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Co-producing impact-in-process with participatory audio-visual research

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Abstract

Within feminist geography, there is a growing consensus on the need for research to contribute to social change and transformation beyond the academy, and increased emphasis on the co-production of impact. In this paper I critically reflect and report on how I co-produced impact with a participatory audio-visual research project, conducted in collaboration with women in Bogotá and Medellín and researchers and filmmakers based in the UK and Colombia. I focus particularly on co-producing ‘impact-in-process’, which builds participants’ capacities, creates spaces of reciprocal learning and increases participants’ confidence and sense of ownership both during and beyond the research process. Yet, while co-producing impact-in-process benefits research participants and has the potential to contribute to social change and transformation, this form of impact is rarely recognised as such.

KEYWORDS

Colombia, co-production and participatory research, gender, impact, participatory video

1 | INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly necessary for geographers and social scientists to demonstrate the impact of their research beyond the academy, as part of the academic Research Excellence Framework (REF)¹ (Darby, 2017; Evans, 2016; Pain et al., 2011). However, critical and feminist geographers emphasise the shortcomings of linear and metrical conceptualisations of impact. Instead, they argue for a more process-driven and reciprocal approach (Evans, 2016; Pain, 2014) – a form of impact deriving from collaborative relationships, knowledge exchange, capacity-building and learning together, opposing extractive forms of knowledge production (Banks et al., 2017; Darby, 2017; Pain, 2014).

Co-produced research involves an extended process that usually relies heavily on face-to-face interactions between researcher and participants (Marzi, 2021). In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic brought such interactions to a halt. Travel restrictions and social distancing measures limited the ways in which researchers could be present with research participants in one geographical place. However, co-producing knowledge, including co-producing impact, has not become less important: rather, it is necessary to ensure that impact-focused research still holds the potential to create social change and benefit research participants. As a consequence, many researchers have altered their research plans and research designs, often with the help of digital tools (Howlett, 2022), to make up for geographical distance with new forms of digital proximity.

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In this paper, I contribute to ongoing arguments in favour of more feminist, participatory and transformative approaches to the co-production of knowledge and impact (Banks et al., 2017; Evans, 2016; Pain, 2014). I focus particularly on a form of impact we call ‘impact-in-process’ (Marzi & Pain, 2022), which is typically engendered through co-production and participatory research. Impact-in-process aims to shift power, create forms of reciprocal learning and increase participants’ confidence and sense of ownership both *during* the research process and *beyond*. Yet, this form of impact is rarely recognised as such, as it cannot be measured or evidenced easily through reach and significance.

I draw on several collaborative research projects which I have led and conducted since March 2020, including research conducted with researchers and filmmakers based in the UK and Colombia, and most importantly with participant women in Colombia. All these projects explore resistance to urban inequalities and the challenges facing displaced women and those who self-identify as victims of the conflict in Colombia. Having been affected by pandemic travel restrictions myself, I developed an innovative way of co-producing audio-visual research remotely. By using their smartphones, the participants were able to participate in online research workshops and to collect audio-visual data, independently of the geographical presence of the researcher. I was also able to visit Colombia in 2022 and to co-produce knowledge during face-to-face research activities.

I argue that it is essential to co-produce impact-in-process with participants by building their capacities, skills and confidence, and by establishing collective and reciprocal spaces of learning and understanding. However, impact-in-process is difficult to evidence according to REF standards, being often hidden in the process and therefore less recognised as valuable by the academy.

2 | IMPACT-IN-PROCESS AND PARTICIPATORY VIDEO

Research impact is defined as the contribution and changes that research brings to society and the economy beyond academic outcomes (Banks et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018). Despite reference to co-produced research and non-linear impact (Research England, 2019), the REF2021 continues to favour a more neoliberal and metrical conceptualisation of impact outcomes, seeing them as being evidenced by ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ (Chubb & Reed, 2018; Machen, 2019). This form of impact assumes a direct relationship between research process and results to provide ‘a chain of evidence’ (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 4) built on research findings that lead towards social and/or economic change (Banks et al., 2017; Pain, 2014; Rogers et al., 2014).

