The impact agenda: values, barriers and transition

Emphasis in the UK on the societal impact of academic research has sparked growing debate about the Research Councils UK impact agenda. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the current UK system for assessing research quality in higher education, introduced measurement of research impact in 2014. The next REF, potentially in 2020, will again incorporate impact case study review alongside existing assessments of academic publications. Some oppose the 'impact' agenda as a facet of academia's increasing neoliberalisation (Slater 2012). Yet many who cautiously welcome it seek to amplify its potential for supporting social justice and social change, aiming to reconcile this potential with the conundrums which the impact agenda creates for co-produced research. Co-production is an increasingly popular approach which can "simultaneously yield greater academic insight and public benefit" (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016, p.11). This paper contributes to these discussions through reflections on the process and impacts of a recently-conducted, co-produced research project.

Co-production relies on collaboration between academic and non-academic research partners to produce both practical and academic knowledge; it has lately received increased recognition from research institutions because it is "perceived as a solution to an argued 'relevance gap'…and to the demands of 'impact'" (Durose et al. 2012, p.2). The top-down and market-relevant impacts favoured by the impact framework undermine collaborative impacts typically sought through co-production approaches. Analysis of REF 2014 impact case studies found the top three impact categories were 'Technology

Commercialization', 'Parliamentary Scrutiny' and 'Influencing Government Policy' (Kings College London and Digital Science 2015, pp.30–31). Another category, 'Community and Local Government', implies that impacts relevant for 'communities' must happen through local government. The framework makes meaningful co-design of desired impacts with non-academic research partners and users difficult, because funding is awarded after researchers submit impact statements. Many significant impacts from co-produced research struggle to follow 'Pathways to Impact' because of impact's marked linearity: predicting impacts, executing plans, and reporting after research concludes (Pain et al. 2015; Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016).

However, the evolving impact agenda remains alterable. The recent independent REF review recommends interdisciplinary collaboration and broader interpretation (Stern 2016). Studies on participatory and co-produced research and its relationship to impact assessment suggest improvements and raise questions (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016; Pain et al. 2015). Communities involved in research should be involved in defining impact, and small-scale impacts recognised as significant. Process-driven impacts deserve recognition; and what about impacts generated by non-academic collaborators, and serendipitous impacts (Pain et al. 2015)? Co-production partners also impact academia – for example by affecting what is taught. This is noted in the Stern review (2016), but not addressed. In addition to research on impact and co-production which aims to help shape this agenda, other engagements demonstrate diverse approaches to evidencing impact, as well as echoing concerns raised above (cf Whittle et al. 2011; Conlon et al. 2014; Macpherson

et al. 2014; Pain 2014; Pickerill 2014; and Veale 2014). This paper highlights facets and outcomes of my own experience of co-produced research, and advocates an approach to impact which promotes ethical deliberation and aims to enhance societal capacity for empowered autonomy.

I argue that for the impact agenda to achieve its stated purpose it must promote research approaches which develop values-based rationality and practices. In so far as it engages research partners in collaborative research processes, co-production promotes dialogue about what is not only achievable but desirable. Such research values emergent needs and learning processes as much as final products. It is unabashedly shaped by relationships and efforts to practice care and reciprocity. It also considers participants' empowerment and ownership of practical impacts as fundamental to the ethics and success of the research. Value-rational, co-produced research, and the emergent, relational, empowering impacts it can engender, are needed globally across societies in which economic rationality often overrides environmental and human concerns.

The next section draws on relevant literature to discuss why the impact agenda must make space for such research. Subsequent sections demonstrate, through examples from participatory action research conducted with a small UK community organisation, the importance of phronesis, or values negotiation; emergent and non-linear processes; and reciprocal relationality. The conclusion acknowledges the limitations of this study, considers the roles researchers play, and argues that value-rational deliberation is crucial not only to research projects but to development of the impact agenda itself.

Marginalised elements of impact

Co-production: supporting user-owned impacts

Co-production, "too important to be considered…merely the latest fad" (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016, p.34), is not a method or technique but rather an approach: it frames knowledge production as a process relying on interaction between researchers and others concerned with what is studied. Co-production challenges traditional power dynamics by valuing the expertise of experience rather than placing academic knowledge above practitioner knowledge. It integrates different ways of knowing to produce academic excellence and practical benefits (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016). It creates a relational notion of accountability, key to creating publicly valued outcomes (Durose et al. 2012). Although the wide-ranging variety of research practices based on co-production "show concern for equality and emancipation" (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015, p.218), co-production is not unproblematic. Attempting co-production requires engaging in messy processes of negotiating power structures and diverse values, confronting our academic positionality, and risking letting go of control of outcomes (and outputs) of research. Many are concerned that "the uptake of participatory methods may be occurring without the necessary shift in epistemological orientation or political commitment", while others contend these notions must remain debateable (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015, p.219). The challenges of co-production are inseparable from its strengths. Co-production engages practitioners and researchers in collaborative value-judgements about what knowledge is desirable, challenging assumptions about knowledge production

