Research article

Getting to the heart of the matter: deconstructing the notion of 'co-production' through collaborative autoethnography

Claire Russell[1],* and Helen Charnley[2]

[1]Lived Experience Educator, Redcar, UK
[2]Emeritus Reader, Durham University, UK
*Correspondence: claire@thementalself.com

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Abstract

This article tells a critically reflexive story in two parts. Part 1 focuses on an initiative during the Covid-19 pandemic to grow service user-led involvement in social work education. Part 2 focuses on the production of this article. Using collaborative autoethnography, we share our experiences of the development of an educational resource: 'The Mental Self in Social Work Education and Practice', designed to encourage critical self-reflection in thinking about mental health and distress, recognition of distress in the self and others, and to enhance capacity for self-care and support for colleagues and service users. Envisioning collaborative autoethnography as a form of co-production, we explore themes emerging from our reflections on the development of 'The Mental Self'. Building on current critiques of co-production, a process implying equality, diversity, accessibility and reciprocity, we share our learning about the value of collaborative autoethnography in creating more egalitarian writing partnerships between people with lived experience of accessing services and academics without such experiences. Avoiding any romanticisation of co-production, we identify disruptive influences and those that support more equitable forms of knowledge production that can be used to disturb the superiority of the academy over the knowledges and skills of people accessing social work services.

> **Key messages**
> - Covid-19 offered an unexpected opportunity for co-production in social work education, which led to the creation of spaces with greater power and control for 'service users' as lived experience educators.
>
> - By using collaborative autoethnography, we provide new insights into how relational openness animates the process of co-production as it unfolds slowly and reflexively, disrupting traditional power differentials throughout the research process, from initial ideas to writing for publication.
>
> - This article extends knowledge and understanding of co-production, identifying the relevance of the Capability Approach and its links with epistemic justice to articulate the value of incorporating the embodied experiences of individuals receiving social and health services. It does this in relation to: (1) developing social work education; (2) illustrating the complexities of navigating university structures and practices; and (3) offering a 'communiversity' perspective in writing for publication.

Introduction

> The Confucianist, Desiccated Scholar is one who studies Knowledge for the sake of Knowledge, and who keeps what he learns to himself or to his own small group, writing pompous and pretentious papers that no-one else can understand, rather than working for the enlightenment of others. (Hoff, 1982: 26)

In this article, we shed light on the possibilities and limitations of co-production between academics and people with lived experience as service users in the context of social work education. Sharing power, and respecting each other's knowledges and experiences, co-production is described by Stahlke Wall (2016: 7) as a process of deepening understanding and building knowledge by 'tapping into unique personal experiences to illuminate those small spaces where understanding has not yet reached'. We do this using collaborative autoethnography, a qualitative research method in which researchers work together to collect autobiographical materials, analysing and interpreting data collectively to reach meaningful understandings (Chang et al., 2013: 23–4).

With complementary roles as lived experience educator and academic social work educator, we shared a long-held dream of working co-productively to achieve equitable partnerships and transform restricted forms of 'service-user involvement' in social work education into service user-led involvement. Almost a generation apart in age, we are both White women from middle-class families influenced by values of social justice. Yet our markedly different life experiences contrast long experience of accessing mental health services, restricted access to employment, and ongoing economic precarity, with positive mental health and plentiful creative employment in social work practice and academia.

Contrasting with the widely reported marginalisation of service-user involvement in social work education during the Covid-19 pandemic (Duffy et al., 2022), we took advantage of the necessary move to online learning to strengthen the involvement of people with lived experience of service use. Claire was commissioned to identify the wishes and support needs of lived experience educators contributing to the social work programme. This resulted in the development of creative resources and forms of engagement for the online learning environment. We focus here on 'The Mental Self', a resource designed to support students in recognising and responding to signs of distress in others and themselves. This marked a

subtle shift from involvement in an 'invited space' controlled by academics, to the creation of new spaces with greater service-user control (Gaventa, 2006). This experience fed our desire to share our learning and, inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) 'The danger of a single story', we embarked on a collaborative autoethnographic journey to generate a two-part story of co-production.

