Conducting co-production using digital technology

October 2020

Cordis Bright has co-produced research and evaluation with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage[1] both prior to and since the introduction of lockdown measures in the U.K. In this blog we reflect on what we have learnt about this process since lockdown.

This blog is intended to provide practical tips (highlighted in **bold** below) for carrying out co-production using digital technology, and to highlight some of the challenges which may be encountered

What is co-production?

'Co-production' broadly means working together with citizens or people with relevant lived experience to improve services. It is increasingly being adopted in health, social care and criminal justice contexts in recognition of the fact that it can improve service planning, local representation and the adoption of local knowledge[2]. While co-production is understood differently by different people, a key principle is sharing power more equally between those who might use a service and those who commission, design, and deliver it[3].

Co-production can look many different ways in practice, such as people with lived experience sitting on strategic boards, participating in decision-making about hiring, feeding insight to decision-makers such as the government, and carrying out research and evaluation activities. We have been involved in this latter type of co-production, sometimes referred to as 'peer research', through our evaluations of two programmes, Blackpool Fulfilling Lives and the national Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) Approach (both prior to and during lockdown), and rapid evidence-gathering research for MEAM into the flexible responses implemented by support services during the COVID-19 pandemic (during lockdown). Both programmes are aimed at creating systems change and improving the lives of people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

This work has involved:

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[1] This is a combination of two or more of the following: mental health need, contact with the criminal justice system, a substance misuse issue, and homelessness.

[2] Clayson, A. et al. (2018). When two worlds collide: critical reflection on co-production. *Drugs and Alcohol Today.* 18(1). [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

[3] NIHR. A map of resources for co-producing research in health and social care. May 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

- Providing training in research and evaluation to people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage

- Collaboratively carrying out evaluation activities such as:

  - Writing questions for, carrying out, and analysing interviews with programme stakeholders, staff, and clients
  - Producing evaluation reports
  - Presenting findings to end users of the evaluations

You can find out about our learning from co-producing evaluations pre-lockdown in our previous blog and podcast. Here we outline what new learning has emerged from Covid-19, in particular around the use of digital technology in co-production.

How has co-production been affected by lockdown?

In the past, co-production work often involved face-to-face conversations, for example in meetings, seminars, interviews, workshops, and training. However, ways of working have had to rapidly adapt since lockdown measures were introduced in the U.K. in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Far more co-production work is now taking place virtually than previously.

These changes have prompted us, alongside others in the sectors of health, social care, criminal justice, and children's services[4], to reflect on the impact on co-production. Here, we have gathered our learning based on our experience, plus interviews with the following colleagues:

- People with lived experience with multiple disadvantage who have been part of the peer research team carrying out our evaluation of Blackpool Fulfilling Lives.

- David Ford, founder and CEO of Expert Link, a peer-led organisation focused on championing co-production. Expert Link worked with us to carry out the co-production of our evaluation of Blackpool Fulfilling Lives.

- Nicola Plumb, manager of the Lived Experience Team (LET) which is part of the Blackpool Fulfilling Lives project. The LET is formed of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage and of local services in Blackpool.

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[4] SCIE Featured article. Co-production in lockdown. 22/06/2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

SCIE. Co-production Week 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

NIHR. A map of resources for co-producing research in health and social care: Remote co-production during (and beyond) Covid-19 pandemic. May 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

Expert Link. Co-production in a digital world. 03/07/2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

Our reflections focus on a) how lockdown measures have impacted the reach and accessibility of co-production, and b) for those who do engage, how communicating through technology has impacted on the experience of co-production.

The accessibility and reach of co-production

The shift towards digital co-production has made co-production more accessible in some ways, and less accessible in others.

On the one hand, because the time and costs involved in travelling to physically attend a meeting or seminar are avoided, it is easier for a greater number of people to be involved. For example, Expert Link established a National Advisory Panel of people linked to multiple disadvantage either professionally or through personal experience at the start of lockdown, through which insight is gathered and sent to government decision-makers on a weekly basis. David Ford noted that this work, which would not have taken place before shifting meetings to digital platforms, has allowed the conversation to span a wider geography than would previously have been possible.

