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Co-production of social research: strategies for engaged scholarship

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Summary

There are incentives on both sides of the practitioner-academic divide for co-production of research. This paper identifies and evaluates five strategies for achieving more engaged and engaging scholarship. At one end of the spectrum are models involving relatively low levels of involvement by practitioners, for example as the providers of data or passive recipients of research findings. At the other end practitioners play an active role in commissioning, overseeing and learning from studies. Higher levels of engagement should enhance the prospects of utilisation but may risk politicising the research process. So it is important to be clear about the benefits of and barriers to different forms of co-production and to recognise what works best, in which circumstances and for whom.

Introduction

Academics and practitioners[1] inhabit very different worlds. Practitioners grapple with complex social and economic issues on behalf of citizens and service users. Their actions are subject to public scrutiny and their decisions are influenced by a host of factors, often including intense political pressures. By contrast academics enjoy an unusual degree of autonomy and many have no interest in addressing 'real world' problems. Not surprisingly, the two communities therefore often hold contrasting views about what constitutes good research. Most practitioners want studies that provide 'answers' whilst many academics prize theory driven research which has no obvious practical application. There are however incentives for the two communities to engage with each other. Ten years ago the UK Government famously declared that 'what matters is what works' and 'evidence based policy' was all the rage (Nutley et al. 2007). In a widely quoted speech to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) the then Secretary of State for Education, called for 'a revolution in the relationship between government and the social research community'. Research should, he argued 'be at the heart of policy making ….. We need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what type of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective' (Blunkett 2000). A plethora of new initiatives, policy reviews, pilots and pathfinders fuelled increased demand for research to test which approaches worked best (Martin and Sanderson, 1999). The National Audit Office published a study of 'modern policy making' containing cautionary tales of 'policy disasters' which were attributed to failures to take account of the evidence (NAO, 2001). The Treasury established an 'Evidence Based Policy Fund' to increase understanding and sharing of effective interventions, and the Cabinet Office set up the Centre for Management and Policy Studies to 'ensure that policy makers across government have access to the best research, evidence

and international experience'. Meanwhile research councils and charitable trusts adopted an increasingly instrumental view of research, emphasising the need for academics to engage with 'user communities'. The ESRC created the Centre for Evidence Based Policy and the Higher Education Funding Council used external research funding as one of the metrics for judging the performance of academic departments, promising 'Significant additional recognition' for academic departments whose research delivered 'demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life' (HEFC, 2009). There has however been relatively little written about the practical and political problems associated with engaged research and how these might be addressed. This paper therefore offers a contribution to the debate by assessing the strengths, weaknesses and politics of five contrasting approaches to co-production of social research. The next section examines the utilisation crisis and evidence about what determines the level of take up of research evidence. The paper then examines the five models and assesses their implications for academics, practitioners and research funders.

The utilisation crisis

The formidable barriers to engagement between social science researchers and practitioners are well rehearsed. As noted above, they have different priorities and preoccupations, are subject to different sorts of pressures, and work to very different timescales. The result is a clash of cultures which with practitioners apparently reluctant to engage with research (Weick 2001, Van de Ven and Johnson 2006) and researchers often failing to put their knowledge to practical use (Beyer and Trice 1982, Lawler *et al.* 1985, Hodgkinson *et a*l 2001). To quote a former senior Cabinet Office official: 'There is both demand problem and a supply problem'. Many policy makers and practitioners are doubtful of the value to them of social science research. Researchers stand accused of taking too long to come up with conclusions, often pronouncing on important issues long after policy decisions have been made - 'bayoneting the dead' as the former Head of Research and Analysis in a large government department once described it to me. A second frequently heard practitioner complaint is that when they do eventually emerge the results from academic studies are often inconclusive, highlighting the contested and contingent nature of policy outcomes, rather than offering 'clear cut' solutions (Lomas *et al*. 2005). To quote another senior Whitehall official, researchers seem incapable of 'cutting out the caveats'. Thirdly, some academics are accused of bringing their own agendas to studies rather than presenting the evidence in a balanced and objective fashion.

