

Co-Creating Knowledge

Creative collaborations between researchers, artists, policymakers and practitioners

How can research contribute to address pressing societal challenges, whilst remaining both independent and trustworthy, living up to the highest scientific standards of validity? In this policy brief, we explore multiple ways in which collaboration between researchers, artists, policy makers and practitioners contribute to research that is better equipped to result in societal impact. We provide practical examples, mainly from the research project Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies (ACT).

Brief Points

- Knowledge co-creation refers to an inclusive approach to knowledge production through interaction.
- Understanding knowledge as co-created challenges a binary view on research impact that posits researchers as the creators of knowledge, and society as the passive recipients and users of it.
- A ‘co-creation of knowledge’ approach entails a dialogue between researchers and stakeholders from research design phase to data analysis and communication.
- Knowledge co-creation has the potential of improving the quality of research, policy and practice.

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Research and Societal Impact

Research in the social sciences and humanities is increasingly faced with demands from funders who expect the academic research they financially support to address societal challenges and demonstrate impact. Notwithstanding this trend, it is a stated aim in many national and international contexts that a proportion of research funding remains available for independent, basic research. One meaning of the term ‘academic’ is in fact ‘not of practical relevance; of only theoretical interest’. This latter understanding is reflected in basic research approaches. The main aim of basic research is to create new knowledge or improve theories that enable a better understanding of the world, without considerations as to whether this new knowledge is immediately useful or applicable. In contrast, applied research has the express purpose of responding to and solving specific problems.

The strict separation of basic and applied research operates on the premise that academic knowledge creation is not part of the ‘real world’ and that the ‘real world’ does not influence academic knowledge creation beyond being an object of study. And yet, universities, academic staff and students around the world have played a central role in shaping the societies they are part of. Likewise, political, cultural and funding realities, to name but a few, fundamentally shape academic structures and practices at any given time and place. Acknowledging these deep intersections between academia and society, necessitates asking: how can academic knowledge contribute to addressing societal challenges in better ways?

Common approaches to thinking about research and societal impact are often strictly sequential and based on academics developing research design, carrying out the research and publishing results in academic outlets, after which these results are translated for use by policymakers and practitioners. One major challenge here is that the communication between researchers and these stakeholders comes at such a late stage in the research process. The result is often that policymakers and practitioners find the outputs too ‘academic’: not necessarily useful or applicable in everyday policy and practice. This can be caused by the fact that the research questions being posed were not seen as relevant in the first place, or that the recommendations provided do not take policy realities and practices into account sufficiently, and therefore cannot be implemented.

In the context of strictly applied research, a clear research interest, and often even research question, is defined by the funder. Here, the funder often also has concrete ideas about methods, data collection, and specific outputs to be produced. There may or may not be space for academic outputs, at least not within the funding of a given applied research project. In this model, the independence of research may be challenged or compromised. A preferred model is for researchers who have funding for basic research to also conduct applied research. This allows them to address questions of relevance to funders, but also to critically engage with defining the questions and outputs.

Perspectives on societal transformation

The often implicit assumption that research and societal impact are separate processes, with one following the other, builds on a particular understanding of how transformation occurs. Here, change in society is seen as occurring through deliberate processes of conscious policy development and decision-making by politicians and bureaucrats. The role of researchers is to provide these policymakers with the necessary knowledge to enable shifts in policies, often described in terms of evidence-based policies. Meanwhile, it is widely acknowledged that policy development and implementation does not follow such a neat A-to-B model. Rather, policies are developed in particular political contexts and climates, and implementation leads to intended and unintended outcomes, some of which can be foreseen, and others which cannot.

Simultaneously, it is well known that societal change also occurs ‘from below’, as stakeholders and pressure groups lobby for shifts in policy or simply inspire shifts in everyday practices. This is what Goldfarb terms ‘the politics of small things’, following many other scholars who have analyzed the significance of politics at the micro level. Such work has illustrated the ways in which consequential political life develops in small spaces where dialogue generates political power through human interactions. The politics of small things traces how small shifts can lead to large movements and structural changes.

Seen from this perspective on societal transformation, research relevance may look quite different. The research process includes many interactions between researchers and other stakeholders where exchanges of perspectives, information, knowledge and experience may occur both ways. Here, questions of research relevance and

societal impact take on a new meaning. For, if societal transformation is neither exclusively top-down oriented, nor organized in a neat sequential and policy-driven manner, then interactions between researchers and an array of stakeholders throughout the research process become significant. Whether in the context of recruiting research participants, conducting interviews, attending relevant seminars, or engaging in social media, researchers are interacting with stakeholders, including policy makers, in various ways throughout. Such interactions may inspire new questions, shift perspectives and approaches, encourage action, and in other ways influence both researchers and stakeholders.

