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The politics of co-production and inclusive deliberation in participatory research

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ABSTRACT

This research engages in a methodological analysis of a participatory art project employing PhotoVoice with refugee and local community youths across two distinct sites: Istanbul and Johannesburg. The project aimed to facilitate inclusive deliberations among the youth, thereby promoting capacity building, reconciliation, and peacebuilding initiatives. Our focus is grounded in the concept of co-production as a practice and principle of inclusive deliberation within the research design, addressing a spectrum of issues from participant-driven research agenda setting, to the design and execution of the research, the selection and creation of photographs, and their dissemination. By offering a critical examination of how inclusive deliberation manifests in co-production research, we highlight the potentials, complexities, and tensions it generates. We argue that while co-produced action research embodies transversal politics, it does not necessarily disrupt the entrenched power dynamics and politically driven hierarchies within the public sphere.

Introduction

The process of 'co-production' as a participatory research method has attracted increasing interest in the literature on youth participation in the public sphere, decision-making, and their recognition as political actors (K. H. Pahl, 2019; Pearson, 2022). This burgeoning literature has engaged with intricate issues, such as the conceptual ambiguity and the critical examination of its normative 'goodness' (Durose et al., 2022), the epistemological positioning of co-production (Flinders et al., 2016), and the often-overlooked role of leadership as hidden political aspect within co-production (Durose et al., 2023).

The theoretical paradigm underlying co-production aims to redistribute power, promote equal and reciprocal relationships (Boyle & Harris, 2009), and challenge conventional forms of participation by offering a more transformative type of engagement (Pearson, 2022). It involves knowledge-making practices through equal participation and deliberation among multiple, and often opposing, voices aimed at challenging and displacing the hegemonic perspectives and interests within the research process (Durose et al., 2012). Participants are repositioned as co-researchers to explore alternative epistemologies and construct counter-

hegemonic narratives (Pahl and Pool, Batsleer et al., 2018). Whilst there are various approaches and modes of inquiry pertaining to co-production (Durose et al., 2022), in the context of our study, co-production emerged as a salient research methodology (Durose et al., 2023). Therefore, in our PhotoVoice project, we combined visual art and oral storytelling, offering a participatory space that enabled the youth with less power to narrate their stories through the research process and to get their political voices, agendas, and aspiration to be heard in the public space. Our aim was to use the potential of PhotoVoice as a methodology to work with youth to share their experiences on issues important to them, making them co-creators of knowledge and creating a truly deliberative space (Senabre Hidalgo et al., 2021; Soma et al., 2022).

There is a growing body of criticism surrounding co-production (K. H. Pahl, 2019; Phillips et al., 2021), particularly regarding the use of trust-building and member checking as means of challenging the epistemic authority of participants (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). Additionally, the motivations and reluctance of participating communities have been found to impede the co-production process (Martin, 2010). Challenges have also been identified related to researchers' time scales, pressures, politics, and priorities, which may not align with those of the communities. Critiques of co-production have also highlighted power dynamics within the research process (Orr et al., 2009) and emphasized the importance of distinguishing participation from collaboration or cooperation (Thiollent & Colette, 2017). These criticisms indicate that PhotoVoice as a co-production experience is a deliberative process, but deliberation is not equal to inclusion. Despite the growing attention towards co-production in research, little empirical research has been conducted to explore its contested nature in the public dissemination stage which is crucial to understand its inclusive nature. To address this research gap, we aim to share our reflections from a PhotoVoice project, which sought to facilitate peacebuilding between refugee and host community youth through creating informal spaces of participation in Istanbul and Johannesburg with its dissemination events, namely exhibitions.

In this paper, we adopt 'inclusive deliberation paradigm' and particularly focus on the exhibition spaces where co-produced artefacts are disseminated in the presence of participants, researchers, policymakers, the public, and the media. This is a rather important phase as Dafilou et al. (2022) highlight seeing the exhibitions as endpoint of a PhotoVoice project limits its potential as a research community intervention and curtails the change and transformation that could take place. Therefore, looking into the how exhibition phases have been co-designed and understanding the challenge of developing partnerships, connecting with the audience within the exhibition spaces can further advance our understanding the issues of change-making.

This paper first looks into the complexities and contested nature of co-production in public dissemination. It then moves to the methodology section and narrates the selection of Istanbul and Johannesburg as 'most different cases with the same outcome', highlighting the unique political and social contexts that may lead to the risk of escalating conflict. The findings are presented in two sections, where the first explores how co-production empowers participants to co-plan exhibition spaces and reach stakeholders to create inclusive deliberations. The second section investigates the complexities of co-production in exhibition spaces, highlighting the persistent power dynamics and spatial limitations that may arise, which can impede inclusive deliberations. The study argues that co-production is a product of transversal politics and is influenced by the cultural and political context and the embodied experiences of the youth involved in the research, which influence the process of public engagement and dissemination and shapes the extent to which deliberations can be truly inclusive. Ultimately, this research provides insights into the transformative potential of co-production while also highlighting its limitations and the importance of contextual factors in shaping its implementation.

