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Intersectionality and co-production in disability and physical activity research; critical reflections on promise, negotiation and transformation

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ABSTRACT

Scholars undertaking intersectional research are called upon to address issues of power, positionality, and difference throughout their research. Equitable and experientially informed co-production complements intersectionality with shared principles that centre marginalised voices and interrogate power dynamics. This article responds to the lack of guidance in integrating these two approaches by exploring our experiences of adopting an intersectional approach to co-production. We critically reflect upon the challenges and opportunities of co-production in our intersectional research into inequalities faced by disabled people in relation to physical activity. In collaboration with the UK's leading organisation for disabled people, Disability Rights UK (DR UK), we created the Moving Intersectionality co-production group that is comprised of disabled people from diverse backgrounds. Reflexive thematic analysis of seven co-production meeting notes, 36 reflective diaries, and nine interviews with co-production partners resulted in the construction of three themes: 1) the paradox of co-production: promise versus reality; 2) negotiating power and conflict in relationship-building; and 3) transformations through shared learning. Taken together, these themes illustrate that intersectional approaches to co-production have the potential to foster equitable relationships for research *if* they are foregrounded in extensive collective reflexivity. Collective reflexivity enabled us to critically evaluate the challenges we experienced in upholding our co-production principles such as navigating how power between co-production partners was shaping our research. To conclude, we call for further research to utilise intersectionality and co-production as complementary approaches to advance the practice of co-production, to reduce social inequalities and to promote social justice.

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Introduction

Despite growing recognition of the importance of physical activity, disabled people continue to face inequalities which prevent them from being physically active. These inequalities are further compounded by other forms of oppression. For example, the Annual Disability and Activity Survey

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revealed that the increased cost of living is disproportionately reducing the physical activity levels and socialisation of disabled women, younger disabled people, ethnically diverse disabled people, and those with several impairments (Activity Alliance, 2024). However, analysing inequalities by taking social categories in isolation from one another (e.g. disability and gender, disability and race, etc.) neglects the interdependent nature of systems of oppression (Rice et al., 2019). Such an approach risks privileging one axis of oppression over others and fails to illuminate how multiple axes of oppression combine and interact. Taking an *intersectional* approach might guard against such risks.

Across academia, including within sport and physical activity, intersectionality has been utilised to better understand how multiple axes of oppression interrelate to create unique systems of inequality (Lim et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2023). Recent intersectional work has examined a wide range of international sports and physical activity contexts (e.g. Dahan et al., 2025; Lambert et al., 2025; Tanweer & McDonough, 2025), Physical Education (Brazier et al., 2025; Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2020), sports coaching (Burgess et al., 2025; Kramers et al., 2025) and para-sport (Munro-Cook & Fullagar, 2025). This has also included work that draws on co-approaches (e.g. Hussain et al., 2023; Pettican et al., 2023), creative methods (e.g. Stride, 2016) and decolonial feminist informed participatory action research (e.g. Nachman et al., 2024) which are pertinent to the scope of this current paper. Intersectionality has the potential to offer a compelling framework for interrogating and interpreting inequalities in physical activity experienced by disabled people facing multiple forms of oppression.

Intersectionality is a theoretical approach with origins in the ideas of Black feminists writing in the 1970s and 1980s. Their discussions of the lived experiences of marginalised women revealed that race, class and gender come together to produce complex forms of oppression that defy one-dimensional analyses (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1977). The term 'intersectionality' itself was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist and legal scholar, as a conceptual alternative to what she termed 'single-axis frameworks' that treat social categories (e.g. race and gender) and relating systems of oppression (e.g. racism and sexism) as discrete objects of analysis (Crenshaw, 1991, 1989). Scholars have since expanded the scope of the theory to explore phenomena at the intersections of different social categories, including disability, in the context of broader socio-political forces, such as colonialism and neoliberalism (Rice et al., 2019). Such intersectional approaches to research offer significant potential for analysing inequalities, how identity categories intersect, how they interact with broader social structures, and how they influence access to opportunities in moves towards social justice (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Lim et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2023).

