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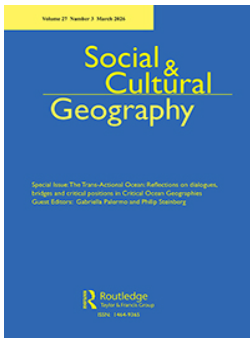
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## What's in a hyphen? Insights from the field on co-production as methodology

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## What's in a hyphen? Insights from the field on co-production as methodology

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on our study of refugee women's urban mobilities, we examine the mechanisms and infrastructure of arts-based co-production in geography. While co-productive approaches are often celebrated for their transformative potential, we interrogate this promise through a series of workshops culminating in a co-produced film with nine women who received bicycles through the charity, The Bike Project. We ask how the 'co' in co-production may obscure hierarchies of power and explore what the hyphen's implied horizontality reveals. By engaging with divergent research temporalities and underexamined aspects of co-production, we reveal how embedded asymmetries among actors shape both the process and its outcomes in complex ways. We evidence how the gap between formal ethical guidelines, the way we write research and meaningful ethics in practice limit co-production's potential and advance emotional value as an undervalued outcome of the approach. We conclude that research at the intersection of geography, migration studies, creative practice and lived experience may produce both emotional and productive value, especially in the afterlives of the project when broader geographies of precarity, institutional constraint and uneven collaboration are meaningfully addressed.

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Co-production; higher education; research ethics; refugees; mobility; arts-based research

## Introduction

The arts are key to many of geography's disciplinary concerns, whether in terms of site, self, materialities or practices (Hawkins, 2012), and geographers are increasingly incorporating creative methods (Hawkins, 2015). Arts-based methods are a way to explore complex geographical phenomena that cannot be captured by traditional data alone. For geographers, creative approaches can present a more ethical or sensitive way of doing research, a way of doing research that has greater social impact and a way to capture

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complex and intertwined geographical processes beyond the text (McIlwaine & Ryburn, 2024). The turn to the creative is not limited to geography and can be seen across the arts and social sciences. As McIlwaine and Ryburn (2024) note, there has been a creative turn in migration studies, mobility studies and gender studies. They caution, however, that this turn carries with it the risk of art-based methods being seen as a panacea for redressing fraught issues around power, participation and positionality in research. Our contribution to this special issue considers the tensions and pitfalls of geographic arts-based co-production (Skop, 2024).

There is a rich geographical literature on participatory research as a family of approaches where participants are directly involved in knowledge production, and that consequently have emancipatory or transformative potential (Cahill, 2007; Demeritt, 2005; Pain & Kondon, 2007). Less attention has been paid to *co-productive* arts in the wider discipline. In this paper, we interrogate the mechanics and affective dimensions of arts-based co-production through a research project with refugee and asylum-seeking women in London. Through a series of workshops culminating in a co-produced film, we explore how co-production – often celebrated for its horizontality – can obscure entrenched asymmetries of power, age, background and training. We foreground positional precarity, including the legal status of participants, and reflect on how these dynamics shaped the process and its outcomes. We elucidate affective and emotional value as a vital effect of a co-productive process, visible through exploring positionalities, temporalities and institutional limitations.

Focusing on the process of working together rather than pre-determined outputs (McNally, 2024), we ask what the ‘co’ in co-production conceals, and how the hyphen’s implied symmetry flattens power hierarchies. This opens space to explore the relationalities that emerge through co-productive arts-based research (McNally, 2017). Our engagement with research temporalities – before, during and after the project – offers an innovative lens to examine how value is produced and distributed. We argue for emotional value as a critical, yet undervalued, outcome of co-production, showing how trust, joy and rupture complicate the ethics and politics of collaborative research. The power dynamics of academic research in geography inherently contain power imbalances: between researchers and participants, within research teams, and in relation with institutional structures. Co-production has garnered interest as a way to rebalance these power dynamics in favour of increased equality, symmetry and horizontality in knowledge production, or even as a utopian approach (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Clayton & Vickers, 2019). We posit that the term co-production can make multiple assumptions of symmetry on either side of the hyphen that do not necessarily translate in practice. The co- assumes an equality between actors in both product and production, and the term implies a symmetry between the product – research, outcome, artwork, evidence – and the collaboration, or process of working together.

By acknowledging the uneven distribution of power in co-production, we argue that the relationships built while attempting to establish the ‘co’ challenge the value and outcome of production in four key ways: by co-producing emotional value; by highlighting the diverse agendas of project constituents; by seeking ways to mitigate and challenge institutional constraints and by engaging meaningfully with material and legal insecurities. To do this, we first discuss the evolution of co-production, from its beginnings as a public administration tool in the 1970s to its current role in migration geographies

and arts-based research. We explore co-production's promise of symmetry in power dynamics and its limitations in levelling power imbalances, citing critiques of its effectiveness (Bevir et al., 2019; Clayton & Vickers, 2019; Perryry, 2022). We then assess the asymmetries that emerged in our project – particularly around labour, temporality and ethics – and explore how these shaped compensation, trust and collaboration. In doing so, we argue that recognizing rather than flattening asymmetries is essential to understanding the different forms of value produced through co-productive research.

