

## Feeling or Funding? Critical Co-production, Rationality, Emotionality and Axiological Reflections

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Co-produced research is at risk of becoming, and has perhaps already become, a 'mere buzzword', separated from its social and academic value. We argue this is connected to two things: the structuring of contemporary, particularly Global Northern academia, and the traditional, dichotomous, and false intellectual separation of rationality from emotionality. Our modest attempt to tackle these problems comes in the form of an extended critical discussion of co-production and a social theoretical account of the emotions. These sections provide something of a 'ground clearing', and based upon which, we illustrate our thesis with two personal accounts about how we came to value co-production as a fundamentally moral and ethical way to approach our research. We conclude by appealing to colleagues to join us in attempting to undermine the empty and tokenistic use of co-production by openly and honestly discussing the axiological and emotional foundations from which they work.

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Following various scholars, we outline below that co-produced research – which is developed, delivered and presented in collaboration with, and/or led by, communities and participants and, in so doing, aims to upend traditional relations of power in academic research – is at risk of becoming, and in some cases has already become, separated from that which makes it socially important and academically distinctive. In this regard, 'co-produced' research, rather than addressing problems and issues that various communities face, can become the latest methodological 'buzzword' used by academics to gain funding, advance their careers, and otherwise 'profit' at the expense of the communities and individuals their work is, in theory, designed to benefit (for a discussion see Smith et al., 2023).

When combined with the continuing legacy of the traditional separation of 'rational' and 'emotional' approaches to understanding the world – wherein science is framed as a particularly rational enterprise – a logical problem flows from this argument. That is, journals and other academic publications, despite some important shifts, still largely exclude emotional accounts of the world when the research process is recounted (see such shifts, for example, in various evidence from across this journal of confessional scholarly tales, evocative 'insider' accounts and discussions of the emotional labour associated with doing research). And when this is the case, there is little opportunity for readers to understand, consider and critique the author's motivations for proposing and delivering their research, and the complex, time-consuming, and emotional realities that underpin their academic findings and claims around co-production.

We have tried, for example, to get a sense of such experiences when reading methods sections describing co-produced approaches, but we are usually left feeling that scholars do not sufficiently outline such key dimensions of their work. This means there is little to no discussion of what we argue is a central feature of undermining the 'buzzwordification' and vacuous use of co-production – an

open and honest reflection on the emotional side of academic life, wherein scholars can consider and outline the axiological foundation upon which their use of, and commitment to, the ethics, ethos and morality of co-production would come forth.

Given this, in what follows, we provide an extended and quite critical theoretical discussion of co-production in academia. We then consider literature and theory which highlight how the emotions feature in life and (co-)research. This sets up the main contribution we seek to develop, that is, to detail, via two highly personal, reflexive and emotive vignettes about our own research experiences, how we have been drawn to co-produced methodologies due to our feelings towards the people and communities we research, rather than as a rational and/or self-serving quest for funding and career advancement. Based on all this, we conclude with an appeal to colleagues who conduct 'co-production' to explicitly recognise, regard and reveal the emotional involvement they share with their research participants and wider communities through systematic (rational), epistemological and axiological self-reflection.

We provide these accounts not as some claim to 'best practice' – although we do consider our work as springing from distinctly coherent and well-developed moral and ethical stances – but instead to highlight two examples of what it looks like when scholars are largely drawn to co-production due to emotional and personal connections to communities and individuals. We do this because, as we outline below, they are rare in colleagues' work. Therefore, we hope our axiological reflections in this direction can further philosophical and methodological discussions around the *essential* place of the emotions in *all* research. But most importantly, they capture elements of our work that we argue would not be present if similar and faithful representations were presented by scholars who are doing co-produced research for largely self-serving reasons or engaging in the vacuous and shallow use of such terminology, which may be, in part, due to economic rationality and logic.

To conclude, we highlight some problems embedded in the analysis, before calling on colleagues to centralise emotional experiences as key to the work they co-produce with individuals, groups and communities. In connection to these, it is worth, from the outset, situating the specific nature of our work. We focus on co-production in an academic context in North America, Europe and Oceania – settings that have distinct workplace structures that articulate with the critique we present. As such, we expect that our discussions do not hold as much, if any, weight in relation to other situations wherein charities, local councils, non-governmental organisations, and the like, develop and deliver co-production. And we also expect that our arguments will not resonate with academics working in different organisational structures and educational cultures – for example, following Mitlin et al. (2020), the different values attached to research, knowledge production, and the roles of universities in the 'Global South' would likely mean our comments have less importance to colleagues who work there. But, with those caveats in hand, we do think there is some important utility in reflecting on the emotions in co-production. To more thoroughly explain and justify this claim, we begin by tracing some of the origins of such work.

## **A Critical Account of Co-produced Research**

Co-production can be traced to civil rights movements and other efforts at social/political organising (Verschuere et al., 2012). While this history is important, our focus here is to briefly contextualise co-production in academia in the 'Global North' (see for a further discussion Mitlin et al. 2020). While there is evidence from various disciplines, especially those broadly understood to be social scientific,

that key elements of co-production have always been central to research (see for example, classic ethnography such as Snodgrass, 1983; Shaw, 2013 and Adler, Adler, & Johnson's, 1992 discussion of William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, and various contributions around standpoint epistemologies Sprague, 2005 and Patricia Hill Collins, 2000), the academic use of the term has a quite clear recent history in North America, Europe and Oceania.