and creating increased dialogue and relationality between science and society (Antonacopoulou 2010). Co-produced approaches can produce research that is more context-relevant, more adaptable to change, and more rigorous than 'expert'-led research; meanwhile participants – i.e. 'the public' – benefit from research processes and relationships as much as from findings (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016).

Presently, co-produced impacts which are non-linear, unpredictable or small-scale are consigned to narrow margins within the impact agenda (Kneale 2014; Macpherson et al. 2014). The effort required of researchers and research partners to substantiate measurable impacts makes funding timescales, adequate valuing of collaborators' time, and/or timely contributions to policy-making difficult to achieve (Mason et al. 2013; Pickerill 2014; Macpherson et al. 2014; Conlon et al. 2014). Processes of impact evidence-gathering can damage mutually-respectful research partnerships cultivated through co-production by re-introducing hierarchical power relations and conceptions of knowledge (Williams 2013). Despite the diverse forms of demonstrable impact, structural power imbalances and linear progress models implicit in the developing impact agenda hinder recognition of emergent, non-linear impacts created through co-production.

Impact's criteria and priorities encourage top-down, expert-led change. As Pain (2014) points out, impact, so far, leans toward promoting masculinist views of knowledge and power: it privileges reach, significance, outcomes, large-scale intervention and competition over typical strengths of feminist research approaches such as collaboration, flat power relations, deep engagement,

relational and reciprocal conceptions of research outcomes, and appreciation of small, diverse transformations. Though Pain discourages such a binary view, her comparison provides a perspective which helps us critique impact's tacit values. Co-production, with its attempts to contest "the strict hierarchy between the 'knower'" and the researched, and its openness to co-construction of diverse truths, challenges notions of "value-neutral objectivist science" which Sundberg terms "masculinist epistemologies" (Sundberg 2003, p.182, quoting Lawson 1995). Evans (2016) reflects on feminist approaches to exercising an ethic of care in participatory research, noting the negative impacts that a focus on large-scale, government- or expert-led change can have on participants who have invested emotionally in projects on a local level. She emphasises the centrality of this ethic of care to the relationships which enable – and exceed – research, as well as the challenges of practising care for all those impacted by research. I join Evans (2016, p.213) in advocating "a re-valuing of feminist and participatory action research approaches, which may have most impact at local level, in order to achieve meaningful shifts in the impact agenda."

Phronesis: co-producing value-rational impacts

In a second binary comparison, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that aims of the natural sciences – i.e. establishing predictive, generalizable theories – have dominated social sciences to the exclusion of 'value rationality'. He suggests the balance between instrumental rationality – based on what is possible to achieve – and value rationality – based on what is desirable to pursue – must be redressed, because "problems with both biosphere and sociosphere

indicate…development based on instrumental rationality alone is not sustainable" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.53).

Without endorsing his notion of 'Science Wars', I support Flyvbjerg's (2001) argument for a more balanced rationality which promotes the deliberation of social values as essential to public discourses. Our colleagues outside the social sciences likely find it equally difficult to "present…an ascertainable contribution to the society and economy" (EPSRC 2016); "tailor and target [their] impact activities to ensure that they are relevant to the specific user and beneficiary groups likely to be interested in [their] research" (AHRC 2015); or "anticipate and deliver the needs of the ultimate users of our science" (NERC 2016) – if funding and reporting procedures do not practically allow for meaningful engagement with potentially diverse users and beneficiaries about what is worthwhile to them and why. The impact agenda must better accommodate the value-rational research needed to make the most of contributions across disciplines.

Mason, Brown & Pickerill (2013) point out a crucial element missing from many of the Knowledge Exchange partnerships promoted by the existing impact agenda (see also North 2013): this important but absent element is phronesis – the process of discussing and negotiating values, aims and power relations (Flyvbjerg 2001). The developing impact agenda neglects phronetic research, instead necessitating that research respond to its imbedded yet unspoken values. In co-produced research, creating desirable, significant impacts with community partners requires a phronetic process of dialogue and decision-

making about the values underlying research, the roles and power of those involved, and the research aims (Flyvbjerg 2001).

