

Chapter 14

Co-production in Refugee Research: Navigating Power Dynamics

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Abstract

Refugees are often underrepresented in health and social care research, which in turn can undermine their representation and involvement in the provision of services. Refugee research can be multilayered and complex with challenges that are both explicit and hidden. In order to understand the inherent challenges, we explore the core theme of power and its influence in refugee research. Power imbalances are embedded in many aspects of the lives of refugees, and this can be echoed in the dynamics of research. Power can be experienced through the history, structures, and practice of knowledge production; it can be seen in the exclusion of marginalised voices, and it can be played out in the processes and structures of research partnerships. Within this chapter, researchers are encouraged to challenge the many barriers to inclusion for refugees and address the role of power dynamics in research. Co-produced research, whilst presenting its own difficulties, has enormous potential to create meaningful and situated shared knowledge which enhances the voice and presence of refugees. However, unless researchers challenge their own need for power and address the structural power that surrounds them, they risk exacerbating existing power imbalances.

Keywords: Co-production; refugees; forced migration; power; inequality; meaningful engagement

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Introduction

Research promoting public involvement, co-production, and community engagement (PICE) is of growing importance in addressing health and well-being concerns ([National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2020](#)). Despite researchers' efforts to engage members of the public, health research continues to minimise the voices of minoritised populations, often due to a lack of researcher awareness, capacity, or funding ([Fiske et al., 2019](#)). This has particular importance in health, as services purport to be evidence-based, yet some of the most vulnerable communities, including refugees, are absent from the evidence on which practice is based ([Amann & Sleigh, 2021](#)).

In order to design healthcare that is 'fit for purpose', evidence needs to reflect the insights, values, and experiences of diverse populations ([Amann & Sleigh, 2021](#)). Public involvement ensures that evidence reflects the real world of those most effected by health inequalities, ensuring their representation ([Fiske et al., 2019](#)). Refugees are defined as having a well-founded fear of persecution, leading to their involuntary movement from their home region. They also have complex, often unmet, health needs, and are frequently absent from health research evidence ([Harley & Wazefadost, 2023](#)). Research involving refugees includes all the complex linguistic, ethical, methodological and analytical challenges inherent in any cross-cultural study ([Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021](#)). However, research can be a particularly high-stakes activity for refugees resulting from power imbalances, legal precarity, and the politicisation of migration ([Clark-Kazak, 2017](#)).

Within this chapter we aim to reflect the core issues in refugee research relating to PICE. The breadth of ethical and practical issues inherent in refugee research are beyond the scope of this chapter, and we refer readers to works exploring these in greater detail ([Clark-Kazak, 2017](#); [Global Compact on Refugees, 2024](#); [IASFM, 2018](#)). Instead, we introduce the principles of co-production in refugee research, focussing on the influence of power on researchers, partners, and researched populations.

Undertaking Co-produced Research with Refugees

Participatory research methods, such as co-production, are growing in popularity in migration research due to their potential to engage participants, improve the relevance of findings, and enhance academic rigour ([Global Compact on Refugees, 2024](#)). The concept of co-production was introduced in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s by academic economist Elinor Ostrom and civil rights lawyer Edgar Cahn. They recognised how engagement between service providers and recipients improved outcomes in their respective fields ([Cahn, 2000](#); [Ostrom, 1996](#)).

It has proved difficult to achieve a unified definition of co-production, as the concept is described as 'slippery', 'woolly', and 'muddled' ([Oliver et al., 2019](#)). However, all definitions encompass the principles of actively engaging stakeholders throughout the research process in order to work in partnership towards shared discovery ([National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2024](#); [Lokot & Wake, 2021](#)).

In health and social care, co-production forms part of a 'participatory zeitgeist', capturing the spirit of service improvement through empowerment

(Palmer et al., 2019). Health research increasingly reflects the principles of power sharing, inclusion, respect, building and maintaining relationships, and reciprocity (National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2024). Support for collaborative research is strong, with multiple gains identified for both researcher and participant. These include interpersonal gains such as enhanced trust, capacity building, and skills development, and improvements to the quality of the research evidence due to increased reflexivity, meaningful and accurate data, and sustainable outcomes (Lokot & Wake, 2021).