## **Producing the co-productive: policy, method, approach**

The claims for and value attributed to arts-based and co-productive approaches can create space for imagination, expression and affect (Hawkins, 2018); facilitate material encounters with art that yield new trajectories for researchers (Sheringham et al., 2019) and allow for inclusivity and greater representation of participant voice (Holt et al., 2019). For Vincent (2022), co-productive approaches are those that focus on outcomes and production of actionable knowledge and those that engage with process and the inclusion of multiple voices. Barrett and Bosse (2022) caution that the mutual benefit of co-production can create dissonance for precariously placed researchers and call for a more nuanced engagement of the entanglements fostered by co-production. As McIlwaine and Ryburn (2024) warn, co-production is not necessarily a cure all and, as Slater (2012) argues, may even run the risk of neoliberal capture. While recognizing that the full array of co-productive activities, outcomes and claims is beyond our scope, we engage with co-production sliced three ways: as means of geographic knowledge production, as implicit construct in socio-cultural migration studies and arts-based work methodology, and as a policy administration tool. We follow co-production's rise chronologically, beginning with its earliest use in public policy to better understand its use by geographers in the field of migration.

### ***Co-production in public policy***

From the 1970s on, co-production enjoyed an increasing vogue in public service administration policy, beginning as a method of service delivery and eventually becoming a method for service design (Bevir et al., 2019). Pitched as a radical re-thinking of public administration, its enduring popularity also provided well-intentioned seeming cover for more insidious policy shifts away from public service funding and neoliberal off-loading of public services onto volunteer community labour (Bussu & Tullia Galanti, 2018).

Arnstein's (1969) foundational ladder of citizen participation begins with coercion at the bottom and ends with co-production at the highest rung, moving from tokenistic gestures towards participation up to degrees of citizen power in the forms of partnership and control. Arnstein's intervention (with case studies largely from New York) came at a time of both increasing autonomous organizing against the state and the birth of neoliberal orthodoxy. In the US throughout the 1980s, co-production became associated with an asset-based approach to service design and delivery; reciprocity between service providers and their 'clients', and the argument that the core economy – 'love, caring and coming to each other's rescue' (Stephens, 2008) – is equal to the world of money and markets (Cahn, 2000). In this way, co-production was presented as an antidote to the

perceived paternalism of the state and public services as well as a marker of democratic commitment in public administration.

Co-production approaches were adapted for British public services, with early support and advocacy from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA), in the early 2000s. In 2010, the Conservative Party's General Election manifesto led with the bold title 'An invitation to join the government of Britain' (Conservative Party, 2010). That year also saw the introduction of austerity measures and the explosion of co-production into the British policy mainstream with particularly wide reach in health and adult social care. Around the same time, co-production began its rapid rise in academic literature and became widespread across the third sector. Many charities and community organizations – often working with very limited budgets – have been enthusiastic supporters of co-production (Mazzei et al., 2020). As Bovaird et al. (2017, p. 846) point out, however, co-production has the potential to 'disguise the complexity of provider-user relationships', alluding to an assumption of hierarchical flattening between practitioners seeking to deliver services and service users in a neoliberal policy context. The inclusivity promoted by the 'co' in co-production can mask where the value in the process is allocated – is effective change felt by so-called citizens increasingly involved in public service policy creation; or does the 'streamlining' of public services represent cost saving to the government in the guise of more equal partnership?

### ***The co-productive turn in academic research***

In the early 2000s, academics began interrogating co-production as a means of producing knowledge, arguing that 'co-production is shorthand for the proposition that the ways we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it' (Jasanoff, 2004). This argument puts academic understanding on equal footing as lived experience in the production of knowledge, both implicated in methods of knowing and understanding the world. Jasanoff writes even more explicitly that co-production is 'symmetrical in that it calls attention to the social dimensions of cognitive commitments and understandings' (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 3).

This understanding of co-production centres the epistemological standpoint that there are multiple ways of knowing and that knowledge production should include lived experience and affective life-worlds of the participant as well as the researcher. The assumption of symmetry also underlies the sanctity with which academic discourse discusses co-production – knowledge emerging from social infrastructures no longer implicates academics in structural determinism.

Co-production has consequently been framed as a utopian method 'which both attends to and works against dominant inequalities' (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 105). Co-production as a method is seen as having the potential to reconfigure and ultimately destroy academia as a specialist site of knowledge production and dissemination by challenging *who* is the legitimate producer of knowledge. For Perryry (2022) however, this democratizing form of praxis is only possible if it is accompanied by institutional change within higher education. In this way, the co-production of critique is a form of epistemic praxis. Such co-productive praxis is 'characterised by boundary work, epistemic

choreography and triple shifting – doing one's job, unpaid engagement, and emotional care work' (Perryry, 2022, p. 350).

