliness programs, co-funded by the UK Government. My view of the activity emerging from Loneliness Connects Us is not comprehensive, but I have not yet seen something that pushes beyond campaigns, information and awareness raising, depoliticized forms of self-help or peer-to-peer structures, arts and creative activities, and the proliferation of projects delivered by third sector organisations. To be clear, I do not accuse anyone of failing to live up to any standard. I am grateful that people read let alone engaged with work that many people made possible. It is interesting precisely why this task of developing politicized, collective accounts engaging with the social conditions of loneliness was so challenging.

It is not straightforward to identify neoliberalism in a singular event during a research project but we repeatedly encountered a series of barriers and parameters that worked to capture and control our more challenging, critically informed and to us interesting findings. Finding spaces, sites, and media for disseminating these more complex and challenging insights was not easy. For example, our research funder organized a meeting with a public relations (PR) representative. He advised us that, "To get something into the Guardian, you need a quantitative study with a sample of 2000 and a statistic. What's your statistic?" Our study was qualitative and so there was an awkward few minutes, punctured by his repetition that he knew lots of journalists but all would want a quantitative study with a sample size of 2000. The funder representative explained that this research was a response to a previous statistic that identified one in three young people are always or often lonely (Kantar Public & Red Cross, 2016). This participatory qualitative research was to explore this statistic from the perspective of young people. The PR representative exclaimed, "That's that study's statistic! You need a new one." Someone else wondered, "What if we say, 'we think 1 in 3 young people are lonely but actually it's much worse than that!'" In the end our funder commissioned a quantitative survey that was communicated in a report published with our findings contained within. It is important to remember that the project was funded to co-produce research that would inform the emerging debate on youth loneliness but this often took the form of presenting the issue of youth loneliness in relation to fixed agendas (e.g., aspiration and research impact) and as an ever greater and more pressing crisis.

Understanding co-production as an institutional and professional practice amidst neoliberalizing contexts helps us understand the vitiation of our collective imaginative capacities. Janet Batsleer and I were working in a university, funded by a foundation and seeking to work with and influence a youth sector that had been subject to years of underfunding under the austerity politics regime (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015), often having to chase a succession of funding agendas to keep organizations viable. Although there are exceptions (e.g., de St Croix, 2016), organisations and practitioners are incentivised to enact approaches that instil resilience, leadership and social action, aligned to notions of innovativeness, or reposition young people as subjects for investment as economically active citizens (de St Croix et al., 2020). These are not

necessarily negative but these neoliberalizing, individualizing and depoliticizing dynamics represent the forms of control and capture, the "traps" that sap the vitality of the events we are seeking to nurture and amplify.

Although we might want to focus on the quality of the collaborative encounter with young people in our projects, as a professionalized and institutionalized practice, co-produced research is a particular type of collaborative thinking and feeling that is specifically reliant on authority from above, beyond and without to begin, be valued, and continued. Our limited capacities to navigate our eventful realizations across the diverse and plural sites, processes and practices for assessing and valuing our research—particularly in the neoliberalising contexts of late capitalism, austerity policy making and the accelerating academy—mean co-produced research is particularly vulnerable to capture and control by particular practices and parameters for valuing knowledge.

Proposition Three: Move from Contradictions to Contrasts

In this proposition I engage with the task of repositioning co-production in relation to forces of control and capture through an imaginative engagement with neoliberalism and different ways of thinking about the state and the idea of plural state-like forms. Neoliberalism and the state are not usually associated with progressive, hopeful or eventful projects but through an inventive process of turning contradictions or opposites (e.g., the state and the event) in our construction of the problem into "creative contrasts" (Shaviro, 2009), I believe we can find imaginative potentials in state-like forms with the capacity and authority to authorize and value co-produced research.

