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CGAP Briefing Note 8

Co-producing research: working together or falling apart?

January 2012

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Research co-production is increasingly seen as one of the most effective ways to ensure research impact. Rooted in ‘engaged scholarship’ – the perspective that research is a collective rather than a solitary exercise – it offers academics and practitioners the opportunity to jointly initiate, develop and implement a research project, to follow it through, analyse the data, and to share and publicise the findings. As the approach blurs and challenges traditional boundaries of ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’, it raises a range of ethical, practical and methodological issues.

This paper summarises a CGAP roundtable discussion held on the 2nd of November 2011 at Cass Business School, London, as part of the 9th ESRC Festival of Social Science. The event brought together academics and third sector practitioners to share their experiences of co-producing research and to consider the benefits and challenges that joint academic-voluntary sector research presents to both sides.

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Introduction

Research co-production is increasingly seen as one of the most effective ways to ensure research impact. Rooted in ‘engaged scholarship’ – the perspective that research is a collective rather than a solitary exercise – it offers academics and practitioners the opportunity to jointly initiate, develop and implement a research project, follow it through, analyse the data, and to share and publicise the findings. As the approach blurs and challenges traditional boundaries of ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’, it raises a range of ethical, practical and methodological issues¹.

To explore and consider the pros and cons of research co-production and to share experiences of what it was really like to go through this process, the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy at Cass Business School, London, organised a roundtable discussion on 2nd November 2011. This formed part of the 9th Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science (Grant Number RES-622-26-392). Prompted by CGAP colleagues’ developing experiences as research co-producers, the experience of other ‘co-producers’, jointly and individually, was sought. The event comprised three sets of presentations followed by group discussion. This briefing note outlines the content of, and insights from, the presentations and discussion.

Presentation 1: Exploring Social Return on Investment at Parents and Children Together

Jim Clifford – Head of Non-Profit Advisory, Baker Tilly, and Visiting Fellow, Centre for Charity Effectiveness (CCE), Cass Business School, City University London

Jan Fishwick – CEO, Parents and Children Together (PACT)

Background

Jan Fishwick and Jim Clifford talked about their backgrounds and outlined the development of their joint research relationship which had so far resulted in three research projects. After a long career in social work, in 2007 Jan Fishwick had become CEO of the charity PACT². This works to build and strengthen families in the Thames region. She had first become aware of Jim Clifford through his being a PACT adopter, but had not met him prior to the start of the research project. Jim had subsequently approached PACT about working with him on his research into evaluative protocols for transactional decision-making, linking social impact with conventional valuation and brand valuation. The resulting research projects, amongst other calculations and

¹ See for example the Special Issues of *Public Money & Management* (2010) and *Journal of Management Studies* (2009)

² PACT – Parents and Children Together (www.pactcharity.org.uk)

reviews, had applied a Social Return on Investment (SROI) model to three areas of PACT's work:

- **Alana House Women's Community Project** – which helps women ex-offenders and reduce rates of re-offending³.
- **Witney Children's Centres** – specifically the work there to improve child health and reduce obesity⁴.
- **Domestic adoption and fostering services** – work by PACT to train and support parents for children from the care system⁵.

Co-development had been at the core of the collaboration and PACT had been involved in the evolution of the projects at every stage. In all three cases the research had demonstrated the effectiveness of the SROI approach. The Alana House study for example, had shown that £35m of value was created each year from an annual investment of £170k.

Challenges

Jan Fishwick highlighted some of the challenges of working together. It had been difficult to find diary time to discuss and develop the projects and to reflect on what they were doing. Achieving the cooperation and buy-in of staff had also been an issue, particularly amongst more operational staff, who had needed more persuading of the value of giving up precious time to collaborate on research. The two partners also brought different perspectives to the project and there had been times when they had had to debate research outcomes and 'meet in the middle'. Examples of this included: the debate on how to interpret other research findings into adoption breakdown rates in the context of the current study, a hotly debated political issue; how to deal with the difficulties the Alana House manager was finding in engaging with the project when she was under considerable practical and time pressures to deliver in the first and crucial year of the project; and reconciling the assumptions of two accountants, one more optimistic than the other.

Jim Clifford added that he had felt the need to get staff and board members on-side at the start of the project, to explain his background, and to combat any preconceived ideas that he was 'merely an accountant', or that he politically and culturally did not buy into PACT's mission and focus. In order to sell the project to PACT, he had framed his initial proposal to PACT in very practical terms, outlining both what the charity would get out of the project but also what they would have to commit to it.