According to Bell and Pahl (2018), the origins of co-production can be attributed to the work of Elinor Ostrom and colleagues who explored such ways of working in the context of public services, and particularly the dynamic between police officers, who they define as 'service providers', and members of the community as 'service users' (Ostrom, 1975; 1978; 1996; Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971; Parks et al., 1981). Ostrom and colleagues argued that service users hold a pivotal role in influencing the effectiveness and efficiency of public services. As such, the public was not only 'consuming' such services but also actively participating in the production of them. And in referring to this collaborative process, these scholars were amongst the first to specifically and explicitly highlight the co-dependency of different groups in delivering and enhancing various public services, assets and outcomes.

In part because of this work, an interest arose in involving 'the co-producers' in the development of scientific knowledge about public services (Verschuere et al., 2012). From this foundation, a variety of definitions, applications and methodologies connected to co-production in research were developed. And while there are clear differences spanning such work, there is also a broad consensus that co-production should, in principle, be creating active involvement, ensuring meaningful participation and striving towards broadly equal contributions between various groups, communities and individuals in academic research (Brandsen et al., 2018). This is then a response to traditional 'ivory tower' approaches to conducting science whereby research is done *on*, and scholars speak *for*, 'subjects'. And, therefore, proponents of co-produced research usually claim to have some elements of acquiring knowledge *with*, *alongside* or *by* 'non-academic' partners, or, more appropriately, *co-researchers*, which then marks a significant epistemic and axiological shift in thinking about research philosophy, design, delivery and outcomes across different fields of study.

However, scholarly interest in this matter did not progress linearly. In the 1980s and 90s, as Brandsen et al. (2018) argue, a prevailing 'market orientation' within governmental and public discourses in Europe led to the treatment of public goods and services – such as health care, education, welfare, law enforcement and civil services more broadly – in the same way as any other goods, whose value and importance were increasingly determined by supply and demand dynamics. And so, service users were viewed as 'consumers' or 'recipients' to whom actions were to be performed 'to' or 'for', rather than as active contributors in the creation, development and enhancement of these services or support. In turn, this shift towards considering users of public services as 'consumers' resulted in scholars being less likely to collaborate with 'non-academic' partners in their research (Brandsen et al., 2018), and this appears to have resulted in a decline in scholarly interest in producing knowledge in a co-produced fashion.

Of course, there will be nuances and debates about how the popularity of co-produced work has waxed and waned. But it suffices for the argument we present here that, whatever the origin of such work, there has been, since the beginning of the millennium, a clear (re)turn in co-produced research in various scholarly disciplines (Pestoff et al., 2012). This shift has been driven by growing discipline-specific rationales asserting that 'co-production' enhances both the social and economic benefits of scientific research (Kirkegaard & Andersen, 2018). Consequently, academics (re)turned to co-produced

methodologies, which Smith et al. (2023) suggest is part of the ‘participatory turn’, in order to develop their research, and the knowledge that flows from it, with various groups, communities and individuals (Pestoff et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2023). However, this shift has brought forth a more critical stance towards the challenges and practices associated with such ways of working – as captured in Brandsen’s pithy comment that co-production is only “useful when carefully applied, but meaningless when stretched” (2018, 6).

Within a process of increasing popularity, ‘co-production’ risks becoming a ‘buzzword’ (Smith et al., 2023), a ‘mere trend’ (Masterson et al., 2022), or, as Kirkegaard and Andersen (2018) put it, ‘a game of pretend’. And, we argue, such critiques become more likely when scholars use ‘co-production’ in their plans or research processes in unconsidered, unfounded and unfaithful ways for ‘fundings sake’. When this happens, ‘co-produced’ approaches are at risk of being used with such frequency, variety and lack of consistency, that what makes such work important and distinctive can be lost. Thus, a problematic and uncritical application of the approach is what Williams et al. (2020) call ‘cobiquity’ – meaning that co-production has become *ubiquitous* – and this is something that scholars already see happening in various disciplines (for discipline-specific reflections, see for example Bremer & Meisch, 2017 and Galende-Sanchez & Sorman, 2021 for climate research; Martin, 2010 for social research; Palumbo, 2016, for health care research). And so, this ‘trendiness’ and ‘buzzwordification’ means that such ways of working can become delivered vacuously and separated from their ethical, moral and progressive political roots.

In this regard, various scholars argue, and we agree, that the increasing prominence and importance that is placed on co-produced research methodologies is not *necessarily* the result of robust debates about how to conduct valuable, ethical and morally just research. And that instead, a (re)turn in this direction is more likely driven by funding bodies, which increasingly stipulate ‘co-production’ as a valued approach, or even a prerequisite, for obtaining research monies (Masterson et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023). While funding being awarded to work that prioritises co-production is, in and of itself, a broadly positive move, our concerns come as this process is tied to an ‘audit culture’ that is increasingly prevalent and, in some cases, fetishised, with academic institutions.