In addition, using technology may make co-production more accessible to people who might not otherwise have felt able to attend meetings and workshops face-to-face. As Nicola Plumb noted,

> *"It's good to be able to use Zoom […] it has connected a lot more people who wouldn't connect. It makes it easier for them doing it online […] I've noticed a couple of the women getting involved a lot more in stuff online, taking more control, but because these ladies we work with are socially isolated, so they're very anxious about going out."*

> Nicola Plumb, LET manager for Blackpool Fulfilling Lives

On the other hand, the use of digital technology has made the reach of co-production more limited in some ways, as digital technology is not equally accessible to all. The accessibility of technology varies person-to-person in several ways, such as in the ability to afford or access hardware, software, and internet access; digital literacy; and confidence using technology. The closing of spaces such as day centres and libraries in response to Covid-19 may also make this problem more acute. Overcoming the stigma associated with not having the requisite skills can be an added challenge.[5]

Relationships with technology have at times limited the involvement of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage in co-producing research, as well as the involvement of research participants. For example, using video conferencing platforms or telephones may trigger negative associations for some people or contribute to feelings of unease. As one person with lived experience of multiple disadvantage, who was involved in peer researcher training prior to lockdown, said:

> *"I didn't come to the online training. I was very unfamiliar with video calling, I'm still very unfamiliar with it. With my mental health, having people sitting there are looking at me… [A friend] did say, 'Why don't you do it?', and it was a bit*

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[5] Expert Link. Co-production in a digital world. 03/07/2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

too intrusive, but that's just my mind. I'm just not used to it. I think you'll encounter quite a lot of people saying they don't want to, for lots of different reasons. They might not want people seeing their home. The newness of the Zoom thing puts a lot of people off."

Person with lived experience of multiple disadvantage

There are some tips which can be useful to mitigate these challenges:

- In terms of access to technology, **some funding sources have been made available to provide technology** to those who need it[6].

- To increase people's confidence using technology for training and workshops, it is helpful to **spend initial sessions practicing using different features and asking questions[7]**.

- For carrying out interviews virtually, peer researchers' confidence was increased by **running practice interviews as a team**, as well as **checking in before interviews** and **debriefing afterwards**. It was also suggested that where peer researchers feel nervous about carrying out an interview using video conferencing, **observing someone else carrying out an interview** first may help. As one peer researcher commented:

    "The practice interview is really essential. When you haven't done it before, you get a lot of anxiety about it. A lot of the new ones have been battling anxiety for a long time. If we could do the interviews with each other [we would] calm each other down and get used to it."

    Peer researcher, Blackpool Fulfilling Lives evaluation

Whilst these tips can be useful, technology will always have limits as an accessible form of communication for some, particularly those who have spent less time in recovery. For this reason, it was also suggested by peer researchers and professionals that video conferencing and phone calls would not facilitate meaningful conversations with research participants currently struggling with multiple disadvantage, such as Blackpool Fulfilling Lives clients.

The experience of co-production

Beyond the potential barriers to access, communicating through digital technology when conducting evaluation activity with people with lived experience can have a range of implications for the experience of the peer researchers and the quality of the output. Peer researchers working with us on the Blackpool Fulfilling Lives evaluation agreed that communicating using digital video conferencing platforms, rather than face-to-face, had affected activities such as completing training in research and evaluation, participating in

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[6] See Expert Link's blog post [Co-production in a digital world](#) [Last accessed 03/09/2020] for links to some funding sources.

[7] For an example of this process, see '[Lived experience in systems change'](#) [last accessed 16/09/2020], in which CFE Research (the national evaluators of the Fulfilling Lives Approach) reflect on using a smartphone app to collect qualitative data from experts by experience about their experiences of systems change events at frequent time intervals. They piloted the app with experts by experience and ran practice sessions before rolling it out as a research method.

workshops to design research tools, and carrying out interviews with stakeholders in a number of ways, some positive and some negative.

On the one hand, conducting interviews with stakeholders via video conferencing rather than in an office setting increased the confidence of some peer researchers:

> *"I did some [interviews] in people's houses. There were kids, dogs barking. I found that great. It makes them more normal."*
>
> Peer researcher, Blackpool Fulfilling Lives evaluation

> *"With the professional people, I think I would've felt more intimidated in a face-to-face setting, them in an office, suit. I preferred it this way."*
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> Peer researcher, Blackpool Fulfilling Lives evaluation

Communicating using technology also offers a chance for some people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage to gain new skills and confidence working in a new forum, for example in facilitating conversations over video conference.