Knowledge Co-Creation

Knowledge co-creation (alternatively termed knowledge co-production) refers to an inclusive approach to creating new knowledge through interaction. What the wide range of initiatives described as knowledge co-creation in different fields and by different actors have in common, is that each starts from an interest in how people with a great variety of backgrounds make sense of and produce knowledge. In an interview situation, for example, co-creation would concretely imply that it is not the researcher who collects ‘pure data’ by creating knowledge in the interaction; it is the interaction that produces the knowledge.

Co-creation is a term frequently found within health care, education, business, environmental sciences and development studies, to name but a few. This approach has been explored extensively both in governance models and research methods. One example of how the approach is used in governance is provided by the Dutch government, which has developed an initiative of co-creating within research for sustainable development.¹ It argues that reaching the sustainable development goals requires different stakeholders – including the government, CSOs and the private sector – to work together, with the active involvement of researchers. The approach often emphasizes civic engagement, collaboration across a range of sectors, and power sharing in decision making. Co-creation is at the core of multidisciplinary collaborative research, initiatives for (digital) community engagement, joint innovation and active citizenship.

Our focus here is specifically on its use within research: on the collaborative generation of knowledge by academics working alongside

stakeholders from other sectors. Most often, a key aim for research with a co-creation of knowledge approach is societal relevance and impact. Which new ways of collaboration and communication between stakeholders might be facilitated? And how can this be done in ways that improve the quality of research, policy and practice? We explore some of the ways co-creation approaches impact research at different stages, including the design, data collection and communication of results.

Research questions and design

The development of a research project starts with determining the research questions it will answer and the design it will follow to answer those questions. Research questions on societal challenges are those that have been defined within a community of practice, whereas those of academic interest relate to a theoretical puzzle that stems from academic knowledge. While these are fundamentally different types of questions, they can nevertheless be combined in one project. Co-creation of knowledge at the design stage requires a collaborative process where academics work alongside stakeholders from other sectors to identify an important societal challenge that simultaneously presents an inspiring academic puzzle.

Data collection and analysis

In most research projects, stakeholders of various kinds take part as 'objects' of study. They are interviewed as key informants who share their professional knowledge on the topic under study or as research participants who are asked about their personal experiences and perspectives. The data gathered is then analysed by the researcher using a range of analytical approaches and software. With a co-creation of knowledge approach, these same individuals can come to play a role in both data collection and analysis.

For example, teachers in schools may be asked to give their students an essay assignment on the topic of research (as in the case of a study on national identity in Norway and a study on resettlement dreams in refugee camps in Kenya).² Furthermore, participatory approaches can be used to engage in shared analysis of data or to get input on preliminary data analysis conducted by researchers.

Communication of results

One of the major challenges impacting approaches where researchers collaborate with stakeholders relates to communication of

results. Academic research operates with different time frames and different expected outputs than those that policymakers and practitioners work with. Researchers are trained to write academic journal articles for peers that typically take up to two years from initial submission to actual publication. As such, most publications on research results appear at the final phase of a 3–4-year research project and even after a project has been officially completed. In contrast, for many stakeholders, the pressures on time mean that even reading the summary report from a research project is a challenge. Furthermore, the policy context in which a research project originally was framed can change dramatically by the time academic outputs are produced.

These different time frames prompt the need for a radically different approach to research communication; the approach with a strictly sequential logic of first academic publications, then translation into real world applicability, is inappropriate. Co-creation of knowledge is an accumulative process where preliminary and ongoing results can be shared throughout the course of a project without compromising scientific standards of validity. This could be done, for example, through interactive workshops; knowledge-in-action leaflets; co-authoring or debating op-eds or blogposts; short presentations to practitioners; providing input to training and teaching materials; or collaborating with artists. In turn, the responses to these initial forms of results communication, and the ensuing discussion this may create, can contribute further to the project as part of the data collection and analysis, underlining the processual nature of co-creating knowledge.

From Research Translation to Collaborative Knowledge Production

A knowledge co-creation approach that is implemented in the research design, data collection and communication of results moves away from the traditional perspective of 'translating' research findings for stakeholders, towards an inclusive research approach where knowledge production is a collaborative process. This approach questions the idea that researchers and stakeholders operate in two distinct and isolated arenas: one in which knowledge is produced, and another in which it is acted upon.

The ways in which we know and represent the world [...] are inseparable from the ways in which we choose

to live in it. [...] Scientific knowledge [...] both embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments and institutions" (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 2–3).

Different stakeholders can contribute different types of knowledge and roles in the process of co-creating knowledge. One important distinction is between experiential and professional knowledge. Experiential knowledge is bodily knowledge where people understand and know things because of having lived through it. Professional knowledge is built up through years of studying and systematic practice according to the rules of a particular field. One can, for example, have experiential knowledge about hunger, having lived through it, which is quite different from, though complementary to, professional knowledge about hunger, obtained through studies on the biological, medical, social, political or cultural aspects of food scarcity.

What roles for researchers?