Inclusive deliberation paradigm: a comprehensive approach to addressing Co-production complexities

Co-production encapsulates the core principle of collaborative engagement between beneficiaries and stakeholders to attain mutually shared objectives. We designed co-production to create 'public value' by involving communities from the early stages and actively altering the 'social conditions in which they find themselves' (Robinson & Tansey, 2006, p. 152). By doing so, we aimed to de-center power relations and enable youth to obtain greater decision-making capacity (Jones et al., 2018, p. 337; Oliver et al., 2021, p. 2). However, this approach presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of achieving a genuinely comprehensive co-production process. For instance, Davies (2023) focuses on his own positionality in the research process, acknowledging how his personal learning journey interacted with the narratives and awareness of the participants. Nevertheless, a noteworthy complexity emerges in relation to the often-overlooked dimension of dissemination and spatial considerations within the co-production processes. This oversight impedes a comprehensive grasp of the methodology and its effective use. To address these complexities, we posit the adoption of an 'inclusive deliberation paradigm', thereby unlocking the untapped potential inherent in the use of PhotoVoice methodology by focusing particularly on dissemination through exhibitions of artefacts (photographs).

Inclusive deliberation paradigm focuses on individuals collaborating to generate knowledge, brainstorm potential solutionsto address issues, navigate potential compromises, and make collective decisions (Dedrick et al., 2008; Johnson, 2019). Therefore, co-production is deeply rooted in deliberation as a research methodology that involves active collaboration between researchers and participants throughout the entire research process, ranging from the development of research questions to the dissemination of results. This approach places significant emphasis on the value of participant knowledge and experience and aims to establish partnerships between researchers and participants based on mutual respect and shared decision-making. Adopting co-production as a research methodology also provides a unique positionality for co-researchers, who also function as participants in the research process, as reflexive agents engaging in action-oriented research. This reflexivity disrupts mainstream knowledge systems (Enria, 2016) and creates non-hierarchical episteme collaboratively with and among underrepresented communities, prioritising their lived experiences and ways of knowing (Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000, p. 89).

Rummens (2012), p. 27) argues that inclusive deliberation plays a dual epistemic function by enabling the identification of citizens' unique concerns and needs, which they alone possess privileged epistemic access to. This aspect of inclusive deliberation paradigm, we believe, can be achieved by centring the research process on the dissemination aspect, where participants meet the wider public and policymakers. Rummens (2012) also underscores a common critique of inclusive deliberation, arguing that it is primarily confined to the informal public sphere, where arguments are shaped by individuals and civil society organisations. The overall deliberative quality of the democratic process relies on the extent to which these informal deliberations influence discussions in the formal public sphere, represented by traditional institutions such as government and parliament. Therefore, integrating communities and researchers in the public dissemination phase of co-production is a critical step to ensure that the deliberative process initiated by co-production is genuinely inclusive, rather than merely rhetorical, given the prevailing power dynamics.

In fact, the growing body of work on co-production highlights the importance of meaning-making, creating embodied knowledge (Refstie, 2021), or facilitating youth's civic engagement and cultural participation (see K. H. Pahl, 2019) whilst drawing attention to co-production's utopian power to transform (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 106). Romanticising co-production as the central pillar of participatory dialogical processes can create cruel optimism among communities and create dissonance between the project's aim and the political and social realities of the context (F. Mkwananzi & Cin, 2022). This is because, while, in micro-analysis, deliberative actors are expected to

communicate and seek agreement in face-to-face situations, from a macro-perspective, enhancing the inclusiveness of the broader public debate may involve strategic behaviour by certain actors at certain times (Rummens, 2012, p. 25). However, the lack of evidence and research looking at dissemination and impact activities challenges the ways in which co-production and its potential to be transformative may be demonstrated at the end of a project when participants occupy public space to share their outputs and stories. Our implementation of the co-production methodology responds to this critique by focusing primarily on exhibition spaces. We demonstrate the potential of co-production in shaping deliberations in the formal public sphere and facilitate extensive engagement between different stakeholders. Nevertheless, participation on equal footing comes up with different complexities and power imbalances that require critical reflection and trust-building (Chikozho et al., 2022). The growing body of work on the relational becoming of co-production focuses on the critical and reflexive analysis of power dynamics, the negotiation of meanings across different co-researchers (Phillips et al., 2021), and thus giving communities the responsibility to represent their experiences through lenses of locatedness, gender, race, and class to form political alliances to deconstruct everyday structural challenges (F. Mkwananzi & Cin, 2022). Inclusive deliberative spaces surely form the basis for removing any power injustice, yet the possibility of such spaces depends on the extent to which iterative dialogue, solidarity, and collective action sit at the centre of the process as the underlying philosophies of co-production.

Caretta and Pérez (2019) underline the complicated nature of the such processes and stress that participants are mostly involved in the design and data gathering process whilst dissemination is often left to researchers (see also Bell & Pahl, 2018). This is a common reason for the failure of actual deliberation, and it is widely acknowledged that actual deliberations are never entirely inclusive nor entirely free from power asymmetries (Rummens, 2012, p. 27). Dissemination, however, is not limited to academic publications. Exhibition sites and the participation of researchers in these sites, along with the involvement of media and policymakers, are also part of dissemination, making deliberation not rhetorical but inclusive by allowing free, active, and meaningful participation of the communities involved in the research process while enabling them to directly communicate with a wider audience they seek to reach through the medium of photography. Yet, these spaces are also imbued with the tensions and challenges making it difficult to disrupt hierarchies. The youth and co-production literature showcases several critiques speaking to power relations such as misrecognition and lack of recognition of youth agendas, the dominance of adults in the process (Hill et al., 2004; Percy-Smith, 2010; Tisdall, 2017), and the prioritisation of institutional interests (Lansdown, 2010). These power hierarchies often start at the onset of the research process, positioning the youth as passive participants of the process and further manifest themselves in the dissemination and engagement by allocating little room for youth voice and creating deliberations that are not entirely inclusive.