The resulting 'utilisation crisis' has long been recognised in the US where it has been the subject of a great deal of soul searching among social researchers. Thirty years ago Alkin *et al*. observed that:

> 'In the graveyard of ignored or disregarded evaluations rest not only those technically inferior studies which earned their consignment to oblivion; there are also many studies seemingly of high quality which somehow failed to move their audiences to action. These latter, "wasted" evaluations disturb evaluators and decision-makers alike because they draw into question whether the evaluation enterprise is, in fact, working' (1979, p. 13).

The neglect of their work spurred scholars to ask what was really meant by 'utilisation' and what could be done to increase it. Cynics argued that engaging with policy makers was pointless since most were not really interested in objective evidence. Suchman (1967) for example highlighted what he called 'pseudo-evaluations', undertaken for covert, tactical reasons:

- 'Posture evaluations' - commissioned to create the impression of a 'rational' policy making process or because funders insisted on it;
- 'Postponement evaluations' - commissioned in order to delay the need to face up to difficult issues;
- 'Eyewash evaluations' - which deliberately focus on the positive aspects of a policy in order to exaggerate its achievements;
- 'Whitewash evaluations' - which wilfully ignore problems in order to conceal failures; and
- 'Submarine evaluations' - which focus on problem areas in order to sink policies which have fallen out of favour with politicians.

Stufflebeam and Webster (1980) echo these concerns, claiming that research is often 'politically controlled' or an exercise in 'public relations'. Weiss (1997) agrees research is often commissioned by practitioners for tactical reasons: to duck difficult decisions; to defend existing positions or build support among other stakeholders for a predetermined course of action. Nevertheless, she argues that it can increase practitioners' understanding of how interventions operate and over time the 'drip, drip effect' of evidence from a series

of studies may reframe the ways in which they think about social problems and potential solutions.

A third strand of the US literature offers a more upbeat assessment. Michael Quinn Patton attributes low levels of utilisation to inadequacies in the ways in which scholars conduct and present their work. Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) argue that practitioners judge the value of social science research in terms of 'truth tests' (are research findings plausible?) and 'utility tests' (can proposed solutions be implemented without major disruption to existing policies and programmes?), and Soloman and Shortell (1981) conclude that that research has therefore to be timely and focus on the issues which confronting practitioners. Leviton and Hughes (1981) established a link between the perceived relevance and plausibility of research and the level of practitioner involvement in it and Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) therefore argue that producers and users of research need to interact throughout the research process. More recently Van de Ven (2007) makes a similar argument for 'engaged scholarship' which brings draws on inputs from researchers, users, clients, sponsors and practitioners.

Senior British policy makers and academics have echoed these calls from across the Atlantic. As Chancellor, Gordon Brown argued that research needs to provide 'real time data on what is actually happening on the ground ….. that enables the professionals who run public services to use their experience to best effect' (Brown, 2006; see also Cabinet Office, 2008). And Andrew Petttigrew (2001) has suggested that we need 'A wider and deeper form and range of engagement between management researchers and practitioners' which involves 'the co-funding, co-production and co-dissemination of knowledge'. The problem is that co-production comes at a price. At a practical level, engagement between practitioners and researchers is time consuming. Work for government can provide valuable research access and new empirical data but labouring over commissioned reports for practitioners can seem a world away from writing the scholarly articles for learned journals – the benchmark against which academics know their performance will ultimately be judged. And it can be difficult to combine the day to day requirements of teaching and administrative duties with the demands of policy relevant research – days spent in meetings with funders, collecting data from case study sites, and speaking at practitioner conferences. More fundamentally, there is a risk that research will be politicised. The pursuit of 'relevance' can narrow research agendas. The pressure for 'timely' results may encourage rushed work which is lacking in academic rigour. Researchers may even come under pressure to tone down unpalatable findings; their reports could be quoted selectively; and conclusions might be 'spun' for

political purposes. The challenge is then to find ways of co-producing studies in order to enhance the prospects that it will be useful to and used by practitioners whilst minimising the threats to academic freedom and the integrity of the research process.