Feminist geographers committed to co-production and participatory research oppose linear conceptualisations of impact, arguing that impact is produced throughout the research process, and beyond, rather than being able to be traced back to one measurable event (Banks et al., 2017; Marzi & Pain, 2022; Pain, 2014; Pain et al., 2011). In fact, it is rarely possible to identify observable and measurable events that demonstrate impact and at the same time follow the ethos of participatory/co-production research involving iterative cycles of action and reflection (Kendon et al., 2007; Pain, 2014). Instead, Rachel Pain (2014) suggests that we need to conceptualise impact as a dialogical, reciprocal and iterative process that retains the principles of collaboration and social justice. Here, rather than impact ‘striking a blow’ (Pain, 2014, p. 21), it is created through knowledge exchange and mutual learning throughout the whole research process, not just at the end of it. Hence the impact is constantly in process.

Co-produced impact-in-process can be unpredictable, small-scale and local, whereas the REF framework measures impact through changes in and contributions to policy and practice up to national and global levels (Darby, 2017, p. 235; Machen, 2019). Yet, when impact is co-produced independently of the research findings, through participation in research and involvement in a series of smaller transformative events, evidencing impact according to frameworks of the ‘audit culture of the neoliberal academy’ is problematic (Banks et al., 2017; Evans, 2016, p. 214). Practically, impact-in-process can be defined simply as knowledge-sharing, empowerment, capacity- and awareness-building, the development of skills among participants, and iterative dissemination, which are part of the research process and are constantly produced by *doing* the research rather than building on its findings (Pain et al., 2011).

In my research I co-produced impact-in-process through a participatory research design including workshops and participatory video (PV) methodologies. PV offers the potential of what Sara Kendon (2003) calls a ‘feminist practice of looking’, by challenging the researcher’s gaze and the associated power relationships within the research process. Recent critiques of PV, however, question the potential of the methodology to produce the forms of impact intended, by highlighting its limited ability to actually shift power in research processes (Kendon, 2016; Milne, 2016; Mistry et al., 2016; Shaw, 2016). Instead, PV can reproduce forms of epistemological violence. Shannon Walsh (2016), for example, contests claims about the empowering effects of PV by highlighting the disempowering effects of neoliberal assumptions and

theories that underlie PV practices, and Sara Kindon (2016) criticises the way Western film production technology and techniques reproduce the Western researcher's gaze by default.

Nevertheless, done well, PV research holds the potential to co-produce emancipatory knowledge (Wheeler, 2009) by including participants in a collaborative and iterative filming process, during which they reflect on their realities to negotiate and challenge social injustice and communicate their needs, experiences and perspectives (Kindon, 2003). PV potentially enables forms of impact-in-process by raising participants' awareness of issues important to them, increasing their confidence, enabling them to learn from each other and building their capacities. It is also a vehicle for communicating with and influencing decision-makers at a local, national and global level (Milne et al., 2012; Mistry et al., 2016). In the rest of the paper, I explore how and what kind of impact-in-process we were able to co-produce with remote and in-person PV methodologies and workshops.

3 | THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

I draw in this paper on two collaborative research projects I was leading and conducting since the pandemic hit in March 2020 in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, of which one was conducted completely remotely while the other followed a hybrid participatory methodology. The operational research team included two independent Colombian community researchers, one in each city, who would manage the administrative requirements locally and be the first point of contact for participant women. They also co-facilitated online and in-person workshops. Filmmakers, based in Colombia and the UK, would co-develop the audio-visual methodology, conduct the training in filmmaking online, edit the final film according to the women's instructions and co-facilitate the filmmaking workshops. And, most importantly, there were the women participants, who are either displaced women and/or those who self-identify as victims of the Colombian conflict.

Bogotá and Medellín are the two biggest cities in Colombia with large displaced populations as a result of the over 60-year-long armed conflict in the country and continuing violence (Abello-Colak & Pearce, 2015; Zulver, 2022). The women participants live in the south of Bogotá, in Ciudad Bolívar, and Comuna 1, 3, 8 and 13 in the hilly outskirts of Medellín, in areas that are classified as poor neighbourhoods with restricted mobility, and limited access to public services. For example, some of the women would live in houses built out of recycled materials and without access to public drinking water. The majority of participants' neighbourhoods are controlled by armed groups and women have to carefully navigate different forms of risk and violence in their everyday spaces. At the same time, however, women do resist their violent contexts, organise in solidarity and become politically active to build their urban imaginaries (Ortiz, 2022).