In relation to ‘audit cultures’, Shore argues that they produce contexts where “accountability is conflated with elaborate policing mechanisms for subjecting individual performance to the gaze of external experts, and where every aspect of work must be ranked and assessed against bureaucratic benchmarks and economic targets” (2008, 281). When aligning with such an approach, those governing, managing or otherwise overseeing workplaces and organisations, increasingly place value on the techniques and principles of accounting as a means of framing, assessing and evaluating individual and group conduct. This is not a neutral undertaking which simply reveals – via ‘counting’ – what is happening, rather, it acts to shape, re-organise, and create “new kinds of relationships, habits and practices” (Shore, 2008, 279). The outcome is the pervasive evaluation of various acts, behaviours and performances through ‘quality assurance’, various quantitative scales, the often-simplistic monitoring of ‘impact’ (for example, the REF and TEF systems within UK universities are prime examples we have experienced) and economic effectiveness and efficiency. In this regard, it is the outcomes of these *measurements*, rather than the acts they are apparently trying to measure, that become the most significant to people who implement and accept them as normal parts of contemporary academic life – *measuring and therefore ‘proving impact’ becomes more important than the actual impact*.

And so, the ‘academic audit culture’ creates a climate in which researchers using co-production may be drawn to focus on quantifying, qualifying and proving, as more important than ‘genuinely doing’ – the audit tail, wagging the ethical, moral, and critical co-produced research dog. In this sense, performatively produced co-production, which *can* be audited effectively, becomes more rewarded and, in some measures, more important, than genuinely co-produced research that *cannot* be audited effectively. Of course, we are setting up a false dichotomy here, but with that said, the logic at the core of our argument is clear – the fetishisation of audit culture has the potential to, and probably already has, cut the ‘heart and soul’ out of co-produced research and many other facets of academic life.

A further critical problem associated with co-production comes from something of the opposite direction to that of its place within ‘audit culture’ – that is, unconsidered assumptions that ‘co-produced’ ways of gaining knowledge will maximise research outcomes and enhance public goods, benefits and values (for critical discussions around this point please see Faulkner & Thompson, 2023; Kirkegaard & Andersen, 2018; Palmer et al., 2019). Of course, there is a truth to the positive potential embedded in co-production, but the evidence base for such claims is underdeveloped in various ways (Palmer et al., 2019) – to be clear, we do not think ‘audit culture’ as described above is a positive answer for this problem. In particular, Palmer et al. (2019), drawing on Alford and Yates (2016) and Wiewiora et al. (2016), question whether ‘co-produced’ strategies, when delivered in practice, actually ensure the enhancement of public value and genuine dialogue with individuals, groups and communities. This means that there might be something of a rhetorical and ideological element to ‘co-production’, or as Phillips et al. (2021, p.5) put it, such terms are used like “buzzwords with a taken-for-granted positive value”, which then leads some scholars, research leaders and funders to uncritically assume that working in such ways will produce social goods via an apparent democratisation of academic research. When such a position is assumed, ‘co-production’ will be expected within grant applications and the associated lack of criticality is foundational to the potential for meaninglessness that Brandsen and colleagues (2018) call out.

We argue that such an intertwining of the process outlined above are at the core of how the language and ethos of ‘co-production’ can become misappropriated and thus *leveraged in symbolically compliant ways* – that is, performativity can trump ‘authenticity’, auditing can trump doing, and talking-the-talk might not translate to walking-the-walk. And rather than doing the emotionally laborious and time-consuming work of actively engaging communities of practice, establishing equal and reciprocal relationships with various groups and individuals, and emphasising/creating collective value and dialogue as a scientifically valuable and meaningful project in community research, such insipid ways of working can become the antithesis of what co-production should be in principle and practice. Put differently, researchers run the risk of using the term in a tokenistic way and, in so doing, undermine future attempts to deliver genuine co-designed, co-researched and co-analysed scientific findings.

Our modest attempt to address this issue is to highlight the ways in which emotional connections to research participants and community groups sit at the foundation of our work, trying to deliver genuinely co-produced research. That is, we argue, emotional engagement of various positive and potentially negative forms, and the feeling of ‘care’ for participants, is what scholars *should*, and most commonly do, experience with the communities they co-produce with. And it is especially these dimensions – emotions and personal connections – that we argue are often central to conducting meaningful, progressive and scientifically rigorous community engaged research, and thus, can be undermined when scholars align their agendas and work practices with those of certain funders for ‘fundings sake’ and symbolically perform ‘co-production’ to satisfy the mores of ‘audit culture’.

Considering how the emotions, rather than being the opposite of rationality, are fundamental to human social life, our involvement in, and our understanding of, 'the world' and (co-)research methodologies, provides a philosophical and social theoretical platform for this argument.

### **Beyond Dichotomies – Life and (Co-)Research are *Always* Emotional**

Emotionality is often incorrectly understood in opposition to rationality, and, as Emerald and Carpenter put it, can be constructed in binary to "intellectual work and professionalism" (2015, 747). Andrew Sayer, in his excellent account of *Why Things Matter to People* (2012), provides a broad deconstruction of such dichotomous ways of thinking and specifically relates this to the intertwining of emotions and rational thought. Of course, dichotomies and important differences between things/ideas/types, do occur and must be acknowledged and explored. However, we argue, following the likes of Sayer, as well as, Bernstein (1983), de Sousa (1987) and Stones (1996), that such 'either/or' ways of knowing the world are, most commonly, overly reductive and liable to result in simplistic analysis and understanding (see also Matthews (forthcoming) for a broad discussion).