Co-production in practice

Although the research process is not a linear one, most studies involve clearly a number of identifiable activities such as design, evidence gathering, analysis and dissemination. Each of these can be broken down in to a number of activities. Research design for example may include initiation, scoping, securing funding and deciding on sample sizes, data and methodologies. Evidence gathering involves reviewing existing literature and gathering new data. Analysis involves processing and interpreting the evidence and writing up. Dissemination may include publication and publicising of results (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1

In some cases practitioners are involved in just one or two of these activities. In others they may be fully engaged from inception right through to dissemination. Figure 2 identifies five different types of practitioner engagement with span this spectrum. Type 1 co-production involves practitioners only as informants. Type 2 involves them at the end of the research as recipients of findings. Type 3 research is endorsed by practitioners at the outset. Type 4 is commissioned and overseen by them. And type 5 involves practitioners at every stage in the process. These different modes of co-production involve different kinds of trade-offs. The practitioner as informant or recipient models allow researchers to maintain a high degree of relational distance which has the advantage of safeguarding academic freedom but may mean that findings are not utilised. Conversely, the practitioner as commissioner model improves the chances that a study will have an impact but also increases the risk that it will be politicised.

Insert Figure 2

Type 1: Practitioner as informants

Type 1 researchers make no effort to link their studies to policy agendas. Practitioners have no role funding or design and there is no strategy for dissemination of findings beyond the academic community. But they do engage with practitioners as objects of study or because they are gatekeepers of important data sources. There is little risk of undue politicisation of the type 1 research. Subject to ethical considerations, scholars remain free to investigate any issue that takes their fancy and to report their findings without fear or favour. Unencumbered by practitioners' deadlines, they can take as long as they like and have no need to bother about the practical implications of their findings. However, utilisation will be a hit and miss affair and given the instrumental turn taken by the research councils and higher education funding councils, exponents of this kind of research may find it difficult to attract funding and come under pressure from within their institutions to engage in studies that achieve demonstrable impact.

Type 2: Practitioners as recipients

The second kind of co-produced research involves studies whose findings are disseminated pro-actively to practitioners. Results can be reported in a variety of ways including through press releases, newspaper articles, media interviews, email alerts, websites, summary reports, and presentations to practitioner conferences. Research councils and charitable foundations have played an important role in encouraging researchers to move in this direction. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has a long history of employing journalists to write accessible summaries of the research which it funds and distributes them widely to 'user communities'. In recent years the ESRC has also gone to considerable lengths to publicise the findings of the studies that it funds. It uses a range of events and media to showcase research outputs and actively encourages researchers to engage with the media and user communities through media training events, guidance on effective dissemination and a 'follow on' scheme which pays for researchers to run workshops, seminars and other events designed to facilitate knowledge transfer. Like type 1 co-production, the politics of this form of research are relatively uncomplicated. Practitioners become involved only on the academics' terms. They have no influence over what is studied or when findings are reported. However, whilst dissemination may increase practitioners' awareness of research, the chances that findings will synchronise with current policy agendas are slim and the prospects for direct impact are therefore limited.

Type 3: Practitioners as endorsers

A third form of engagement involves endorsement by practitioners of research priorities, programmes and/or individual studies. Representatives of 'user communities' are consulted about research councils' priorities and the large research programmes which they initiative. (Recent examples include the ESRC's programmes on 'Public Services: Quality, Performance and Delivery', 'World Economy and Finance', and the 'New Dynamics of Ageing'). They are also increasingly involved in endorsing individual studies. This usually involves submitting a letter of support attesting to the usefulness of the proposed research and sometimes a commitment to provide access to key personnel and data. They may also act as reviewers of applications and/or end of award reports.