A more cynical take might align the increased interest in co-production not in an epistemological standpoint that values participants or the researched as active producers of knowledge, with potential to challenge the social and institutional power of researchers, but with the appeal to *impact* (Smith et al., 2020). Such an approach lays the explosion of co-production as generating impact at the foot of the neoliberal roots of REF and impact frameworks. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) was introduced by the Thatcher government in 2009 and assesses UK universities with the new metric of research impact. Geographers have both called for REF's definition of impact to explicitly include 'co-production of knowledge between universities and communities, modelled in research practice in participatory geographies' (Pain et al., 2011, p. 183) and countered this argument by critiquing a 'politics of obedience' to the neoliberalisation of academic institutions (Slater, 2012, p. 117).

Whether radical or obedient, some claim that co-productive approaches in geography can 'question and destabilise traditional barriers between "expert researchers" and "researched communities" to enable spaces for collaboration, negotiation and the co-construction of knowledge' Wynne-Jones et al. (2015, 218), and that co-production specifically creates 'research relations that are more horizontal than in conventional objectivist research' (Clayton & Vickers, 2019, p. 397). Meanwhile critiques of research reward structures that do not adequately support participatory practices continue (Robinson & Hawthorne, 2018), along with calls that academic co-productive praxis is no guarantee of equalization, and care must be taken to 'ensure that research challenges rather than reproduces marginalised positions in society and space' (Holt et al., 2019, p. 391). Like the debates around co-production in public policy, co-production as a means of knowledge production is mired in the tension between potentially transformative, radical and empowering inclusion and the appearance of progressiveness in the service of neoliberal metrics.

How knowledge is co-produced within academia also raises the question of relative power, hierarchy and inequality among academics. This is especially evident in the precarity of many research positions (Enright & Facer, 2017). The recognition of positional precarity among researchers belongs amongst other structural and logistical challenges of co-producing knowledge that have led to conversations on the inherent 'messiness' of co-production, and a focus on the process as a product of the work (Clayton & Vickers, 2019).

### ***Co-production and the arts in migration studies***

Adjacent to the increasing commitment to co-production as epistemic praxis in academia, and in geography specifically, is the increasing interest in co-production among other 'co' words in migration studies. Co-production in migration studies has been presented as a way to challenge essentialised representations of refugeeness, support creative agency, adopt a reflexive mode and reconfigure relationships of power between the researcher and the researched (Godin & Donà, 2022). Central to this is the argument that collaborative and artistic engagement in migration research has the potential to honour migrants' self-representation; enable dialogic exchange and create space for reflexive approaches

to learning together (Erel, 2024). Co-production with vulnerablized groups is presented as a way to reduce the extractiveness of research; decolonize research and break down hierarchies (Selim & Waite, 2023). Co-production consequently aligns well with the reflexive turn in migration studies where centring voice, agency and lived experience are seen to support best ethical practice (Amelina, 2021; Dahinden et al., 2021; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). Co-productive and creative approaches thus have increasing significance for scholars of migration and geographers concerned with questions of power and migration at different scales and social contexts. However, there is an emerging critical assessment of co-production in migration studies beginning with the recognition that homogenizing and colonizing tendencies in refugee studies effect the 'co' in research (Atem & Higgins, 2024) – whether it is co-production, co-research or participatory research. Clayton and Vickers (2019) highlight that although co-production has the power to traverse theory and action, its success depends on how the collaboration emerges. Similarly, Gibbes and Skop (2020) find that co-production is a process that depends on trade-offs and tentative alliances. They argue that the abolition of hierarchy in practice requires reflexive critical engagement with the complexities of relationship formation. This is especially pressing in cases where minority world researchers 'lead' on or indiscriminately apply co-productive approaches research in majority world contexts (Lenette, 2022). Jeffery et al. (2019) build on this by turning their gaze on wider social change, conceding that co-productive artistic expressions cannot fully overcome unequal power dynamics or effect long-term change in a context where migration policy is dominated by punitiveness.

Increased scrutiny of arts-based methods, in migration research and more broadly, yields similar findings; that artistic practice in research can capture embodied and unspoken viewpoints (Tarr et al., 2018) and can rebalance power between project actors (Lupton & Watson, 2021). Observations of process messiness likewise abound. Some claim the process, and the negotiation of relationships that it entails, is what matters most (Kara, 2015), while the broader material networks implicated in artistic production have also been scrutinized, along with what happens after the project 'ends' (Sharp, 2007), and whether creative methods can reproduce intersectional inequalities (Farrales et al., 2022; Mclean & de Leeuw, 2020). More recently, scholars have recognized the emotional aspects of co-production, elucidating how relationship negotiations create myriad challenges that are 'structural, some practical, but ... also often emotional' (Clayton & Vickers, 2019, p. 398). Richardson (2016) alights explicitly on the emotional work in the process of co-production, and how it manifests in the 'micro-spaces', defined as the workshop, the project and the event.