With this starting point in mind, Jack Barbalet provides a foundational approach to understanding the emotions:

The word 'emotion' carries a lot of weight: indeed, it is overburdened with meaning. Its widest application is probably as a term of pejorative evaluation. When it is used [in this text], though emotion simply indicates what might be called an experience of involvement. A person may be positively or negatively involved in something, profoundly involved or only slightly involved, but however or to what degree they are involved with an event, condition or person it necessarily matters to them, proportionately. *That it matters, that a person cares about something, registers in their physical and dispositional being. It is this experience that is emotion, not the subject's thoughts about their experience, or the language of self-explanation arising from the experience, but that immediate contact with the world the self has through involvement* (Barbalet, 2002, 1, our emphasis).

This is then an approach to understanding the emotions which avoids considering them as 'types' (hate, love, fear, greed, happiness), or in opposition to rationality. Instead, it grasps such experiences as fundamental to how we are connected to the things, persons, ideas, objects etc. that are the symbolic and material stuff of our social lives.

When considered as *dispositional involvement*, we are much better placed to see how the emotions are not some extreme or momentary lapse within our otherwise rational lives (see Denzin, 1984 for a classic exploration of this point), but, rather, how emotions are a central feature of how we exist within, negotiate and make sense of the world. In this regard, the rationality that is commonly described and favoured as the 'go-to' way of being-in-the-world, can be understood as a relatively recent outcome of shifts in the social organisation of life around a capitalist model (Barbalet, 2001), wherein we live in increasingly interdependent social arrangements (Elias, 2000 [1939]). As Norbert Elias argued, some 70 years ago, about modern group life:

Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success (Elias, 2000 [1939], 398).

The shift towards rationality and the associated re-evaluation of emotionality as something to be avoided, restrained and otherwise controlled is a distinctly modern social invention and convention. One which is often uncritically assumed to be normal, natural and is, as such, rewarded in most social interactions (Barbalet, 2001, 2002; Elias, 2000 [1939]).

This process shapes contemporary social life in general and is specifically related to a stereotypical account of a 'scientific' worldview. Such a way of seeing and engaging in the world has traditionally been understood as one whereby scholars work towards increasing levels of rationality and decreasing levels of emotionality (see for a discussion Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). While there is certainly an empirical truth to this, and we broadly accept the importance of rationality (especially when it is understood as a post-hoc intellectual framing of feel and intuition), maintaining a dichotomous approach leads to a lack of attention being directed towards how *the emotions are, in fact, central to the scientific endeavour*. And, we argue, this process is why axiological reflections, if present at all, do not feature detailed discussions of the emotional 'landscapes' that have drawn scholars to their research in various ways.

Reed and Towers (2023) assert that sociologists, in particular feminist scholars (see for example, Carroll, 2013), were among the first to integrate emotionality in academic research about social processes and the production of social phenomena. Such emphasis on the emotions in exploring human experiences and social relations has been referred to as the 'emotive turn' (Reed & Towers, 2023). This process is associated with a social theoretical 'moment' in the late 1970s and 80s, which extended into the 90s and early 2000s, which placed the emotions at the centre of human social life (for examples of key work please see, Barbalet, 2002; Collins, 1975; Denzin, 1984; de Sousa, 1987; Elias, 1987; Kemper, 1978; Lutz 1998; Maguire, 1991).

Highlighting the key role the emotions play in our lives, as Reed and Towers (2023) claim, has encouraged an increased attention to their epistemic features – that they are important in knowledge production and human understanding. Put differently, people often find themselves 'feeling' their way around life as they attempt to comprehend the social, cultural and historical worlds they live in and reproduce. Emotions then function as "practical resources" (Cottingham, 2022, 3) that shape our knowledge about and acts within, the social worlds we share with each other. This theoretical appreciation underscores important shifts in interrogating the role of the emotions in how, and what, we can know about things.

Seen in this light, we are also never devoid of an emotional stance in our academic ways of thinking, doing and talking – even our rational attempts to understand the world are connected to, and informed by, a *feeling* of commitment or a *dedication* to a *calm* and analytical approach. In this regard, Bondi (2012) and Holland (2007) highlight the importance of the emotions in academic quests for knowledge, asserting that the pursuit of understanding derives from a scholar's emotional connection (Barbalet's dispositional involvement) to their work and the people it involves. This emotional dimension serves, then, as a starting point that motivates researchers to delve deeper into their work, which, in turn, can foster a curiosity that is intricately interwoven with the scientific pursuit of knowledge. In other words, scholarly endeavours are, then, "never emotion-free" (Bondi, 2012, 234), and are rooted in emotional engagement.

Furthermore, scholarship evokes emotions within researchers themselves (Widdowfield, 2000). For example, Goodwin et al. (2001), in their exploration of social and political movements, demonstrate how researchers may develop a sense of 'reciprocity' and 'sharedness' over the course of working with participants in a project, which then shapes their subsequent behaviours. How researchers, in



turn, cope with such emotional involvement can be understood through what Arlie Hochschild (1983) refers to as 'emotional labour'. This term involves the process of managing emotions that emerge through work-related interactions in order to meet the requirements of a specific job (see also emerald & Carpenter, 2015). Scholars then often need to develop techniques to make appropriate decisions regarding the expression, suppression and management of various emotions during the research process. Therefore, rather than thinking of (especially social) scientific research as a distinctively rational activity, a more nuanced and empirically congruent account would also highlight the ways in which designing, doing, writing-up research, and scientific decision-making processes more broadly, are inherently affective, affecting and affected by the emotional interactions between researchers, participants and the ideas they both hold to be more-or-less reasonable.

