

Understanding coproduced research

By Michelle Bye-Gannon and Emel Thomas

Abstract

To appreciate the subjective experience of others, we must explore the meaning society has for them, how they interpret their encounters, and how their individual narratives impact their behavior. Subsequently, the focus on what other people think and feel (their narrative) is heavily context dependent due to the interplay of culture and may require an adaptive approach. Capturing authentic experiences and viewpoints can support systematic change that improves the life outcomes of participants, and capturing genuine voices is crucial to the effectiveness of any such study. Coproduction has the power to facilitate co-interpretation to foreground new knowledge that can drive impactful transformation. However, the reality of using coproduced research requires careful contemplation of the researcher's reflexivity and strong ethical consideration of the intended coproducers. Coproduction is a powerful research method that can be used to obtain authentic insights into marginalized and peripheral groups, but this requires rigorous strategy and a clear understanding of the need to safeguard the well-being of those participating. The role of the researcher, as well as coresearchers, must be explicit when seeking authentic responses; equally, ethical limitations to anonymity and confidentiality must be made clear—safeguarding coresearchers must always take precedence.

Learning outcomes

- identify and explain a range of coproduced research strategies/methods associated with gathering data from diverse groups.
- recognize the opportunities and challenges involved in coproduced research that is focused on participant identity.
- develop coproduced research strategies to engage an appropriate research audience.

Introduction

In 2019, my sister's fiancé took his own life. On the surface, his life had appeared happy, settled, and fulfilled; however, his postmortem inquest indicated that his secondary school experience (including one intentional exclusion) had contributed to his final act, decades later. This significant detail made me question how many of the males currently excluded from school were acting out repressed emotions and how many of the males, who continue to account for around three-quarters of all suicides (Office for National Statistics, 2022), had also resorted to suicide in part due to their time at school. Embarking on a part-time PhD project in 2020, I knew I needed to explore the experiences of male secondary school students in relation to dominant heteronormative identities and their subsequent impact on their mental health to gain an understanding of the barriers to help-seeking and identify strategies to build resilience to help reduce the number of male exclusions and the male suicide rate. However, I was also acutely aware that I was neither male nor an adolescent—I needed a way to access their world and experiences without alienating or diminishing their authentic voices. My positioning as an adult female educator and researcher was potentially problematic; for example, both my gender identity and my relative power as a teacher could create barriers to acceptance among research participants. Yet it was vital to my research that I engage with male youth to actively pursue an understanding of a gender different to my own. Subsequently, I required admittance to and understanding of their world. I was an outsider who sought to become an insider or, at the very least, be accepted (Edwards & Holland, 2013) by my research participants.

In seeking coproduction, you must remain perpetually aware of your positionality and how your identity as a researcher impacts your study. Will your coresearchers recreate or control your identity (Giampapa, 2011), or can fluid boundaries result in sufficient trust over the period of your research to allow for authentic access to a peripheral world? In embarking on coproduced research, remain alert to how self-aware your coresearchers are of themselves and their relationships to others, how they make choices depending on the situation, and the relative unpredictability of human behavior. Remember that this methodologic approach involves knowledge obtained by people's self-interpretation of their interactions and daily lived experience (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006); nevertheless, ethnography has faced deep criticism for placing something foreign (a researcher) within the familiar (the researched). By engaging with tensionless ethnography, this critique can be addressed; actively place yourself within a disengaged and disloyal position at odds with the systems of power and control by

listening to the silenced voices within it (Friberg, 2021). In my research, this required detachment from the powerful establishment of the British education system and absolute allegiance to hearing the young, marginalized voices within it to unveil real-world experiences, knowledge, and perspectives from an overlooked group.