Our research operates at the nexus of these interrelated co-production trajectories, attempting to use co-productive arts-based methods to produce knowledge around migration and mobility, understand how these practices intersect with third-sector organizations filling public service gaps and produce from this research compelling art-based narratives that recognize agency and can capture the attention of policy makers at the local, city-wide and regional level. In the co-production trajectories described above, a uniting thread tugs at a lingering unease within co-production practice despite its rapid rise in prevalence and popularity. Although not within the scope of this article, the same unease, at times categorized as ambivalence, ripples through recent interrogations of other flavours of participatory research (Kennelly et al., 2023; Mason, 2015) and of co-

production in urban planning practice and planning theory (Albrechts, 2013; Schramm, 2024). Our own ambivalence – feeling the value of the work, wary of complicity in neo-liberal frameworks and frustrated with institutional obstacles to conducting it – has led us this interrogation of both our project and the process.

While we focus on the mechanics of co-production in migration studies, through the lens of an arts-based project, we note that co-productive work also takes place outside of arts-based work and that not all arts-based methods are inherently co-productive. In the following, we explore the unease with co-production practice by building on Richardson's understanding of its emotional work (Richardson, 2016) to propose *emotional value* as a key (and undervalued) aspect of the approach. We use this to ask how the nuances of emotion and trust are navigated within co-production's inherent power imbalances, and how recognizing rather than eliding these asymmetries of power might allow for different (and valuable) valuations of both production and product.

### **Method: challenges in approach and process**

To follow and untangle the uniting threads of unease that tug at co-production as a way to produce knowledge; deliver and shape public policy; and centre migrant agency through artistic expression, we reflect on our co-productive research with The Bike Project (TBP). TBP is a charity that collects and refurbishes second-hand bikes and donates them to recent refugees and people seeking asylum (The Bike Project, 2024). Our research collaboration explored gendered immobilities in the asylum system and unpacked their relationship to city geographies and urban mobility. This work was part of a larger ESRC funded project that looked at the issues of race, migration, mobility and living with diversity in London (Open City Project, n.d.). In this section, we focus on the mechanics of the project. We discuss process, recruitment and implementation to consider the complexity of power and networks of trust in co-productive research. In particular, we highlight the long *durée* of the project – before it received funding, and long after.

The academic team established after funding was awarded comprised seven researchers at four universities. We began by conducting interviews with TBP's CEO, a trustee with lived experience and a former women's cycle training programme manager. We used these interviews to identify TBP's needs and to avoid our presence as researchers being an intrusive and extractive drain on the charity's resources. We decided on the research aims together and agreed to run co-productive arts-based workshops with refugee and asylum-seeking women accessing cycling training through TBP's Pedal Power training scheme. We also agreed to interview Pedal Power women who took part in the workshops and participate in and observe Pedal Power training sessions. This blend of methods aimed to centre the voice and agency of participants and take part in different aspects of their lives in the city. We recruited an artist through our impact partner, Counterpoints Arts, recruited nine Pedal Power women through the Pedal Power manager and invited them to participate in a launch workshop led by the artist. Through the initial exploratory workshop with participants, we co-produced the content of the subsequent workshops and the final 'output' aim, a short film. Our findings are based on a period of 6 months of field and arts work conducted in spring and summer 2022.

In our discussion of *how* we co-produced the research, we include the research participants, the research team, the artist, professional services staff at all four of the

universities involved, staff, former staff and volunteers at TBP. By taking this more expansive approach to research stakeholders, we aim to acknowledge the power asymmetries including but not limited to temporality (before, during and after the research), labour precarity (both paid and unpaid) and positionality. Existing studies of co-production methods in the social sciences tend to highlight the stakeholder relationships between researchers, research participants and community or third-sector partners (Ersoy, 2017; MacGregor et al., 2022; Sievers, 2023; Zijlstra et al., 2024), neglecting the role of wider institutional contexts. We highlight a wider range of stakeholder to engage more fully with how trust is balanced and negotiated within networked relationships (Ettlinger, 2014; Richardson, 2016).

We were interested in the temporalities of asylum, everyday mobilities, and how the temporalities of research shaped stakeholder relationships and the different types of value the research project generated. The project began following an introduction from the founder of the NGO, Common Place, to the CEO of The Bike Project. This introduction took place in 2017, 5 years before any participants were recruited or any 'co' production including all stakeholders took place. The life cycle of this piece of research is likely to stretch to at least 8 years by the time this article is published. While this duration is not unusual in academic research, it gives researchers far more power in shaping the project, while participants join the project in the middle, leave before the end and often do not partake in the research project's afterlife. This highlights the importance of what the different outcomes and outputs of co-production mean for different actors. Temporal asymmetries point to negotiation of different sets of power asymmetries: at the stage of applying for funding; when establishing collaboration for co-production; when co-producing and when following the afterlives of co-production. These asymmetries are in turn shaped by the precarities of labour and legal status and differing levels of seniority and amongst the co-producers.

