

# Are we there yet? Co-production and Black Thrive's journey towards race equity in mental health

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement have mobilised a global community to engage with Black people's experiences of exclusion, detention, violence, and neglect at the hands of the state and within wider society. This awakening has been a welcomed catalyst for change; placing pressure on organisations to demonstrate their commitment to antiracist practice. For some, the drivers for change may be economic, rather than moral. Whatever their personal or organisational position, many are embarking on new territory and seeking a quick fix to address entrenched racist structures and systems. On the surface, co-production presents the opportunity to invite lesser-known voices to take a seat at the table to design solutions for the greater good. This optimism leads many to believe it will narrow the inequalities gap.

Black Thrive Lambeth, a system's change initiative was established in 2014. This cross-sector partnership addresses systemic racism that creates and sustains inequalities for Black African and African-Caribbean communities. Guided by FSG's Collective Impact Model (Kania & Kramer, 2011), the partnership is supported by a Black-led backbone team who provide strategic oversight, mobilise resources, and undertake

a convening role to centre the voices of Black communities in decision-making. Co-production is one of several methodologies used to influence policy, commissioning, the design of services and practice. This chapter draws on our reflections as the backbone team. We illustrate the tensions that arise when applying this methodology, critically explore the extent to which co-production offers the potential for societal transformation, and highlight how a well-intentioned approach may inadvertently marginalise communities.

### **Co-production in the context of Black Thrive**

As a Black-led team, we are consulted on the perspectives of ‘The’ Black community. Our racialised identities add value and enable us to speak with authenticity. However, the concept of community is arbitrary, intersectional, ever evolving, and challenges the notion of a singular Black voice. We grapple with the idea of ‘speaking for’ and are acutely aware of ‘the dangers of ... misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege. [However,] ... speaking with and to can lessen these dangers’ (Alcoff, 1992). Through our work, we seek to create platforms and spaces where Black communities can speak for themselves.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, systems were detached from the realities for Black communities (Public Health England, 2020). Their voices and experiences were undermined by narratives that the pandemic was ‘the great leveller’ (Hartog, 2020). While statutory organisations waited on data to confirm what Black communities already knew, we engaged stakeholders to undertake research. Black people rooted in the community were trained as researchers and participated in the entire research process. We also commissioned an organisation to explore the experiences of people who had no recourse to public funds.

Our research surfaced how our social identities create shared and distinct experiences of the pandemic. This modestly resourced project provided insights into local need, the interventions required for the recovery process and informed decision-making locally and nationally. Interest in

this work was partly due to the statutory system and academic institutions not having the reach into communities. The social capital that comes with our shared identities enabled us to mobilise swiftly and created the foundation for developing connections and building trust. That is not to say that people did not approach our work with caution, but we had access to sections of the community who are ordinarily out of the view of white-led organisations (Addae & Danquah, 2019).

Our employment project supports system change to create environments where Black people living with long-term conditions thrive in work. Research led by the community identified structural barriers to accessing and sustaining ‘good work’ (Amasowomwan et al, 2021). This has informed efforts to transform Human Resources processes within partner organisations. It also surfaced the aspirations within communities to deliver solutions for themselves (Aseru et al, 2020). However, the chronic underinvestment in Black-led organisations presented a barrier. These insights informed the design of a grant-giving programme co-produced with experts by experience. The first round of funding has demonstrated the benefits of devolving decision-making and removed some of the structural barriers that prevent Black-led organisations from accessing resources (Crawford et al, 2020). We hope to provide a template that funders may wish to build upon to distribute resources more equitably.

When Black people are vulnerable or in distress, the statutory system is either slow to act or adopts punitive responses. The disproportionate use of the Mental Health Act (1983) is one example of the restrictive practices imposed on Black bodies. We engaged communities during the review of the Act and shaped legislative reforms, which included the provision of culturally appropriate peer support and advocacy (GOV.UK, 2018). This intervention aims to support people to navigate and challenge racism within mental health systems and improve care quality. We have worked with service users, carers, and other stakeholders to co-produce a service that centres the racialised experience of Black communities. Health and social care systems who wish to design services that narrow the inequalities gap must embody antiracist practice, recognising that it goes beyond an intellectual

process but engages the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our being.

Co-production is often hailed as the gold standard of involvement, many feeling the pressure to engage in elaborate co-production activities. However, co-production need not have a distinct beginning nor end. We have worked with communities over many years; the intensity of their involvement fluctuates depending upon capacity, resources, and the levers available for systems change. It can take time for a solution to come to fruition, but it is crucial to act on what we know and avoid revisiting discussions that have been exhausted. We bring people together to sense-check our collective efforts, surface new knowledge, and refine our approach to distributing power equitably.

**Co-production: the (un)intended art of exclusion, extraction, and exploitation**

[C]o-production risks functioning as a means for academics [facilitators and organisations] to reproduce themselves through a parasitic [...] relationship with the collective labour of communities.

(Bell and Pahl, 2018)

Co-production has become a lucrative industry and within the racial justice space, it comes with many contradictions. A history of systematic marginalisation creates a context where Black people are less likely to occupy positions of power within public services. Co-production's ideologies and practice continue to uphold the status quo. It seems to accept the assumption that today's service user could not be the CEO of tomorrow, and often uncritically accepts that white people produce, and Black people must be brought into the space to share power. It is complicit in maintaining power differentials by 'engaging' Black communities in a ritualistic dance where decisions only *appear* to be shared. In this way, co-production perpetuates the marginalisation of Black communities. A more radical position would be to ensure that groups who

currently do not hold institutional power are equitably and proportionately represented in the organisations responsible for decision-making.