Our 'inclusive deliberation paradigm' embodies the philosophy of comprehensive and meaningful involvement, extending beyond the traditional confines of co-production. It sees public dissemination and exhibition as integral components of the co-production. By prioritising transparent sharing of outcomes with the public and giving responsibility to participants in the organisation of these events, we bridge the gap between the collaborative efforts of stakeholders and the broader community, transforming co-production into a more holistic effort where the true potential for positive change can be achieved. In the next section we focus on the methodology to set out the context how we engaged with limitations of the co-production to make it more deliberative.

Methodology and context

Our data draws on a PhotoVoice project[1] conducted in Turkey and South Africa, the two largest refugee-receiving and hosting countries that provide unique contexts for cross-contextual opportunities for refugees and host community members. We focused on the experiences of refugees, which are inherently central to understanding tensions between refugees and host communities and

the youth's opportunities for civic engagement. Exploring the boundaries of different modes of communication, participation, and the potential of the arts-participation nexus for laying the ground for peaceful relations became a pivotal question to unpack across the project. Therefore, the ways in which we engaged with participatory art as a methodology but also as an ontology in this project formed the crux of how youth envisioned peace.

Our case selection follows 'most different cases with the same outcome' as we worked on uniquely distinctive sites with different experiences of migration and with different policy and political contexts yet shared one common feature of escalating tensions between the communities in each context. For instance, Turkey had an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, allowing them access to free health and education. In contrast, conditions are less ideal in South Africa, which hosts refugees and asylum-seekers from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, among others, and does not have a camp policy (UNHCR, 2023). This means that, like in Turkey, these individuals reside amongst residents of South Africa resulting in a complex environment of mixed populations. However, there were violent xenophobic attacks against refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants in Johannesburg and Cape Town at the time this research was conducted. These diverse policy landscapes, therefore, affect the experiences of refugee youth, yet they also escalate conflict because refugees are seen as intruders who are competing for the scarce resources in both countries. We elaborated on different cases in major refugee-hosting and receiving parts of the world and undertook small-scale research with 22 local and refugee youth across two sites. We worked with 12 youths (6 Syrian and 6 Turkish) in Turkey and ten youths in South Africa (3 Zimbabweans, 2 Congolese refugees, and 5 South Africans). The youth were aged between 18 and 30 and there was a gender balance across all cohorts. We also collaborated with 4 NGOs across two sites and carried out 38 interviews with youth, NGO representatives, and visitors of the exhibitions.

In challenging circumstances, our primary focus was on cultivating trust and establishing rapport with participants. We took the initiative to foster our own 'trust circle', inspired by Opferman's concept (Opfermann, 2020), at the outset of our research by capitalising on the established reputation of the NGOs in working with youth. Our approach involved engaging with young participants well in advance to facilitate the emergence of a 'trust circle' organically through carefully nurtured interactions, creating an atmosphere conducive to open conversations and a collective responsibility for the project. This did not imply the absence of power dynamics within the interactions among researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the youth. The NGOs we collaborated with had long-established relationships with the youth, positioning them as the primary supporting entities. Consequently, while a sense of mutual trust existed between the NGOs and the youth, a subtle hierarchy emerged, with NGO personnel exercising a nuanced authority over the youth, given their pivotal role in providing support over time. This dynamic frequently manifested itself in workshop settings, where, despite initial claims of youth ownership of the process, there were conscious efforts to avoid conflict with the NGOs.

Moreover, the research project's funding originated from a global North institution, specifically the United Kingdom, and involved the participation of researchers from the UK. Consequently, during the initial stages of engagement, these researchers were often perceived as holding ultimate power and decision-making authority. It required multiple workshops to effectively deconstruct these power relations and foster a more equitable collaborative environment. As researchers, our concerted effort to deconstruct these power relations was underpinned by a profound awareness of our ethical obligation, rooted in the principle of an 'ethics of care'. This ethical framework necessitates a critical examination of how inequalities stemming from power dynamics can be mitigated, all while ensuring that our research does not inflict harm upon the communities involved (Reich, 2021). In our case, this commitment held particular significance, as we were actively engaging with refugee communities, striving to represent their interests, and seeking to contribute to their objectives within the scope of our project. Our overarching goal was to ensure that our research could genuinely benefit these communities. Hence, the mitigation of power dynamics

between our research team and both the youth and the NGOs was an essential prerequisite for us to ensure the politics of co-production as much as possible through pre-engagement meetings, which involved socialisation and coming together.

The co-production process of the project started only after several pre-engagement workshops with the potential participants to discuss the project's aimsand to create an informal space for the youth to step in and design the process as they deem fit for the messages they want to share with the general public. Participants were provided with professional and comprehensive photography training in each context that focused on both technical and composition aspects of photo-taking. They were given cameras and sufficient time, approximately two to three weeks in each context, to take 5 to 10 photographs per person.