Of the seven researchers, the Principal Investigator and three Co-Investigators were all men in senior academic positions who held permanent contracts, with expertise in migration, geography, mobility, and ethnic and racial studies. The three junior (paid) researchers were all women early career researchers on fixed term contracts, reliant on the outcomes of this project for qualification in seeking future academic employment. Two of the early career researchers were on skilled worker visas at the time of research and reliant on project outcomes for continued visa sponsorship. The artist, a refugee herself, was hired on a freelance basis and is self-employed. Within The Bike Project, we worked with the CEO (permanent and salaried); the Pedal Power manager (on a permanent contract with a salary just above the living wage) and the Pedal Power instructors (self-employed, hourly paid and working irregular hours). The Pedal Power manager, Pedal Power instructors and we the lead authors were all women in our 20s and 30s. The Pedal Power women all held precarious legal statuses – either through pending asylum applications, having no right to work and subsisting on asylum support or as recent refugees navigating new conditionalities and challenges in work, welfare and housing. The Pedal Power women's ages ranged from 20s to 50s and represented a range of professional expertise from artist to taekwondo coach.

Insecure employment relationships revealed some of the asymmetries of power in the co-productive process. One of the Research Fellows left when she was offered a longer contract and longer term visa sponsorship at another institution. This led to the

recruitment of the first author as her replacement. The Pedal Power manager was asked to work evenings and weekends by her line manager to accommodate our research project (she left the third sector by the time the project had ended); and there was considerable turnover in Pedal Power instructors who highlighted the challenges of uncertain hours, low pay and self-employed status with TBP. These turnovers, both within the research team and The Bike Project, impacted the longevity of the research relationship, required rebuilding collaborative relationships and were exacerbated when the CEO left TBP, which introduced additional challenges in continuity. Part of broader challenges in arts project continuity within the context of neoliberal approaches to arts funding (Sharp, 2007), we found that differences in legal status, employment status and labour precarity highlighted the ‘complexity of provider-user relationships’ (Bovaird et al., 2017) and the temporal limits to reciprocity and longevity. Insecure labour led to churn and the repeated re-negotiation of relationships which provided a precarious backdrop to the Pedal Power women’s experience of status insecurity.

Such challenges throughout the research shaped the values, outputs and afterlives of our co-produced project. Each of these speaks to challenging hierarchies in knowledge production; shifting agentic focus in social policy and renegotiating power in research. In the following section, we reflect on what came out of our co-productive work.

### **Findings: values and afterlives**

Out of this research we, the pedal power women, researchers and artist, co-produced a 25-minute film and a 5-minute trailer of the film. We, the authors, produced an evaluative report for TBP, two journal articles, three conference presentations and three learning events for other charities working at the intersection of race, migration and mobility. Finally, we the authors, and our impact partner Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity (GEM), produced a policy briefing and podcast episode based on our research findings. The co-produced work culminated in a private film screening hosted at TBP in October 2022 for the artist, research participants, researchers and project supporters. The film can also be viewed on the Open City project website until 2026 (<https://opencitywarwick.co.uk/>). The products and event, however, cannot be fully captured in this description. Both product and event stretch far beyond the life cycle of the project and cannot be succinctly summarized in list form but, as we found, were best captured in moments of artistic representation both during the event and throughout the relationships that we built with research participants and wider stakeholders during, before and long after the project came to its official funded end.

### **Value (financial)**

We aimed to thank participants for their time and compensate them for travel and childcare expenses, without which compensation many would not have been able to participate. This aim ran into several major challenges common across co-production research (Clayton & Vickers, 2019; Rogers & Warren, 2023). First, cash gifts are restricted by most Higher Education Institutions and potentially compromise participants without permission to work (Warnock et al., 2022). Second, universities will not compensate unregistered or informal childcare providers and will not provide travel expenses in

advance of them being incurred. We felt that to deny cash would deny participants agency over how to spend their money, limit spending to chain stores that accept vouchers and replicate some of the punitive and paternalistic practices of state agencies. Likewise, expecting participants subsisting on weekly asylum support payments or Universal Credit to front travel expenses would have put them under undue financial pressure.

