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**Research article**

# The role of reflexive and relational spaces in exploring the contradictions and challenges in co-producing research

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## Abstract

Co-producing research with young people presents contradictions and challenges. Reflexive and relational spaces are essential to exploring and addressing these. Reflecting on the evolution of our co-production approach over the two phases of our study on growing up in coastal towns in the UK, we argue that reflexive, relational spaces are essential to recognise and respond to co-researchers' diverse objectives, needs, knowledge and skills, and to address emerging contradictions and challenges, to build trust and mutual understanding, to learn from each other and to review and refine the research design as an ongoing, iterative process. This increases the possibilities of co-production for creating different kinds of impact, including on co-researchers' skills and knowledge (at individual and team levels), and on relevant substantive knowledge, with potential for influencing policy.

**Keywords** co-production; reflexivity; relational practice; values; young people

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### Key messages

- Reflexive, relational practice is essential in recognising and responding to co-researchers' different objectives, needs, knowledge and skills.
- It is vital to address emerging contradictions and challenges throughout the research process.
- These practices enable co-researchers to build trust and mutual understanding, increasing the scope for impact at multiple levels.

## Introduction

This article explores some challenges in co-producing research, drawing on our two-phase study of the aspirations and experiences of young people growing up in coastal towns. Many UK coastal communities were once thriving centres of commerce and tourism, but they have faced economic decline since the 1970s, and are now characterised by low social mobility, precarious and low-paid jobs, and poor health and educational outcomes (CMO, 2021; Stephenson and Harrison, 2022). Despite efforts to tackle these challenges at local and national levels (HM Government, 2022), high levels of deprivation persist (House of Lords Liaison Committee, 2023). Yet little research has focused on young people's perspectives on growing up in coastal communities, or their aspirations for themselves and their towns (but see McDowell and Bonner-Thompson, 2020; Wenham, 2020). As part of our pilot study on Growing Up in Coastal Towns in 2021, Avril Keating (AK), Claire Cameron (CC) and Rachel Benchekroun (RB) were keen to co-produce qualitative research with young people to centre their perspectives throughout the process and create new kinds of knowledge, both methodological and substantive. We also hoped they could help us pilot place-based and visual research activities at a time when Covid-19-related restrictions limited face-to-face fieldwork. With the support of Young Advisors, a national organisation, we partnered with Youth Action in North East Lincolnshire, led by the Council's Youth Voice Lead (Pippa Curtin, PC), and further developed ideas together. Phase 2, in 2022, was a longer project building on the learning from Phase 1, in the same location with an expanded team. As our primary community partner, PC played an essential role in the development and outcomes of the study, not least in recruiting and supporting young people as Young Researchers. Molly Ward (MW) played a dual role as a council employee in PC's team and as a Young Researcher.

In this article, we reflect on how our experiences of co-producing research evolved across the two phases of our study. Drawing on our diverse perspectives, we examine our values and how we tried to enact them through our research. We critically reflect on the activities we undertook, how we sought to 'share power' across the team, how co-researchers were involved across different stages of the research and the impact. We suggest that recognising and addressing the emerging contradictions and challenges of co-production through reflexive and relational practices can help co-researchers bridge across differences and increase opportunities for impact on co-researchers, policymakers and the community. In sharing our learning, we hope to contribute to methodological knowledge which could be useful to practitioners and academics interested in co-production (Bowman, 2024; Smithson et al., 2021).

In the following section, we situate our experience by providing a brief overview of scholarship on co-production and participatory research. Next, we critically reflect on how our research methodology and practices evolved across the two phases of the study, and how we sought to translate our values into practice. We then consider what helped or hindered the process, and we discuss the implications for working across institutional boundaries. In co-producing this article, we engaged in much debate and sometimes challenging discussion; here, we present our attempts to reconcile our respective views.