Benefits

In Jan Fishwick's view the benefits of the collaboration had been very significant for PACT. She summarised them as:

- **A better understanding and articulation of value** – the SROI projects had given PACT a much clearer, more structured understanding of the value of its

³ Clifford, J. (2010). *Alana House Women's Community Project, In conjunction with Parents and Children Together: SROI Evaluation*. London. Baker Tilly and Cass Centre for Charity Effectiveness.

⁴ Clifford, J. (2011). *PACT Witney Children's Centres: SROI Evaluation*. Reading. PACT. and London. Baker Tilly.

⁵ Clifford, J. (2011). *PACT Domestic Adoption and Fostering: SROI Evaluation*. Reading. PACT. and London. Baker Tilly.

work based on evidence and rigorous evaluation. The work allowed PACT staff and board members to articulate that value more powerfully.

- **A clearer strategy** – the SROI model had allowed PACT to consider how successful projects could be extended or built upon, and to judge future projects in a more structured way. In the case of the Witney Children’s Centres work, for example, the research had highlighted a clear way forward by showing that the work being done with children could be extended to younger age groups.
- **A stronger platform** – an understanding of the value of its work had given PACT greater confidence in how it presented itself, enhancing its positioning, strengthening its platform and making it better known.
- **Greater influence and engagement** – being able to demonstrate the value of its work, had given PACT the opportunity to influence decision-makers particularly in the field of adoption, including the Children’s Minister, Tim Loughton MP and the Ministerial Adviser on Adoption, Martin Narey.
- **Increased ambition** – PACT had become bolder about its future plans now that it had a clearer picture of the value of its work.

Jan Fishwick and Jim Clifford concluded by saying that over time their research relationship had become very positive and both looked forward to future projects. The sentiment of ‘Research...so what?’ had quickly evolved into ‘Research...what next?’. The relationship they had developed, and the threads of shared interest that they had found, had enabled them to work collaboratively on a wide range of further projects, including drawing Jim into a wider engagement with the sector through the link with the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies⁶.

Presentation 2: Donor cultivation in theory and practice

Jeanie Scott – Business Development Manager, Arts & Business Scotland

Background

Jeanie Scott gave a brief introduction to Arts & Business Scotland (A&BS)⁷ – a charity, member organisation and advocacy body which gives advice and training to arts organisations and provides consultancy to businesses on how to engage with the arts. During 2011, A&BS had worked with the Centre for Giving and Philanthropy (CGAP) on a research project to map the levels of skill and delivery around donor cultivation amongst A&BS member organisations⁸. The project had been accompanied by a series of philanthropy masterclasses to showcase examples of effective practice and to disseminate research knowledge. The research revealed significant differences in fundraising skills and delivery across the arts sector. Broadly speaking, national organisations had the resources and expertise to cultivate donors effectively whilst smaller organisations often struggled through lack of investment, resources, know-how and time.

⁶ Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) (www.cvaa.org.uk)

⁷ Arts & Business Scotland (www.artsandbusiness.org.uk/)

⁸ Harrow, J., T. Jung, H. Pavey and J. Scott (2011). ‘Donor cultivation in theory and practice’. Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy, Cass Business School, City University, London, and Arts & Business Scotland, Edinburgh

Benefits

The co-production relationship between CGAP and A&BS had been smooth and productive and A&BS was looking forward to the next questions that it would tackle with CGAP. Jeanie Scott outlined the several positive outcomes of the project, including:

- **A broader perspective** – the project had given opportunities for A&BS to broaden its horizons, look at the wider context and think strategically about the arts sector in Scotland. Helpfully, these brainstorming discussions had been conducted within the academic framework provided by the research and were therefore always tied back to practical outcomes.
- **Benchmarking and strategy** – the project had enabled A&BS to benchmark the arts in Scotland against other segments of the voluntary sector. That benchmarking had allowed A&BS to think strategically about how the sector needed to evolve in order to keep pace with others.
- **Evidence** – in a fiercely competitive sector, any project that demonstrated good work being done and created evidence of the value of that work was critically important.
- **Co-promotion** – the project had provided new audiences for both A&BS and CGAP.
- **Co-learning** – the project had provided both parties with access to the work of the other organisation.
- **Resources** – the project had confirmed the need for A&BS to have a staff member dedicated to managing/overseeing co-produced research.