During the project, in the service of delivering prompt payment to participants, we committed several violations of institutional ethics committee frameworks in the pursuit of what we believed to be principled ethical decisions. To navigate the chasm between formal financial regulations and co-productive ethics in practice, we effectively outsourced our production budget to the artist, attempting to leverage the positional asymmetries to sidestep institutional limitations. When the artist was not comfortable giving cash payments and felt our allocated budget for participants would constrain her budget for materials, we agreed to use vouchers and reduce the participants thank you gifts by half. Although this outsourced approach allowed us to pay in cash towards childcare and prepay travel expenses, it revealed how some co-producers (we as the authors and the artist) have more power than others (the participants). Linked to the issue of research temporality, this also revealed to us the limitations of co-production when the budget is not also co-produced with participants. While somewhat of a chicken and egg scenario, it is possible that in the afterlife of this project, a future project with a fully co-produced budget may arise.

Although we allocated a production budget to the artist, challenges arose when the university processing payment instalments were unable to do so in a timely fashion. This method of handling the project's budget put both the authors and the artist in a precarious financial situation. The payment delays left the project – introductions made, relationships established – set to begin without any funding provided to the artist, including the production budget for participants' expenses and the payment of the artist's fee. We were constrained by the end date of our contracts and therefore advanced our own personal funds directly to the participants, for which we were not paid back for many months. Without the aid of one Co-I able to use his professional stability to influence the process by chasing payments in person, the money likely would have taken even longer to come through. This financial negotiation is illustrative of how the co-productive hyphen can flatten. In practice, negotiations over the budget and payment of funds revealed how money was withheld in turn by participants (in favour of a larger materials budget) and by the artist and researchers (because of institutional constraints), highlighting intersecting, layered positional precarities of legal status, training and labour each pulling in different directions.

The Open City project was not alone in facing the challenges created by university financial regulations; numerous other research projects attempting co-productive activities faced similar challenges which were highlighted in discussions at the conference panel that led to the creation of this Special Issue (Rogers & Warren, 2023).

### ***Value (emotional)***

The value in participating in the Open City project for the participants was evident in the emotional reactions during the private screening of the final film. During the screening,

there were giggles and gasps of delight and recognition as participants saw themselves on screen, describing and claiming proud moments cutting in front of red busses, zigzagging through coloured cones and draping themselves in fabric. One participant described feeling like a queen on her bicycle in the film, another joked around pretending to ride just a handlebar and wheels and both moments elicited excited smiles and laughs from the audience. The finale of the film showed the artist riding her bicycle through landmark London sites wearing a long dress made by the women, and the satisfaction at seeing their work imprinted on the known landscapes of London was palpable in the room. In the moment of this event, the artwork gave a visibility to the work and the women on a larger stage, achieving one of the women's goals that emerged from the art workshops.

The Open City project's emotional significance could be fraught, and while mostly affirmative also opened the door for emotional rupture. The trust the Pedal Power women placed in the artist and by extension in the research team, which allowed for the joy, was also violated at a key moment during the film screening, when a failure to edit out some sensitive footage with one participant leaning low over a pattern piece before the screening caused gasps of surprise (not delight!) from two participants at a key moment in the film. This fissure of trust both evidenced the emotional engagement of the participants and damaged the project's value for the women, puncturing an evening otherwise filled with a joyful camaraderie amongst the participants and pleasure at seeing themselves represented on screen. The emotional value of the work resonated clearly during the screening, in ways both positive and challenging, and utterly unquantifiable by traditional academic, policy initiative or market economy standards of value.

The participants' reflections on the project were testament to the affective value of the co-productive process. As Emine<sup>1</sup> described:

After the first workshop, I felt inspired, and I found it quite affecting. After that first presentation, I decided to get involved. I was intrigued about how we'd work together, how we'd create together and how we'd work as a team.

The playfulness and power of co-creation was also brought up by Paula who said: 'in drama you can voice the stories for other people, maybe you don't always tell'. Beyond this, participants also commented on the adventure that involved travelling to different parts of London for the workshops and some of the tangible and intangible benefits of participating. For Gulnaz:

You give us good advice, happiness and most important you give us travel money we need travel money. Travel money is so expensive for us. Home Office give us £40 in one week so how is possible every day I need go somewhere and so I am happy with art group and Pedal Power. You your group and Pedal Power give me laugh, I forget before how is laugh, now I am laughing laughing smiling even when I go alone on the road I put smile on my face, if you smile you feel good inside

And for Hajeera: 'I was never stressed after this workshops. It was very good'. Beyond these immediate reflections, for us and the participants, the process of co-production led to some lasting relationships across and in part because of significant asymmetries in age and background. The time we spent co-producing and sharing our experiences and the necessity of reciprocity in the co-productive process meant that we built friendships some of which stretched far beyond the project end date.

### ***Value (productive)***

For The Bike Project, value came through the testimonials of the women summarized in a report by the research team, amounting to an independent evaluation of The Bike Project's work. For many women, we found that the bicycle's value was not for transport, but rather the feelings of confidence, agency, wellbeing, support, consistency and care delivered to them by TBP in the provision of bicycles, training, workshops and social interaction. TBP used this report as evidence for maintenance and acquisition of funding to support their work. However, despite evidence that the consistency of social interactions such as the Pedal Power group mattered enormously to the women, The Bike Project actuated a near total turnover in staff near the end of our project, in part due to the precarious nature of funding and work in the charity sector.