## The aims of research co-production

Rather than conceptualising community members simply as participants in and/or beneficiaries of research findings who are unlikely to benefit in any direct way, research co-production, or participatory research, involves collaborating 'with those affected by an issue being studied for the purpose of action or change', prioritising 'genuine and meaningful participation in the research process' (Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020: 5; see also Bell and Pahl, 2018; Bowman, 2024; Rosen, 2023). By engaging with diverse partners and forms of knowledge which are 'often overlooked or undervalued by more traditional forms of academic research' (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 106; Cook, 2021; Zurba et al., 2022), it reshapes knowledge production (Duggan, 2021). Involving young people as co-researchers is particularly important in light of the internationally recognised right of children and young people to participate in making decisions that affect them (United Nations, 1989), and as a democratic principle (Bowman, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). As such, the research process is as important as outputs (Co-Production Collective, 2022a). Value is placed on the intended outcomes and impact on – or meaningfulness for (Bowman, 2024) – co-researchers and wider communities (Halvorsrud et al., 2021). This includes the personal development of community partners, which may incorporate aspects of well-being or fulfilment (Amorim Lopes and Alves, 2020; Langley et al., 2022), as well as capacity-building among marginalised populations (Green and Baker, 2022; Hickey, 2018; Ledingham and Hartley, 2021; Williams et al., 2020). The nature and depth of co-researchers' involvement in the research and decision making is therefore an important consideration (Zurba et al., 2022), requiring power to be shifted away from academics and policymakers and towards community partners. It requires attention to be paid to the translation of core values into practice, such as accessibility and inclusivity, reciprocity (ensuring that the process is mutually beneficial for all co-researchers), transparency and authenticity (ensuring that decisions are made 'openly and collectively') (Co-Production Collective, 2022a; SCIE, 2022). The impact on the personal and professional development and well-being of academic partners should also be recognised (Camara et al., 2020; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Kill, 2022). Nevertheless, we should also acknowledge that co-production may be adopted for more instrumental as well as for social justice reasons (for example, to facilitate recruitment of participants from a marginalised group, or to comply with research funder requirements).

Given the diverse motivations for co-producing research, and the challenges in putting it into practice, research co-production is not intrinsically 'ethical', with necessarily positive impact. Researchers need to pay attention to the processes and causal effects (Voorberg et al., 2015), to ensure, for example, that co-researchers have genuine opportunities to develop their skills and to influence the research, and that co-production does not become tokenistic (Bowman, 2024; Staley, 2015), leading to co-researchers feeling disengaged.

## Recognising the challenges: reflexivity and relational practices

Conducting participatory research is a messy process (Bowman, 2024; Cook, 2021). Translating co-production values into practice can be impeded by structural and practical factors. Working together in relational and reflexive ways can help to identify and address potential and emerging needs, challenges and barriers – at individual and organisational levels (Camara et al., 2020; Green and Baker, 2022; Halvorsrud et al., 2021; Rowley et al., 2022). This requires ample time (Camara et al., 2020; Kill, 2022) and 'frequent, sustained, and early engagement' with community partners to build and sustain trust (Zurba et al., 2022: 457; see also Armstrong et al., 2023; Cook, 2021; Hickey, 2018).

Building trust among co-researchers requires consideration of 'the mismatch between academic calendars, funding timelines, community needs and expectations' (Armstrong et al., 2023: 4; see also Kill, 2022). Sufficient funding is needed to pay for co-researchers' time, both for practical reasons (to enable all co-researchers to participate) and to demonstrate the equal value and importance of academic and community partners (Bell and Pahl, 2018; Bryan et al., 2018). However, funding systems and ethical

approval processes in academic institutions tend to prevent ‘meaningful co-production in the planning stages of research’, allowing ‘insufficient time to establish relationships’ (Smith et al., 2022: 36; see also Duggan, 2021; Habermehl and Perry, 2021; Pearce, 2021; Whittington, 2019). While research co-production ‘should begin from the collective production of research aims and questions’, there is a risk of taking up the (unpaid) time of community partners with what are often unsuccessful funding applications, leading academics to seek out prospective partners once funding has been granted, thus ‘encouraging an instrumentalism and potentially leading to suspicion regarding the motives of academics’ (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 109). Time can also become compressed across different stages of research, notably in the creation and sharing of research outputs.

Co-producing research requires attention to be paid to individual co-researchers’ needs and preferences in relation to when, how and for how long they wish to participate in the research (Whittington, 2019), and the kinds of training and support needed. Flexibility and regular reviews are important to address these needs and preferences (Albert et al., 2023; Kill, 2022). As highlighted by Zurba et al. (2022: 457), ‘iterative and interactive reflection on the purpose and progress of knowledge co-production’ can help to maximise the positive impact on – or ‘meaningfulness’ for (Bowman, 2024) – co-researchers and wider partners, and reduce the risks of unintended negative consequences. Co-produced research may work best when it develops through existing relationships, although often relationships are formed with the intention of co-producing research.

Building strong relationships requires continual questioning and challenging of ‘both the status quo and the perspectives of all co-producers’ (Co-Production Collective, 2022a), disrupting and subverting traditional structures of power, exploitation and domination (Bell and Pahl, 2018; Bowman, 2024; Cooper and Jones, 2021; Howarth et al., 2022). There is a need to ‘[unpick] assumptions around collaboration, participation, equality, non-hierarchy and divisions of labour’ (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 109). It is important not to deny power dynamics or ignore ‘divisions of labour and knowledge in the name of a false equality’, but rather what is required involves ‘negotiating, questioning and challenging them’, opening up spaces, keeping them open and ‘trusting in the process’ to generate new knowledge (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 109, 110).