Crucially for minoritised populations, like refugees, co-production has the potential to tackle unequal power dynamics and challenge the dominant hierarchies in knowledge production (Pincock & Bakunzi, 2021). Instead of a researcher led enquiry there is an exchange of ideas, through ‘dialogical teaching and learning’ rather than extraction (Marzi, 2023, p. 4). Findings are therefore meaningfully ‘situated’ in the context of the participant, so that what is learnt together has greater meaning and potential for application to practice (National Institute for Health Research, 2020).

Power and PICE

Researching refugee lives often centres on issues of power. Power imbalances are embedded in many aspects of the lives of refugees and can be echoed in the dynamics of the research process. Here we explore several key aspects of power in the use of PICE for refugee research, including issues associated with knowledge production, the underlying disempowerment of refugees, the role of ‘voice’ in research, and the importance of partnership working.

Power and Knowledge Production

Much could be said here about the power dynamics in knowledge and research, which can vary from epistemological values to practical application. Participatory research may be more challenging for researchers than many traditional research methods, as it demands greater awareness of power dynamics, reflection and a willingness to relinquish control (Hernando-Jorge et al., 2024). True partnership working requires researchers to reconsider strongly held epistemological beliefs, challenge systemic and institutional norms and relinquish their power, all of which can be personally and professionally difficult.

The researcher, who may have fought hard to achieve status and an element of control, must surrender this, humble themselves and tolerate the discomfort of ‘not knowing’ in their work (Albert et al., 2023). Instead, they must desire collective knowledge creation and embrace ‘other(ed)’ ways of knowing (Thaminathan & Kinsella, 2021). Once they have undertaken this personal shift, they are likely to see the structural challenges inherent in traditional academic settings.

The research context and process contain multiple barriers to co-production driven by imbalances in power. On an epistemological level, there are calls to decolonise research by acknowledging, challenging, and minimising Eurocentric research methods that undermine the knowledge and experiences of marginalised

populations (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). This is a moral imperative, particularly when working with populations oppressed by colonial legacies; however, this can be particularly challenging in a Western/Northern academic context, which is characterised by the control of so many core elements of research, such as ethics, funding and other structural expectations (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Researchers may be expected to uphold these traditions whilst navigating the need to release control to others, creating a complex interface between the institution, the researcher, and the researched.

On a practical level, the ways in which research is structured and funded in Northern academia directly limits opportunities for co-production and perpetuates existing power imbalances (Freedman et al., 2024). The systems employed to design, fund, conduct, and disseminate research all prioritise academic and institutional gains over equitable collaboration, which places non-academic partners and vulnerable participants/co-researchers at a disadvantage (Freedman et al., 2024). Knowledge production is typically ‘top down’ with core decisions ‘locked in’ early in order to secure funding, meaning that non-academic partners are often excluded at crucial points of the process (Shuayb & Brun, 2021).

Whilst the challenges are acknowledged, the role of power imbalances is particularly significant when working with disempowered groups, such as refugees. They are amongst the most underserved and unheard people in any research context (Fiske et al., 2019; Røhnebak & Bjerck, 2021) and despite 80% of the world’s refugees living in the Global South, the vast majority of research into their needs is conducted and published by scholars and organisations in the Global North (Mistry, 2024). This places the voice of refugees in the hands of privileged Northern academics, who decide what to study and fund, how to conduct the research, and how/where to disseminate findings (Mistry, 2024).

PICE has the potential to reduce harm and mitigate power imbalances within entrenched systems of inequality (Alexander et al., 2022; Shivakoti & Milner, 2022). However, if the researcher is to avoid perpetuating paternalistic or neo-colonial behaviour, partnerships need to be approached with sensitivity and care (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Networks between parties, particularly in Global North and South collaborations, need to have tangible gains for all parties, addressing the additional resources required by researchers in the South, and fostering genuine, lasting solidarity (Shivakoti & Milner, 2022).

A Disempowered Population

Power is a feature of all research, but arguably, refugees and people facing forced migration are amongst the most disempowered populations being researched (Radl-Karimi, 2020). Their experiences before, during, and after flight are characterised by high levels of exclusion, marginalisation, and passivity, which can be echoed within the research process. Power issues arise from the lack of presence of refugees within research and the influence of polarising narratives.

The decision to undertake co-produced research with refugees requires attention to a number of issues affecting participant involvement for authentic

partnership working, and the creation of safe and democratic research ‘spaces’ to promote discourse (IASFM, 2018). Given the potential safety risks for refugee participants, which can include stigma, physical harm and legal issues such as deportation, safety is likely to be a significant barrier to active participation (Amann & Sleigh, 2021).