To maximise the interaction and dialogue for exploring peacebuilding across the youth, we asked the participants to pair with another (a local youth pairing with a refugee youth) as they took the photos. Although the groups got along well, there were some internal dynamics and tensions within the participants. We have observed a more friendly and caring relationship taking place in Istanbul, the host community youth were very protective of the refugee youth due to the increasing xenophobia incidents such as verbal attacks to Syrian refugees when they speak Arabic in public. These protective behaviours were in the form of choosing safe spaces to take photographs or accompanying them at all times. At times, this also meant that Turkish youth might have dominated the decision-making process regarding what photos to take and where to take them for safeguarding purposes. On the other hand, in South Africa, tension arose from some of the local youth's lack of engagement with their peers because of the physical violence and looting taking place against the foreigners in Johannesburg. This inevitably affected some of the participants engagement with another and the political messages they wanted to share.

Once the photographs were taken in such a deliberative environment, we held a number of workshops in each context to select, analyse and discuss the photos they have taken and to design the exhibitions from invitation letters to the curation of photos in the exhibition space to ensure that the deliberative process is also truly inclusive. It was completely up to the youth to decide whom to invite, where to hold, and what photos to display. The selection of photos involved intense and lengthy conversations among the youth, as they considered this process extremely important to the co-production principle in shaping their messages and stories intended for power holders (policy makers, representatives from municipalities and bureaucracy, and the public). As researchers and NGO workers, we collaborated with them to send out invitations and engage with the logistics of the exhibitions. Finally, we had one transnational exhibition in each context that hosted photos from one another.

In the following two sections, following our inclusive deliberation paradigm, we discuss the dissemination aspect of our project. First, we focus on ownership and then move on to outline the complexities encountered during the dissemination phase, highlighting how even projects based on co-production principles can shift towards the end, due to the difficulty of mitigating power hierarchies that arise within the public sphere.

Claiming ownership: the co-design process of Youth-led Exhibitions

The project was initially designed to understand shared experiences and challenges faced by refugee and host community youth, in order to disrupt exclusionary discourses that dehumanise refugees. However, the participants claimed ownership of the project at an early stage in the co-design process by actively engaging with the themes, photo prompts, and stakeholders, and by inviting others to exhibitions in both countries. The funding landscape for these projects is very political in the sense that research agendas are often set beforehand with limited consultation with those on the ground, due to time constraints. Therefore, pre-engagement activities can ensure youth involvement in designing and delivering activities themselves. The co-design process of deliberating on the themes started with such engagement workshops, aiming to disrupt existing hierarchies and power

structures in research relationships (between funder, researcher, NGO, and participant). During the initial stages of research, we closely monitored participants to gauge whether their individual identities were impacting the depth and quality of their engagement. It has become evident that the viewpoints and perceptions of both refugee and host community youths have started to align more closely. So, these preliminary engagement activities have effectively served as a means to break the ice and establish a foundation of rapport.

The NGOs that already had an established presence and trust with these youth, along with the researchers, acted as political allies in expanding their social and political networks to ensure that the project aims could be achieved. This enabled young people to have greater responsibility and control over what the workshops would explore, and how and where the exhibitions would take place, as well as who would attend them. Particularly, coming together with the youth early on, meeting them prior to the start of the workshop, talking through the processes, expectations helped them to develop their own visions to the process, enabling them to develop a sense of community and desire to be in charge of the process. Hence, instead of distancing apart, they started to form a collective identity as their views and perception started to change.

During the co-design process in Istanbul, an introduction meeting was held where a Syrian refugee youth expressed scepticism regarding the focus on shared everyday inequality experienced by Turkish and Syrian youths. Instead, he proposed a shift towards capturing photographs that depict peace, hope, and reconciliation between the two communities (male Syrian Refugee);

> I think it would be much helpful for us to talk about peace and what could bring us together. I don't think talking about the inequalities will take us anywhere, that's what I have been doing since I arrived here as a refugee. I want to look into future and explore how we can live together. (Syrian male refugee)

This was a critical moment for opening the epistemic space and shaping the agenda of the type and content of work needed for refugees, and his proposal was unanimously supported by other youth in the group. By claiming the research space early on, participants felt more comfortable articulating and sharing their feelings, ideas, narratives, and photographs with each other, developing a collective voice under adverse hermeneutical conditions. Additionally, this helped the youth build a strong bonding group with one another.

In the context of the 2019 xenophobic attacks that occurred in Johannesburg, the youth in the South African community recognised an opportunity to showcase how refugees and host communities can peacefully coexist through mutual understanding. They aimed to depict everyday life and the duality of nationalities within the community in a positive light, rather than highlighting any negative or hostile experiences they may encounter. The focus was on presenting a harmonious coexistence between refugees and the host community. As stated by one of the Congolese refugees involved in the project:

> At such a critical time like this, we need to stand together more than ever and show unity, it is a unique opportunity for us to overturn these xenophobic attacks, and this is the message I want to give to policymakers and people in the exhibition. (male Congolese refugee)

In both contexts, the participants claimed ownership of the project, participated in the art exhibition, and enjoyed the opportunity to showcase their work and develop a deeper understanding of each other's culture in the inclusive deliberative environment created. This indicates that the co-production research yielded a notable effect in fostering a convergence of perspectives among diverse stakeholders over the course of the study by 'bringing together different stakeholders who normally may not interact with each other' (De Jong et al., 2016, p. 27). So, our delicate design of the exhibition spaces as an integral part of the research process appeared quite fruitful. For instance, a South African youth commented on how he had become firm friends with the refugee youth he worked with after the project and highlighted the importance of the training workshops and brainstorming sessions as spaces for politicising their struggles and building a critical dialogue to claim a space. Having control over setting the agenda at the onset also helped them plan the

exhibitions, decide on the exhibition spaces, and choose whom to invite because their stories in the photographs had a specific target audience. They have indeed cultivated a shared collective identity under the label of 'youth'. Both the process of planning the exhibitions and the interactions during the exhibitions served as spaces for more inclusive communication and deliberation.