Continued reflection is needed on what kinds of research outputs will be created; how and when; by and for whom; and how they will be shared with different audiences. This is crucial if co-production is to live up to its promise of being empowering and beneficial to all co-researchers and to the wider community, rather than being extractive (Spyrou, 2024) and reproducing power structures (Bell and Pahl, 2018). This means pushing back against the privileging of peer-reviewed publications in academia, which, while important to academic researchers, are inaccessible to most people (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Instead, it is vital to co-produce diverse types of resources and to consider how these can be useful and accessible to intended beneficiaries, not just to fellow academics. Similarly, research co-production should pay careful attention to the impact of the process on co-researchers (Hickey, 2018). This should be done in appropriate ways that do not prioritise measurable impact at the expense of understanding meaningful outcomes (Co-Production Collective, 2022a).

## Putting co-production into practice: challenges, missteps and the evolution of our approach

In this section, we reflect on how we sought to navigate challenges and enact our co-production values through reflexive and relational practice across the two phases of our research on Growing Up in Coastal Towns. In preparing these reflections, we have drawn on the following: notes from informal project planning meetings and informal conversations between members of the research team; transcripts of workshops with the Young Researchers (pre-, during and post-fieldwork); minutes of Advisory Group meetings (Phase 2); co-produced resources for invited seminars/workshops on co-production for wider audiences; the recording of an interview with PC, MW and RB undertaken by People’s Voice Media; and ongoing reflexive discussions among all the authors of this article.

The two-phase co-produced research on Growing Up in Coastal Towns in North East Lincolnshire was part of a larger mixed methods project at UCL, London. Alongside the academics (AK, CC, RB), the team included the North East Lincolnshire Youth Voice Lead (PC) and young people in the role of Young Researchers (including MW). In Phase 1 (2021), we co-developed and used participatory, place-based activities in interviews with young people in their communities. We also interviewed some older people about their experiences of growing up in the community to identify possible changes over time. Building on our reflexive discussions, the second phase of the study (2022) aimed to engage more deeply with the principles of co-production and to develop our understanding of how experiences of growing up in coastal communities have changed over generations. Below, we critically reflect on the evolution of our co-production approach.

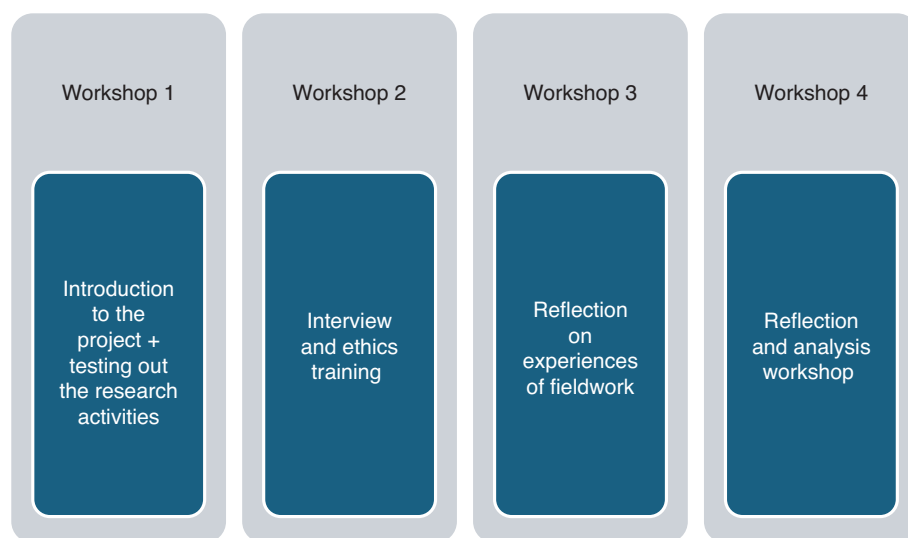
### Phase 1: instrumental and democratic goals

At the start of this phase, the academic team set out to explore two research questions: first, *in what ways does growing up in a coastal town impact young people's experiences, aspirations and life chances?* And, second, *what solutions would young people propose to improve their coastal communities?* This project was first initiated to pilot place-based and visual participatory methods with young people envisaged as participants, rather than as co-producers. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns delayed and curtailed the original plans for the study and prompted a radical shift in our research aims and design. In response, we adapted a co-production approach that AK had taken in previous projects, involving the Young Researchers in the design of the activities and generation of data. To facilitate this, the academic leads contacted a national organisation with experience in youth-led research (Young Advisors), who put us in touch with a local practitioner (PC) who became central to the project as a co-researcher.