Engagement is key: formulate a research design that both supports your intended group of coresearchers and hands power and authority over the choice of research methods to them. Empowering the powerless is a conducive method to accessing diverse voices; initial interactions with your intended coresearchers prior to research methods being adopted, followed by their input into the research focus and research questions, can yield the most informative data once the study begins (Rosvall, 2015). Additionally, this enables an inductive approach whereby you can build on established theory and reflect on your understanding of the relationship between meanings and the actions of your coresearchers. Equally important is consideration of an adaptive approach, where your initial research informs subsequent phases of research; this is advisable to secure in-depth data collection that facilitates thorough analysis. In my own research, I used a phased approach that employed ethnographic observation in the initial phase to capture notes and subjective reflections on the research environment, cultural influences, and perceived responses of male participants. Successive phases employed *participatory research methods* (PRMs), defined as a method of choice if researchers desired social change through the ideas, actions, plans, and strategies identified by participants (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Diverse voices should be afforded full immersion and participation in aiding the researcher in the construction of knowledge from their experiences and in contributing to any suggestions as to how to improve policies and practices that impact their lives; they should not be mere sources of data acquisition (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). PRMs have the potential to address power imbalances while also serving as a beneficial tool for obtaining data in your study that can lead to social change that assists more than the individual coresearcher.

What Is Coproduced Research?

To foreground the voices and experiences of diverse groups, your research project must acknowledge your position as an outsider and recognize that your knowledge acquisition relies on acceptance of a shared learning journey. Coproduction can use the voices of several

stakeholders: individuals, families, community groups, public sector players, businesses, government, and society. Stakeholders have the power to both inform and improve the quality of your research. In turn, the outcomes of your thesis may disclose the expertise required to advance society. My research project sought to use coproduction at the earliest stage to gain insight into how male secondary students interpreted and expressed their mental health in terms of their maleness within school settings. This required their authentic perspective, which highlighted the importance of using participatory research as a method to facilitate participants using their own frames of reference to convey their viewpoint. Participatory research is a suitable method to produce knowledge from real-world actions in a collaborative and democratic style with the groups affected by a study's inquiry using frameworks to ensure action and change. Subsequently, involvement of male adolescents in the design of my research methods aimed to meaningfully engage them in producing relevant findings. When using participatory research, your coproduction can involve designing key questions, co-planning research activities, and communicating with stakeholders. Placing value on the voices of those outside the research community can ensure that the project delivers the best outcomes for that community.

While coproduction can facilitate a fluid method and use of multiple strategies, the researcher must always consider the impact of power and accountability. Be very clear on roles from the outset—who will hold responsibility for which elements, where does culpability reside, and how will equitability be maintained? When completing your ethics application and formalizing your research project's participant information and consent, ensure that accountability is clear and that safeguarding has been established. Preempt potential issues with proposed solutions in your risk assessment and be self-aware and sensitive regarding power imbalances. Equitable coproduced research may be supported by using either emancipatory research, which changes power and control from researchers to those who would be the research subjects, or participatory evaluation, an approach that shares the decision making with stakeholders in the evaluation process of a program or service (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Coproduced research empowers you to propose appropriate initiatives when formulating plans, policies, and strategies using the insight of those impacted. Furthermore, in all forms, coproduced research enables diverse groups to dynamically shape and contribute to research studies through empowerment, self-determination, and facilitation of agreed change as central tenets guiding the research process (Hutchinson & Lovell, 2013). Subsequently, it can support agency, foster

open participation, and improve the services offered to diverse groups. Positive coproduction can lead to greater systematic change. This organic process is valuable in the research field because different individuals will have varied experiences that could come together to achieve beneficial collective outcomes that challenge long-standing assumptions and practices (Atkin, Thomson, & Wood, 2020). The power of organizational and societal structures can be redressed by coproduced research: subversion of the status quo can be achieved by capturing the insight of the voiceless.

Section Summary

- Coproduced research methods are an effective tool for gathering data from diverse groups and key stakeholders, with several methods that can be used through a fluid approach to data collection.
- It is important that the researcher consider their positionality in terms of power, accountability, and responsibility in relation to intended research participants: how can the researcher ensure that equitable research is achieved?
- Using coproduced research requires clear ethical consideration and distinct roles and responsibilities from the outset, with strong safeguarding practices mapped out in advance.

How Do You Engage with Potential Coresearchers?

