Reviewer’s report

Title: Lost in the Shadows: reflections on the dark side of co-production

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Reviewer: Bronwen Merner

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this editorial by Williams et al.

Oliver et al raised some contentious points in their original article and Williams et al have responded well to them.

In the first part of the paper (pp. 1-6), Williams et al offer a sound argument that applying an expansive definition of co-production obscures the power differentials that are more relevant to consumers as partners. They also provide a well-evidenced argument that Oliver et al privilege a technocratic rationale for co-production at the expense of a democratic rationale.

In the second part (pp. 6-10), the authors address each of Oliver et al's costs of co-production. I did become confused at times following the thread of their argument in this part. The authors frame this section as demonstrating "in each case how the critique of co-production would be more accurately and fruitfully aimed at the academic and wider structures that impede it."

But in their responses, I feel their counterarguments move between the following:

* whether the cost exists at all (e.g. "However, applying this logic would suggest co-production is actually relatively inexpensive when compared to international research collaborations and academic 'networking' activities" (p. 6),
* the cost is reflective of co-production "done badly" ("However, here again they allude to poor practice as a cost of co-production" p. 9) or
* the cost is due to academic and wider structures (e.g. "why, for example, is publishing in high impact journals and teaching valued more highly than working directly with fellow citizens to improve society?" p. 8)

I think responses on each of these grounds is reasonable, but perhaps the framing of the section could be expanded to include more than "academic and wider structures"?

Also, I feel uneasy about the following sentence: "Ironically, rather than risk people feeling ignored, the implication appears to be that it might be better not to invite people to speak at all. If the integrity of research rests on exclusion, then we would suggest it does not have much integrity left to lose." My interpretation of Oliver et al is they are making the point that poor practice in co-production (e.g. cherry-picking, contributions not treated transparently) may lead to harm to participants. Perhaps I am misunderstanding the argument of Williams et al but are
they suggesting it is better (and has more integrity) to involve people even when co-production practice is poor and they are at risk of harm than not to involve them at all? Further explanation is required.

I wonder if this middle section could be shortened as I think arguing point by point distracts somewhat from the solid, broader critique the authors make in the first and third sections of the paper.

I think the third section (pp. 10-13) examining the context of "dark side" critiques is sound and the conclusion provides a strong finish.

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