From the outset, all parties were aware of the importance of joint planning for the project and discussed co-production values, including diversity and reciprocity. Through preliminary discussions, we agreed that PC's role would be to recruit Young Researchers, drawing on her existing engagement with young people in North East Lincolnshire, and to help organise and advise on the workshops that UCL would provide to support the Young Researchers during their time on our project. We also agreed that the Young Researchers' role would be to: advise on the proposed participatory activities to ensure that these were accessible and engaging; recruit and interview some of their peers and older people; share feedback on their experiences of the participatory activities; and contribute to data analysis in a workshop. It was agreed from the start that community partners (youth workers and Young Researchers) would be paid for their time. (The Young Researchers were paid through gift cards for the outlet of their choice, since taking the formal employment route would have posed significant administrative barriers.) Participation was voluntary. PC identified six young people who were interested in taking on the role, but ultimately two were unable to take part for personal reasons. All four of the Young Researchers who took part were female and between the ages of 18 and 21; they were from diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds. The Young Researchers had some prior experience of working in consultative and advisory roles, but they were new to doing research.

RB and AK developed materials for four workshops with the Young Researchers (lasting two hours each), to provide training, support and opportunities for reflection before, during and after the fieldwork (see [Figure 1](#)). PC supported RB in organising and facilitating the workshops. To fit around the Young Researchers' study and work commitments, sessions were held in the evenings. Partly because of Covid-19-related social distancing measures, the workshops were facilitated in a hybrid format; this meant that the team were not always in the same physical space, which constrained communication and the development of relationships at that time.

In the first workshop, RB presented some visual/place-based activities and piloted them with the Young Researchers, seeking their feedback. RB subsequently conducted in-depth interviews (online) with the Young Researchers which, in addition to being the first stage of generating data, served to model

**Figure 1. Summary of the co-production activities with Young Researchers in Phase 1 (October 2021)**

the role of researcher, and enabled further reflection on the usefulness of the activities. In keeping with our co-production principles and project aims, some changes were made to the activities as a result of the discussions in Week 1, although these were minor. The second workshop was designed to be a training session, rather than a dialogical process; it covered practical and ethical issues – largely from the university's perspective – in relation to recruiting participants, organising interviews, the purpose of research interviews, some of the key skills needed, how to obtain informed consent, collating data and keeping it secure, and understanding their duty of care as researchers. The academic members of the team were conscious of their responsibility to provide training on these topics to help ensure that all aspects of the research were conducted ethically and in line with university guidance. However, this top-down approach sat in tension with our co-production principles, leaving little or no space for a more critical engagement with the university's approach to 'consent', for example. This led to some later unsettling situations which the team discussed in a subsequent workshop (see following section).

### **Lessons and challenges from Phase 1**

Reflection within the team during the workshops, and in regular conversations between PC and RB and with the wider academic team, generated insightful reflections on factors that were facilitating or impeding the research process. First, while RB emphasised to the Young Researchers the importance of allowing enough time in their fieldwork to build rapport with participants, to complete the necessary forms and to facilitate the activities, the *lack of time* across the project was a notable challenge in several ways. For example, in the second workshop, there was insufficient time for the Young Researchers to try out new skills through role play or to discuss scenarios to apply new knowledge. The short amount of time between the first two workshops and the fieldwork did not allow adequate space for reflection, discussion and adaptation of the methods. It also became clear that the two weeks allocated to the Young Researchers to recruit participants and undertake interviews was insufficient: emerging issues included the Young Researchers' other commitments, their participants' availability and finding times when their identified interview settings could be accessed. The short time frame for the workshops and data collection was intended to encourage completion of the fieldwork, following feedback from Young Researchers in previous co-production projects led by AK. In this instance, however, it clashed with the reality and demands of our Young Researchers' lives as they tried to juggle their research role with their studies, work and other responsibilities.

Following Workshop 2, the Young Researchers were asked to recruit three to five of their peers and one or two older people (for example, parent, grandparent) and to carry out their interviews within a two-week period. Workshops 3 and 4 provided opportunities to reflect on the research process and the emerging data. It became apparent that the process of obtaining 'informed consent' from participants and explaining the forms to them had been a challenge:

I found that some people don't really like doing [forms], they were like, 'can you fill out the form for me?' It was like, 'No, you've got to fill it out yourself', and they were just like, 'Read it out to me'.

I think the hardest thing was the young people doing the background information [forms] because ... they couldn't understand [certain words] so I had to read it out to them and basically explain it. ... it was just a difficult thing for them.

The discussions underlined the difficulties in balancing the requirements of the university ethics committee with the needs of the Young Researchers and their participants. The university-approved information sheet and consent form were long and detailed, and included language which was not easy to understand. They needed to be more accessible so that all participants could understand them and the Young Researchers could explain them. As PC reflected, we needed to find ways to make the process:

really accessible and easy to understand for whoever, whatever their ability. ... it can feel a little bit like a contract, and contracts always feel a little bit out of reach for a lot of people, don't they? The words aren't that easy to understand. So, I guess that [simple] language, saying the stuff that we need to say, is something to think about for whenever we're doing anything, but not just with young people but with adults that might have different abilities.