Diverse groups, by their very nature, can be small and provide unique challenges in terms of both access and engagement. Choosing to conduct research with those who may have been subjugated, disregarded, or silenced requires clear and concise objectives that establish the benefits that their participation can bring to their community. Traditional expectations around sampling need not apply—you select coresearchers for the information they innately possess and the diverse group they can naturally access for data collection. Thus, smaller sampling facilitates quality data collection and stronger engagement as you foreground authentic listening and demonstrate the value placed on what your coresearchers can contribute to academia (Davis & Chitiyo, 2019). A personable approach to recruitment of coresearchers is advisable. Meeting with individuals informally in a familiar social space can facilitate a desirable climate to discuss the research project and provide individuals with an opportunity to ask questions. An environment of comfort, security, and freedom of expression should counteract potential insecurities around power imbalances. To show equity rather than

superiority, position yourself next to your intended coresearcher to validate individuality and freedom of expression. This simple act can ease potential anxieties surrounding hierarchal structures and promote the importance of sharing and understanding lived experience (Jachyra, Atkinson, & Gibson, 2014). However, allow potential coresearchers “thinking time”—time to process the information you have given them in their own space to consider whether they have any further queries or concerns. A phased approach may be suitable to your research aims. Work into the time frame of each phase space for coresearchers to reflect on each research method undertaken and the opportunity to compare their interpretations of the data with you. After all, it is imperative to surpass binaries and hierarchal divisions to create new knowledge when using co-research because this enables a more complete form of social reality by negotiating the space between insider and outsider knowledge and insight through the interactive process of co-interpretation (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019). To secure authentic responses, an offer of anonymity is important and can be provided using pseudonyms. This ethical intention should assist coresearchers in conveying raw expression and deep exploration of sensitive topics.

Remember that accessing diverse groups may require the express consent of their gatekeeper, for example, a head teacher and parent/carer in the case of schoolchildren or a chieftain in the case of a tribe. Be respectful of social and cultural expectations when approaching these individuals—their role is to safeguard the diverse groups they lead. Emphasize to the gatekeeper, as well as to the diverse group, that coresearchers will be fully informed of the research purpose (as well as its benefits and risks) and are entirely free in their decision regarding participation or withdrawal (Comstock, 2013). Subsequently, it is advisable that you convey your research information in a simple, straightforward, and easy-to-understand way that may require innovation to engage your diverse group. Keep written information to a minimum, and incorporate graphics and visuals where appropriate (Wiles, 2012). Consider whether a dual format would be most effective—for example, when working with children or adolescents, would informal language shared via a comic strip format explain the research information and consent more suitably? Or would using social media or other online platforms be the most effective strategy for reaching a modern audience?

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- Best practice involves a personable approach used in collaboration with respect for and explicit consent from the gatekeepers of diverse groups.
- To engage an appropriate coresearch audience, you must facilitate a safe environment for open discussion with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- Embrace a small sample and be creative with the language and format of your research information and consent.
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What Methods Can You Use for Effective Coproduced Research?

Capturing genuine voices is crucial to the effectiveness of your study and acknowledges the validity of diverse groups and their authentic lived experiences. To earn trust and acceptance, consider the use of a launch event that evidences (and builds support for) the aims and intended impact of your research project—make your agenda visible, and encourage engagement with the issue you aim to address. Additionally, a launch event can be indicative of which research methods engage your diverse group and stimulate authentic responses to broad issues. Subsequently, a launch event has the potential to facilitate in-depth exploration of the individual experiences you intend to pursue and help future coresearch participants inform the design of subsequent phases of your research. In my own research with adolescent males, I used a launch event of a male mental health day on International Men’s Day to raise awareness of men’s issues and operated it with one key year group from which I sought future coproduced research participants. The launch event enabled exploratory sampling that provided new insights and generated information that probed relatively unexplored topics and highlighted potential routes to the discovery of new ideas and theories (Denscombe, 2010). Moreover, the launch event delivered sessions that replicated different research methods that the potential coresearchers could adopt in future participatory research phases. One session offered a creative metaphorical model to empower (through trust) and explore experiences by enabling individual creativity to self-theorize (Edwards & Holland, 2013); another session deployed modern media methods of video blogging to create self-representation of identities and self-interpretation of their creation; a third session used physical activity linked to verbalization of thoughts and feelings, preferred over traditional face-to-face methods (Beauchemin & Manns, 2008). Ensure that your launch event has a clear theme that revolves around your intended research topic, which will stimulate relevant discussions and empower members of the diverse

group to share their viewpoints on the effectiveness of each element of the event. Later, this will support the use of PRM (in subsequent phases) in uncovering their perceptions of what the intended solutions should involve. The event will serve as a foundation for discussion and evaluation; consequently, the event will use a range of elements to enable deployment of PRM with later participants who can reflect on which style of activity they found most beneficial and would like to use during the later stages of the research project. For example, in my research project's launch event, participants felt that the creative activity empowered them to be open, which led them to select this as a research method during subsequent phases.