Challenges

Jeanie Scott also outlined a number of areas of challenge that the co-production process had highlighted:

- **Bridging the culture gap** – both partners had needed to familiarise themselves quickly with the culture of the other. In addition, A&BS had had to get to grips rapidly with the practicality of academic research.
- **Respecting responsibilities** – the researcher and the voluntary sector organisation had different responsibilities in a research project: the researcher was there to research and the voluntary organisation was there to provide content and help shape the project. These separate roles had needed to be understood and respected.
- **Trusting an informal agreement** – the relationship between CGAP and A&BS had been an informal one, based on a dialogue conducted over several meetings and emails but never set down in a formal document. A&BS had had to get used to the idea of a fluid relationship based on trust without written agreement of outcomes.
- **Dedicated representatives** – an important part of the project's success had rested on the existence of a dedicated, responsible person within each organisation to act as the hub for the project.
- **Agreeing the language** – there had been issues over language and the use of phrases (e.g. 'donor education') which were not widely understood outside of CGAP. Language and terms had had to be agreed and used consistently. As A&BS had been offering up the subject matter and its contacts for the project, it had been important that the results were communicated effectively to the A&BS audience as well as to the academic community.
- **Ownership and copyright** – there had been questions over ownership: Who owned the toolkit produced by the research? Could someone profit from it?

Presentation 3: Why co-production can be essential to good research outcomes

Cathy Pharoah – Professor of Charity Funding and Co-Director Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy, Cass Business School, City University, London

Cathy Pharoah began her presentation by highlighting the ESRC's interest in how greater impact could be achieved by academics and practitioners/users working together on research⁹. This collaboration could be in a number of areas¹⁰. Co-production – drawing on the resources, interests and contribution of different partners and stakeholders to address provision for public welfare – was very much part of the general Big Society approach. However, co-production was not new: applied research and evaluation often depended on close collaborations between practitioners, policy-makers and researchers, and the real challenge was how it was conducted. Co-production approaches to research could be challenging for both practitioners (or commissioners and funders) and researchers. As co-production was encouraged and became more common, it was important that more formal frameworks were put in place to address those challenges.

Cathy Pharoah outlined a number of examples of research projects where – due to the conflicting agendas of the parties involved – the collaboration had not been as successful as it might have been and reflected on the lessons that could be learnt from these cases.

Theme 1: Vulnerable subjects – what happens when those being researched feel threatened?

Example 1

A research project was established to evaluate a new and innovative government health initiative, an experimental project which sat outside mainstream NHS services. The evaluation was marked by sensitivity from the start with both those involved in the new project and those working within the related mainstream services concerned about being shown to fail. The vulnerability felt by the practitioners being evaluated was heightened by their preconceived view that the senior researcher appointed was not to be trusted and was willing to do a hatchet job on behalf of commissioners. The practitioners also felt powerless in the research process. They had no control over how the project was conducted but strict contractual responsibilities in terms of assisting the project (by supplying data, providing access to clients for interviews, etc).

The mistrust that developed amongst the practitioners led them to adopt a number of tactics to undermine the research:

- **Withholding information** – the practitioners did not provide full records to the researchers on their activities and their clients, claiming afterwards that they had

⁹ The ESRC Delivery Plan 2011-2015 states that 'Evaluation shows that sustained contact with users is often the best way to increase impact and we will ensure this engagement is central to the research process'

¹⁰ The ESRC's third sector management strategy sets out important aspects of contact with users as: Improving the evidence base and sector effectiveness through the co-production of knowledge; Building the sector's capacity to use research; Developing systems for knowledge brokering and exchange; Maximising the impact of research and knowledge transfer activities.

been prevented from doing so by confidentiality issues. This enabled them to claim that the research lacked full data.

- **Recruiting the researcher to their cause** – the practitioners ‘picked off’ the research assistant, who found that the friendship and trust established to gain access to data from the project, led to requests for protection against the research supervisor.
- **Trivialisation** – the practitioners trivialised the research process by providing examples and materials of highly dubious status.

The research report concluded that, whilst there was some very good work within the initiative, there was also considerable evidence of poor value for money. Despite this finding, substantial ongoing funding was provided to one of the strands of work which had received a relatively weak assessment. It appeared that the evidence of value which the practitioners had provided privately had convinced the health authorities that the project was worth funding despite the research results.

Example 2

In a second health example, a government project was set up within a mental health institution to explore the experimental deployment of staffing grades in different roles, basically testing whether less well-trained nursing staff could take on more senior responsibility for long-stay patients. Requests from the institution’s medical and psychiatric staff for a formal role in the evaluation were refused by the research commissioners, a sensitive issue because of their potential roles in the outcome of the trial.