Using collaborative autoethnography

> Sometimes the knowledge of the scholar is a bit hard to understand because it doesn't seem to match up with our own experience of things. In other words Knowledge and Experience do not necessarily speak the same language. But isn't the knowledge that comes from experience more valuable than the knowledge that doesn't? (Hoff, 1982: 29)

Reflecting on our respective knowledges and experiences involved a process of critical emotional and intellectual engagement with our own assumptions and processes of learning through slow realisations and epiphanies (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach reduces risks of individual bias, selective memory, logistical challenges and dominance by individuals (Ellis et al., 2011; Tripathi et al., 2022). But, mindful of critiques of autoethnography as an exercise in self-indulgence, lacking in rigour (Winkler, 2018), we faithfully followed the principles of collaborative autoethnography. Working individually and together, we developed clarity about our motivations, situations and standpoints, and our respective sources of privilege, power and oppression. We contributed different but complementary understandings of social injustice as an individual matter experienced by 'the underdog', and a structural matter arising from sociopolitical forces. Further differences emerged as we embarked on writing, notably our familiarity with different forms of literature, and preferred and possible paces of work (Soklaridis et al., 2021). Progress was slow before we invested in (self-funded) writing retreats prioritising self-care to achieve well-being through balancing attention to work, food, mindful exercise, rest and relaxation (Burch and Penman, 2013).

Ethical considerations

Committed to principles of relational ethics – mutual respect, dignity and connectedness (Ellis, 2007) – and carefully considering power relations (Phillips et al., 2022), we saw ourselves as the only identifiable human subjects in this project. But conscious of the inevitability of identifying the institution from which our story unfolds, we obtained ethical approval from Durham University research ethics committee. Guided by Lapadat (2017), we supplemented information about risks and protections for individual participants with reasoned argument about the role of institutional power and its greater effectiveness in protecting institutions than research participants.

Sources of data

Drawing on Chang et al. (2013), we amassed published sources of evidence and argument about service-user involvement and co-production, personal reflections, meeting notes, email and WhatsApp exchanges. This multi-stranded ball of wool often felt overwhelming, but encouraged by scholarship in collaborative autoethnography (Hernandez et al., 2017), we came to celebrate this tangled data in informing our understanding of what is already known, and in revealing different knowledges and different ways of knowing (Beresford and Boxall, 2012).

Analysing data: 'unravelling the ball of wool'

Acting as critical peers, we identified themes with greatest salience, recognising commonalities and contrasts in our understandings. Emotional labour, power, exclusive othering, time, pace and capacity contrasted with trust, allyship and inclusive othering. While Helen categorised these themes as 'necessary

ingredients', 'barriers to be overcome', and 'theoretically informed' aspects of co-production, Claire sketched a more dynamic analysis, seeing co-production as a creative process with elements encouraging 'tenacity' held in tension with 'disruptions'. Our relational approach helped us to develop shared understandings, filling gaps in our individual experiences, and avoiding any negative effects of power imbalances (Ellis and Adams, 2014).

Writing together

Autoethnography opens up spaces for different types of writing: descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive or evocative, analytical-interpretive and imaginative-creative (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). Interweaving these forms of writing, this article is the culmination of shared planning, individual contributions, mutual scrutiny and agreed adjustments; these processes were repeated in responding to feedback from the journal editors and reviewers.

A story of co-production

Part 1: Growing 'service-user involvement': from 'The Mental Self' to 'Cultivating the Mental Self' in social work education and practice

'Service-user involvement', a requirement of UK social work education since 2003, has been widely critiqued as a triumph of hope over experience lacking evidence of sustained changes in practice (Stanley and Webber, 2022), amounting to the appropriation of service users' narratives under the guise of better preparing students for social work practice (Russo and Beresford, 2015; Sapouna, 2021; Voronka and Grant, 2021). But we must remember that these critiques are themselves made in the context of prevailing neoliberal managerialist practices affecting social work practice and education (Morley, 2016), and 'stripping away the things that make us human' (Metcalf, 2017).