Creating a safe space can take many forms, but should include environment, pace, and communication to ensure physical, psychological, and cultural safety (Harley & Wazefadost, 2021). Each participant in each study will have unique safety needs, which may be unexpected, hidden, nuanced and may change during the research process (IASFM, 2018; Pincock & Bakunzi, 2021). Ideally, research should be beneficial to all involved parties, yet it is frequently most beneficial to the researcher (IASFM, 2018). Taking time to identify potential gains, such as skill development and financial remuneration is valuable (Freedman et al., 2024), and time taken to understand the motivating factors of potential participants can be an important part of ensuring the research process is meaningful and not exploitative.

The desire to protect research participants can be unwittingly disempowering, and assumptions about the perceived vulnerability of refugees can further rob them of agency, hindering their attempts to take ownership in studies (Amann & Sleigh, 2021). Giving voice to a disempowered population requires us to enable refugees to shape their own dialogue (Røhnebak & Bjerck, 2021). It can be tempting for researchers to assume that the focus of refugee research should be on narratives of loss, victimhood, and deprivation. Similarly, there is a drive to portray a counter-narrative of resilience and the ‘model minority’ (Radl-Karimi et al., 2020; Røhnebak & Bjerck, 2021). Both of these reductionist narratives can shape the direction of research, influencing the formulation of research questions, analysis, and conclusions. Working in co-production enables a more nuanced and varied message based on real lives, real challenges and real capacity, challenging the labels of vulnerability.

It takes time and sensitivity to create a supportive dialogue, and the skills required are not ubiquitous. The researcher needs to show flexibility (Marzi, 2023), leadership (Lokot & Wake, 2021), and emotional intelligence (Hernando-Jorge et al., 2024). Only when a safe space has been constructed is the potential for collaborative knowledge production truly maximised (Albert et al., 2023). We would recommend adopting what Carl Roger’s defined as the ‘core conditions’ of a safe relationship – *empathy*, *congruence* and *unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1950). By taking time to consider the perspective of the participant, at depth, it becomes easier to see the risks and challenges they face, and responding with empathy to their needs makes them feel held and understood. Congruence is a form of honesty, and is fostered through open communication and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Finally, unconditional regard ensures that all participants are valued and acknowledged as knowledge creators (Harley & Wazefadost, 2023). These three ‘states’ create conditions in which parties feel understood, well informed, and secure; they are treated with dignity and respect, and can trust the people and the process (Pincock & Bakunzi, 2021).

Power and ‘Giving Voice’

If the researcher seeks to widely represent refugees in research, they need to consider the ‘voicelessness’ of many refugees as a significant power imbalance. Refugees are certainly under-represented, and despite being the most affected by policy decisions, they are the least involved in the policy-making process (Mistry, 2024).

Involvement should include consideration of ‘who?’ and ‘when?’. By asking ‘who is not here?’ on a regular basis, the researcher can ensure their work has greater representation, explicitly reporting gaps and acknowledging the implications of absent groups (Cin et al., 2024; Turnhout et al., 2020). Giving voice to refugee communities is complex, in particular because there is no unified refugee voice (Harley & Wazefadost, 2023) as there is enormous diversity of experience between people with different demographics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, or faith. Additionally, refugees may have other differences related specifically to forced migration, such as legal status, living circumstances, and number of years in exile, which can create major differences in need and experience (Røhnebæ & Bjerck, 2021; Shuayb & Brun, 2021). Inviting the ‘right’ voices to enrich research requires the researcher to be transparent about their process and navigate the heterogeneity across refugee groups in order to be genuinely inclusive (Radl-Karimi et al., 2020; Røhnebæ & Bjerck, 2021). Within refugees groups, there are people who are ‘hard to reach’ amongst the ‘hard to reach’, making it difficult to represent those beyond the more vocal and capable (Cin et al., 2024; National Institute for Health Research, 2020). The most ‘available’ people are often sought for multiple studies, meaning that their voices could be amplified at the expense of others, with some people experiencing research fatigue and others being excluded and under-researched (Lokot & Zreik, 2024).