When the role of emotions is discussed in the context of 'co-production', is most commonly in relation to emotional labour. For example, Rasool (2018) argues that it is especially community researchers employing co-produced techniques, and scholars who usually spend a lot of time with their participants, are likely to develop emotional connections. This is because they "live through the same [traumatic] experiences as the participants [...] day in and day out" (2018, 118). Consequently, it is almost impossible for such researchers to "explore the lives of others at an arm's length" (Rasool, 2018, 120). Such relatively close involvement commonly results in emotional labour that comes with the management of the researcher's feelings for the participants and their community and the challenging emotional interactions which can become daily occurrences while in the field.

A logical outcome of such work is that these emotional experiences will be embedded in decision-making processes during the project, including the analysis, findings and dissemination of the research outcomes. And while we might be able to understand this logically, if scholars do not sufficiently reflect on this very important dimension of their work or provide accounts of it within their methodological discussions, the research community cannot grasp how central the emotions are to the doing of research – a problem which, as outlined above, we think needs to be addressed to help centralise how genuinely co-produced work often involves rich, powerful and perhaps even painful emotional involvement.

In this regard, emerald and Carpenter point out that emotional labour in research shows that "life is reason and emotion, and our emotional and cognitive functionings are inseparable and we cannot escape this, perhaps especially (but not exclusively) as social researchers" (2015,747). In other words, emotionality contextualises, emerges and shifts throughout the course of research and, despite scholars' important attempts to present rational and relatively detached findings, such attempts are distinctly aspirational and can *never* manifest in some 'pure' reason (see Matthews (forthcoming) for a broad discussion). In relation to co-produced research, we argue, that such a methodological approach will regularly be founded on a clear emotional involvement with participants, communities and areas of study, and produce a whole raft of emotional experiences. Emotional involvement in such research projects then refers to, on the one hand, the relationship with the (co-)researchers/participants, which function as a motivation to design, deliver and disseminate the research in co-produced ways. And, on the other hand, it refers to the feelings and emotional bonds that might arise from the affective interactions with the research itself and the (co-)researchers/participants, which are likely to create emotional labour for all involved during and after the project.

If our argument is broadly accepted, we contend that there is something distinctively (although not uniquely) emotional about doing co-produced research. And spending time considering and



highlighting that side of such research *can* be an important element in protecting against *some* of the critical comments we presented earlier. In this regard, we expect that those who are drawn to propose co-production as a valued methodology for largely rational, performative and/or self-serving reasons – to gain funding or otherwise progress their careers – will find the emotional side of research we have discussed somewhat alien. While this does not *necessarily* undermine their ability to deliver co-produced work adequately, we expect that such approaches may well come ‘unstuck’ when the challenges of delivering co-production and the emotional labour that is associated with it, become apparent. And that starting from a position of valuing forms of emotional involvement will actually produce a rational approach to such work which means that researchers are well placed to deliver, what we believe to be, the core principles of genuine co-production. To provide some personal substantiation to this argument, we will discuss how emotional involvement with our work and our (co-)researchers/participants is the foundation of our scientific decision-making processes which compels us towards researching in co-produced ways.

### **Emotionality and Axiological Reflections Upon Our Own Research**

We are acutely aware of debates around researchers’ attempts at ‘reflexivity’ turning into insipid and egotistical self-congratulatory accounts with little academic merit (Ryang, 2000; Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). In what follows, we are treading a thin line in that regard. But with that said, we think there is something important embedded in our stories, hence our approach. In particular, we discuss how we have found ourselves doing research which, despite important differences, we can confidently call co-produced to the best of our abilities.

We are at different places in our academic journeys. And this means we have fundamentally different expectations from our university in terms of income generation (gaining external funding). Marit is a second-year PhD student on a funded scholarship which means her focus is on delivering excellent research within three years with the additional and voluntary target of writing a grant application in her final 9 months. Chris is a full-time academic who is expected, although not contractually obliged at the time of writing, to apply for funding. His progression internally (promotion) is fundamentally tied to the money he brings into the university. We work together as PhD researcher and advisor, and during our regular discussions, it became increasingly apparent that our stories share similarities which can cast important light on the critical comments that other scholars present about co-production. In this regard, we have never worked towards a co-produced methodology as part of a rational pursuit of funding. Instead, we are drawn to our work because we feel compelled to contribute in some positive ways to the lives of the people we research with. And that we have both experienced the emotional toll and drain that comes from being quite obviously emotionally involved with our research.

In detailing some of those experiences we provide insights that many scholars do not explicitly recognise, regard or reveal. In so doing, borrowing Ronald Pelias’ words, we “turn to a strategy of writing that lets the heart be present” (cited in Ellis et al., 2008). We have dwelled on these ideas individually and together; we have spent (too much) time feeling and thinking about them. We do not present them lightly and we find them equally important, uncomfortable and challenging to discuss. But, they are fundamental to the (rational) science that we are undertaking. They provide insights into two projects which employ co-produced methods, not because we think that is a rational thing to do,

although we will return to that idea in the conclusion, but because we are emotionally compelled to do so.