When knowledge is co-created and different stakeholders play different roles, what is the role of the researcher in this process? This question cannot be answered in one way only. A wide range of researchers with different epistemological and methodological approaches have explored knowledge co-creation in a variety of disciplines. Some researchers provide empirical evidence to facilitate knowledge-based debate, while other researchers challenge stakeholders to explore an issue from a new perspective or through a new lens. For example, introducing examples of transnational contributions in media and policy debates in Norway has led to some shifts in discussions of civic participation as solely taking place within the frame of one nation-state. Whatever standards of scientific rigour and critical independence a particular researcher adheres to – based on her or his disciplinary background and research practice – researchers contribute as professionals in systematic knowledge creation.

Examples of 'Co-Creation'

The ACT project (2014–2018) explored how normative ideas of what active citizenship is reflect people's lived experiences in Scandinavia. The project asked three key questions: what inspires active citizenship in Oslo and Copenhagen today? How is a sense of community created through active citizenship practices? And, finally, how is the idea of the 'good citizen'

represented and contested in public debate? ACT was set up in an interdisciplinary way in order to draw both on theoretical insights of political theory and philosophy, as well as empirical approaches from anthropology and geography. It explored co-creation approaches that spanned data collection and analysis, as well as communication of results.

A key issue that emerged in the project was how diversity was being discussed in public debate on active citizenship in Norway, and what impact this debate had on those with a minority background, of one kind or another. In collaboration with the Red Cross and with co-creative practice and learning coach Miram Sandbæk, we developed a participatory workshop and a subsequent interactive conference on this theme. Artists, academics, entrepreneurs and individuals working in the public sector and civil society came together to explore the different stories that are told about diversity in Norway today.

The workshop, which brought together about 20 participants, aimed to explore how stakeholders experienced this theme and their own role in it. The subsequent conference built further on these explorations with a larger group of around 75 participants. The intention was to increase awareness about how different stories about diversity, belonging and participation impact individuals and their agency, and how different organizations and individuals were working with these themes. Through a series of practical workshops that were hosted by practitioners, the conference aimed to create room for alternative stories and actions. To name but a few, the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue offered a community dialogue workshop, Palestinian artists showed film and other artwork, while Cura Salas used roleplay to explore the theme of 'angry young men' in their work with the Norwegian Child Services.

Thus, the conference explored interactive ways of sharing and creating knowledge, inviting

artists, entrepreneurs and a range of organizations to share their visions and practices around storytelling on diversity. Its broader aims were to make different stakeholders known to each other, enabling them to exchange perspectives and tools. At the same time, this exchange not only drew on, but also provided invaluable insights for our research on active citizenship. Exchanges focused on key themes of participation, belonging and public debate on the good citizen.

By creating an arena for a diverse group of people to come together, connect and exchange tools, the conference aimed to increase the participants' ability to contribute to a more inclusive and humane debate about diversity, belonging and participation that affects all residents in Norway, irrespective of age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, migration background, educational background, political standpoint or area of residence.

How to Capture Impact?

The workshop and conference were successful in the sense that there was great interest from artists, policymakers and practitioners, and the exchanges were powerful and inspirational for many of the participants. Still, this example also illustrates a major challenge with approaches to co-creation of knowledge. While the societal relevance of research is relatively easy to establish, its impact is much more difficult to capture. This is an even greater challenge when impact is understood in the way described in this brief: as something that can take effect in a bottom-up, processual way.

We need new ways to trace societal impact that do justice to the unexpected and unpredictable ways in which the process of research can have impact. Throughout the design, data collection and communication phases, research may have impact on stakeholders in a range of ways. Discussions on research questions and ways of conducting research may not only influence the

researcher but also practitioners and policymakers. Being interviewed or taking part in a focus group discussion can have a profound impact on research participants, for example when sharing one's life history for the first time. And taking part in interactive workshops where one learns about the practices and perspectives of other stakeholders can likewise influence the ways in which individuals can and want to participate in society.

Key Questions

To improve the societal relevance and impact of research, new mechanisms need to be developed. This raises the following questions:

- What funding mechanisms stimulate collaboration between researchers and artists, civil society actors, business and government?
- How can national and institutional evaluation mechanisms best capture processual approaches to impact?
- In what ways can experiential and professional knowledges better communicate? ■

Notes

1. Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018) 'Co-creating with research for sustainable development'. Available here: www.government.nl/topics/business-for-development/weblogs/2018/co-creating-with-research-for-sustainable-development
2. See Erdal, Marta Bivand and Strømsø, Mette (2018) 'Children's rights, participatory research and the co-construction of national belonging', *Human Rights Education Review* 1(1): 25–45; and Horst, Cindy (2006) 'Buufis amongst Somalis in Dadaab: the transnational and historical logics behind resettlement dreams', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19(2):143–157.

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THE PROJECT

The project 'Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies' (ACT) studies citizenship norms and practices in Oslo and Copenhagen. ACT is a collaboration between researchers at PRIO, the Aarhus University and the Arctic University of Norway. The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.