Coproduced research also can be encouraged by offering voluntary participation in a concise survey that is open to all members of the diverse group with which you wish to conduct research. Use this opportunity to explain what your research project is, why you believe that it is important to involve the diverse group, and your intended aims and outcomes. Give due consideration to your diverse group prior to deciding whether the survey should be on paper or online: operate it according to their technological preferences; for example, teenagers will show a preference for digital technology and be more likely to participate in an online survey. If you organized a launch event, use the survey to capture the popularity of the event and assess which research strategy offered the richest data. Surveys not only capture information; they also acknowledge the subjectivity of participants and their autonomy to understand themselves and the world around them. Evidently, your survey findings can form points of discussion with any interested participants who decide to partake in the next phase of your research project and allow you to ascertain commonality and open discussions that avoid singular accounts. Conclude your survey with an expression of interest in becoming a participant in coproduced research. Meet with each party that has indicated a willingness to be involved and provide them with a clear idea of what will be required of them. Individual interviews can be intimidating and pressured. Consider the use of small focus groups with discussion stimuli to cohesively work on the research project. If you used a launch event, encourage reflection on the activities that were offered, and if you used a survey, share the results captured to gather opinions on these outcomes. A focus group allows for open dialogue on what research methods members of a diverse group believe will be most effective in obtaining the data you seek from that group. My research involved the use of focus groups to cocreate a research event whereby my coproducers would become coresearchers who captured data and evaluated the effectiveness of the cocreated event with me.

Remain aware of your placement as a researcher within the research space. Capturing ethnographic notes and reflections in a research diary could prove significant to your research aims. Through a research diary and the act of being present among the diverse group, you can immerse yourself in their culture and interact with them as they experience life. In this manner, you can grasp what the world looks like to the diverse group by discerning judiciously what is seen, interpreting it, and consulting with the coresearchers to clarify the emerging elucidations (Delamont & Jones, 2012). Furthermore, a research diary is crucial to capturing preliminary findings and understanding which methods have an impact (or not) and how your diverse group may shape and adapt the original research questions. Modern research into researcher diaries argues for their undervalued effectiveness; they assist researchers in navigating choices, enhancing self-awareness and self-reflection in the research process, and capture personal perspectives and true responses to stimulus and evidence of cultural/environmental influence. Best practice would see you provide members of your diverse group with their own research diaries. A further benefit of this research method is that it has the potential to yield more valid or authentic data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) and can provide an overarching view of responses to the stimulus without the impact of overt awareness of being observed. During my research, I provided 20 adolescent male students with their own research diaries—this empowered them to capture research notes and generated data for us to interpret together during subsequent focus groups.

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- Engagement with diverse groups can be stimulated through the use of a launch event that introduces the aims and objectives of the project and highlights your passion to enact change.
- Coproduction methods must be considerate of the intended participants: would using digital technology help or hinder your diverse group?
- Aim for immersion in the diverse group by using focus groups to codesign research questions and methods and to later evaluate and interpret the data collected, together.
- Keep a research diary and reflect on whether your research could benefit from the diverse group keeping research diaries to capture authentic responses and observations.

What Are the Limitations?

Of course, with objectivity and openness comes risk: there is a safeguarding risk that your participants may make, or hear, a serious disclosure (such as a child protection issue or intention to self-harm) when responding to or participating in research tasks. As a researcher, you have an ethical and professional duty to report this according to the rules or regulations of the research space; for example, if you are conducting research within an educational establishment, you must adhere to their internal safeguarding reporting procedure to enable the relevant pastoral staff to assist the student. Subsequently, during the consent stage, it is vital that you make participants aware that confidentiality cannot be upheld in these circumstances; ensure that participants are told that everything will be kept confidential unless they share something about themselves or someone else being harmed or being at risk of harm. Be clear that if this happens, you will have to talk to them about the appropriate safeguarding steps that will be followed (Wiles, 2012). During subsequent data analysis, be mindful of any impact disclosures made on your data collection. Preempt potential safeguarding concerns by creating clear safeguarding protocols that are specific to your research project; for example, my focus group method would always commence with mutually agreed “safe space” ground rules, such as listening respectfully to each other and not repeating shared personal stories outside the research focus group.