In relation to completing the consent form, one of the Young Researchers shared that her young participant 'just did "yes" for everything. They didn't even read the question. It was "yes, yes, yes".' This indicated the Young Researcher's concern that, while complying with the university's ethical processes, the interaction meant that her participant had not given genuinely 'informed consent'. It led to some reflection as a team on the importance of ensuring that participants truly understood what they were consenting to. Moreover, we recognised that interviewing people known to us meant there was 'an element of trust already' (PC), which, while it tended to facilitate the research encounter, did not negate the need for obtaining (truly) informed consent as in any other research context. But these reflections raised deeper questions which we did not fully explore at the time. What was the nature of meaningful consent for participants, including for the Young Researchers themselves (Bowman, 2024; Whittington, 2019)? And, had we placed a potentially unreasonable level of responsibility on the Young Researchers to gain participants' (truly) informed consent? What could or should we have done to address this?

In the reflective workshops, the Young Researchers also highlighted how the use of visual/place-based activities in the interviews with young people had made the research encounters 'more fluid', generating 'more in-depth answers', and therefore had felt like 'more of a conversation', whereas, by contrast, they experienced their interviews with the older people (where they were asked to use a more traditional, semi-structured interview guide that did not include any visual or arts-based methods) as more stilted.

Our ongoing reflections throughout the first phase of the study shaped the development of Phase 2 (see Table 1).

## **Phase 2: embedding intergenerational dialogue and strengthening our co-production approach**

In early 2022, we applied for an additional grant from UCL. The aims of Phase 2 of the study were to embed the intergenerational research focus (comparing young and older residents' experiences of growing

**Table 1. Summary of Phase 1 and Phase 2**

Phase	Activity
Phase 1 (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Planning meetings (AK, CC, RB, PC, MW)</li> <li>– Two training workshops pre-fieldwork (facilitated by RB and PC)</li> <li>– Participant recruitment and fieldwork (Young Researchers)</li> <li>– One reflective workshop during fieldwork</li> <li>– One reflective workshop post-fieldwork</li> </ul>
Phase 2 (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Advisory Group</li> <li>– Planning meetings</li> <li>– Training workshop pre-fieldwork</li> <li>– Outreach, promotion of project, participant recruitment, organisation of focus groups and community walks – by PC, MW, RB; focus groups and interviews facilitated by Young Researchers with support from PC, RB</li> <li>– Seminar presentation/workshop for wider audiences on co-producing research (PC, CC, RB)</li> <li>– Data analysis workshop</li> <li>– Community event to share findings</li> <li>– Co-production of research outputs</li> </ul>

up in their coastal community) and to strengthen our co-production approach. While the timing of the funding application deadline prevented the involvement of all co-researchers in this stage, the university researchers drew on the shared learning across the team so far, and the input of a co-production adviser, who provided guidance throughout Phase 2. We were more explicit in identifying and applying our co-production values in the application, the research process, and the outputs and outcomes. As PC noted in a later group interview about the co-production process (People's Voice Media, 2022), 'We're all here because we bring something to the table that can help this process.' As PC reflected, the strength or 'magic' of a co-production approach lay in:

everybody bringing their different perspectives and different skills and different strengths to the table, and sharing those with other people .... None of us have got all of those skills, but all of us will take something from that table that we like.

For this second phase, we aimed to collaborate as co-researchers across all research stages, from design, participant recruitment and fieldwork, through to data analysis and sharing findings, drawing on our previous learning. The funding gave us more time than in the previous phase, allowing us to undertake the activities over seven months and invest more time in building relationships. Encouraged by our funders, we formed an Advisory Group of academic and community partners with local, substantive and methodological expertise, which shaped the design of the project and promoted deep reflection throughout the study. The research team collaborated more closely in developing new research activities, to carry out fieldwork together, to regularly reflect as a group, to analyse the data more deeply together and to share findings with different audiences in different ways, drawing on existing community networks. We developed a 'theory of change' to map out how this approach could help us develop our skills, knowledge, experience, confidence and aspirations; produce rich, in-depth qualitative data addressing the research questions; influence relevant policymaking in North East Lincolnshire; develop new partnerships with community and academic organisations; and contribute to learning about co-production. The four Young Researchers from the first phase continued in this role, and two former research participants (both male, aged 16, in education) joined as Young Researchers.

As a result of our discussions about improving the research design, we made a notable change to how the data generation activities were organised. Whereas in Phase 1, the Young Researchers were asked to recruit participants and arrange interview spaces for themselves, for Phase 2 it was agreed that PC, RB and MW would coordinate (and recruit participants for) the planned data generation activities

(focus groups and one-to-one or paired interviews in shared spaces, including a school and a community group). This approach would facilitate deeper learning for co-researchers, and it would not be dependent on the Young Researchers' own networks. We recruited young people through a school and youth group, older people through two community organisations, and both young and older people through our wider networks and online communication.