### *Researching visually impaired and guide running – Marit*

In the early months of 2021, I met Martijn who is a dedicated runner with sight loss. I was in the midst of my master's program at the time, in which I aimed to research runners with sight loss and running guides and their feelings about 'inclusion'. When I met Martijn, he was looking for a guide who could commit to multiple sessions each week and build in some consistency.

And so, Martijn and I developed a running partnership. In my field note diary, I wrote about our runs, what I sensed and felt, and I described the (often deep) conversations we had. Our running experiences became the most central part of my thesis and together we produced a podcast in which we further explored our running partnership. Martijn was my 'main interlocutor', and we developed a deep friendship alongside the research.

Because of Martijn, I could get to know other runners with sight loss and guide runners. I immersed myself as much as I could in their lifeworld. I have had many open, honest and emotional conversations about the beauty and sadness of living with sight loss and how to navigate a society that is so inherently ocular-centric. The runners shared their stories of disappointment and happiness, vulnerability and resilience, setbacks and successes, and through their experiences and my own. I learned (and I'm still learning) how guided running is more than a physical activity; it's a *partnership* — a journey of overcoming challenges and achieving goals *together*.

This research has 'moved me'. Even after writing up my thesis, graduating, and starting a new phase in my academic journey in another country, Martijn's story and that of the other runners motivate me to further develop visually impaired and guide running research and run multiple times a week as a guide. This way, I've also got to meet Agata and Iris with whom I run on a weekly basis and who have become dear friends to me. Getting to know them, their unique stories and ideas about making the world of running a bit more accessible, reminds me over and over again of why I am doing this particular research and why it is important to value those I do my research with, my friends, as more than simply 'my participants'.

As I pen these words, I am in the second year of my PhD, for which I pitched a focus on guided running in the establishment of a sociological account around consent in sport. I did so because there is not much literature on the topic which means I can potentially make some academic contribution, but more importantly to me, I deeply care about accumulating knowledge, disseminating it through publication and education, and effecting positive change with my running-mates Martijn, Agata and Iris and all other runners that I've met, and am yet to meet, throughout my journey of being a guide runner.

I have a privileged position; the PhD comes with funding. I receive a monthly salary and a budget to spend on guided running-related activities. If it wasn't for this money, I would not be able to commit most of my time to the PhD and so, I wouldn't be able to give myself 100% to working towards delivering impactful research. I'm very grateful for this opportunity, but I have to be honest in saying that this is emotionally challenging at times. Having befriended runners and being deeply physically and emotionally involved in this sporting world means

that it is hard, and at times painful, to accept that my running body has limitations, that my capacities as *a student* are bound, and that I feel frustrated and sad whenever runners and others living with sight loss tell me stories of facing exclusionary behaviours and attitudes that are deeply ingrained in the world of running and academia. And so, I, as an individual, and my research, as part of an academic institution, can only do so much to effect positive change with these runners.

I try to do so by incorporating forms of co-production into my research. A PhD in the UK does not neatly align with many of the principles of co-production. It is challenging to engage in co-analysis and as *I* must write *my* thesis, it can't be co-written. Even the 'myness' of that last sentence is at odds with the core principles of co-production. Reflecting on this is important because doing my thesis without paying any attention to such ideas would be going against what I value in guided running and in research more broadly: dialogue, partnership and recognition.

To work in co-produced ways, I've organised a symposium for runners, guides, scholars on this topic, and other people involved to facilitate a platform for listening and responding to experiences of 'sight loss' and 'sightedness' and bridging knowledge 'within' and 'without' academia. And I aim to centralise the voices of runners with sight loss and guides in how I am designing, delivering and analysing my work by asking them to work with me at various stages to ensure they will gain what they consider to be important knowledge from the process. This has shaped how I approach similar future events, my research questions, topics and focus. This process is the start of collaborations and conversations with runners that is already, and will continue to be, central to my PhD work.

So while I am limited by important institutional structures in how I can fully embrace all components of a co-produced methodology, I am fully invested in drawing as much as possible from such an ethos into my work. I am enabled to engage with elements of co-production, because of the funding which is attached to my PhD. And I do this, not because I want to follow the 'trend' of co-production, or because it is a requirement that I must rationally attend to, but because I *feel* and *think* that this is the best way to deliver meaningful, powerful and effective scientific research.

### *Brain damage in boxing – Chris*

I am expected to bring in funding to my university. But I have never been very good at this side of my job. Up until 2022 I had submitted at least one external funding bid per year as a principal investigator and all were unsuccessful. Some of these bids were interesting and would have had a positive effect on individuals and communities had they been successful, but if I'm honest, my heart wasn't in them. I was writing bids because that's what I thought I had to do.

Alongside over a decade of failed funding applications, I've completed over a decade of challenging, important, sometimes innovative and often emotionally powerful research. I've published great papers and books, but those academic outputs can't tell the full story of my time in the field. I've seen the damaging effects of being involved in various sports first-hand. I've been with men when they have confronted their own mortality and realised that they might not see their children reach adulthood. I've watched from the sidelines as young people, PhD students whom I advise, and friends sacrifice their bodies and brains in the

pursuit of sports performance. And I've had painful conversations with people who know they're increasing their risk of cognitive decline, neurodegeneration and dementia.