 This part of our story is set during the Covid-19 pandemic, 'engendering forced isolation and social distance, economic hardship, fears of contracting a potentially lethal illness, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness' (Polizzi et al., 2020: 59). Reflecting on her experience at that time, Claire wrote:

> Acutely aware of the effects of Covid, I adapted my regular contribution to social work students' learning about mental health and social exclusion, to place greater emphasis on their own well-being as a necessary condition for supporting others. I drew on my own experience of a continuing journey of healing based on the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone and Boyle, 2018), which responds to the limitations of psychiatric diagnoses based on a model of disease. Instead, the framework focuses on what has happened, with what effects, what meaning and how has it been survived. I designed 'The Mental Self' to support and encourage students to engage in critical reflection and self-reflection to develop effective practices of self-care (Pyles, 2018, 2020). Facilitating 'The Mental Self' workshop was underpinned by experience as a Mental Health First Aid instructor member, and familiarity with wider aspects of the social work programme. I'd also been involved as service user consultant to the evaluation team for 'Think Ahead' [a fast-track route to qualification as a mental health social worker in the UK] (Russell and Smith, 2020), and supported a new service user contributor, keen to share with students her experiences of involvement with children's and adults' social services. This set of responsibilities and activities flows easily onto the page, but each one was only possible within an environment with sufficient trust to be able to signal a need for adjustments in support. Academic colleagues fulfilled roles as 'magic feathers', reducing anxiety, building my self-belief and confidence. [Derived from the Disney film, *Dumbo*, 'magic feather' refers to support from others, increasing self-belief and making the seemingly impossible, possible.]

Following positive responses to 'The Mental Self', academic colleagues supported a successful funding bid to the regional teaching partnership to deliver 'The Mental Self in Social Work Education and Practice' to other social work programmes across North East England. In turn, this generated demand to work with newly qualified and more established practitioners, with a focus on 'Cultivating the Mental Self'. This achievement, however, was not an entirely positive experience, as illustrated in the following extract:

> Helen: I remember you feeling overwhelmed by the mountain of evaluation forms and offering to help with analysis needed for the final report by a deadline. By then I had retired and had the time! You were worried about the two or three participants, all from the same institution, who said they hadn't learned anything … (You had written to me: 'Feel like I'm a hermit crab who dared to explore, had a leg bitten off and now needs to stay in shell … Who said resilience can be built by exposing self to wider audience? Me! 🤣😂') … when over 95% of the feedback showed just how valuable the course had been, increasing knowledge and awareness of mental distress in the self and others, increasing resilience, developing skills in self-care and support for peers and service users. There were so many qualitative responses, it feels right to use a couple here, both from social workers in their first year of practice:

> 'I think more than anything it has been about myself, and it has been good to hear from everyone else about the similar struggles and pressures we are all under and maybe don't talk about. Claire's personal experiences were really insightful and brought the training home, I think it helps us inform our practice more hearing about someone's lived experiences' [recently qualified social worker].

> 'I have to be honest and admit that at the time the training took place I thought, oh god, not more training … However, the course was very useful for me on a personal level, but professionally too, as I have been able to discuss mental health more confidently with my clients and colleagues.'

Growing evidence of the positive impact of 'The Mental Self' led to strengthening its relational aspects, developing a 'PowerPoint-free' iteration accompanied by a take-away workbook with reminders for cultivating awareness and self-care. While highly encouraging, these developments do not mark an end to a need for support. Magic feathers, even though 'lighter touch', remain an important resource in acknowledging a need for, and requesting, support – steps that require emotional labour in themselves (Oliver et al., 2019). Nonetheless, Claire has become a magic feather in her own right, enabling others who access services to engage with students as educators, and supporting Helen during the process of producing this article. For example:

> Claire: Hope your day is going well.

> Helen: If 'well' means listening to tales of institutional abuse/corruption on a psychiatric ward – staff applying 'rules' randomly, failing to safeguard etc. Slightly concerned I should be more stressed than I am (not) at exposure to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*-like descriptions this a.m., but have been assured social worker has submitted a safeguarding concern. Cultivating the Mental Self is an invaluable tool for me. Thank you – magic feather yourself! 😊

> Claire: I have had to learn to recognise when I'm over-empathising as it fires up anger which adds to feeling drained and depleted. It's not nothing – to prioritise self-care.