There are many ways of defining neoliberalism, as outlined above, I am interested, however, in the role of the state and the ways in which the state's authority has been critiqued and transformed through processes of neoliberalization. Emphasizing the state in a discussion of neoliberalism runs counter to ways in which we have been encouraged to think and talk about the issue. Foundational to the neoliberalizing projects were the profound shifts from public to private, state to market, democracy to capital, to business, collective to individual, and government to governance as legitimate and effective sites, practices and logics for values and valuation (Brown, 2015). It is crucial, however, to attend to "actually-existing" forms of neoliberalism(s) (Peck et al., 2012). The rhetoric of de-regulation of the state was equally a project of re-regulation (Castree, 2008). Thus, in order to understand the actual practices of neoliberalism, we need to develop more expansive ideas of statehood and state power. (Konings, 2012)

As the neoliberal project has worked to capture and transform various state sites, practices and processes, in this dramatization of research co-production, we must resist the idea of the single, monolithic state in order to protect against our imaginative capture and explore the potential of plural state-like forms. The classic definition of a state is Weber's (1946, p.78), "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory…" It is

important, however, to recognize the considerable contingency and diversity in state arrangements (Jessop, 2016). Dhawan (2020) invites us to reject the assertion of the unitary, reified and naturalized or essentialized state, and account for the effects of different ways of thinking and doing the state. Clarke (2020, p.215) proposes the state as a "loose assemblage" of places, people, policies and practices which range from the issuing of statutory policies from the great offices of state to the encounters people living with disabilities have with services, spaces and practices of disability assessment. Cooper (2017, 2020) inspires us to playfully and prefiguratively follow the "conceptual lines" of different ways of doing the state. It is possible to learn from alternative approaches to legal decisions (e.g., Hunter, 2015), budgeting (e.g., de Sousa Santos, 1998), currencies (e.g., North, 2008), and ways of constituting polities (e.g., Noveck, 2009). These historical and actual, fictive and/or prefigurative states can provide new parameters for critique (Cooper, 2020), conjure new states into being (De Cesari, 2020), and create new imaginaries and rationalities for ways of organiszing the functions of states or state-like forms. The question is what functions, resources, capacities, and relationships of duty and opportunity are appropriate for nurturing and amplifying events from research co-production?

Effects: Encountering State Phobia

Following this proposition was initially frustrating, as I lacked the intellectual and practice resources within the arguably state-phobic process and speculative approaches that inspired the co-productive imagination I was seeking to articulate (Duggan, 2020). Foucault (2008, 188) defines state phobia as the tendency for "an exaggeration of the negative functions of the state" and "denunciatory commonplaces in which the state was assumed to be fascistic." Dean and Villadsen (2016) illuminate the significance of state phobia to the political legacy of Foucault and the wider post-structural field. The state is, for example, an "apparatus of capture' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 424–473) and "the great destroyer of practices" (Stengers, 2007). Massumi (2015), a significant voice in process approaches, illuminates the role of affect and immanence in politics. He carefully attends to the practices, spaces and institutional arrangements of processes oriented towards realizing creativity. He cautions us, however, against reproducing structures—and so states—in any counter or minoritarian project,

> How can the dominant ideology be changed without imposing a new one that in the end reinscribes much the same structure, and works with much the same presuppositions, as the old one – and is no less a structure of domination? (86–87)

Kujala and Burles (2020) critique Massumi's reading of Spinoza that is foundational to his work. Massumi proposes, "an ethic of self- and collective-transformation by gesturing toward the excessive, productive possibilities of embodiment and affectivity" (Kujala & Burles, 2020, p.149). This account emphasizes the *Ethics* (Spinoza, 1996) but obscures Spinoza's (2002) concerns in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* about the

State and political authority in relation to limits on individual and collective transformation.

This encounter between the process and speculative approaches in the singularity of developing the Loneliness Connects Us research and dramatizing research co-production proved unsettling in that it placed me at the limit of the practice and intellectual resources I possessed. Arriving at these limits on my ability to nurture and amplify the potentials in co-produced research events, the question remains: how through dramatization might we situate ourselves differently (Savransky, 2018)?