Both projects, therefore, started with questions that broadly explored women's gendered right to the city but were open to emergent themes that were of concern to the participants. As is typical for participatory action research (Cahill, 2007a, 2007b), in both projects the women influenced the content of the research and the final film. The themes the women focused on in the end were their resistance to urban inequalities and the challenges they experienced during and beyond the pandemic. The first project and film (*Reinventadas*) discussed the challenges facing the women at the peak of the pandemic and examined how the pandemic became a portal (Roy, 2020) amplifying previously existing as well as newly developed urban inequality, violence and poverty; pushing women to reinvent themselves towards better urban futures. The second project and film (*Volviendo a Vivir*) explores the women's experiences of different forms of violence (Cahill & Pain, 2019; Pain, 2019) in relation to the conflict, their displacement, the process of settling into the city, and the building of their new urban lives. However, rather than focusing on the hardship the women experienced in the past, both films highlight the optimism, resistance and activism of women, and their desire to create better urban futures.

In total we worked across the two projects with over 30 women of low socio-economic status, living in poorer areas of Bogotá and Medellín. The majority of women are heads of household, have caring responsibilities and work in the informal economy. When the pandemic hit, like other researchers, I had to shift my audio-visual participatory research to a remote and online space. In both projects team members met over a period of over 10 months in weekly Zoom workshops, during which we discussed the research and video material in action and reflection cycles typical for participatory action research, trained the women in filmmaking and discussed editing decisions for the final film (for more detail of the remote method, see Marzi, 2021).

Women who participated in the project used their smartphones for filming, for the training and editing activities and to join Zoom workshops. Only a few women had their own computers with an internet connection and/or any technological knowledge beyond how to use their phones for WhatsApp. I facilitated the workshops collaboratively

with the filmmakers and the Colombian researchers. In addition to the remote/online workshops and film material, I draw on face-to-face fieldwork I was able to conduct in January and February 2022 in Medellín and Bogotá. I conducted face-to-face interviews and 2 days of workshops with each group of women from both projects in both cities. Workshops included mapping exercises and discussions with and without the filmed material, on topics of displacement, violence, and resistance and activism to produce emancipatory urban futures. We decided to compensate the women financially. We believe this is ethically important given that the research activities required extensive commitment in terms of time and participation from the women, which could have entailed loss of income.

4 | CO-PRODUCING IMPACT-IN-PROCESS

As noted earlier, it is rarely possible to evidence impact-in-process in line with the audit culture of the REF. Both participatory research projects did produce a tangible end-product as a result of the research process, namely a film. While I could argue that there is a result produced in a linear way that now can be used to measure impact, for example by counting the times the film was screened, how many different audiences watched it or maybe how many other outlets referred to it or its content, the film is not what I count as impact-in-process. Rather the process of *creating* the film engendered different, and difficult to measure, impact-in-process. Therefore, I want to challenge the idea that the impact of my film projects can be measured only by the film, its reach and significance. Below I will highlight some of the impact-in-process both research projects generated.

4.1 | Skill development and capacity building

This project generated several skills and capacities. For example, during in-person workshops the women enhanced their ability to discuss and present on sensitive issues, especially on topics around the Colombian conflict. However, first I would like to focus on the practical skills that were developed by the remote PV methodology. Skill development and technical capacity-building of participants are frequently referenced as positive impact outcomes in PV projects (Kindon, 2009; Milne et al., 2012). Like Mitchell et al. (2016), we had to start by teaching basic technological skills but with the additional challenge of developing and delivering training sessions online. Initially the women struggled to use their smartphones in the new virtual environment they had to manage. They had problems entering the weekly Zoom meetings with their sound and video on and could not always participate fully. Weak internet connections and lack of familiarity with different kinds of apps provided new challenges in addition to being in a pandemic and other challenges in their everyday lives.

For me participating in the project was something good because it allowed me to learn a bit about technology, technological tools, meeting other people online who are part of the process and telling how I lived the pandemic day by day.

(Interview, D)

Watson et al. (2016) argue that when phones are used to film, the absence of the researchers during the filming process enhances peer-to-peer learning and shifts ownership of the process towards the participants. The remote process certainly enabled a form of skill development and capacity-building that the women perceive as extremely valuable beyond the project. The more participants' technological capacities developed, enabling them to lead the PV process, the more they became committed to the project overall. Indeed, the ability to take control of the video process, and to use learnt skills even after the project were important impact-in-process outcomes stated by the women during interviews.