Despite the effectiveness of 'The Mental Self', we end this part of our story with an email message, a sharp reminder of the impact of institutional power as a threat to effective involvement by people with lived experience of service use:

Claire: Seriously thinking of cancelling my workshop because it's just not worth the stress. They now want to set me up as a new employee (with none of the benefits). For the privilege, I'll get paid 20% less. … Tax taken off at source for someone who barely earns £8,000/y. Unbelievable and ironically oppressive. 😭 Their systems that do not apply to me – treat me as if I'm trying to dodge tax – tax that I'd love to pay – if I ever managed to earn enough over the threshold to actually pay any tax … !

Part 2: Co-production in writing

Here we offer new insights into writing co-productively for publication using our respective 'capabilities'. Derived from the Capability Approach (Nussbaum 2000; Sen, 1999), concerned with human development, social justice and human rights, 'capabilities' refer to the freedom to use one's skills and strengths. Commonly represented as entitlements relating to physical, intellectual and social life (Nussbaum, 2007), Fricker (2015) has argued for a further capability – an entitlement to contribute to the bodies of knowledge and understanding that form the basis of deliberation in democratic societies. This acknowledges the importance of knowledges that come from experience in developing theories, policies and practices (Beresford, 2019; Carr and Ryan, 2016). Fricker (2015) argues that unequal opportunities to contribute to knowledge reflect wider societal inequalities, and constitute a form of epistemic injustice whereby those with greater power suppress alternative forms of knowledge by: (1) deliberately excluding particular experiences; (2) inadvertently devaluing particular experiences; and/or (3) ignoring particular experiences that are not fully understood or cannot be articulated in ways that can be widely shared.

Co-production aims to overcome these processes of exclusion in the social work arena by placing equal value on the knowledges and experiences of service users. Trusting relationships, productive tensions, and two-way learning through relational openness, all nurtured through fair remuneration (Knowles et al., 2021), are seen as ways of achieving more by working together than apart (Heaton et al., 2015). However, critics point to a 'dark side' of co-production (Oliver et al., 2019; Steen et al., 2018). Referring to the necessary shifts in power, Crimlisk (2017) suggests that if co-production seems easy, it is likely that 'we are just playing at it'. And in mental health environments where reason is privileged, Rose and Kalathil (2019: 1) argue the 'untenable promise of co-production', as 'the mad' are rendered speechless, and their knowledge is treated as inferior. Addressing these critiques, Williams et al. (2020) distinguish between good and poor practice in co-production, highlighting structural factors that prevent the achievement of genuine co-production between academia and members of marginalised groups.

Current evidence and argument about co-production focus largely on service development and research, with little attention to co-production in the dissemination of knowledge, particularly in writing for publication (Natland, 2021). One exception by Fillingham et al. (2023) stresses the importance of developing close relationships in the writing process, unhurried pace, and freedom of expression to avoid inhibitions resulting from unfamiliarity with academic language. Here, we extend thinking to questions of authorship, in what Gustafson et al. (2019) refer to as 'Writing to transgress'. Conventional academic practices prioritise the 'writer/s' in hierarchies of jointly authored publications (Kara, 2021). Twin volumes addressing the challenges of co-production in the context of Covid-19 (Beresford et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021) attempt to develop non-hierarchical authorship using an alternative practice of alphabetically ordered authorship in one volume, with reverse ordering in the other. A more radical approach to collective authorship can be found in Kinpaisby (2008), envisioning a 'communiversity' characterised by collectivity, solidarity and possibilities of transformation. Reflecting our own understandings and experiences of co-production, authorship reflects Claire's pivotal role as lived experience educator with Helen's complementary role as social work academic within an environment of mutual respect and openness to learning.