White-led organisations commissioned to co-produce with minoritised communities often have an overwhelmingly white workforce. Consequently, challenges and solutions are framed and understood through the white gaze. Implicitly, this sets the parameters and rules that govern what is achievable, who is 'suitable', or who can bring value to the process. By default, it excludes individuals perceived as 'disruptive' or 'overly negative', through the fear that they will derail the process. Failed attempts to sift out 'undesirable contributors' lead to behaviour management approaches that enforce prescribed norms. It may appear reasonable to engage individuals who enable the process to run smoothly. However, voices may be silenced when facilitators fail to recognise that behaviour perceived as disruptive may be an expression of unprocessed and deep-rooted trauma.

Community co-producers rarely have the privilege of privacy and are invited to share their traumas in public spaces. There is an unspoken expectation for them to share their innermost thoughts and feelings in good faith, without assurances that it will lead to improvements for them, their loved ones, or community. The emotional labour required and the risk that people may be re-traumatised is often underestimated. To collaborate with compassion it is essential to resource support systems, such as therapy, coaching, and/or activities that bring community members joy.

Other ways in which co-production pays lip service to addressing inequities in power, occurs when the causes of inequalities are located within individuals and communities rather than framing challenges within the context of systemic racism and other forms of oppression. Facilitators and system co-producers often fail to interrogate whiteness or create space to explore their prejudices. Neither is it common practice to encourage all participants to delve into their experiences of racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and so forth. Racialised communities may feel unable to express their experiences of oppression and empowerment for fear of making people who do not share their lived experience feel uncomfortable.

Although efforts are made to create safe spaces, they may still be subjected to overt and indirect expressions of racism during the co-production process.

The white gaze may also confine or restrict Black communities' imaginations, where they are discouraged from exploring radical solutions with the potential to disrupt the status quo. These ideas are perceived as too ambitious, unrealistic, too expensive, too political, and so on. There is often little appetite to rock the boat, let alone to capsize it. Rarely is there an opportunity to dismantle something and start again; instead, the focus is on working with what is already there, which raises the question about the extent to which you can create sustainable change if you are building on structurally flawed foundations.

When solutions are generated, community co-producers seldom benefit financially, neither does it improve their status. New knowledge and ideas cannot be achieved without lived experience. It brings 'world-making power' to the process and should not only be acknowledged but remunerated (Bell and Pahl, 2018). There are stark inequities in the value placed on Black and brown labour where racialised communities are rarely recognised financially for their contribution.

The process assumes that Black communities should be satisfied with improvements in policy or service provision. The intellectual property, status, and financial gains from the process remain in the firm grasp of the facilitator(s), organisation, or funder. For too long, dominant systems have misappropriated the ideas and cultures of marginalised communities for profit. Steps should be taken to ensure that the labour of Black communities is remunerated, that they are credited for their work, remain the experts on their experience, and material benefits that arise during or after the co-production process are distributed equitably for the benefit of Black communities.

As a Black-led team, we hold many parallels between our co-production experiences with organisations and those of individuals in the community. We are invited into predominantly white-led spaces to share our expertise, to support them to address racism within their systems. We resist expectations to co-produce palatable recommendations,

but we too are faced with power imbalances in these spaces. Despite the expertise that resides within the team, there is a reluctance to reimburse us for the time we commit. We have also been confronted with situations where people and organisations with an insatiable thirst to be at the forefront of antiracism and mental health, race to document our thinking without crediting the source of their inspiration. Through our personal experience, we are acutely aware of the power differentials and strive to address this in our work.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to maintain a healthy level of cynicism. To consider that co-production's ability to create equitable and just systems may at times be ineffectual. Radical forms of organising that seek to shift power dynamics often cease to be transformative once they have been co-opted into 'standard practice' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Co-production can be a useful tool to support systems change. When done well, it embraces complexity, welcomes uncertainty, creates space to build relationships founded on mutual trust and disrupts power hierarchies. In our work, co-producing with Black communities has led to new insights, ideas, and innovations that deliver benefits for communities and wider society.

This work is hard; at times, it can feel like you are swimming against the tide. The status quo is maintained through existing legal and policy frameworks, and the people who uphold these structures create obstacles that bring transformative work to a standstill. We occupy the space between our community and the system. Our loyalties and allegiance are questioned on both sides. We continue to hold this tension between the need to amplify communities' voices in white-dominated spaces, while being conscious that co-production is an imperfect process and cannot serve as a quick fix to address deeply entrenched systemic issues.

### What needs to be done

Co-production requires appropriate care, resources, infrastructure, time, and deep reflection to get it right. It is essential to:

- Value the expertise within Black communities and resource them to lead the process.
- Create space for reflexive practice, purposefully engaging stakeholders in self-critique, whereby they interrogate whiteness and white privilege as it manifests itself in people's lives, organisations, systems, and the co-production process; take action to address the issues that arise from this work.
- Ensure that the products (eg intellectual property) and benefits (eg financial gains) that emerge from the process are both owned and distributed equitably with communities.
- Situate 'the problem' within broader structures in society and systems of oppression rather than within individuals and communities.
- Involving Black communities in decision-making should not be reserved for the co-production process. Organisations must commit to attracting, developing, and retaining Black people in senior positions within their workforce.

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