I've also participated in similarly damaging behaviours myself while boxing for fun, fitness and as a part of my research. My wife might tell you I'm rarely emotional, but all this is so personal to me that I'm regularly brought to tears when I must confront these issues. I've had to deal with my own mortality, I've experienced my own cognitive decline and memory loss. I've logged on to Zoom calls with colleagues and started crying because I had not processed the reality of what others' trauma means for them and me, and I've let this all affect me in ways that result in the worst of myself sometimes coming out when interacting with loved ones – I will spare you the details, largely because they're hard for me to detail.

I carry a dual emotional burden with me as I face the future of my career. I'm compelled to make a difference to the lives of those living with the consequences of sport, but my experiences mean I'm now emotionally fragile when it comes to actually doing elements of this work myself. I've always forsaken myself in various ways, but now I'm no longer emotionally capable of doing so in this direction – my emotional reserves are depleted and what remains I must safeguard.

Recently I channelled my motivation to understand this area better by developing a scheme of research with former athletes and their families and carers. Engaging with charities, local services and organisations, and, of course, the athletes and their families was an obvious step. I didn't do this because I'm a savvy funding-generating scholar – I've a decade of failed bids to demonstrate that point. But rather, it's because I have a deep emotional connection to this work – I am saddened, upset and angered by the current world of sport which leads so many young people to forsake their brains in various ways that are largely unknown to themselves and their parents. After a year or so of work, a senior colleague pointed out that I'd been working in a way which can be fairly defined as co-produced. He helped me highlight this element of the work my collaborators and I had done together in a funding bid.

Perhaps I was lucky, perhaps it was all the academic support I received, perhaps it was because the emotion that I, my co-applicants and research steering group, put into this work, perhaps it was because co-production is trendy? – but we were successful and gained external and then internal funding in the space of a month. This has enabled me to employ a fantastic Research Fellow with academic and practical experience in co-producing dementia care. We are working together with our research steering group to deliver insightful research and further funding in this direction. And I can drive this work forward without having to be at the 'coalface' of doing the actual data collection. I've accepted that I am no longer able to do that side of the work due to the emotional toll it takes on me. But in accepting that, I now have more time and energy to focus on gaining the funding I need to support others in collecting this important data and pushing the primary co-produced research forward.

The point I am trying to make here is that while funding was my rational goal, I was unsuccessful, but my emotional compulsion to develop community engaged and engaging work on a meaningful topic has been partly (perhaps largely) connected to me actually gaining funding. And it came at the right time because a decade in the field has taken more than its fair share from my body, brain and 'heart'. All boxers leave a part of themselves in the ring, and I've done that, but I've also left a part of myself in the research I have conducted. And now, largely due to necessity, I have found balance between my feelings about doing good

research and the pressure from my employer to gain funding – it is the former that leads the process and in gaining funding I'm enabled, with colleagues, collaborators and co-researchers to deliver important impactful co-produced research.

### Some Problems and Suggestions

These two personal and quite emotional accounts represent key parts of our axiological reflections on our research – they capture why it matters to us, and why we do it the way we do. Many other scholars *can* tell similar and more powerful stories, and we know that much co-produced design, delivery and dissemination work turns on such an emotional axis. *But* discussions about such topics are seldom presented in academic papers. Perhaps, as we suggested above, the legacy of dichotomous understandings of rationality/emotionality means scholars still tread with caution when detailing the emotional experiences, which are foundational to their relatively rational attempts to understand the world? Or, perhaps, it could be that academics talk-the-talk of 'co-production' in pursuit of funding opportunities and therefore, such emotional realities are indeed not present in their work?

Whatever the reasons, we think that providing epistemological and axiological space for ourselves, and hopefully our colleagues, to openly explore such experiences, will offer important insights to what pushes and pulls many towards co-production. We hope we can add to others' efforts who have tried to normalise an approach to doing and writing about such work (see Peers, 2018), which we think can *in part* help resist the tokenistic and empty (ab)use of co-produced methodologies in the pursuit of funding (Kirkegaard & Anderson, 2018; Smith et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2020). This, then, is equally a call to journal editors and research leaders to encourage and allow space for authors to express the emotional side of their research explicitly and meaningfully within academic publications.

There are several problems with our analysis, some of which we have hinted towards already. Firstly, we must accept that it is completely possible for someone to propose and deliver co-produced research in a way which is largely a rational enterprise. This might begin as a relatively rational and self-serving decision to obtain funding and continue as a scholar's professionalism means that they stick closely to key underlying principles and the ethos of co-production. When such work is delivered, and the individuals and communities that the research is designed to collaborate with are supported and do indeed gain something of significance, this must, of course, be seen as a success. However, we expect that such cases will not be the norm, and in reality, when scholarship is done with only minimal emotional connections to co-researchers, a central feature of such work will be missing – that is, the involvement which compels academics to value and foreground the lives, thoughts and futures of people they are researching will be absent. And when this is the case, we expect it is more likely for co-production to be misappropriated or delivered in symbolically compliant ways.

Secondly, there are more-or-less rational reasons to undertake co-production which are not tied to emotional connections to specific people, groups and communities. For example, technocratic and 'audit cultural' justifications connected to the need to demonstrate research 'impact' and/or a *commitment* to democratic and egalitarian approaches to doing science could certainly drive colleagues towards a considered delivery of co-production. We are certain that, when done appropriately, such motivations *can* open space and opportunities for co-produced research. And, as discussed above, while we would argue that such 'rational' ways of approaching co-production would still contain various dimensions of emotional involvement (see 'commitment' in an earlier sentence as

an example of an underlying feeling/disposition which enables rationality), we would broadly accept critical comments aimed at our thesis from such a position.