This approach has been pivotal in shaping our story of co-production, shown in Figure 1. 'Emotions and emotional labour' featured most prominently, with 'time, pace, capacity' and 'power, insider/outsider

Figure 1. Co-production involving people with lived experience and academics
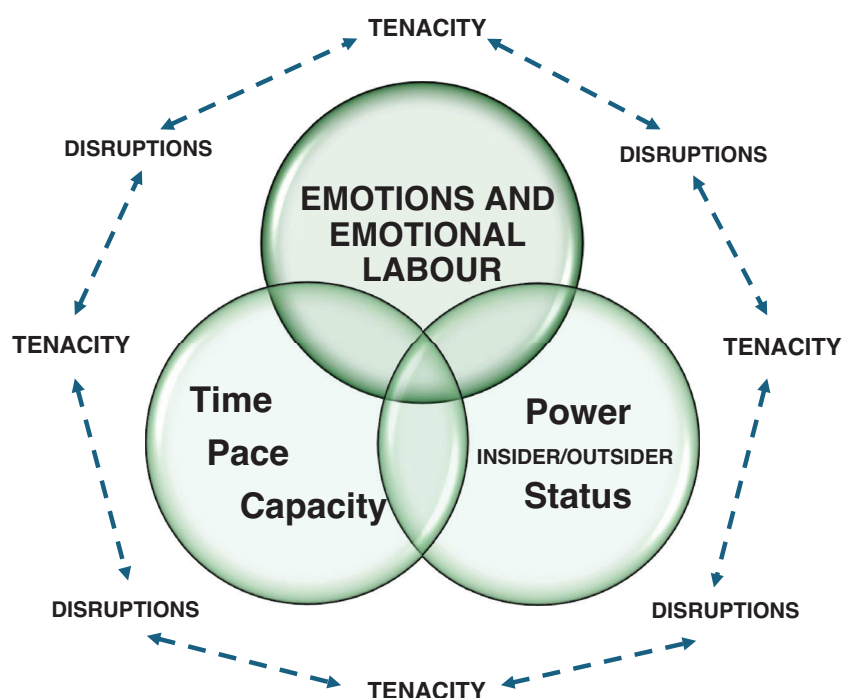
status' serving as key constituents in a process suffused with ever present tensions between disruptions and tenacity. Threats of competing demands, limited availability and exclusive othering were held in check by a trusting relationship based on reciprocity and inclusive othering to bolster our tenacity.

Emotions and emotional labour

This theme ran through the development of 'The Mental Self', and the production of this article. Focusing on the emotional labour of survivors' involvement in mental health research, Faulkner and Thompson (2023: 540) identify a number of culture clashes: 'lack of understanding of challenges embodied by people with little or no experience of work, of ongoing distress, or of simply not fitting into the social norms of the academic workplace'. Building on our commitment to openness in a working relationship suffused with unequal status and power, we acknowledged each other's strengths and shared our vulnerabilities. Worry, fear, frustration, distress, anger and blame all made appearances alongside patience, acceptance, pride, satisfaction and gratitude. Sharing these feelings, we were able to process each challenge we met, finding ways forward and building confidence in our mutual curiosity. An illustration comes from an email exchange after Helen asked Claire if she felt able to document her thoughts about emotional labour:

> Claire: This is probably not what you're after as my little paragraph. That said, it is my first best attempt. What I find difficult is rewording … on the page. I could try again verbally to say what your point is in blue, as I've waffled and gone off track, methinks … Anyways, here it is:
>
> As a lived experienced educator, it is difficult to describe how embodied emotional labour manifests. I often feel I am perpetually putting myself in an (institutional) environment where I am subjected to the same emotional reactions, bodily pain sensations and frustrations of possessing little or no agency, as during decades of severe illness. Only this time I am able to step back, see these patterns for what they are and recognise power differentials at play. I then take great care and time to articulate my feelings in ways that invite curiosity from

those who have a mind to listen without defence. Then I can take my experience and choose whether (or not) to continue to be involved, which I invariably do. The frustration comes from the knowledge that all this effort (as work) is unrecognised and unpaid, while academics are paid and recognised but with no platform or shared space available to reflect on their own embodied experience of the process of involving service users.

Helen: Thanks so much Claire. This is a really powerful paragraph. It is entirely to the point and not off track at all. But, of course, you've got me reflecting about your sentence: 'This is probably not what you're after as my little paragraph'. So:

1)   The upbeat response is, to quote Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) 'Though she be but little she is fierce' – and encourage celebration of fierceness.