The artist's extracted value from the project came both from the funding allotted for her time and from the work she was able to create with the Pedal Power women by building on the trusted relationships established by TBP and the research team. Her contribution also added to her portfolio. The artist's protection of the outcome for the project at times came in conflict with the research team's ethical stance and responsibility for protecting the interests of the Pedal Power women. The nuances of how project funding was allocated to sidestep university regulations created some of this conflict. The glacial pace of university payroll processing, utterly unsuitable for freelance work remuneration, also created a fissure of trust between the artist and the research team dependant on the university to pay the artist.

The financial negotiations very nearly derailed the project at several key points, undermining the years of work building up to the tight weave of trusted relationships being in place to undertake the project in 2022. Our decision to advance our own funding was taken in part due to not wanting to renege on what we had already promised to the Pedal Power women, thereby violating a painstakingly created trusted relationship and introducing one more precarious experience into already precarious lives. This positional precarity saw us placing faith in the hands of one Higher Education Institution and hoping that advancing our funding would not prevent us from meeting our own housing, child-care and visa costs. The potential academic and career value for us as early careers researchers also contributed to our decision to keep the project running, with hope that we could trust the university would eventually pay the artist, who would then pay us. This also reveals precarity in our positions – both in terms of our fixed term contracts and the desire to further our own careers by being able to demonstrate research success to our senior colleagues and potential hiring panels. These layered positional precarities – of seniority, gender and legal status – highlight an urgent need for co-production in migration studies to take seriously the relationship between the material constraints of refugees and people seeking asylum and the material constraints of fundings in the arts, in the third sector and in higher education.

### **Discussion: institutional power and knowledge production**

In some ways, the reciprocity of co-production came through after the workshops and film screening took place and in part due to the asymmetrical expertise and experience brought by different participants. Hajeera, for example, invited one of the women

researchers into her home, cooking biryani, pakoras and bhajis after we put her in touch with a social worker who was able to provide informal guidance on her granddaughter's care proceedings. Both Hajeera and Gulnaz have subsequently taken part in one of the author's subsequent projects. Likewise, Rahima welcomed a researcher into her home baking a batch of cardamom cookies. When Rahima explained to the researcher that her only place to sit in her bedsit flat was her bed, that researcher was able to deliver a donated sofa-bed to her home. Since taking part in the project, Rahima has also taken part in another of one researcher's subsequent projects and was also introduced by one of the researchers to someone with shared experience of the asylum system who now works in the sector that she aspires to work in. The trust and emotional connection that co-production brought also led Wajda, a tattoo artist who received the right to work during the project, giving one of the authors a new tattoo. These connections and the depth of the relationships that we built through the project cannot always be reflected in formal research write ups. They show again that co-production's transformative potential and its potential as a form of praxis (Perry, 2022) are limited by the gap between formal ethical guidelines, the way we write research and meaningful ethics in practice. Co-production allowed us to redress imbalances of power in the research relationship by going beyond 'paper ethics' and building meaningful, reciprocal and solidaristic relationships in the longer term. It is perhaps in the afterlife of co-production then, that its purported equality emerges and crucially, in the life beyond the text that the transformative potential of co-production is made manifest.

Despite this, the tension remains that in the end, the research team was able to extract valuable data from the project on multi-modal cartographies, mobility, cycling psychologies, bike symbolisms and migration geographies. It also allowed us to expand our research networks in the service of future research projects. In some ways, we were able to be more extractive, rather than less, through the co-productive process. The trusted relationships built through the arts workshops and weekends spent together allowed the semi-structured concluding interviews we undertook with the Pedal Power women to delve into some very moving, personal, vulnerable and, at times, harrowing stories and moments from the women's lives. Employing co-production through arts-based work allowed us to learn these stories and did not negate the requirement for the research team to tell these stories through academic papers and conference presentations. The project, in the end, was responsible to the funders and the universities employing us to produce the kinds of outputs recognized as valuable outcomes of research grant funding, and although impact has entered research assessment frameworks, unquantifiable emotional value both in terms of hidden rewards and moments of stress and worry does not make the cut. While making every attempt with this research project to create and provide value for all the participants – not draining The Bike Project's resources, and providing them with a research report; offering the participants an experience they could value and enjoy, as well as appropriate compensation for their time, travel and incurred expenses; and providing the artist with funding, an already established group of participants and freedom to run the project – the requirements of our funders and academia, as well as ourselves, form another set of constituencies in the project with desired outcomes and expected value of their own.