Learning from community-based co-production

Designing phronetic research together

Case study: Oblong The discussion here draws on research conducted with Oblong, a small community organisation based in Leeds which runs a volunteering programme involving about sixty-five people per year, Head Space mental well-being courses, and Woodhouse Community Centre. A registered charity, Oblong employs six part-time staff and funds its activities through grants, and revenue from Woodhouse Community Centre. Oblong defines six core organisational values: equality, collectivism, empowerment, being community-led, sustainability, and respect & care. Its structure includes peer management for staff and non-hierarchical decision-making within project collectives involving staff and volunteers. Oblong's organisational values, structures and daily practices, combined with the financial and political pressures it faces as part of the UK third-sector, comprise a rich context for impactful co-produced research.

Research approach Conceived as Participatory Action Research (Kindon 2005), this research relied upon participants' active engagement. Its aims were both practical and theoretical (Kindon et al. 2007). The project drew on principles of constructivist grounded theory, testing "tentative ideas and conceptual structures against ongoing observations" and adapting

methodological techniques to emerging questions (Charmaz 2008; Suddaby 2006, p.636).

Academically and practically, Oblong's praxis of social values interested me most, and I wanted this research to meet organisational needs. I offered to work for Oblong two days per week for one year. I proposed to either work on administrative tasks whilst conducting observations, or focus on facilitating workshops to re-energise collective engagement with Oblong's core values. Staff, trustees and I together chose the second option, which would address emerging practical research questions about day-to-day practice of organisational values, as well as responding to theoretical questions around processes of contesting neoliberalization relevant to my required doctoral research outputs. We agreed I should participate in Oblong's peer-management practices through a placement with the staff team. Weekly reporting, quarterly planning and quarterly peer appraisals provided collective oversight and input into the direction of the research.

Research positionality Previously an Oblong employee and currently a local resident, I considered myself both stakeholder and partner during this research. My positionality as 'insider/outsider' moved along a continuum in different situations (Herr & Anderson 2015), but I was trusted to contribute to decision-making at every level and accountable for my agreed targets. Reflecting on potential power inequalities, I decided I must respect, rather than second-guess, my colleagues' evident trust in Oblong's collective decision-making processes to mitigate any undue influence. The 'more-than-research' relationships I enjoy with Oblong staff are based on an ethic of care (Evans 2016) and on shared

experience of previously working together. However, my academic writing

tasks – and eventual qualification – would not be collective. My placement

ended with an affirming process of 'peer exit appraisal'. Seeking verification of

'my' research impacts would feel uncomfortable and incongruent with the

research approach (Williams 2013; Pain et al. 2015). Reduced contact after

years of collaboration raises feelings of sadness and disconnection for me

which I hope future involvement will ease.

Research activities This paper refers to four main research activities:

1.) After meeting with volunteers' collectives, a need emerged for re-vitalising

Oblong's volunteer forum, the Bob-along. Along with volunteer co-organisers, I

're-launched' and facilitated this dwindling forum. Six-weekly sessions

resembled informal focus groups, incorporating Appreciative Inquiry and Open

Space techniques, diagramming, shared food, and socialising (Whitney &

Trosten-Bloom 2003; Kesby et al. 2005).

2.) During the research period, staff and trustees identified a need to update

and develop numerous organisational policies – e.g. to govern parental leave,

grievances, recruitment. I joined staff and volunteer Policy Working Group

members in collectively drafting, discussing and editing policies subsequently

proposed to trustees and staff.

3.) I also participated in the Development Collective: primarily grant fundraising.

Arising from this work, and drawing on practices learned through staff training, I

facilitated Oblong's annual strategic 'away day' for staff and trustees to build

shared understanding of values and make decisions about long-term

organisational direction. In my research role as participant-observer (DeWalt

2010), as in the Policy Working Group, this work prompted conceptual reflection on the processes and significance of the phronesis taking place.

4.) Staff identified a need for training in communication skills to help improve collective working and decided this pertained to my research role. I organised a session with an external trainer and partook as participant-observer. Prior to the training I conducted reflective interviews (Ellis et al. 1997) with each staff member about their feelings, actions and perceptions of Oblong's values in relation to staff communication practices.

Co-designed impacts

In contrast to the impact toolkit my university provides – which guides researchers to identify overlapping priorities between potential impacts and stakeholders' priorities – co-produced, phronetic research builds priority-setting with stakeholders into research processes. Oblong's Bob-along forum discussed "classic value-rational questions: Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done?" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.130). Participants argued over, and stipulated improvements to, organisation-wide practices – like security measures, meeting protocols, and 'branding' – and influenced development of major funding bids.