In Istanbul, the focus of the photos was to share them with the public and engage with the public as much as possible to change the narratives, stories, and stereotypes about refugee livelihoods. Therefore, the exhibition was held in the most lively area of Istanbul, at a 16th-century Ottoman Pavilion. On the other hand, the photos, and stories of participants in Johannesburg were intended to address policymakers, NGOs, academics, and researchers who are working with refugees to ensure that their voices are truly represented. Unlike in Istanbul, the youth had little faith in changing the public discourse, particularly at a time when xenophobic attacks were at their peak. They found it more valuable to come together with those who are working with them and supporting their cause, to expand their political and social network for political alliance, despite the fact that this limited their engagement to those sympathetic to them. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. As F. Mkwananzi et al. (2023) argue, building alliances and moving to the grassroots level to form a cross-institutional network with more powerful actors is vital for the youth leading precarious lives to ensure that their political voices are heard and supported. The impact of setting the agenda and co-designing the aims and outcomes of the project also had several implications for the exhibition spaces, such as the participants' growing unity and mutual support as they bonded together with a shared spirit of collaboration to express their unique perspectives shaped by personal experiences. This progression serves as tangible evidence that their individual identities were blending into a collective whole, and their viewpoints and perceptions were gradually aligning. In Figure 1, we highlight the process and steps of such collaboration.

Agenda setting and co-designing exhibition spaces also required the input and collaboration of us, as co-researchers and NGOs. As the participants set the agenda and claimed the ownership, in an attempt to ensure equitable partnership, we, as the researchers in collaboration with the NGO workers created a safe 'space within the research community where passion and rigour boldly intersect out in the open' (Leavy, 2020, p. 21). This aspect of the project was indeed the first step to creating 'invited space' for political engagement despite its own challenges manifesting themselves

Timeline Diagram of Co-production

1. **Design of Themes and Objectives**
This is the phase where we re-evaluate the project objectives and give the participants room and space to explore and decide on the themes they wish to address

2. **Taking Photographs**
Deciding on where and how to take photographs, discussing possible locations where they could freely walk to capture the photos speaking to their themes

3. **Photo Selection Process**
This involved two rounds of co-analysis of photographs and iteration of deciding which photos reflect the themes identified by the group

4. **Co-Planning Exhibition**
Deciding where the exhibition should take place, who should be invited, the design of invitations, and how the photos should be presented

5. **Exhibition Space**
Discussions on how they will engage with the audience, what participants will tell about their photographs, what they will say in media interviews,
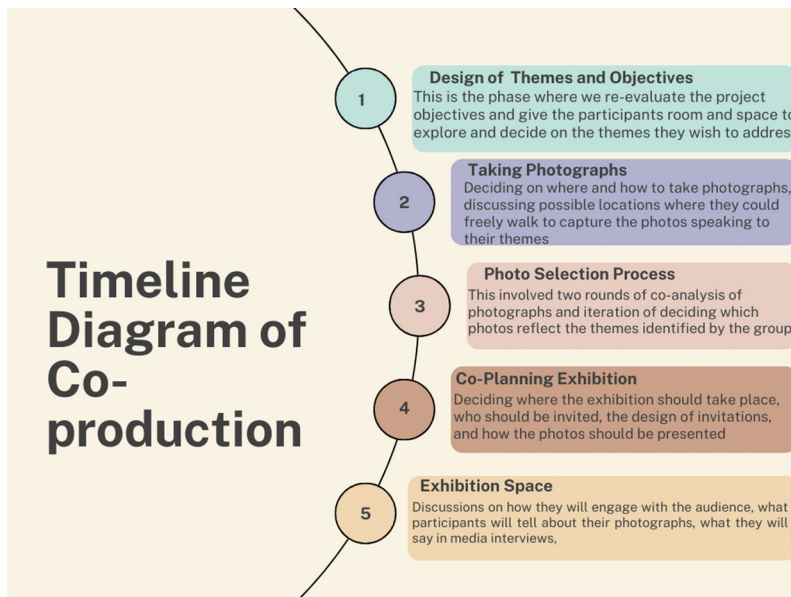
Figure 1. Timeline of Co-production phases.

in different ways. In this process, inclusive deliberation manifested a crucial role: the creation of a public that consciously acknowledges common needs and interests. However, this space is not always without tensions. In the next section, the paper turns to consider the complexities of co-production in the process of dealing with private and closed public spaces, the processes of photo-taking and dissemination.