Due to the nature of your study with diverse groups, there is a possibility that participants may experience psychological distress that will need to be minimized. For example, in my own research, there was a risk that the participants may have had personal experience of loss through suicide that would require signposting to support services. Through stringent risk assessment, prior to your research, you can minimize most risks. Make participants aware of their right to opt out of the study entirely with no pressure to remain and advise them that discomfort (to an extent) may form part of the study process (such as thinking about difficult topics, confronting issues, or being asked questions they have not considered before). If participants are willing to continue, these topics may reveal valuable insights. Ensure that you provide support service information at every stage of your research, again being considerate of the needs of your diverse group by providing details of in-person, as well as digital, services. Best practice would be demonstrated through the creation of a distress protocol document to complement your safeguarding document with example scenarios and solutions. For example, if a coresearch

participant becomes visibly distressed during an interview, the lead researcher will stop the discussion, assess the individual's ability to continue, and (if unable to continue) signpost the individual to mental health support services.

Because your intended research situates you among (and within) a diverse group, you must always practice reflexivity—fully acknowledge your identity and be wholly conscious of its potential influence throughout your research. Our positionality can be problematic if it creates a perceived power imbalance. Reflect on the visible and invisible characteristics that you (the lead researcher), the coresearchers, and any participants have. A good starting point for consideration is the protected characteristics of the Equality Act of 2010 that are legally safeguarded against discrimination: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. Remember that other socioeconomic characteristics, such as class and educational status, also could result in power differentials. In my own research, my age, race, and sex immediately separated me from my coresearchers, who were adolescent males from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As a researcher, I had to consider how each characteristic placed me in a privileged position. For example, I had full self-awareness of the status attributed by society to my Whiteness as actively recognized racial power (Britton, 2020), and I took steps to mitigate this. Your participants most likely will be different from you, which can cause your characteristics to alienate you as different or categorize you as an outsider. How will you create reassurance and acceptance if the diverse group views you with distrust? Coproduction can build allegiance here: by placing your trust in individuals and empowering them as coresearchers, you can generate equity. Additionally, continuously examine your own reasoning and the potential bias of your own assumptions. This strategy will prove vital to your research because both you and your coproducers bring concepts, ideas, theories, values, experiences, and intersecting identities (Edwards & Holland, 2013) that require reflexivity of their impact on findings. This is where a research diary can capture subjective reflections and interpretations on intersectionality to enable analysis of your thoughts and decisions against a relevant framework.

Section Summary

- You have a duty of care to the diverse group that assists with your research—never promise complete confidentiality: safeguarding always takes precedence.
- Risk assessments are important tools for safeguarding your participants, but they cannot eradicate the risk of psychological distress on individuals. Always make signposting to support services available.
- Practice continuous reflexivity—consider intersectionality and challenge your own preconceived notions.

Conclusion

Coproduced research can enrich your project with data that only lived experiences can yield. If, like me, your research aim is to evidence the need for systematic change or improve the lives of diverse groups, then coproduction is a tool that admits you into a world to which you do not belong to capture the necessary data to achieve your intended outcomes. As outlined previously, coproduction requires stringent planning and mitigation of risks. Your diverse group likely has already experienced subjugation or minimization and requires a proven advocate in you. Clarity is required from the outset. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are crucial to the effectiveness of your coproduction and facilitate the removal of future barriers or misconceptions.

Dignity, equity, and respect are the key ingredients of coproduction. Plot research methods together as a team and engage in data collection as equals. Never stop listening to the feedback you receive from your diverse group; release your preconceptions and bias, and trust in the immersive experience ahead. Always remain reflexive, monitoring how intersectionality impacts research design, data collection, and, later, analysis. Be open and receptive to new ideas and notions. Your research aims to contribute new knowledge to the world; therefore, coproduction has the power and potential to unveil original information that can enhance academia and pave the way for innovative research methods. Hopefully, this guide has inspired you to try this novel research method to benefit from the rich, authentic data-collection opportunities it provides without losing your sense of self in the research process.

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