In addition, and as part of our efforts to deepen our co-production of research activities, we decided to continue using some of the visual/place-based activities from the first phase, but also, as a team, we co-designed new ones. These included using photo prompts and large Ordnance Survey maps in the focus groups and, with the input of an experienced local tour guide, organising a community walk with the Young Researchers and some young and older participants. The walk facilitated multi-directional knowledge-sharing and learning about the local area, and it provided opportunities for conducting walking interviews. These activities generated discussion, visual data and reflection by participants on their experiences of growing up in their local area, their feelings about their coastal towns, how they felt the area had changed over time, their aspirations for themselves and their town, and their views on what needs to change. (See [Keating et al., 2024](#), for analysis of study findings.) Engaging with the outside space created unique opportunities for intergenerational interactions and the co-production of new kinds of knowledge, based on participants' different generational identities, experiences of growing up in the local area and perspectives on how local places and spaces have changed. As MW observed, the community walk provided 'a nice environment to have conversations with people you wouldn't normally'.

Finally, to facilitate participation of our co-researchers in the data analysis, RB first transcribed recordings and conducted preliminary analysis of transcripts, fieldnotes and visual data to identify emerging themes, then shared these themes with PC and the Young Researchers at a one-day data analysis workshop. During the session, we reflected together on the emerging themes, as well as on our experiences of the research process, the potential impact of our participation at individual and broader levels, and how we wanted to share findings from the research. Identifying ways of sharing the findings with a wide audience was particularly important to the team. Rather than seeing this as primarily an academic research project, we wanted to address the interests and needs of different communities, and to communicate our findings in accessible ways. We agreed to co-produce a project report, blogposts, articles and an infographic, and to co-organise an interactive event for participants and local decision makers, all of which took place (albeit not all within the original time frame of the project).

## The impact of co-producing our research

To explore the value of the co-production process and the impact on individual co-researchers, we engaged in reflective, open-ended discussion, both informally throughout the study and in a more structured way in the final workshops of each phase. Additionally, RB asked the Young Researchers to complete an online questionnaire at the start, middle and end of Phase 2.

When asked what they had learned from their experience of participating in the project, the Young Researchers emphasised the new kinds of knowledge they had developed about their town by engaging with residents from diverse backgrounds:

I think the best [thing about taking part] is it's very, very different to hear what people's views [were]; [they were] so, so different and the young people are so different. So it was really nice to just learn about the young people and what they want to do and stuff like that.

I liked how you can see how people's views are very similar, even if they've grown up on different sides of the town.

The best thing was just hearing different views about old people experiencing different things to us.

The Young Researchers also valued the relational aspects of doing research: 'speaking to people – understanding their needs and everything'. In Phase 1, they were hesitant as to whether they had developed new skills, but by the end of Phase 2, they were beginning to identify the development of certain skills through their researcher roles. One Young Researcher identified having 'learnt more about socialising skills with both the younger and older people' and 'coming out of [my] comfort zone', while another described feeling 'brave' and developing skills in 'listening to other people'. It was felt by the whole team that the co-production process had provided valuable opportunities for intergenerational interactions, which tended not to be available outside of family structures.

PC highlighted the unique forms of knowledge the Young Researchers had contributed to the analysis at the end of Phase 2:

you [Young Researchers] have come up with things that [RB] wouldn't have seen or wouldn't have thought about in the same way. That's what's really important. That's what I always advocate for. You guys see things in a different way, and that's why it's so important that you're able to share your perspectives ... Otherwise, it's just an adult perspective on young people's views, instead of it being adults and young people working together ... that's important that adults and young people are working together, as equals really.

From their perspective as Youth Voice workers, PC and MW emphasised their belief that the Young Researchers had grown in confidence, developed their social and research skills and become more self-assured as they began to realise the value of their contributions to the study. MW also felt that the Young Researchers valued being able to utilise this research experience in seeking further educational and professional opportunities. Several of the Young Researchers were simultaneously engaging in, and/or expressing an interest in, a range of community-based roles. As Hart (1992) has underlined, the confidence developed through participating in research can support community organisation. Equally, PC, MW and RB recognised ways in which they had benefited, in a professional and/or a personal capacity. PC experienced a strong sense of connection with, and ownership of, the local area, wanting the area to be a great place to live, work and grow up in. Similarly, MW felt that her involvement in the project had opened up new kinds of knowledge about her local area, not only in relation to young people's perspectives, but also through gaining insights into older residents' perceptions, shared through their stories and memories, which provided a unique view on how place-based experiences and aspirations have evolved across generations and over time. RB recognised how the team's continued reflexive and relational practices had grown her interest and skills in research co-production and her understanding of its possibilities for effecting change at individual, community and wider levels.