In answer to the question ‘when?’, it is clear that refugees should be present as active partners throughout the research process, not once the key decisions have been made (Cin et al., 2024; Turnhout et al., 2020). Often co-production is ‘retro-fitted’ into the project when it should be *designed* into the project to ensure that involvement is an explicit feature of the study (Lokot & Zreik, 2024). Another feature of giving voice to participants lies in language. Language is not a neutral backdrop to research as languages are often afforded a great deal of power (Squires et al., 2020). Undertaking research across language barriers may be an essential part of the access agenda in line with PICE principles, ensuring that research reflects the widening diversity in our communities; however, non-English speakers are often excluded from participating in research (Egilsson et al., 2022). This can be because researchers do not see the relevance of including them, do not feel skilled enough or do not have the funds to support interpreters, or because limited guidance is available (Nikulina et al., 2019). It is impossible to undertake cross-cultural research without attention to linguistic barriers and willingness to address them (Squires et al., 2020). This injects another layer of complexity, planning and cost for the researcher, without which they are automatically excluding large groups of potential participants. Providing interpreters and translated materials is an obvious start. However, this does not automatically

solve all linguistic problems, and attention should be paid to conceptual equivalence across dialects, continuity across multiple interpreters, interpreter influence, and the loss of subtle meaning (Egilsson et al., 2022). In addition, researchers need to ensure that invitations reach people who do not speak the dominant language, and undertake robust reflexivity to identify and challenge biases (Squires et al., 2020).

Working in co-production is reliant on the ability to understand and be understood, with language as the primary means of conveying subtle and often abstract messages. The principles of co-production, if applied effectively have the potential to enhance understanding and broaden the researchers' awareness of the multiple linguistic influences that shape the messages they receive (Squires et al., 2020). The aim is to create linguistic equality (Nikulina et al., 2019), which requires both openness to the impact of language and willingness to address the challenges it creates. Arguably, the process of managing language and giving voice is best undertaken in collaboration. By making all relationships explicit and being clear about roles and expectations it is possible to minimise power dynamics and develop the participatory roles of interpreters as co-researchers (Egilsson et al., 2022). Like all relationships in co-production, interpreters inhabit a delicate and complex position; they can be powerful, pressured and vulnerable (Radl-Karimi, 2020; Tiselius, 2019). In co-produced studies the role of the interpreter should be developed, with recognition that they are a valuable asset to the research process (Radl-Karimi, 2020).

Power and Partnership

Co-production is a partnership activity, but the process of engagement is complex. Partner organisations can provide essential cultural brokerage, enabling access to a wide range of people who might otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher. However, the precarious, rapidly changing, underfunded nature of refugee services and organisations; coupled with multiple stakeholders, social/political sensitivities, and entrenched power hierarchies, all place the community partners in a vulnerable place from which to negotiate their needs (Freedman et al., 2024; Lokot & Wake, 2021). Whilst they create valuable points of access, they may also select participants/co-researchers that align with their own perspectives or are not wholly representative of the wider community (Lokot & Zreik, 2024). Agencies and organisations will each have their own agendas, which, if not understood and explored, can shape the power dynamics, creating gatekeeper roles that limit engagement (Gibbes & Skop, 2020).

Despite all the potential benefits of co-production with partner agencies or groups the complexities can make a win-win outcome difficult to achieve and somewhat idealised (Gibbes & Skop, 2020). Instead, co-production partnerships require tentative alliances and considerable compromise (Shivakoti & Milner, 2022). It requires the willingness to recognise and disrupt power hierarchies, accept the messiness of the research process and the unpredictability of outcomes. Practical approaches, such as the avoidance of formal titles, the use of diverse methods (such as small group discussions and limiting the reliance on

language through the use of creative approaches), can help to flatten the hierarchy and prioritise input from those without power positions (Lokot & Wake, 2021). In partnerships, it may not always be possible to fully or instantly enact all co-production principles, and researchers should embrace the principles as an ongoing journey rather than a final result (Gibbes & Skop, 2020; Lokot & Wake, 2021).

Partnerships often fail to prioritise the outcomes of the most vulnerable party in order to meet the controls and outcomes favoured by Northern academics (Alexander et al., 2022). In response, Shivakoti and Milner (2022) advocate for a shift from partnerships to supporting localised knowledge production, providing support and funding to institutions and groups in situ, who have contextual knowledge. This is both feasible and beneficial, addressing existing inequalities and broadening perspectives in refugee research (Shivakoti & Milner, 2022).