Proposition Four: Imagine State-Like Forms for Research Co-Production

This final proposition dramatizes research co-production through imagining new state-like structures with the capacity to authorize and activate collaborative thinking and feeling towards the co-production of events. This proposition is less a clear, single statement than a series of rolling propositions and a continual attention to what was produced. I was asked to help establish a democratic youth assembly for young people living in housing association accommodation across Greater Manchester. Youth assemblies are often criticized for the tokenistic engagement, where young people have presence but little or no power ((Dunne and Duggan, 2023)). Instead, I proposed that we work with the young people to enact a youth state, not focused on the political representation of other young people but with the aim of taking action on issues affecting their communities. From my perspective, this would explore how state-like forms might have the power to authorize its own forms of research and be a site and space for nurturing and amplifying the achieved events. I used £5000 from the original budget for the Loneliness Connects Us research to fund the activity.

The approach to building the connections between the Loneliness Connects Us and this new phase was open and expansive, beginning with a series of encounters for the young people to engage with the outputs from the prior research. I began working with a group of 11 young people from a local youth organization and the housing association. The group attended a loneliness summit we hosted to bring together young people with policy makers, charity representatives and the general public. The day featured a theatrical performance, presentations of evidence from the earlier research, participatory scenario-based activities that wove the evidence into specific situations, and then moved onto exploring practical strategies for navigating loneliness. We began weekly meetings, staging a series of encounters between the youth group and the Loneliness Connects Us "outputs." One week involved the new group participating in an immersive theatre experience, an escape room style encounter, we developed with a theatre practitioner and games designer. Working with an artist, we agreed to focus on a finding from the original research—concerns about social media and FOMO or the Fear of Missing Out—and tried to create a response that. The proposition for the new group was to imagine and develop new resources and repertoires of social practice to help young people feeling lonely. We wondered if we could create something as simple and

powerful as, "do you fancy a brew [cup of tea]?" In the end the group co-produced a 3-dimensional immersive experience that plays with notions of nostalgia, quiet connection, and the joy of missing out.

The activity was a successful youth arts project but, entirely unsurprisingly, it did not succeed in terms of re-imagining a youth state. In fact, a significant limitation of the project was that we did not get to the point where we spoke to the young people about the idea of the youth state. The plan was that we would use the remaining funding from the Loneliness Connects Us to develop the group and then once that was complete we would use funding from the housing association to begin the conversations about what it might mean to create a youth state, run by them and for them with supported by adults working with and for them. Due to a range of factors, including cuts to services and changing personnel, the funding did not materialize, and the work stopped.

Effects: Beginning to Think and Feel Like a State

Dramatization is a, "risky exercise of crafting philosophy in the hold of the events that connect the creation of concepts to the historical, political and ethical dramas that call for them" (Savransky, 2018: 5). This approach brought into tension the speculative and process approaches that I was working with to co-produce research with the institutional and professional contexts of research co-production. Process and speculative approaches are incredibly generative for inspiring, staging and attuning to eventful creations in research co-production. The challenge posed is, however, can we theorize and practice these expansive and appetitive adventures of staging and re-staging our events in different spaces, sites and contexts; especially when co-production is a type of thinking and feeling that can only be authorized from without, above and beyond the collaborative encounter.

During the research my ethical commitments were an ethics of the event. Presented as part of their propositions on research-creation in the development of the SenseLab, Manning and Massumi (2014) describe an ethics of the event as "a collective practice of care", a political virtue in which we fold our concern for individuals into broader concerns for nurturing and realizing events (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 108). I expanded on this via Stengers' (2020) exhortation for, "allowing ourselves to be touched, and artfully giving to what touches us the power to make us imagine, think, and learn" (p. 18). Through the research I understood the eventful happenings abstractly as the combinations of bodies, ideas, affects and capacities. But our task is to challenge how singular situations challenge our abstractions. These "bodies" in concrete terms included academics and young people, the encounters and the potentials co-produced or inhibited were profoundly entangled in the temporalities, affects and constraints of the research co-production project imaginary (Duggan, 2022). The effects are complex but the interactions between events and those working to nurture and amplify them are, in the case of academics, wholly dependent on forms of authority beyond the research, including research funding—or permission for unfunded research—and permission from an institutional ethical review board.