Complexities of co-production in the exhibition spaces

Claiming ownership of the process and setting the agenda appears to be the empowering aspect of co-production, as it offers a space to create shared meanings and inclusive deliberation. However, it brings a lot of complexities and challenges in creating an inclusive space due to the heterogeneity of ways of knowing, perceptions, priorities, and research agendas, and their subjective lenses which then challenges the inclusivity aspect of deliberation. Going beyond Beauvais (2018) argument that inclusion should precede deliberation in order to enhance the quality of democracy, we should note that inclusion is not the same thing as having the same level of participation in decision-making. Although the value of co-production emanates from its role in facilitating the construction of 'mutually agreed-upon knowledge' (Caretta, 2015, p. 2) and its role in empowering participants, it may lead to tokenistic addition of participants in the research process. This may be the case when the research process is not co-designed to fit the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups (Phillips et al., 2021, p. 1291). In this project, we encountered two persisting complexities of co-production in two different settings that challenge the inclusive deliberation paradigm: power dynamics in the Istanbul site and spatial limitations in Johannesburg. While both sites presented distinct challenges, it became evident that the dynamics of power were more pronounced in the Istanbul location, whereas the Johannesburg site grappled more significantly with spatial issues. We posit two primary reasons for this divergence in concerns. First, the Istanbul location was deeply embedded in asymmetrical power relations. The exhibition process was publicly accessible, situated centrally within Istanbul, and at a historically significant site and designed to allow inclusive deliberation from the beginning. This centrality and historical significance inevitably meant the inclusivity of additional stakeholders in determining the appropriate use of such heritage sites. In contrast, the Johannesburg exhibitions coincided with xenophobic events and lootings in the city. These external factors compelled researchers to adopt a more closed exhibition format and to undertake carefully controlled photo shoots, which challenged the notion of inclusivity beyond the design of the co-production research process. This was imperative to ensure both the safety of the researchers and to facilitate public engagement within a closely monitored environment. Below, we narrate how each exhibition site was dominated by a contextually unique challenge and how this affected the co-production space and process and the extent of inclusive deliberation facilitated in each site.

Exploring power dynamics in Co-production research processes

Power dynamics are an "intrinsic, productive force in bringing 'co-production into being" (Phillips et al., 2021, p. 1291), and power differentials between researchers and communities can impede the creation of inclusive deliberation spaces (Caretta & Riaño, 2016). Involving community members at the onset of the research process (inclusivity) and engaging in 'equal partnership' with them is one way of addressing power imbalances and facilitating mutual learning (Abma, 2019). As outlined above, in both sites, our co-production research process started with participants claiming the space, setting the research agenda, and having a voice in how and what aspects of their lived experiences they want to present. Power dynamics played an important role as the project's funding came from a Global North country. We sought to tackle this complexity in the initial stage by developing the research proposal in collaboration with NGOs and community youth leaders in each country. We reset and redesigned our research process with the inputs received from pre-

engagement workshops that gathered researchers, NGOs, and refugee youth. We diversified the number of stakeholders and enabled a vibrant and safe environment for participants to engage in meaningful participation, so that they could change the agendas to accommodate their priorities. This has allowed us to tailor the research design to fit the specific needs of the participants to allow them to engage in meaningful deliberations.

We noted that power relations played an important role in the co-production of research space, particularly in the Istanbul site in different ways that challenge the inclusive deliberations that we were hoping to reach. As the group gathered and visited different sites of Istanbul together for outdoor training with the photographer, who also paid utmost attention to equalising voices and giving equal time and space to each participant to reflect their voices, the youth developed an enormous collaborative spirit and negotiation process, and their perceptions were coming even more closer during the course of the study. They decided to take the photographs as a group rather than in pairs, using the signature of Istanbul PhotoVoice, and refused to put their names under individual photographs they had taken, reflecting a collective consciousness and solidarity with each other. This experience has shown that the success of co-production in producing inclusive deliberations.

Yet, despite developing a strong bond and relationship with each other throughout the research process, power imbalances during the planning of the exhibition and the interaction in the exhibition spaces left out some voices, restricting the inclusiveness of the deliberative process. After the photo-taking process was completed, the youth launched a process of co-designing the exhibition invitations, choosing the public space they wanted to use for exhibitions and listing the key people they wanted to invite. They wanted to hold the exhibition in a central location in Istanbul that could be accessible to people from different backgrounds. Therefore, the exhibition was held at Hünkar Kasrı, an Ottoman Pavilion in Eminönü, opening to the Grand Bazaar but adjacent to the New Mosque (Yeni Camii), attracting many people from residents to tourists.

However, the selection of photos to be exhibited was not an easy or straightforward process. Although the youth collectively decided on the photos they wanted to share with the public and prepared captions for each photo, the management and curator of the exhibition space engaged in a second round of photo selection due to the fragility of the political climate in Turkey. This was done to ensure the safety and security of participants and to prevent their stigmatisation in public and the exhibition space. In this process, some photos selected by participants were taken out on the grounds that they may trigger a reaction from the public and community. These photos included images of the LGBTQ+ flag or anonymised photos of children selling water on the streets to highlight the issue of child labour. This meant that some voices were silenced and censored, showing how power and privileges can foster exclusions (Bain & Payne, 2016). While our expectation was for the integration of the dissemination (exhibition) into the co-production process to augment the inclusive deliberative quality, unanticipated challenges surfaced during this phase. These challenges compromised the efficacy of the co-production process, ultimately leading to the failure of inclusive deliberation as social hierarchies remain difficult to disrupt. As a result, the voices endorsed by dominant actors continued to receive institutional and social validation in public, making the participation of seldom-heard voices tokenistic.