The most important thing is how we can continue to put the gained knowledge into practice in our organisation because we have realised that the technology is a tool for us to continue to raise issues and make them visible and to continue in the co-construction from the academic and from the community [point of view].

(Interview, G)

Therefore, the remote PV project certainly had an impact on women's confidence in relation to technological skills, one that is continually in process, with women continuing to use and enhance these skills. They had not used phones in this

way before and mentioned on several occasions the feeling of accomplishment they had from now being able to join Zoom easily, sending video data and knowing how to film video material.

4.2 | Collective and reciprocal spaces of learning

I think that those videos teach us so much about other territories. Sometimes we get caught up in where we live and there are places that we have no idea they exist ... [Through these videos] we get to know the city and its surroundings. We must not only keep negative things in our minds, we must adopt these beautiful things that we have and those that give us a reason to want to continue, because we as leaders can change that and that what is painful helps us to change this reality.

(Workshop, C)

Like Ruth Evans (2016), we collected a large amount of (visual) material from each woman in order to learn about her experiences in past and present everyday spaces. Many of the videos women shared with the groups would tell their stories of displacement and of the challenges they experienced when settling into their respective cities—something we were able to discuss more deeply in the in-person workshops, at which many of the women met for the first time in the ‘real’ world. In both online and face-to-face research activities they shared their anger, their pain but also their defiance and their hope for change and better urban futures. Moreover, the women did not only share their stories, they also learned from each other, creating and deepening networks of solidarity and activism, where the film becomes a form of testimony. The process of making the film was, therefore, a process of reciprocal learning including spaces for awareness-building, empowerment, and knowledge-sharing. I define all of those as forms of impact-in-process, not measurable but meaningful for the women themselves.

I feel very good about the movie because it was something new for me and I had the opportunity to meet other people who had the same displacement or worse than mine. It was a new teaching and we learned many things and we had the opportunity to share and bring out that pain that we carry inside us.

(Workshop, MA)

Reciprocal learning, however, is not limited to the women participants. As mentioned before, impact is often defined as a one-way, linear process, achieved by building on research outcomes at the end of the process and as a ‘uni-directional knowledge relationship between universities and communities’ (Pain et al., 2011, p. 185). However, if we understand impact as a two-way, reciprocal relationship then this understanding of impact challenges masculinist forms of power/knowledge relations (Pain, 2014).

That means that impact-in-process is also a form of critical and decolonised (un)learning, where the researcher reflects on their positionality. That means reflecting on oneself in relation to the research process and participants, and critically examining the power relations at play from the beginning of the process up to the interpretation and dissemination of the co-produced knowledge (Rodriguez Castro, 2021; Sultana, 2007, 2019).

Therefore, in both research projects it was not only the research participants who would share their experiences and understanding of issues important to them and learn from others. I, and of course other researchers involved in the project as well, would (un)learn from the women. My position, then, as an educated, white, privileged person from the minority world needs to be reflected on in relation to the intersecting inequalities of race, ethnicity, class and gender in the Colombian, and specifically the women’s, context (Rodriguez Castro, 2021). This reflexivity shifted me to a position of listening (Fairey, 2018) and trying to create feminist collaborative research and to co-produce impact-in-process that involved relationships with others and challenged hegemonic power (Pain, 2014). Therefore, rather than being the expert I became the student. We had many moments where women would start by saying ‘No, Sonja, listen. I’m explaining to you what this means’. We also had many moments where hegemonic power was difficult to challenge, especially in online workshops. Women would constantly call us ‘*profe*’ (professor), implying a hierarchy of knowledge, while we would ask them to call us by name or we would answer with ‘Si, senora/doña’ to re-balance power. I am, however, cautious about claims that we were able to sufficiently flatten power hierarchies, especially as a white researcher in a UK higher education context (Ritterbusch, 2019); we did, though, have some success in shifting power, and especially after face-to-face workshops, the women became increasingly confident, seeing themselves as the knowledgeable experts. They also took ownership of the film by organising their own screening events in Colombia.