The extent to which these mechanisms enable practitioners to influence what is funded is debatable. Research councils' strategic objectives have become increasingly closely aligned with the Government's key economic, social and environmental objectives but they are couched in fairly broad terms and it is not therefore very difficult for most applicants to demonstrate some sort of link with their proposed research. Large research programmes usually attract large numbers of applications many of which probably would not have been conceived in the absence of the programme and they do therefore stimulate the supply of research on priority themes. But applications – both to these programmes and those made in 'response mode' - are still appraised by panels consisting of fellow academics and some researchers therefore see practitioner endorsement as a 'box to be ticked' rather than a decisive factor in determining whether their proposal gets funded.

The requirement to demonstrate that a proposed study addresses practitioners' priorities and the knowledge that they may be involved in evaluating an end of award report undoubtedly provides an incentive for engagement and it may well make it more difficult to secure funding which challenges conventional wisdom or has no obvious practical application. However, persuading practitioners to 'buy into' research is not especially difficult since the practitioner has nothing to lose. The level of commitment asked of them is minimal. They are not required to pledge funding from their own budgets or to offer a great deal of their own time. Type 3 co-production is therefore a modest form of engagement which offers a rather neat way of beginning to reconcile some of the tension between safeguarding of academic freedom and increasing utilisation of research. It does help to stimulate dialogue between practitioners and researchers and perhaps encourage scholars to reflect upon and draw out the policy implications of their research for society. It may also

mean that researchers give more thought to dissemination at the outset of a study, rather than tagging this onto the end of a project as an afterthought. And because practitioners are aware of the research from the outset they are more likely to take notice of the findings which emerge. On the downside though, studies of this kind typically take at least two years to complete, by which time both the policy agenda and the practitioners who endorsed them may well have moved on. Utilisation is therefore far from guaranteed.

Type 4: Practitioners as commissioners

Type 4 co-production enables practitioners to exert much greater control. They conceive and initiate studies. Researchers join part way through the process and are selected by practitioners, often through a process of competitive tendering. Researchers are responsible for gathering and analysing evidence but the commissioners can influence the research design and reporting and dissemination are often shared endeavours. Researchers may draft reports and/or presentations but practitioners often make detailed suggestions for revisions. Many government departments and other agencies employ research managers act as go-betweens – interpreting practitioners' needs, commissioning studies, quality assuring the research undertaken by contractors, and summarising and transmitting findings to the key audiences in their organisations and feeding evidence into policy debates, policy statements and other documents.

Type 4 co-production has a number of attractions. It ensures that research is focused on the policy issues of the day and enables practitioners to dictate reporting deadlines and formats which are tailored to their needs. In theory this should significantly enhance the prospects that studies will generate 'useful' findings. However, even the most carefully designed and skilfully managed studies are frequently overtaken by events with the result that their findings seem outdated or irrelevant. The rapid turnover of ministers, senior advisers and research managers within government departments is also a problem. Politicians concerned with making their own mark are often disinterested in on-going studies inherited from their predecessors, and many departments lack 'organisational memory' of relevant evidence from earlier research. The usefulness of some commissioned research is diminished by delays in releasing findings. This is partly the result of lengthy internal clearance processes prior to publication and sometimes due to the defensiveness of practitioners who fear that political enemies may use unfavourable findings against them. Finally, there is of course a significant risk that type 4 research will be politicised and

academic freedom sacrificed on the altar of 'relevance'. Practitioners determine what is studied and what is not studied, and when and how findings are reported. Research specifications often require researchers to use particular methods and conditions of contracts usually require researchers to sign away intellectual copyright, ownership of the data and publication rights. In contrast to type 1, 2 and 3 co-production, which are undertaken largely on the researchers' terms, commissioned research privileges the needs and priorities of practitioners. Whilst this has obvious attractions, it may deprive governments of innovative thinking and independent analysis which might help improve policy in the longer term.