As a way of thinking through the tensions between an immanent ethics and concerns of authority in a research project we can begin with Stengers' figure of the diplomat. Stengers (2011b) presents the figure of the diplomat as a non-modern counterpart to the expert, whose function is the working through of a particular problem, connected to a particular ecology of practices. Integral to Stengers' diplomat is the pursuit of peace between parties in which peace is possible but not probable, and the requirement that the diplomat negotiate terms and the return to those who "have the power to reject her proposals" (2011b: 378). Significantly, Stengers developed the figure of the diplomat as a way of intervening in the 'science wars', mediating between sociologist and scientists (Conway, 2020). Any attempt to translate the figure of the diplomat to co-producing loneliness research, ought to remember Stengers citing Leibniz's advice "'*Dic cur hic* [say why here]'—say why you chose to say this, or to do that, on this precise occasion" (2005: 188). Thus, we would not be interested in litigating the long-established war between neoliberalism and the forms of affirmative, social democratic and/or collectivistic commitments but rather, for example, why this specific policy maker on this occasion is making policy that reproduces neoliberalizing forms of self-help in the programs they fund. It is likely that diplomatic knowledge and practices would be appropriate to working in these interstices, but it is evident that the modest world of research co-production is significantly different to Stengers' diplomatic order of professional scientists and paid academics, populating defined and enduring groups.

When working with a group of young people in a co-produced project, once the research has occurred and we are talking to audiences beyond the project we can reassemble the group but our encounters will be constrained by, not least, funding as experienced in the legacy phase of the Loneliness Connects Us research. It is interesting that Stengers' engagement with ecologies of practices is informed by her skepticism of the continuing role of the university in knowledge production (Stengers, 2011a). Perhaps something is lost in this account of figures of the diplomat and ecologies of practices, an acknowledgement of the significance of alienation in academic practice and the precarity of the spaces and relationships in contemporary academia which anchors research co-production (Hall, 2018).

At this point I find myself searching for a more collective subject for research practice, what I tentatively propose is the figure of the state-like form. Obviously, this would not be the monolithic, unitary state that functions as a form of control and capture but rather a defense of our imaginative capacities from the neoliberal attack on the possibilities of the state. We are not short of affirmative and critical accounts of how this state-like figure might function in relation to realizing and nurturing events. A crucial aspect will be inventing and constructing the infrastructures and collective structures with the capacity to authorize research and activate collaborative thinking and feeling towards creating new data and eventful co-production. This would create the spaces required to formulate problems and regenerate our collective imaginations for careful forms of experimentation that do not fall prey to the traps and capture of traditional state forms, representing control by capital interests and domination over alternatives to the unitary state (Stengers, 2020). We can imagine the functions of a state-like figure to

form the parameters, inspirations and relations of both critique and a speculative, affirmative alternative for co-producing research.

Conclusion

The success criterion proposed for this article was whether through the dramatization of research co-production we arrive at a more interesting position for re-imagining our practice. Through the series of four propositions and an account of their effects, I have come to define co-production as an imaginative project focused on collaborative thinking and feeling towards the realization of events by professionalized researchers (e.g., academics) and non-professionalized researchers (e.g., citizens, communities and publics) developed in relation to co-production's concerns (e.g., neoliberalism, the remaking of the state). In response, working through the singularities of practice in relation to the rhythm of speculative propositions, I came to re-imagine research co-production in relation to state-like forms—a putative youth state—with speculative capacities to authorize, nurture, and amplify co-produced events. Significantly, founding a state is not necessary to co-produce research. Indeed, there are persuasive Marxist and anarchist arguments against the state (Lefebvre, 2009; Springer, 2012). Nevertheless, I argue in accepting co-production we ought to accept and strategically and imaginatively engage with its concerns, and through this process two effects have been created.