In that sense, and building on the first point as well, we appreciate that there is *something* of a ‘strawman’ feel to elements of our framing of self-serving academics striving for funding for funding’s sake. We have proceeded with this weakness in our argument because it is almost impossible to explore scholars’ personal motivations to conduct their research by reading most methodology sections in papers. This means that we have taken as our starting point a logical position, informed by scholars who have written on this topic (Kirkegaard & Andersen, 2018; Masterson et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023), asserting that it is possible, and even likely, that such scholars do exist and will gain funding by vacuously claiming ‘co-production’. To substantiate or refute such claims, we recommend future research is conducted using methodological strategies which can explore the emotional-rational decision-making that sits at the foundation of what draws researchers to co-production. In this direction, Hannah Gardiner (2024) recently presented some of their findings about how researchers engage in co-production, and we expect they will provide valuable insights in the months and years ahead.

Thirdly, we are very aware that unchecked emotions can lead to various poor and otherwise inequitable decisions being made. It would be quite possible (if disingenuous), for a middle-class, white, able-bodied scholar to use our comments to justify researching middle-class, white, able-bodied individuals and groups to who they are emotionally connected. Of course, such a population deserves to be involved in co-produced research, but given the continuing dominance of academia by middle-class, white, able-bodied individual, there is clearly an important need here for a critical reflection on such social proclivities. There is, then, a rational need to reflect on our emotional involvement with our research topics, and the individuals and communities we work with. It is here, within a balancing of emotionality and rationality as a duality, rather than a dichotomy, that we think the most utility can be found. This dualness is also present in our reflections above, rather than framing our experiences as some purely emotional processes, our rationality and irrationality are intertwined, inform each other, and are best considered as temporarily intellectually separable, but fundamentally dual – two sides of the same coin – as front is to back, so to speak.

From our discussions of theory, reflective accounts, and the previous paragraph, we hope you see that there is no simple divide between emotion and reason. Rather, *they are always already together in various balances and blends*. It is our argument, then, that unchecked emotionally charged research is liable to commence and conclude in unconsidered and unrefined ways, and an overly rational approach might well result in the central features of co-produced research being diminished, overlooked and simply being symbolically ‘nodded’ towards for the sake of funder’s/auditor’s requirements.

It is largely within disciplines in which scholars often engage with social theoretical accounts of the world that the ‘emotive turn’ has indeed turned. To scholars from those academic spaces, we expect our call to write more extensively about the emotional realities will resonate intellectually and/or emotionally ‘in their flesh’. While our work may be of interest to thee, it is perhaps of more importance to those not *au fait* with such ways of working. The problem then comes as co-production continues to grow as a ‘trendy’ term because there will be increasing interest from scholars that have traditionally, considered the emotions to be a distinctly unscientific epistemic phenomenon. Our argument, then, is aimed in part at those academics embedded in scientific worldviews which seek to fundamentally separate out the researcher from the research and researched – most of whom we

understand would not be regular readers of this journal. And, if that is you, we offer the preceding arguments and reflections as both an important contribution to your future efforts, but also as words of warning about the emotional cost which is connected to such work. And we ask you to please avoid using co-production if you are unwilling to read and think deeply about the political, social, moral and scientific ethos underpinning such work, and to give your 'academic self' wholeheartedly to such a project.

We also offer a word of warning to colleagues who are proposing 'how-to-guides' and protocols for co-production. Such attempts often come from a place of wanting to enhance the rigour, utility and outcomes of research (see for example Howard & Thomas-Hughes, 2021), and we would usually encourage these motivations. However, there is a tension between such approaches and the emotionality we have described above. Seeking to make co-production more 'sciency' in such ways may be alluring, might attract scholars to do similar work and in some eyes make it more 'valid' and 'auditable'. But we would strongly suggest a different approach as more useful for those interested in learning about how to do co-production – read, learn and think anew about the political, social theoretical and moral/ethical underpinnings of such research. And from this foundation, reflect on existing and successful collaborative research, and seek specific advice from experts in the field. This process will provide a platform from which scholars will not require a 'how-to-guide' or a protocol because, instead, they will have a philosophical appreciation, a 'knowingness', from which they can (co-)design and (co-)legitimise their own ways of co-working.

Based on our own work, we encourage scholars to explicitly address their emotional engagement with their research, and the people, groups, and communities they do it with, and reflect on how these experiences intertwine with, and frame, their objectives and practices. This is because we think it is such emotional involvement that underpins much of the best scientific research, and it is in this, that the political, social *and scientific* justifications for community engaging research can often be found. And of this sort of work, and in keeping with our focus on the emotions, we wish to make an associated and partially irrational claim – there is something of a *joie de vivre* that reverberates and echoes within and across this sort of emotionally engaged and engaging research. It is hard to capture this in rationalised academic theory, or indeed academic audits, but many colleagues will know it and feel it when they watch and listen to someone who lives it talk about their work. We would *love* for elements of such ways of interacting with research to shine through in written accounts and it is via methodological and axiological discussions that they can often most appropriately be captured.

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