Recommendations for Co-production in Refugee Research

There are many practical recommendations for conducting co-produced research, including chapters within this text. In addressing co-production within refugee research, we recommend the contributions of the [Global Compact on Refugees \(2024\)](#), [Mistry \(2024\)](#), and [Harley and Wazefadost \(2023\)](#) for their ability to highlight best practices. Our personal recommendations focus on the researcher's development to address the personal and structural challenges ahead through a mixture of humility and courage.

Humility may seem an unexpected suggestion for academic roles that are often steeped in ideas of status and power. Researchers are encouraged to elevate their role and status in research in order to meet the demands of the sector. However, this undermines the heuristic process and thrusts the researcher into the burdensome and impossible role of 'expert' in the lives of others.

The need to be unknowing and inexpert is often uncomfortable, but it is the very essence of discovery, as we must be willing to tolerate the unknown so that we don't only find out what we already know. Phenomenologist Clark Moustakas described this process as akin to the way we locate an empty seat in a dark theatre – the sense of feeling our way and using clues to locate what we need to find (Moustakas, 1990). Disempowering ourselves is a privilege because it is a choice. It is the first step towards solidarity and the acknowledgement of others' expertise and knowledge.

Another personal development that is clearly valued in the literature on co-production lies in positionality and reflexivity. The ability to set aside judgements in research is contentious, but understanding one's influences, biases, and perspectives can be a valuable step. Taking time before, during and after a project supports the development of critical reflection. We would urge you to explore varied ways of engaging in reflexivity, the more creative and exploratory the better. Engaging in any activity designed to turn the attention inward enables the researcher to explore their response to power, enhance their accountability and understand how their identities, preconceptions and motivations may affect the research process and findings (Harley & Wazefadost, 2023; Lenette, 2022).

It takes courage to humble oneself, but here we are asking you to be courageous on behalf of others. We have described many systemic challenges facing the researcher, and having the courage to name the injustices and barriers that impede PICE is crucial. Researchers, especially early career or novice researchers, rarely have real power to effect change, but they have evidence of the value of co-production, and often soft skills to persuade others. Organisations may say ‘no’ as a matter of course, but when information is presented in a compelling form, and with enough voices, they will frequently find a way to make things happen. Use networks, the power of expert peers and the evidence base to convince others of the validity of PICE, and do not shy away from naming approaches as unjust and discriminatory.

Conclusion

Co-production in research with refugees and people experiencing forced migration is a nuanced and complex process, but one with the potential to reduce the power imbalances inherent in refugee research. It does not, however, guarantee a win-win outcome or the reduction of existing inequalities and power hierarchies (Freedman et al., 2024; Gibbes & Skop, 2020). Pincock and Bakunzi (2021) highlight how power relations are often overlooked in co-produced refugee research, masking underlying power imbalances and leading to symbolic or tokenistic involvement (Freedman et al., 2024).

Through the process of preparing this chapter we have identified multiple strands of power related challenges and explored the potential of co-production as a means of addressing them. There are inherent power challenges in being a refugee, being part of an academic structure, working in partnership and undertaking knowledge production. All of these have the potential to derail attempts at co-production, undermining voices, reducing safety and creating disharmony.

Our key messages hinge of the researchers’ abilities in relationship building and reflexivity. Without the capacity to build, manage and maintain respectful, honest and genuinely collaborative connections with partners and co-researchers the research is doomed to fail. Without understanding ones biases, being open to different perspectives and undertaking honest reflexive exploration, the power challenges will remain unaddressed.

The breadth of experiences in the lives of refugees and the socio-political structures in which they live can make it extremely difficult to capture evidence that is meaningful. The researcher bias can cloud their vision, leading the research direction and reducing the opportunity for genuine discovery. Their fears can lead them to employ well-meaning protections against perceived vulnerabilities, which undermine the presence of the co-researching refugee. A desire for control can create a tussle between stakeholders, without recognising that all parties may wish to control the process and achieve their own outcomes.

The answers lie in the foundation principles of co-production: power sharing, inclusion, respect, building and maintaining relationships, and reciprocity (National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2024). The researcher needs to begin by seeing the context from multiple perspectives in order to adopt the role of

informed facilitator (Nikulina et al., 2019). The process of partnership requires an understanding of each member organisation or individuals' motivations, navigating the gap between the needs of participants and partners and the demands of academic structures. By investing in core relationship goals through open, trusting and respectful engagement it becomes possible to create the safe and collaborative spaces needed for all parties to be heard and seen (Albert et al., 2023).

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