2)   Hopefully you're simply asking for reassurance – does it feel scary to put what you really feel on paper? Consider yourself reassured!

3)   The more doubtful response is to check what's going on? This feels like a reminder of the power of the person that puts the words on the page, and I worry that you feel you need to please me. Now we're back to me needing reassurance from you! ☺

Claire: Love 1) from Shakespeare!

2)   probably yes, although 'little' was referring to word count of my (re)wording paragraph, I think primarily, although I also recognise what you're saying.

3)   I'm constantly doubting myself, especially at the moment. Call me Thomas 😄

And, consider yourself reassured 😊

This exchange chimed with Hope et al.'s (2022) study of help-seeking behaviour among hospital patients who sought help from nurses who were 'engaged', but who avoided seeking help from nurses who were 'distracted', 'dismissive', and not experienced as 'listening' – messages that have strong resonance for co-production in research and writing.

The embodiment of emotional labour in co-production

Describing emotional labour as a form of work that seeks to subject employees, their bodies and emotions to strong regulatory, organisational and managerial pressures, Knights and Thanem (2017) argue the importance of researchers reflecting on their embodied emotions, and the emotion work involved in research processes. This brings us to a particularly painful aspect of undertaking this work. Claire's hours of involvement in the preparation of this article, designed originally to demonstrate the possibilities of developing 'service user-led involvement', with potential benefits for institutional reputation, were judged to fall outside institutional boundaries in terms of remuneration, despite government funding to support service users' and carers' involvement in the design and development of social work degree courses. The following exchange reflects our shared frustration:

Helen: I remember you writing to let me know the response from the hierarchy: 'a flat no, as "where would it lead?"', and the 💐 sticker you signed off with. I read this as a sign of indignation and responded: 'Indignation comes from being treated in an undignified way. There are several answers to "where would it lead?"'

Claire: Just re-reading this whole conversation/debate reinforces the issues I'm talking about (and the visceral response I'm re-experiencing right this minute)!! How much time/emotional labour is it reasonable to expect me to put in (the additional time to write all these emails not even acknowledged or taken into account, notwithstanding). Off to lie down in dark room whilst waiting for slow coach pc to restart and feelings of thwart to subside…

I was proud of the way I said they could do with considering the cost of not paying people with experience to write articles. And this is what I wish I'd added: 'sends a clear message, structurally – and goes against the very values you espouse'.

Helen: We can include it (payment for writing) in the article. But you can also send an email to say precisely that.

Claire: No, I don't think I want to send an email. I'll just be myself and try to build relationships. I don't want to fight about money with people I don't know. Definitely write it up in the article though. I'm embracing the thought of becoming an agitator.

Returning to the same concerns later:

Claire: My latest invoice has taken 45 days to be paid and I'm at a total loss as to how to get this. X had said after last month, it couldn't happen again. My ability to navigate systems is undermined by my distress about those systems.

Helen: I am so conscious of the privilege of being formally employed (or later, in receipt of a pension). For me, this stuff is worth including in our critique of co-production – the rhetoric and the reality. Just hope my determination does not = further draining of your energy.

Claire: No – already on the same lines as my thinking. My favourite line at the moment: 'this is definitely going in the article'.

These exchanges speak to the cathartic opportunities offered by collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), and to Bell and Pahl's (2018: 211) argument about the importance of remuneration for non-academic co-producers of research:

If academics bring the cumulative experience of their reading, past research and academic encounters to a project, community co-producers may bring histories of oppression, marginalisation and empowerment, which play out in particular ways. In the context of co-production these experiences must be understood as labour deserving of payment: it is the 'stuff' from which knowledge is produced. Paying for it acknowledges its world-making power; and publicizes (and politicizes) it. It also calls attention to the arbitrary manner in which such labour is remunerated: value is, after all, extracted from it in a number of circumstances other than academic co-production, but it is rarely paid for.