As in the previous example, the ‘subjects’ of the research found a way of seizing back some control over a process which they perceived as a threat. Some consultants set up their own evaluation, in parallel to the funded one which they carried out through their own resources as they did not have a budget for any further independent research. This presented considerable risk for the external research team: their work would potentially be undermined were the ‘alternative’ approach to yield very different conclusions. Even if it were alleged that the internal researchers had partisan interests, they still had the weight of their very senior professional scientific status and extensive research experience behind them.

When the external research report was presented to its commissioners, permission was given for the internal report to be presented at the same time, to avoid confrontation. Fortunately, the two reports came to fairly similar conclusions, although the rationale and reasons for getting there were very different and the lessons/implications that could be drawn from the two evaluations would be very different indeed. As part of their report, the internal researchers analysed the power structure of the external research team, concluding that the main research officer was dominated by the senior researchers and, in spite of being closest to the research, had had no voice.

Cathy Pharoah commented that carrying out parallel, independent research was a tool often used by organisations which felt threatened by an externally-commissioned evaluation and had the resources to undertake a separate study.

Theme 2: Competing agendas – what happens when researcher and practitioner want different things?

Cathy Pharoah went on to talk about instances where the agenda of those funding research differed from that of their researchers. Whilst practitioners and policy-makers commissioning research were often driven by a genuine desire to gain better

understanding of a field, their effectiveness or needs, there were occasions when other, more problematic agendas came into play. Examples of this include commercial interest, publicity, market advantage and political positioning. It was not unheard of for research-funders to look to research as a way of raising profile and gaining publicity, strengthening market position, gaining inside knowledge and market advantage, or of bolstering a political position. Indeed commissioners might only be making resources available for research on the understanding that one or more of these agendas will be fulfilled.

Cathy Pharoah outlined an example of a corporate that had funded independent research into the role of senior company staff in giving time and money, hoping to gain access to some private data about research participants through the work. In another case, a corporate with a heavily value-driven ethical stance – an important part of their product offering – viewed some potential research into corporate ethics in community investment mainly as an opportunity to demonstrate the ethical strength of their own position. After considerable discussion and attempted negotiation, it proved impossible for the researchers and potential commissioners to reach an agreement on an approach which would be both neutral and valuable.

Where commissioners/funders saw research as a positioning tool – whether their aims were political influence, enhanced reputation or stronger market position – the research relationship was likely to become strained and fraught. Tensions could arise around:

- **Levels of engagement in the research process.**
- **Unrealistic expectations of what research could achieve** – questions which could not be answered, and researchers too anxious about funding to say so.
- **Clarity about roles.**
- **Unsought-for results.**
- **The fate of the results** – excellent research results side-lined because they lacked PR impact as a result of being too specialised or nuanced to attract press interest.

These tensions could lead to:

- **Power-struggles and unsatisfactory outcomes for various stakeholders.**
- **Suppression of research results** – using a variety of tactics such as undermining methodology, kicking into long-grass, prevarication, etc.
- **Lack of scope for productive follow-on/ learning/ future funding** ('never doing that again').
- **Reputational loss on all sides.**
- **The search for new partners.**

For many researchers, the answer to these kinds of challenges was to retreat to base, claiming that their role was simply to produce knowledge which was methodologically robust, and to present it for others to use as they wished. Often researchers – explicitly or implicitly – would close off further discussion by using specialised terminology, highly statistical approaches or other technical methodologies which non-specialists could not articulate. Here the risk was that the research results would disappear, un-disseminated into academic portals amidst accusations of irrelevance, with the non-academics alienated because they were not sure what was being said by the research. In such cases, the likelihood a positive on-going research relationship and further funding was limited.

What if it all goes right?

Cathy Pharoah outlined that where researchers, practitioners and policy-makers could achieve synergy and shared purpose, the potential rewards of co-produced research were significant:

- **Funding, and sometimes more funding.**
- **Access to people, data, networks and insights which richly ease and enhance the research capacity.**
- **Risk-sharing** – very important where innovation, and also where non-researchers have a strong hand in determining the research design.
- **Many outlets (and additional budgets) for disseminating the research.**
- **Influence** – the ability to feed into key policy and practice forums within the field and to influence policy and practice on the ground.