The big players in type 4 research in the UK are the large government spending departments. In 2009/2010 the Department for Children's School and Families had a research budget of £40 million, the Department of Health's Policy Research Programme had a budget of £33 million, and the Scottish Government has an annual research budget of more than £30 million. Much of this funding is devoted to in-house research and analysis (the Home Office for example employs around 400 staff in its Research Development and Statistics Directorate) and a lot of the research which departments outsource is undertaken by consultancy firms and market research companies rather than academics. Nevertheless, government departments constitute a very significant source of research funding for many university based social scientists. This gives them considerable buying power and there is clearly a risk that academic departments which become overly dependent on government funding may feel under pressure to tone down difficult messages for fear of failing to secure future commissions. It is also conceivable that in seeking to win contracts researchers might be tempted to cut corners in order to meet unrealistic timetables or stay within budget. There are however variants of type 4 co-production that may help to guard against these risks.

Rather than being commissioned by a single department or government agency, research has sometimes been commissioned and/or funded by consortia of potential users. In some cases a lead agency provides the budget but invites a wider group of stakeholders to join an advisory group which oversees the research. Alternatively partners may co-fund studies. One of the longest running examples of this approach is the programme of local government research undertaken by Warwick University with funding from subscriptions from a consortium of local authorities. Another example is the Local Authority Research Council Initiative (LARCI), which sponsors research on behalf of the research councils, Department for Communities and Local Government, Audit Commission, the Improvement and

Development Agency, Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association, Local Government Association and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. Joint funding and oversight mechanisms of this kind encourage policy relevant research and can help to make the most of scarce research funding. And it ensures that no one funder is able to dominate the research agenda, thus helping to safeguard the researchers' independence. However, there are significant transactions costs. Researchers may struggle to reconcile the different expectations of a multitude of masters and mistresses, and the need to keep all parties on board sometimes calls for delicate and skilful negotiations - both among the funders and between them and the research team.

A second model involves consortia of researchers undertaking research on behalf of a single client. Some of these collaborations focus on individual research projects. Others involve large programmes of research. The Department for Communities and Local Government for example recently funded a consortium of twelve university research centres and commercial consultancies to work together on a series of related evaluations of local government policy. And the Department of Health funds a 'Public Health Research Consortium' which brings together researchers from eight universities, a survey research agency, a children's charity and a Public Health Observatory to undertake research on interventions designed to tackle health inequalities. Collaborations of this kind offer number of benefits. They give clients access to a range of complementary skills, for example bringing together researchers with expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods. Consortia also mean that researchers have strength in numbers which may enable them to resist inappropriate demands from clients. However, they depend on effective collaboration among researchers drawn from different disciplines and different institutions. Given the resistance of many academic researchers to being 'managed' and the rivalries which exist between universities, the internal politics of such consortia are sometimes problematic.

A third mode of 'type 4 co-production' involves the use of expert panels. The Department for Communities and Local Government for example has four such panels – covering regeneration and planning, local governance, housing, and fire and resilience. Rather than commissioning new research, these draw on the existing expertise of panel members who are commissioned on an ad hoc basis to prepare briefings, papers, analyses, think pieces and syntheses on 'hot topics' which are current interest to practitioners. Some panels also advise the department on its research programmes and peer review research projects. Rather than being managed by the client, the panels are orchestrated by an academic who is designated as the 'lead panel member'. They commissions, manage and quality assure

assignments and administer payments to panel members on behalf of the department. Externalising the commissioning and research management roles in this way simplifies the procurement process, often enabling projects to be turned round within in a matter of days.

A fourth approach to type 4 co-production involves buying in, rather than contracting out, research expertise. An example is the ESRC's 'Placement Fellows Scheme' which funds secondments for social scientists to work in a host organisation on short term projects. More than fifty such placements have been created in UK government departments, the devolved administrations and a variety of other agencies (including health authorities and trusts, the National Audit Office, the Local Government Association, the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and Natural England). The LARCI runs a similar scheme which funds secondments to local authorities.