In keeping with the co-production principles discussed earlier in this article, sharing power was fundamental to our approach, and it had a beneficial impact on all members of the research team. While power hierarchies existed within and between institutions, for example in relation to professional roles and funding, those with more power used their positions to empower those with less power, and to level the hierarchies by taking a facilitative approach. The academic project leads (AK and CC) shared advice and guidance with the academic researcher who was 'in the field' (RB); through regular communication and a dialogical process, they supported her to take a lead in building relationships with community partners. RB and PC (and later MW) quickly developed a partnership based on equality and trust – they were equally motivated to learn from each other, recognising and valuing each other's different kinds of knowledge and skills. As the Council's Youth Voice lead, PC had built strong and trusting relationships with the young people who became Young Researchers on the project; she facilitated their involvement in the project in ways that empowered and supported them. RB was able to build on this to develop relationships with the Young Researchers herself. Both RB and PC involved the Young Researchers in decision making whenever possible, and they explained the reasons for decisions and processes which were governed at a different level. However, while RB, PC and MW met and reflected together online fairly regularly, the geographical distance between RB and the Young Researchers – coupled with the

fixed time frame of each phase of the study – limited opportunities for co-presence and the development of relationships.

Finally, as a research team, we felt that the process of co-producing research may have had a positive impact on the wider community:

Young Researcher 5: It's got people talking.

Young Researcher 6: It's made people re-evaluate how they see their town.

PC: Helped other people think about their area.

The broad range of connections we each brought to and found through this project not only supported the production and analysis of data as expected; it also helped in the sharing of our findings (both substantive and methodological). For example, through the connections we created, we organised an end-of-project event for local residents; co-created blogposts and an infographic; gave presentations at conferences, seminars and workshops; and co-wrote a media article, a report, journal articles (Benckekroun et al., 2022; Keating et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2024) and a case study for a book (Benckekroun and Curtin, in press). We have also shared the findings as part of the local area's 'insights', which will inform developments and practice in the future.

## Discussion

Certain factors played key roles in supporting the research process. PC's and MW's existing relationships with the young people facilitated the recruitment of our Young Researchers, and helped build a sense of team and a shared commitment to the project. By working closely and collaboratively with PC and MW, RB was able to develop a good understanding of the Young Researchers' needs, and together we established effective forms of communication. The Young Researchers were already engaged with their communities and had some experience in consulting locally and more widely, through the involvement of Youth Action and Young Advisors. Because of this prior experience, the Young Researchers all knew each other (to varying degrees), which supported communications and relationships within the team. They proved to be highly skilled in listening to each other and reflecting on practice (Cook, 2009) – these skills were of crucial importance not only in training and support sessions, but also when interviewing residents and co-facilitating focus groups. The Young Researchers' initial confidence levels varied, but they increased over the time of the study.

As a research team, everyday relational practices – and practices of care – were important, at multiple levels. Creating and sustaining supportive, relational spaces for reflection, discussion and regular communication was crucial, although more time would have enabled deeper and more critical reflection (Cook, 2021). Regular reflection on the emerging issues and challenges in the first phase of the study helped us to navigate and prepare for the second phase.

At times, the range of temporalities, aims, needs and priorities of different partners created contradictions and challenges in relation to varying aspects of co-producing the research. Official time frames and processes were experienced variously as helpful and restricting. Sometimes the different project stages clashed with co-researchers' wider commitments (school exams, paid or voluntary work, starting university, other personal commitments) which required us to work flexibly, creatively and supportively as a team (Smithson et al., 2021). While the university's ethics approval process generated some helpful feedback, it also felt constraining at times. Despite our efforts to make the information sheet and consent form as clear and accessible as possible in Phase 2, the requirement to include certain legal language continued to feel problematic, not only for participants, but also for the Young Researchers in trying to explain these (Bowman, 2024). The question of informed consent was approached largely through the 'single lens' (Cook, 2009) of the university, and it was not adequately explored from the Young Researchers' perspectives (Whittington, 2019). The concern raised by the Young Researcher about

her participant ticking 'yes' to all the statements on the consent form without appearing to fully read it (discussed earlier) could have been an opportunity for RB to facilitate a critical discussion of what the different co-researchers understood by consent, and how to better address this in our research – but her (misplaced) prioritisation of official processes, and pressures on time, prevented this. Embracing this challenge to the institutional perspective in the moment, and adopting a 'kaleidoscopic lens' to explore a potentially 'messy area' (Cook, 2009: 280, 281), could have led to the co-construction of a more nuanced and productive understanding across the team – the growth of 'collective knowledge' (Cook, 2021: 5) – of consent and consent processes (Whittington, 2019). Moreover, at the time, we may not have been sufficiently mindful of the role of institutions in shaping participants' agency in the consent process, such as the school, where declining to take part may have been difficult (Kirby, 2020). Participants did, however, exercise agency in choosing whether (and how much) to share their experiences and views with us, and to engage in reflective discussions. Navigating commitments to relationships in the field and to the requirements of the university could lead to contradictory demands; this highlights the importance of regular reflexive practice within co-production teams.