One, understanding research co-production in relation to collaborative research encounters and an imaginative engagement with co-production's neoliberalising concerns helps clarify definitions of what co-production is and what the *co-production* in co-produced research relates to, makes possible or forecloses. Although, there are those that would perhaps disagree (e.g., Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), treating research co-production as a sector-specific manifestation of co-production, the global policy imaginary, helps address a number of definitional issues that have long troubled the field (Durose et al., 2022). One, co-production's emphasis on the neo-liberalizing transformation at the interstices of the state and society, service provider and service user, professional and client, and academic and non-academic helps differentiate it from, for example, Participatory Action Research (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2001) does not emphasize the relationship between a professionalized researcher (e.g., an academic) and citizen, group or public (e.g., non-academic). Two, there are those that invest in research co-production practice values or inspirations from external traditions such as democracy, activism, social justice, collaborative ethnography, approaches from the arts and so on (e.g., Banks et al., 2018; Kill, 2022). Although this crosspollination is to be encouraged, we might question calling research "co-produced" and not, for example, Critical Participatory Action Research or collaborative ethnography if it was inspired by CPAR or collaborative ethnography. Instead, research co-production specifically defines collaborative encounters between professionalized researchers (e.g., academics) and non-professionalized researchers (e.g., citizens, community groups, and publics) *with* an imaginative engagement with

co-production's neoliberalising concerns. Three, understanding the history, lineage and inheritances of research co-production as a sector-specific manifestation of the wider co-production agenda helps us question whether certain definitional features—such as equal participation between academics and non-academics throughout the project, from planning to evaluation (e.g., Nesta, 2012)—that are inherited from public service co-production, ask if they are appropriate for research, and develop appropriate approaches for knowledge co-production.

Two, I was tasked with re-imagining research co-production in relation to the role of an authority and capacity invested in the event, and the forms of expansive and appetitive processes of collaborative thinking and feeling in a world in process. This article was not co-produced and from some accounts of what it means to co-produce research this would be a contradiction. However, the work of process approaches and dramatization in particular is the ceaseless attention to our abstractions, our ways of thinking, what they illuminate or obscure, make possible or foreclose. In this case, dramatizing co-production and its concerns provoked an adventure of thought and practice realizing that co-production is inescapably entangled in the neoliberal transformation of the state, that process and speculative theoretical approaches are state-phobic, and the search for imaginative and affirmative ways of thinking and practicing state-like forms appropriate to research co-production. The challenge is finding new practices for expanding a co-productive imagination amongst and amidst the diverse groups involved in research projects. An inexhaustive list of those that made Loneliness Connects Us possible includes researchers, youth workers, funders, theatre producers, actors, and young people as co-researchers and participants. What would it mean to think and feel collectively, imaginatively, and eventfully across these diverse groups, temporalities and spaces? Furthermore, we should avoid non-specific uses of neoliberalism as a proxy in place of an argument (Peck, 2010). There is a question as to what will happen if we escape neoliberalism? Regardless of such changes our task remains attending to the specific processes and practices that mediate, constrain or afford our institutionalized knowledge production—at this point, neoliberalism amply describes these parameters in academic research.

I propose that a speculative state of the youth could perform a series of cascading functions for these collective acts of imaginative and eventful thinking and feeling. For example, one, create the parameters for critique and the production of affirmative alternatives. Two, create an imaginative focus and techniques of relation for working with and around the event, negotiating and thinking and feeling in relation to the authority of the event. Three, inspire prefigurative and imaginative processes to enact new state-like forms not designed to reproduce dynamics of control and capture, destroying new practices, but rather create spaces and infrastructures for careful experimentation and the creation and care for what is new. It is an open question where we might locate this structure but there is a case it ought to be outside the university, with academics as partners and not leading on applications. Ideally, it might be located within an established youth democratic assembly, with a legitimate democratic mandate for authorizing a specific inquiry and the capacities to develop it.

This article presents an adventure of thought, demonstrating—dramatizing—an approach to research co-production which incorporates collaborative and eventful encounters between academics and non-academics but also engages with the necessary imaginative work of transforming the contexts in which we develop our research practice. Working within and against the prevailing neoliberalizing contexts our actions and achievements can appear inadequate at best. The failure to establish the state of the youth, even speculatively in discussions with young people, was a crushing blow to this project. It is only since, working with colleagues, I have received funding for two more projects currently developing parts of the state of the youth that I feel confident enough to write about this experience. This funding has created an opportunity to reanimate the rhythmic processes of the imaginative engagement with the neoliberalizing concerns and constraints on following events wherever they may take us.

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