Type 5: Practitioner-co-researcher

A fifth mode of engagement involves practitioners and researchers working alongside each other at almost all stages. In some cases practitioners take leave of absence from their organisations to work on a specific study. In others honorary researchers participate over an extended period in a series of studies. There are also examples of practitioners who somehow manage to juggle research and full time 'day jobs'. More often though this mode of co-research suits policy officers who have a strong personal interest in research and already possess some formal research training. Co-research can also be attractive to practitioners wanting a 'career break'. And some senior practitioners welcome involvement in research towards the ends of their careers as part of a wider portfolio of expert and advisory roles. Co-researchers often have a great deal to offer and can help to build better understanding and trust on both sides. However, junior staff may find it difficult to take back evidence to their own organisations. This mode of engagement works therefore works best where the co-researcher holds a position of influence in their own organisations and among their peers. Unfortunately, by definition such individuals often have the most demanding jobs and are least likely to be able to spare time for co-research. This mode of research is therefore likely to remain an interesting and useful adjunct to other forms of co-production rather than replacing them.

Conclusions

Co-production of research is here to stay. The reliance of many social scientists on funding from research councils, whose priorities are increasingly aligned with policy and practice, and from large government departments means that there is almost certainly going to be more, rather than less, interaction between researchers and practitioners in future. The good news is that this should enhance the prospects for utilisation. The downside is that it may become more difficult to secure support for studies which question conventional wisdom or have no obvious relevance to immediate policy concerns. The strategies presented in this paper provide a range of examples of different forms of engagement which, in the right settings, can generate productive interactions between researchers and practitioners whilst safeguarding academic freedom. However, none of these models is a panacea. What works best will vary according to context and there is a need to continue to experiment with and to monitor the effectiveness of different forms of co-production. It will also be important that all parties retain realistic expectations of co-produced research. The policy process is invariably complex and contested. Evidence is only one of a number of influences on decisions and social scientists provide just one of a number of different types of evidence. In many cases they will not be able to provide the kinds of evidence which practitioners require, and sometimes rigorous, relevant, timely studies will be swept aside by pressing political considerations. Nevertheless, practitioners need to take research seriously. Funding research is the easy part. Finding ways to apply it is often more difficult.

There is also a role for the higher education funding bodies to play. Rather relying on panels of academics to pass judgement on research impact, it would surely make sense to ask practitioners to rate the relevance and usefulness of research outputs. Increased practitioner involvement not just in co-producing but also in co-assessing research would help to raise practitioners' awareness of the kinds of studies that are available and would send a powerful signal to scholars about the importance of engagement with policy and practice.

For their part researchers need to approach co-production of research with humility and patience. Robust design, careful analysis and skilful engagement strategies do not guarantee utilisation'. As Martens and Roos (2005) note:

> 'We cannot be discouraged if our evidence is not immediately adopted by policy makers. We do, however, need to ensure its

> wide dissemination and its ongoing accessibility for when the issue re-emerges …… Researchers with "back-pocket" mindsets will be able to reintroduce research that stands the tests of time into public or government debates, long after the original evidence was gathered'.

There are rewards associated with engaged scholarship but researchers should not expect quick or easy wins. They need to commit themselves to the 'long haul'.

Note

[1] The term 'practitioners' is employed throughout this paper as a 'catch all' phrase covering policy makers (officials and politicians), practitioners and 'frontline' public servants.

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Figure 1 Key elements of the research process