The power dynamics also played a constraining role during the interactions in the exhibition space where a well-attended opening ceremony was organised and press, local, and national-level policymakers visited the exhibition spaces, and interviewed the youth. The initial formal ambiance of the exhibition space made some participants uncomfortable in their interactions as they felt lost and intimated about the messages they wanted to give out to the policymakers. This partly stemmed from finding themselves in a formal space where the discourses of communication were alienating for some of the participants who were not sure how to voice their demands. As the local media was there to record the voices of the youth and interview some of them to publicise the exhibitions, there was a fear among the refugee youth about not being able to present themselves and their communities in the way they wished to do. The environment they found themselves in the first hours of the

exhibition was also shaped by power hierarchies between policy-makers and youth. Although youth wanted to interact with the policy-makers during the exhibition to get their voices and messages communicated, they ultimately found themselves in a less engaging conversation but a more formal and transactional one in which they were asked to list their needs. Yet, once the policy-makers left the exhibition space, they felt more open and comfortable as the press approached them, made informal interviews, asked about the photos they have taken and gave them the opportunity and space to talk through some of the photos. This meant that the spaces could be both formal and informal, depending on which 'power-holding' stakeholders were engaged and how these spaces were shifting and fluid, relocating power to the different actors. Once those considered more authoritative figures left, the youth felt they had control of the exhibition space and were more confidently interacting with both the local media and the public.

The final manifestation of power dynamics was observed in the exhibition participation process which underscores a notable limitation of the inclusive deliberation paradigm. One crucial aspect of the project was its gender-sensitive approach, which included allocating a portion of the budget for child-care facilities to enable the participation of refugee youth with care responsibilities. However, one Syrian participant was unable to fully engage in the exhibition design and process as she was caring for two babies. Despite the child-care support provided by the project, she refused to use it, as she believed her babies were too young to be left with anyone. Although other youth encouraged her to bring her babies to the exhibition space, as she had done for some workshops, she was hesitant to do so. She feared negative reactions in the midst of a growing public discourse against Syrian women. Her reluctance and lack of motivation to be physically present in the exhibition space were shaped by deeply contextual, uneven, and predefined power structures she faced in her everyday life. This suggests that there are limits to so-called 'inclusive' nature of the deliberative paradigm in relation to the researched/researcher dynamic. The empowering and agentic process of agenda-setting, photography training, photo-taking, and making took place in safe community and public spaces created by the NGOs and researchers. However, as the youth encountered public sphere actors such as policy-makers, visitors, and the public, they had to negotiate power relations and navigate power asymmetries, which made some aspects of the participatory research 'less partici-patory and democratic' (Janes, 2016), thereby noting the limitations of the inclusive deliberation paradigm. Whilst Istanbul exhibition sites were imbued with contesting relations power, when we turn to Johannesburg site, we see space-related limitations.

Creating safe spaces in times of political unrest

Another complexity encountered in co-production is creating safe spaces to articulate what is often not expressed in public and to form new narratives and truths. Space is fundamental to the idea of representation because it can set boundaries and lead to a symbolic representation of marginalised groups if it is exclusionary. Creating safe space is essential for inclusive deliberation and crucial to create a boundary space that merges different social worlds, identities, and realities for genuine collaboration and the production of knowledge (Durose et al., 2012). Spaces that decentralise hierarchical relationships of power and control among different groups can create an inclusive deliberative environment where facilitation, knowledge exchange, and communicative processes take place based on openness and deliberation (Pahl et al., 2010). In particular, non-formal spaces play an essential role for marginalised and less powerful populations as they seek to align themselves with more powerful actors to gain legitimacy and avoid experiences of abjection (Tyler, 2013).

In this project, accessible and safe space, particularly for South Africa, played an important role in creating a different reflection on the politics of location. While xenophobic violence and targeting of immigrants is a regular occurrence in public space in South Africa, during this research, a renewed flare-up of xenophobic riots occurred across the city of Johannesburg. Participants who are generally vulnerable to this violence expressed extreme concern about their condition, and many were hesitant to proceed with the project. Some participants managed to

take pictures in public spaces before the riots, whereas many felt it was too dangerous to 'stand out in public as an immigrant in the city.' However, South African youth involved in the project were very sympathetic to the plight of the immigrant youth and notably against the wave of xenophobic violence. The threat of exposure in public space moved many participants to continue with PhotoVoice in private and closed spaces, taking pictures in homes, restaurants, and at college. These spaces were perceived as safer and, while semi-public, still afforded a level of safety and protection. This liminality of the space urged them to create 'private' public spaces which meant safe and secure public spaces open to only invited subjects of the public for dissemination. Therefore, the dissemination of the images was also held in a semi-public space, in a private venue (the exhibition hall of a well-protected hotel) with limited access to the general public. The youth decided to invite only those who are closely working with the refugee populations, activists or public officials working for refugee advocacy to expand their network of support. The discussions around whom to invite and where to hold the event also provided an opportunity for us to reconfigure our roles and responsibilities—participants, researchers, and NGO workers alike—to collaboratively create a space that fostered a dynamic context and rich interactions, allowing for multiple narratives to emerge and ensuring that inclusive deliberations were effective. Within this created space, our aim was to create a learning community to discuss the ways in which to counter the regimented and dehumanising anti-refugee sentiments.

In the end, the exhibition was well attended by 100 researchers, policy-makers, diplomats, and service providers to refugee youth, and only those with invitations were accepted to the meeting hall. While these strategies appear to limit inclusivity of potential deliberations to emerge in the exhibition space, we managed to create a safe space to respond to the increasing level of anxiety among refugee youth. Even in this setting, immigrants were hesitant to attend an evening event due to violence. Private transport was arranged to pick up and drop off participants at home so that they were not exposed while walking on the street. Despite this arrangement, one of the refugee youths chose not to attend the exhibition as he feared the violence he might experience as he stepped out of his community. The ongoing lootings and assaults against refugees reduced many participants' freedom of movement, affecting their ability to genuinely engage with local youth to participate in the co-production process, although they all attended the workshops, engaged in the photo-making process, selected the photos, and designed the exhibitions. They did have the opportunity to postpone the exhibition to a later time when they could safely interact with the public, but they wanted to hold and be part of the exhibition as they thought it would be timely to give out a strong message as a form of resistance to the escalating xenophobia. The safe and refugee-friendly space encouraged the youth to engage meaningfully and enthusiastically with the audience. In particular, having high-profile attendees, including diplomats and policy-makers from municipalities, gave them a unique chance to engage with those in power and the political will to listen and attend to alternative narratives, which made up for the adverse condition of not being able to have a public engagement.