The challenges created by university financial regulations in the execution of co-productive work align with the lack of traditional value this work provides back to the

universities. This links to Stephens (2008) argument that co-production values the core economy. Our experience, however, reveals the limitations to embedding the core economy and its hobbling by financial and labour market realities in higher education. Outputs like pride in representation or joyful laughter at an event are not quantifiable or recognized by the standard infrastructures of peer review, journal metrics, conference proceedings or citation factors. While universities increasingly recognize impact as a viable or even desirable output of academic funding, impact as recognized by academia still requires tangible or quantifiable benefit. Emotional value produced through workshops or events does not count; it is not a changed policy, a new service or an improved health metric. And, in effect, as co-production becomes an increasingly prevalent academic motif – widely celebrated but rarely interrogated – universities continue to extract value from its popularity, even as the practice itself risks reproducing the very hierarchies it claims to dismantle. It is through critical interrogation that we expose how the hyphen in co-production flattens power asymmetries and positional precariousities – particularly across research temporalities – in ways that complicate the ethics and politics of co-production in social and cultural geography.

## Conclusion

This article is our attempt to acknowledge the uneven distribution of power in co-productive relationships and posit that the relationships created in establishing the ‘co’ across power imbalances challenge the value and outcome of the ‘production’ in ways both fruitful and demanding to all those involved in the work. We offer three concluding thoughts.

First, we highlight co-production’s *affective* value, evidenced in the emotional impact, intangible joy and unofficial afterlives of the project. We recognize and embrace the beauty and power of arts based co-productive approaches to bring joy despite the limitations of co-productive arts work in terms of quantifiable outputs and their attendant institutional straitjacketing, where output evaluation mechanisms and impact metrics transform the affective into something commodifiable. Many of the women spoke to the joy of discovering new places in London and of taking part in the creation of their art project. Not only do the arts create a space for visibility and recognition not otherwise afforded by ‘support services’ or traditional research methods, but they create a legacy that is testament to the transformative power of relationships embedded in creativity, playfulness and reciprocity. Despite fraught negotiations of precarity and labour, we find the power of arts collaboration is in just that – the play acting, the discovery, the laughter and the connections made and hopefully sustained. This form of epistemic praxis, however, rather than destabilizing the hierarchies of power in knowledge production has greatest potential through relationships and friendships built. This raises the question of whether and how academia can better recognize affective value through shifting the evaluation bias from quantifiable outputs to narrative assessments and testimonials of academic work.

Second, we argue that acknowledging, rather than flattening the diverse agendas of the project constituents and recognizing the imbalances of power in the project rather than claiming equality amongst participants, creates space to see how different forms of value – economic, academic and emotional – are produced

differently for different actors. We feel the disciplinary unease with co-production's impossible claims to symmetry and horizontality may be alleviated, and some of our own positional ambivalence resolved, by freeing co-production from the burden of symmetry across the hyphen; instead recognizing the messy productive potential of asymmetries inherent to any work done across so many varying participants, institutions and organizations. We argue that by recognizing our roles, relative power and our own misgivings, we can increase sincerity about institutional constraints and begin to challenge them. In doing so, we hope that we can reveal how agentic focus and dialogic exchange are always bound by material and institutional constraints.

Finally, we want to reiterate, loudly, that universities have an institutional problem supporting this kind of work. Our work incurred several institutional financial ethics violations, and the interlinked chains of relationships, painstakingly established throughout the project, were jeopardized in multiple ways by navigating the funding structures available to the team for remunerating participants. We hope that writing openly about our own outsourcing (itself part of the neoliberal lexicon that critical approaches to co-production in public policy have challenged) and our means of sidestepping what we felt to be unethical constraints to working with vulnerabilized groups can prompt wider conversations about cash thank you payments, informal childcare and the limitations of existing financial regulations when conducting co-productive research. We recommend specifically that university ethics committees reviewing projects might confer more agency to those reviewing each individual case. A more personalized approach, with more decision-making capacity and time allotted to the reviewers, would allow a familiarity with the project and what support it might need, rather than defaulting to standard protocols written to function university-wide, across all disciplines. The same might be argued for financial regulation oversight on reimbursements; that a personalized review of the needed spending allocations per project would grant prior authorization for the type of spending required by the project's ethical praxis. In particular, we hope that this debate can occur in the context of recognizing the layered positional precarities of (a) legal status, class, gender, caring responsibilities and race; (b) casualization in Higher Education, financial security, gender and class; (c) insecurity and funding in arts and the charity sectors, race and class.

In sum, although co-production may not on its own democratize knowledge production, enable participants to 'join the government' (Conservative Manifesto, 2010) or abolish hierarchy, its diffuse, divergent and sometimes surprising outcomes can produce myriad value – both emotional and material – for those involved. It is through its affective potential that co-production might eventually build towards progressive social change. We look forward to discussions that advance and expand these debates in different research contexts, including post-colonial and settler colonial contexts, across various groups of co-producers.

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## Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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