Lessons to be learnt – achieving a common understanding

Cathy Pharoah concluded that the pitfalls she had described could be best avoided by achieving a common understanding at the very beginning of the co-production process. It was crucial that researchers and practitioners/commissioners had an early, full and frank discussion about the real-world contexts for the research. From the research side this needed to involve honest discussion of what was possible in research terms; from the practitioner/policy side, it needed to include recognition of how they wanted the research to be used. The partners had to ask themselves collectively why they were conducting the research and question precisely what they were trying to achieve, and how best to achieve it.

Researchers often began by trying to define the research question but, in the real world context of engagement, getting to the real research question was far more difficult than people acknowledged and, in relation to co-production, it was likely to require a highly iterative and inclusive process. Cathy Pharoah added that the key policy and practice areas on which the research was likely to touch also needed to be discussed upfront, rather than the all-to-common approach of considering them at the end of the project and token-istically tacking a raft of unachievable 'next steps' on to the end of the report.

Once both parties had come to a common understanding of what they were trying to achieve, the co-production process needed to be driven by a shared view of how best to achieve it. The project then needed to progress on a basis of communication, trust and respect for participants' different roles.

Group discussion

Following the presentations the participants had the opportunity to raise questions and comments. As part of this, the following themes were raised:

Balance of benefit

- There were a number of comments about where the balance of benefit lay with co-produced research. Traditionally, the academic sector had 'done research' to the third sector. It was the third sector that was sitting on the 'fodder', so the balance of benefit was in favour of academia.

Who shapes the research question?

- In the case of the A&BS project, A&BS members might have been hoping for best practice examples to come out of the study. Whilst the research had emerged from what A&BS members wanted to know, it was actually framed differently and yielded different results to those that the members might have been expecting. Whose research question(s) predominate(s)? Is it only true co-production if both parties shaped the research question?

The risks of 'researcher capture'

- There was less distance in a co-producing relationship than in a traditional research project and that could lead to a loss of objectivity and the researcher empathising with the research subject. An example was cited where a researcher had become very embedded within the organisation being researched to the extent that a second researcher was brought in to give a second, objective eye.
- Jan Fishwick commented that Jim Clifford's closeness to PACT (as a PACT adopter) had been seen as an advantage. It had been felt that having such an informed researcher would add power to the project and validate the work being undertaken. The report had been peer-reviewed by an external expert precisely because Jim Clifford had been so close to the subject matter.

Handling sensitive results

- One participant described a project where it had worked well to give some of the results orally at a meeting rather than include them in the report. These were findings that were not directly relevant to the research question but still of interest to the client.

Competing agendas and interference

- The view was expressed that voluntary sector organisations tended to interfere more than private sector companies in the results of research. Increasingly, businesses were clear on their commercial need to understand what was going on, what was working and what was not, so they were only interested in open results.
- In the voluntary sector, the practitioners/commissioners tended to have greater vested interest in the results and take the outcomes more personally. One explanation for this sensitivity could be that research funding was so hard to find in the third sector that there was heightened focus on the outcome. Another factor might be that voluntary sector employees tended to have a deep commitment to the mission of their organisation, which might lead them to take critical research results more personally.
- There was political and reputational risk inherent in research. Interference might stem from fear of the results exposing a lack of knowledge/ effectiveness/ skills of both board members and/or staff.
- The reason behind a research project could be telling. It was problematic if the organisation was looking for either validation of what it is doing, or because it was boxed-in in some way and looking for an exit. Research always needed to be approached with openness and a genuine interest in any result, however unexpected.
- One participant commented that if a voluntary sector organisation had the stomach for co-producing research, they probably had the stomach for the results. The willingness to co-produce was in itself a healthy sign of openness to

scrutiny. The commissioner/funder might also sense that they would get help/resources to deal with any issues thrown up by the research.

- The research process could stimulate change even before the report was published, or whether it was published or not. The fact that questions were asked could make people consider and change their practice.

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Further reading

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About CGAP

The ESRC Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy (CGAP) is the first academic centre in the UK dedicated to research on charitable giving and philanthropy. Three main research strands focus on individual and business giving, social redistribution and charitable activity, and the institutions of giving. CGAP is a consortium including the Universities of Strathclyde, Southampton and Kent, University of Edinburgh Business School, Cass Business School and NCVO. CGAP's coordinating 'hub' is based at Cass Business School. CGAP is funded by the ESRC, the Office for Civil Society, the Scottish Government and Carnegie UK Trust.

For further information on CGAP, visit www.cgap.org.uk