Time, pace, capacity

An interesting challenge throughout this process has been our attempts to respect each other's capacity in terms of health, time and pace of working, and to be continually curious about each other's capacity for thought: practical, imaginative and theoretical (Fricker, 2015). The significance of time first sprang to mind when exchanging thoughts about collaborative autoethnography being associated with learning through slow realizations or epiphanies:

Claire: Love this language and descriptions suggesting time. Reminds me of the value of 'slow social work' (as much or as little as I understand of that term). Durham [University] itself has arguably utilised slow social work principles in supporting part of my development. Wouldn't happen without the relationships and time investment. Relational and iterative.

Helen: Thank you, thank you – love the idea of 'slow social work' – I'll be off to research what's been written about it!! Ah – a great article: 'Slow scholarship for social work: A praxis of resistance and creativity' (Wahab et al., 2022).

Claire: Excellent – YES. We are advocates of the Slow social work movement – I'm an expert at anything Slow! 😉

The following exchanges show our attention to pace in our attempts to maintain momentum while acknowledging the demands on our daily lives, and they remind us of Bozalek's (2020, 2021) articulation of slow social work as foregrounding trust and rendering each other capable:

> Claire: Weren't you going to send me what you've written since [we met]?
>
> Helen: Yes, but only for after your next workshop. My understanding was you needed every available working day in preparing for that. Not so?
>
> Claire: Well, yes, I know. We need to include our frictions … your momentum that I keep thwarting (☹) … my capacity being the size of a thimble
>
> Helen: Thwarted momentum happily reframed as ultra valuable opportunity for reflection 😊

By contrast:

> Claire: At risk of pushing your 'losing momentum disruption' button, can we leave meet up until after July 13th. All my positivity and best intentions to get everything prepared in good time are slipping away into the future, a future that looks increasingly like not enough time, pressure and god knows how it's (next workshop) going to come together without me cracking up. It's just not fun. …. I will pull workshop off (as we both know). I only wish I could somehow develop a better way of making progress, as the 'stick' approach is very painful.
>
> Helen: So sorry the messages and evidence of 'I know I can do this' do little to lessen the pain that fills your space. Oh, for miracle cures. Life is truly unfair.
>
> Claire: A little inspiration from one of my good friends, helping me today. Feeling more positive: https://youtube.com/shorts/HDLj6h2N2LM?feature=share.
>
> Helen: Tenacity – one of our themes!

Later, following a day's writing retreat:

> Helen: I continue learning so much from you … I'm feeling re-energised to move forward with the happy challenge that is our article. I'm so lucky you are keeping my mind stimulated. Feels a bit like puzzle solving. We have the pieces, we know the overall picture, but fitting the pieces together requires careful observation, head scratching, experimentation, rearrangement and slowly the pieces fit together. Thanks for your tenacity!!

And later still:

> Claire: Hi Helen. Wondering if we can change dates. I'm reflecting on what you said about getting it finished – as I have holidays booked, then it (teaching) might be starting to gear up again.
>
> Helen: Just checking in again that you do want to do/complete this and you aren't feeling you have to because of what's already been done. Don't want my saying I'd hoped to try and complete (be ready to submit) by Sept. to put you under unfair pressure.
>
> Claire: No, I do want to complete. A lot of time and effort and commitment, so without doubt on that score. As you know, my energies and capacities do vary, so sometimes best intentions end up having to change. Aim as we mean to go on. 😊

Power, insider/outsider status

Moving on to these themes, we are reminded of the impossibility of separating power and status from emotional labour and challenges associated with time, pace and capacity. Within this project, power and

status have operated at individual and structural levels, linked to our positions inside, outside and on the edge of the academy (Noterman and Pusey, 2012). The following exchange about applying for ethical approval illustrates our conscious efforts to address power at an individual level:

> Claire: I'm so pleased you've taken on responsibility for this 'headache of a form' – which may seem easy to you, having done loads of them before (my assumption). It looks fine to me, from what I can gather. (Did the title seem better to you without the word notion in it? I have: 'Getting to the heart of the matter: deconstructing the notion of co-production through CAE'. I don't mind if you think it's better without – just wanted to mention it). I just liked the way the word notion suggests co-production is just that (a notion) that is often used to obfuscate the truth and implies co-working but really reinforces what the researcher (usually academic background) thinks already or is looking for. So anything that doesn't ally with their 'questions' or 'lines of inquiry' gets forgotten or lost. Power differential maintained. Serves the person being researched? Or serves the agenda of the researcher?