On the other hand, peer researchers, David Ford, and Nicola Plumb agreed that some aspects of face-to-face communication are lost when using video conferencing. Firstly, non-verbal communication is somewhat obscured when carrying out interviews with stakeholders and participating in training and workshops as a team, it was reported:

> *"It won't come anywhere close to sitting down in a room with someone and sensing how they feel and how they're responding."*
>
> David Ford, founder and CEO, Expert Link

Secondly, communicating via video conference felt more formal than face-to-face training and workshops people had attended in the past. For example, the need to mute and unmute when using video conferencing placed added emphasis on turn-taking and at times, disrupted the flow of conversation. This resulted in some people feeling less confident in speaking and asking questions. As one peer researcher commented:

> *"When I'm with my group of guys, I can ask them 'Can you explain that a bit better to me?' It doesn't affect everyone in the Zoom call and everything going on. You've got to stop the flow for everyone else. During a break you could go up to a trainer and say, 'Excuse me, I didn't quite understand this bit.' […] You can't really do that on a Zoom meeting. I found the training wasn't as fluid, because you're muting, unmuting, putting hand up. In a room you can just pop your ideas out."*
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> Peer researcher, Blackpool Fulfilling Lives evaluation

Additionally, it was highlighted that a lot of informal conversation which would typically happen before and after face-to-face meetings, and in breaks, is lost when using video conferencing. This informal conversation was felt to serve an important purpose, allowing people to feel relaxed enough to exchange ideas and ask questions they may not share in a formal group setting, and allowing a team to bond socially.

"It's hard until [we can meet] together, because that's where they motivate each other and get ideas. You need a strong team when you're doing co-production, because you need to build them up to be confident and speak their mind. If you look at recovery models, they're all about connection and social interaction. The people with lived experience [are] missing that hug, that handshake, that coffee with someone, that social interaction when you go outside and have a cig […] and all the good bits that come with it. You can get your business done over Zoom but there's no real connection."

Nicola Plumb, LET manager for Blackpool Fulfilling Lives

There was a consensus that, although intangible, the confidence and sense of mutual support which are fostered by communicating in a way in which people feel comfortable play a key role in how fully people with lived experience of disadvantage are likely to engage in co-production. As a result, lockdown measures can make it more difficult to engage people who are not already involved in co-production in becoming peer researchers, as there is a need to use technology to build up a relationship and to go through 'gatekeepers' to establish contact.

Although peer researchers, David Ford, and Nicola Plumb agreed that face-to-face communication cannot be replicated, the following tips can help to counteract some of the shortfalls of communicating digitally:

- As with face-to-face co-production, including time to **catch-up and socialise at the beginning and end of sessions**, **taking sessions slowly** to allow time for ideas to be explored as a group, and **taking regular breaks** at least once an hour.

- **Creating an informal forum for staying in contact** and sharing information, such as a WhatsApp group chat (as this involves sharing mobile numbers, it may not always be appropriate, and some people may not want to be included)[8].

- **Using breakout rooms** on Zoom to create smaller sub-groups helps to stimulate conversation, and *'make time for the 'quiet voices' and support them to be heard'*[9].

- Trying to **understand the ways in which different people feel comfortable participating** and accommodating this where possible[10] [11]. For example, some people

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[8] NIHR. A map of resources for co-producing research in health and social care: Remote co-production during (and beyond) Covid-19 pandemic. May 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

[9] NIHR. A map of resources for co-producing research in health and social care: Remote co-production during (and beyond) Covid-19 pandemic. May 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

[10] NIHR. A map of resources for co-producing research in health and social care: Remote co-production during (and beyond) Covid-19 pandemic. May 2020. [Last accessed 03/09/2020]

[11] For example, CFE Research (the national evaluators of the Fulfilling Lives Approach) used a smartphone app to collect qualitative data from experts by experience about their experiences of systems change events at frequent time intervals. The app included several options for inputting data, including text, video, photos, and audio. In practice, videos and voice recordings were the most commonly used option by experts by experience. CFE also offered alternative data collection methods to the app (a digital camera, a Dictaphone, and questions on paper) for experts who did not feel comfortable using a smartphone app. Source: 'Lived experience in systems change' [last accessed 16/09/2020]

may feel more comfortable sharing their input through a one-to-one phone call than a group video call.

- **Making short videos to verbally send updates** to peer researchers, such as meeting invitations as opposed to e-mails can be more effective in increasing engagement, through establishing a personable tone and highlighting the opportunity for social interaction.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that greater use of digital technology in co-production going forward might create an opportunity to engage a wider cohort of people with lived experience, for whom travelling to a meeting or conducting research in person can be time-consuming, resource-intensive and anxiety-inducing. Clearly, however, the use of digital technology cannot replace the connection that is formed in person and which is crucial to successful co-production, and brings with it a range of potential barriers to access which must be carefully managed.