As we developed Oblong's organisational policies together, critical and practical thinking about power relations created by procedures encouraged productive processes of cyclical reflection. Discussions around dilemmas and disagreements – e.g., How much parental leave, beyond the minimum, is affordable? Should grievances be handled by trustees in a non-hierarchical

organisation? – enabled us to embed Oblong's values in policy. The resulting robustness of the several key policies developed on non-hierarchical management and organisational operation positioned Oblong to share best practice and pursue accreditations which increase access to funding and support.

The staff communication skills training, and preceding reflective interviews, helped the team learn listening and facilitation tools for negotiating disagreements, voicing concerns, navigating power relations, valuing contributions and espousing organisational care ethics. Improved communication increased the team's effectiveness in planning and decision-making. A researcher suggesting staff communication training based on an impact-driven intention to "create a new environment" (University of Leeds 2016) would likely damage relationships and be counter-productive. This phronetic research activity instead stemmed from participant-led discussions about the value-rationality of Oblong's daily practices.

The Development Collective – deliberating weekly about how to access and use resources whilst maintaining Oblong's aims and values – secured £350,000 of funding, steered involvement in developing a network of local organisations, and conducted Oblong's annual social impact survey. Strategic 'away day' facilitation focussed on deliberations about the application of intrinsic values to outward-facing plans. Outcomes included improved internal relationships; increased understanding of shared values; and agreement on key decisions about future plans, potential expansion, and external partnerships. Pertinent impacts for Oblong's strategy-building and sustainability emerged from

processes of phronesis and collaborative reciprocity, not from analysis of research data.

Co-designed research activities:

- functioned as iterative learning cycles for participants to reflect on and adapt Oblong's values praxis through different aspects of organisational practice and procedures;

- produced data relevant to broader organisational processes of contesting neoliberalization (see Darby 2016); and

- helped to generate, and reflexively evaluate, practical, relevant 'impacts'.

They also created empowerment through ownership of outcomes and increased capacity for value-rational decision-making (evaluated in Darby 2015). Participant-driven research activities generated significant strategic impacts for Oblong and its 'beneficiaries', and positively impacted Oblong's resilience, resourcefulness and collective empowerment by addressing vulnerabilities, equipping group members with skills, affirming autonomous values, and decreasing barriers to resources and influence (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012; Darby 2016). Relational, responsive research created small but relevant transformations in organisational practice (Pain 2014).

Emergent impacts: non-linear and process-based

Research which values "movement, process and change" – as impactful research surely must – allows for emergence within research design (Charmaz 2008, p.157). Each research activity described above emerged from circumstances affecting Oblong during this project, and from participants'

collective decision that my role would be facilitative and engaged, not operational and observational. I could not predict the Bob-along volunteer forum becoming central to creating practical and relevant impacts before working with participants. The opportunity to participate in organisational policy development arose from circumstances and discussions, not a research proposal. Likewise, the opportunity to help shape and participate in the staff team's communication skills training arose from existing organisational conditions and relationships. This emergent, process-based activity enabled me to create interview questions and commission training which were impactful because they were responsive and context-relevant. Though Oblong holds strategic planning sessions yearly, the content and impacts of my 'away day' facilitation depended on events which emerged during research processes. Charmaz (2011) and Flyvbjerg (2001) emphasise the importance of qualitative research grounded in context – allowing for emergence of both methodology and outcomes – to development of socially transformative theory and practice.

The activities described also demonstrate non-linear, discursive ways co-production processes create research impact (Pain et al. 2015). Participants' ideas about the Bob-along's format and aims changed progressively. As with any experiential learning or action research cycle (Kolb 1984; Reason & Bradbury 2001), we needed to act, reflect, analyse and re-formulate plans. In organisational policy development, not research findings but the process of asking questions about values within a relevant real-life situation created beneficial impact. The staff team's communication skill-building remains an iterative, action-reflection process: staff continue to use and adapt their

learning. Change occurred because of questions the research process generated, not findings. Strategic planning will impact the organisation iteratively over time, as participants revisit decisions to inform short-term planning, target-setting, and future strategy as circumstances change.

Impact toolkits and training ask researchers to plan impact, implement plans, collect and report evidence, and, lastly, review and reflect. This envisioned impact process illustrates a distinct linearity which subverts essential value-rational processes of iterative reflection. The examples discussed here demonstrate how co-produced research creates non-linear, process-driven impacts more likely to be relevant for non-academic research partners (Pain et al. 2015).