> Helen: Big thank you Claire. I love what I learn every time we have exchanges. I was thinking about simplifying constructions (and ultimately word counts). I am so steeped in this and even think of my 'hacking' ability as a skill!! But that's academia for you. You're quite right – taking out 'the notion' makes a subtle change to the meaning and I agree with your analysis.

At the structural level, the exercise of power was experienced most vividly in the dismissive sweeping aside of a request for modest remuneration for Claire's involvement in writing up this research: 'where would it lead'? Multiple email reminders over more than a year finally resulted in Helen securing an agreed fee for work from another institution, enabling a token payment for Claire. The emotional (and economic) costs involved far outweighed the fee, and resulted in payment of less than £1 per hour. Contrast this with the delight in securing external funding to extend delivery of 'The Mental Self':

> Claire: Yippee! So, it's nice for ME to be able to give back to the SUC [service user and carer] budget for a change 😉

Following a well-received presentation about lived experience to a research group, Claire was invited to present at a symposium on lived experience. Having absorbed messages of 'costing the university', she pitched her fee on the basis of imagined (low) affordability:

> Claire: Just confirmed my ££ request for the workshop at the event after feeling very guilty. Makes me sick to think about what was said about not paying me for [time spent writing] our article. Do practitioners of anti-oppressive practice practise what they preach?

> Helen: It really underlines the limited, restricted institutional view of service user involvement that constitutes the legitimized abuse of power and continuing marginalisation of people with lived experience of service use unless they are appointed to academic posts.

> Claire: On the plus side, working in my own time takes the pressure off, as being paid comes with its own challenges of expectation and time-pressure.

Not concluding but moving forward

> Now scholars can be very useful and necessary, in their own dull and unamusing way. They provide a lot of information. It's just that there is Something More and that Something More is what life is really all about. (Hoff, 1982: 31)

Our two abbreviated stories have helped us to get closer to 'the heart of the matter' of co-production, described by Staniszewska et al. (2022) as a kind, yet incomplete, revolution. Engaging in inclusive othering

and drawing on our respective capabilities, we show how service user involvement in invited spaces might be recast as service user-led involvement in newly created spaces (Gaventa, 2006). Our journey led us to, and through, the wonder-full world of collaborative autoethnography, focusing on lived experience, caring relationships, and a better world, particularly suited to the field of social work (Bochner and Ellis, 2021, 2022). Encouraging 'evocative depictions', and refusing to 'hide insecurities beneath layers of technical language and jargon' (Bochner and Ellis, 2021: 253), autoethnography has helped us to shape our story in ways that value the knowledge that comes from experience (Hoff, 1982).

Emboldened by the clearly articulated legitimacy of collaborative autoethnography as a research method, we have added to the store of knowledge and understanding of co-production, going beyond the cognitive to lay bare its physical and emotional demands. Developing and deepening a working relationship that felt balanced in terms of effort and power, we were able to adjust to each other's pace and respect each other's ways of thinking. And in practising a form of slow research, we have maintained the tension between disruptions that threatened progress and a shared tenacity to bring the project to fruition (Wahab et al., 2022). But this is not the end of the story. We have illuminated the never-ending emotional labour required of people with lived experience of service use to gain full recognition in the academy, despite a supportive mandate. As a vehicle for exercising, embodying, portraying and enacting uncertainty (Bochner and Ellis, 2022), collaborative autoethnography has allowed us to share our experiences of working together as allies to write for publication without resorting to guest, ghost or gift authorship (Kara, 2021). But while it has allowed us to maintain narrative control in sharing the pains and the pleasures of moving towards service user-led involvement in social work education unconstrained by institutional agendas, we continue to be mindful of the greater power of larger collective movements (Beresford and Carr, 2012). We hope that our use of collaborative autoethnography meets MacKinnon's (2009) challenge to social work academics to engage in public discourse with people experiencing marginalisation, and that it will spark ideas to open further avenues for democratising knowledge production through genuine co-production in which professionals in the field of social work education, associated with anti-oppressive practice, are enabled and empowered to practise what they preach.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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