Ideas for new research methods suggested by PC and the Young Researchers could not always be incorporated into the research design, once funding and ethical approval had been granted. The short time frame in the first phase of the project, combined with the challenges of conducting research when the Covid-19 public health measures were still in place, made the role of the Young Researchers particularly demanding, limiting the time for practising their research skills or deep, reflective discussions prior to entering the field. As with many research projects, the funded hours were used to plan and prepare the fieldwork, and to produce and analyse data; little time was left for writing up and sharing findings, which placed additional demands on everyone's time. All co-researchers were paid for a pre-agreed amount of time; this meant that, first, we could not build in additional reflective time with the Young Researchers and, second, PC spent much more time on the project than had been anticipated, being keen to do a 'really good job', rather than stopping when she had completed her paid-for time. We wanted to balance the need to produce 'academic' research outputs with the need for more diverse resources which would be accessible and useful to local partners, residents and decision makers, but we had not built in sufficient time (both in terms of project planning and in terms of co-researchers' paid hours) to do justice to this (Bryan et al., 2018).

The use of a three-stage questionnaire with the Young Researchers in the second phase of the study was based on RB's assumptions that it could provide evidence of 'impact'; that the Young Researchers would perceive their participation as an opportunity to 'acquire' skills, experience and knowledge that would benefit them in some way; and that this would form their main motivation for taking part and their interest in the role. However, this did not necessarily fit with the Young Researchers' perspectives. Rather than taking an 'instrumental' approach to the project, the young people were largely motivated by their existing involvement in youth work and their strong relationships with PC and with each other – this was identified through our ongoing reflective conversations and the end-of-project workshops. This supports the suggestion that there 'is value in regarding co-production as an exploratory "social space" and a generative process' (Smith et al., 2022: 39; see also Cook, 2021). While we would not wish to overstate the impact on individual members of the research team, given the relatively short time frame of the study, we recognise that there have been positive outcomes for co-researchers, including new types of knowledge, enjoyment, social connections, self-esteem and satisfaction from contributing to something they value (Co-Production Collective, 2022b).

Our co-production approach generated significant substantive knowledge, providing insights into: the shared perceptions and experiences of young people in relation to their local area; the diversity of perspectives of young people in relation to their plans for the future; and the perceived changes – from the point of view of older participants – to local places and spaces for young people and feelings of safety since the 1950s and 1960s (see Keating et al., 2024). Our methodological knowledge has grown

too: our experiences have played an important role in shaping and refining our strategies in subsequent co-production projects with young people in coastal towns; in radically simplifying the language in information sheets and consent forms to make them more accessible; and in reflecting more deeply on different understandings of 'consent' and how to navigate the consent process in a more meaningful way. Our approach opened up opportunities for influencing policy at a local level; however, the impact on this is difficult to demonstrate, given the short time frame of the study and the very limited time available within the project timescale for activities aimed at influencing policy. The project has also contributed to our efforts to develop public awareness of youth experiences and the role of youth workers in the media. We have brokered links between local youth workers and media organisations, fostering new connections and relationships, and widening public awareness of the challenges and benefits of youth workers and of growing up in coastal towns.

## Conclusion

In reflecting on our experiences of co-producing research with young people to explore questions about aspirations and social mobility, we have highlighted the importance of reflexivity and relational practice in co-production. We have shown that steps towards this include building in time for regular reflective/reflexive discussions on the research process between and among co-researchers across all stages of the research, and of involving all co-researchers in decision making across the different stages, by working flexibly and taking into account co-researchers' interests and availability. We have argued that this approach helps co-researchers to:

- understand each other's different perspectives, forms of knowledge and objectives
- develop a shared understanding of the values or principles of co-production, and work together to put them into practice
- critically engage with emerging contradictions and challenges of co-production, and collaboratively explore ways to address them
- bridge across institutional boundaries, learn from each other and create new kinds of knowledge
- increase the opportunities for impact in relation to the construction of substantive knowledge, the personal and professional development of individual co-researchers and the team as a whole, methodological insights, and potentially on policymaking and the wider community.

Reflecting on our research from a post-pandemic standpoint, we echo others in celebrating the growing support for research co-production among funders and policymakers, while emphasising the importance of recognising the time, resources and reflexive spaces that are required to do it well. We hope that the new government will recognise the positive role that young people can play in co-producing research in their communities.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by UCL IOE ethics board.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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