Caring impacts: reciprocal and relational

The emergent, non-linear research impacts discussed above were effectual because they resulted from values-based decision-making, reciprocity and collaboration (Taylor 2014). The impact framework, however, encourages researchers to "make the biggest possible impact on policy and practice" (ESRC 2016). This approach exaggerates the authority of academic knowledge and prioritises impact over ethics of care. It assumes research will produce results to which others will react, instead of supporting research which is itself reactive and responsive. The case discussed here relied on relationships and ethics of care to create research which responded to partners' needs.

Because I offered time and engagement to Oblong, and the staff team offered valuable collective management time, the Bob-along forum evolved

responsively and benefitted organisational and academic aims. My willingness to contribute to Oblong's policy development, and Oblong's willingness to trust me in that role, meant I experienced and helped create values-based praxis, instead of inferring analysis from documents or disengaged observations. When the need arose for training and reflection on staff's internal communication, caring relationships enabled me to ask sensitive interview questions to support reflection and to provide an insightful, responsive brief on the team's needs to the trainer. Oblong's willingness to provide developmental opportunities and collective guidance gave me skills and knowledge to offer effective facilitation for strategic planning. Research questions constructed with investment in Oblong's core values – equality, collectivism, empowerment, being community-led, sustainability, and respect & care – and co-designed research activities drew on the "'more-than-research' relationship[s]" between participants (Evans 2016, p.6). The care, reciprocity and shared values underpinning these activities meant research processes could have meaningful, generative effects on the organisation during the project, instead of producing a critique afterwards to theoretically instruct others (Taylor 2014; North 2013). The outcomes in this study refute the notion of impact as something researchers do to or for others. To support the transformations which occur through phronetic research processes – based on reciprocal relationships, ethics of care, and value-rational interactions – a generative impact agenda must enable non-academic partners to impact research as much as they are impacted.

Conclusions: co-producing value-rational impact

Institutional tools for creating impact statements ask researchers to map changes their research will create on every scale from local to global, prizing large-scale impacts across broadly envisioned 'change environments' (University of Leeds 2016). Impacts of this research with Oblong came from context-grounded collaboration, originating at a small scale. These elements of co-production generate empowerment through participants' ownership and commitment to outcomes they co-created, enhancing research impact at small scales. These impacts may well apply at much broader scales – indeed, all the more so because they respond to real-life contexts. The importance of empowering, collaborative processes to creating ownership of impact may be the most often-overlooked but broadly relevant aspect of co-produced research.

Impact frameworks are variegated – drawing heavily on metrics in Australia, focussing on long-term contributions of doctoral trainees in the United States (Jump 2015), and, by contrast, "emphasis[ing] institutional reflection, learning and sharing" in the Netherlands (Williams 2012). I do not wish for a measurement system which aims to judge and enforce 'positive social values'. But the developing UK impact agenda tacitly imposes values of top-down change, expert-led knowledge production and unquestioned marketization though its tools, assessment criteria, and funding processes. Impact agendas exert effects beyond their institutions or countries of origin, via researchers' engagements (Williams 2012; 2013). Research approaches which help promote and develop values-based deliberation; emergent, responsive impacts; ethics of care; and participant ownership of outcomes must become integral, not

marginal, to the impact agenda if it is to contribute to societal changes which address global environmental threats and social injustices.

As an academic community, we can seek to guide the budding impact agenda to mature into a fit-for-purpose approach: this requires 'impact' to recognise the value and necessity of research which may not commercialise, legislate, or 'go viral', but which seeks to listen, deliberate, reciprocate, respect and collaborate. Researchers contribute to impact's direction by creating space for reflection within publications, conferences and critical research projects. While the case discussed in this paper involves a small UK organisation with particular self-defined values, the practicalities and realities of impacts generated through co-production vary greatly according to scale, location, and research partnerships. The broad experience of researchers using co-production approaches across different contexts (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015) can inform the impact agenda by highlighting the impacts achieved through such research and by continuing to develop, reflect on, and share approaches which make space for co-produced impacts. We might yet claim space, perhaps within funding procedures, to incorporate processes of generating working practices with research partners and co-defining impacts. Whilst the impact agenda prompts useful reflection about effecting change, such questions are much better addressed with those affected. Issues facing societies on levels from local to global demand solutions which acknowledge interdependence and promote co-operative, inclusive deliberation. An effective impact agenda will encourage research which helps develop societal capacities for values-based decision-making, collaboration and iterative responsiveness to evolving challenges.

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