However, the South African experience was still a co-produced and negotiated space that was an act of agency. Despite fears of real/perceived violence, the youth's deep commitment to organising, setting up, and attending the exhibition as an act of resistance challenged the wider social and political narrative during a period of instability and civil unrest and created a deliberative environment. The local youth, NGO workers, and researchers aimed to mitigate the tensions experienced by refugee youth to a large extent by creating regulated spaces for inclusive, safe, peaceful, and meaningful participation. Yet, the timid engagement of refugee youth from time to time showed that these spaces could not be disconnected from the political and social fault lines of the riots happening in the city. What this experience shows us is that to create spaces for inclusive deliberative encounters, even during times of political upheaval, refugees should be the co-producers of emergent responses and subjects of policy interventions. Non-formal but safely guarded spaces, such as the one created in Johannesburg, provide a good base for both the youth

and policymakers to step out of formal structures, boundary spaces, and modes of deliberation that may have institutionalised hostilities to discuss specific strategies and different narratives (Batsleer et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This paper has presented the inclusive deliberative potential of co-production process in participatory research. It has highlighted that creating accessible spaces and enabling meaningful interactions is an important aspect of co-production to open up embodied and experiential ways of knowing to enable inclusive deliberations paradigm. Our reflective account taps into an under-researched aspect of co-production: the exhibition spaces and dissemination practices which we identify as critical stages for inclusive deliberations to work effectively. While power imbalances and subjectivities are well researched in co-production process, little research exists on what happens when the products, counter-narratives, and experiences within the co-produced spaces are widely shaped with the public to introduce heterogeneity of expressive capacities and knowledge (see Cin et al., 2022).

In light of the objective of the PhotoVoice – to recalibrate power dynamics – it is evident that such structural dynamics are resistant to change making the deliberative process not entirely inclusive. We show that participatory studies necessitate persistent, critical, and collaborative engagement with the analysis of power relations which consistently exerted influence on both the exhibition and dissemination spaces in both of our contexts. Such influences posed challenges to fully empowering researchers to autonomously shape the narratives or adjust their interactions with the public. However, this does not imply an ineffective process. Notably, there were discernible instances of change, achieved by engaging influential stakeholders, especially those crucial to policy change, and by fostering shifts in public perceptions.

The power relations manifested differently across two distinct sites. While the pre-engagement workshops in each country served as a means to foster unity among the youth, facilitating the co-production process, they also provided a space for inclusive deliberation on how to manage the project. This led to a sense of ownership among the youth, forging strong bonds and forming a collective identity, particularly evident in Istanbul. However, it is important to acknowledge that the political context played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the PhotoVoice project in Johannesburg. The growing anti-immigration sentiment in the region influenced the photo-taking and exhibition phases of the co-production (See Figure 1). Some participants in Johannesburg were constrained to using indoor spaces due to external pressures, and the exhibition spaces were limited to indoor venues. Consequently, the sense of collective identity that existed in Istanbul was not as strong in Johannesburg. This leads us to a critical reflection on the role of participatory methodologies. While the way in which these methodologies are conducted is crucial, it is equally important to recognise that they do not operate in isolation. The broader political and spatial contexts in which they are carried out have a profound impact on the outcomes and the extent to which participants can claim ownership of the process. So, the power dynamics and inclusive deliberative outcomes of participatory projects can vary significantly depending on the specific context in which they are taking place. Understanding and addressing these contextual factors is essential for achieving meaningful and equitable co-production and collective empowerment among participants.

We conclude that power dynamics and the creation of safe and accessible deliberative spaces play a significant role in co-production research process. Power imbalances can hinder the creation of inclusive spaces, but equal partnership with community members can address these imbalances and facilitate mutual learning. Despite efforts to disrupt social hierarchies, seldomly heard voices can still be tokenistic, and the institutional validation of those in power persists. We also show that creating safe and regulated spaces for inclusive deliberation was essential in mitigating the tensions experienced by refugee youth during a time of political unrest, as we explored through the case of

South Africa. Non-formal but safely guarded spaces can provide a base for both marginalised groups and policymakers to engage in inclusive deliberations.

We illustrate that for many youths, the process of collaboration and co-production offered reflective, dialogic, and deliberative interactions. Yet, transferring these interactions and experiences to a wider public platform through exhibitions invokes tension between creating a space for multiple voices and closing down the articulation of those voices (see also Martinez-Vargas et al., 2024). Such tensions emanate from oppressive modalities of politics infusing into public space, creating a dominant hegemonic narrative and perspective that rarely gives an opportunity for diverse epistemological spaces (Mkwananzi et al., 2021).

Data statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and its potential re-use, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available.

Note

1. Ethical approvals for this research were obtained from three institutions located in Johannesburg, Istanbul, and the UK (where the research funding was received).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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