4.3 | Impact as transformative process: Confidence, ownership and resistance

I have learned not to keep what I feel to myself. I never thought I would be able to express so many emotions with this wonderful team. For me it was very important to have learned from all of you. I feel happy because I was able to capture a little of my life so that people see that we can progress in our lives.

(Workshop, N)

Participatory research to co-produce knowledge, and PV in particular, aim at generating impact in the form of transformation and social change (Kendon et al., 2007). Here the process of producing a film collaboratively opens up spaces for participation, dialogue and mutual learning to create what Freire (1997) calls conscientisation (consciousness-raising) (Banks et al., 2017; Vélez-Torres, 2013). Impact here is process-related and the process itself can be quite messy, negating the idea that impact can be planned and designed before the research process takes place.

Instead, our projects created smaller transformative moments and events, often through learning together, developing new understandings, and inspiring new actions for social change on individual and collective levels. Those forms of impact are not necessarily visible in the research end-product, the film, but they are remarkably meaningful for the women participants, as seen by the quotation above from one of the women who had been displaced in the past, suffered violence before and during settling in Medellín and now struggles with a terminal illness. For her, participating in the project and creating a film that tells part of her story not only generated confidence and pride, but also provided her with the knowledge that even after her death something will be told of her and how she overcame hardship, and gave her the hope someone else would benefit from her story in the future.

My reflection is that dreaming is not enough. You have to make your dreams come true. And in a certain way, many of us have dreamed of being actors or protagonists of some series or novel, without realising that each one of us is the protagonist of our own life.

(Workshop, Y)

The quotations from Y and N, as well as the ones above from MA and C, show how the impact-in-process here becomes a form of confidence-building by enabling them to take ownership of the process and learn from each other. The PV projects, therefore, co-produced knowledge about women's urban inequalities but also became emancipatory and transformative pedagogical processes, generating critical hope (Freire, 1997; Sultana, 2019) that can lead to action, collaboration and behaviour change. Resistance became one of the bywords in both research projects, used by the women either when they were telling us how the hardship of the pandemic had made them reinvent themselves (as shown in *Reinventadas*) or when they described how they resisted the violence and inequalities they experienced and experience still in the city while re-making their urban lives according to their aspirations.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper I contributed to ongoing arguments in favour of more feminist, participatory and transformative approaches to the co-production of knowledge and impact (Banks et al., 2017; Darby, 2017; Evans, 2016; Pain, 2014; Rogers et al., 2014). I have sought to set out an argument for co-producing impact-in-process by demonstrating how we created this form of impact with women participants in Colombia. Here impact-in-process has been generated by building women's capacities, technological skills and confidence, and by establishing collective and reciprocal spaces of learning for both researchers and participants, *during and beyond* the research process.

Influence on international policy, governments and industry is still the priority when it comes to impact outcomes, while impact that benefits communities in the form of capacity-building, knowledge-sharing and confidence-building is the focus of only a minority of research and impact case studies (Evans, 2016).

Yet, this does not make impact-in-process less important. If research impact is defined as the contribution and changes that research brings to society and the economy beyond academic outcomes (Banks et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018), then impact-in-process is a crucial part of this definition. If transformation is what we aim to co-produce with action research then impact-in-process can lead to resistance to the status quo and to solidarity for social change as we have also seen in other international examples (e.g. Cahill, 2007a).

One question, however, remains: how can we evidence impact-in-process in a way that makes it valuable for the audit culture of the academy? In feminist research that means we need to question who has the authority to define what kind of impact ‘counts’ as evidencable and *impact for whom and for what purpose?* The change impact-in-process creates is non-metrical and often not measurable, and it cannot easily become a form of statistics that reflects impact success for the next audit round of research impact. Yet, it is meaningful impact, engendering critical hope (Freire, 1997; Sultana, 2019) which transforms and leads to action, collaboration and behaviour change on an individual and collective level, more local but still just as important, as the examples from my own research have shown here.

Nicole Harding (2020, p. 2) explains that ‘feminist research is produced for the purpose of action against power’. This is why impact-in-process is so important. While numbers and metrics often tend to reproduce hegemonic power relationships, research that co-produces impact-in-process challenges those power relationships, tries to re-define them, to work towards the creative transformation and reciprocal learning much needed in the current times of climate disasters and different forms of constant crises and social upheavals.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The REF is a performance-based system that evaluates the research quality of higher education institutes in the United Kingdom to allocate research funds.

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