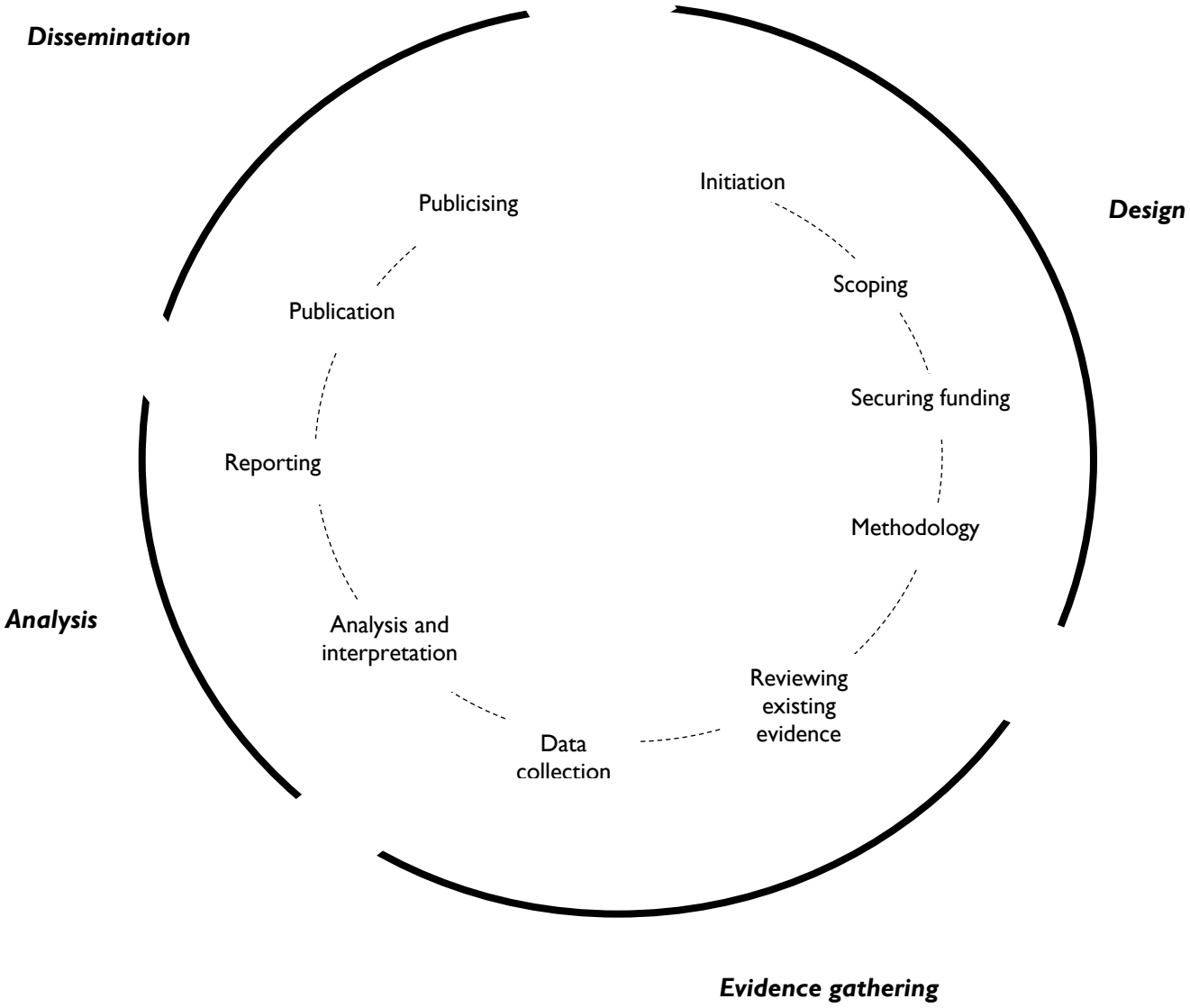
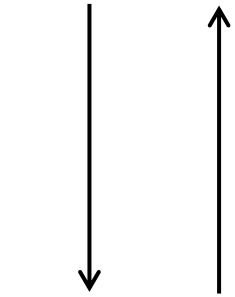


Figure 2 **Modes of co-production of research**



	Design				Evidence gathering		Analysis		Dissemination	
	Initiation	Scoping and specification	Commissioning	Methodology	Literature review	Data gathering	Processing evidence	Reporting	Publication	Learning
Informant						X				
Recipient						X				X
Endorser		X				X				X
Commissioner	X	X	X	X		X			X	X
Co-researcher	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X