There is no clear blueprint for conducting intersectional research. Yet there is an imperative for scholars to 'unequivocally orient to issues of power, positionality, and difference throughout their research processes' (Rice et al., 2019, p. 412). Our article reflects upon our own endeavours to take up this imperative in our intersectional research exploring inequalities experienced by disabled people in relation to physical activity. To achieve this, we drew upon the participatory approach of *equitable and experientially informed co-production*. Equitable and experientially informed co-production differs from other types of co-produced research (e.g. Citizens' contribution to public services; Integrated Knowledge Translation [IKT]) as the lived experience and experiential knowledge of relevant communities, citizens, and/or service users is considered *essential* throughout the research process (see Smith et al., 2023 for a discussion on the types of co-production). This type of co-production also complements the strategies proposed by Haynes et al. (2020) for the design, methods, and analysis of intersectional research in several ways.

One of the strategies put forward by Haynes et al. (2020) for an intersectionality methodology is the centring of marginalised people – in their example, Black women – as subjects. Black women, like many other marginalised groups, face what Fricker (2007) terms 'epistemic injustice' in academia, and outside of it: their testimonies, knowledge and ideas are often questioned, disregarded or dismissed. Establishing Black women's voices as legitimate sources of knowledge can help to mitigate the impacts of epistemic injustice, exposing multiple forms of oppression as well as

challenging patterns of invisibilization, scholarly neglect, and misrepresentation. This strategy also insists upon research methods that position scholars to do research *with* Black women rather than *on* them (Haynes et al., 2020). We applied this strategy in our research because disabled people are subject to similar forms of epistemic injustice both within and outside of academia. Equitable and experientially informed co-production attends to this by foregrounding people and communities with relevant lived experience and experiential knowledge throughout the research process. As Smith et al. (2023) contend, this type of co-production seeks to ensure that those who have traditionally been excluded or marginalised in research can meaningfully influence research through equitable partnerships in the co-production process.

Another strategy of intersectionality methodology proposed by Haynes et al. (2020) involves addressing power in the research process. Hill Collins (2000) describes matrices of domination whereby power operates in various domains, including the structural and the interpersonal, to disempower marginalised groups. Here, considering ‘positionality’ – critical evaluation of one’s position in relation to such matrices of domination, and the power afforded to individuals and institutions within them – is paramount for interrogating power dynamics and their effects (Marks et al., 2025). The reflexive question of ‘who-am-I-to-do-this-work?’ (Fine, 2006, p. 90) was especially pertinent for the White non-disabled project lead of this research. A collective positionality statement for the research is offered within the results and discussion section. As Rice et al. (2019, p. 415) explain, ‘many White scholars do not consciously see themselves or their conceptual frameworks as raced or racist; nor do non-disabled scholars often recognise processes of ableism that underpin their investments in certain knowledge systems’. Akin to community engaged-scholarship (e.g. Schinke et al., 2013), grappling with questions of power and domination is equally central to equitable and experientially informed co-produced research. For Smith et al. (2023), establishing equitable partnerships with community and citizen partners is contingent upon critical engagement with social hierarchies and systems of oppression and their various functions and impacts, notably where they serve to marginalise certain groups and forms of knowledge.

Despite strategies for intersectional research and principles underlying co-production, there is little guidance to support academics and practitioners in *how* to conduct co-produced research through an intersectional lens. In what follows, we respond to calls for more reflexive accounts of undertaking co-produced research in sport, exercise and health (Pettican et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). The aim of this paper is to explore our experiences of adopting an intersectional approach to equitable and experientially informed co-production – captured in meeting notes, reflective diaries and interviews – to reflect upon some of the challenges that we have encountered, and how we have navigated them. We are not yet at the end of this journey. This paper itself has been drafted in dialogue as a co-production group, and it, in turn, may bring new challenges, and invite us to search for new solutions. Our aim here is not to provide a recipe for doing ‘intersectional co-production’. Rather, our aim is to stimulate discussion and debate around the various ways in which intersectionality and co-production might complement and inform one another to produce new methodologies and practices for research in sport, physical activity, and beyond.

Theoretical framework

Debates on the nature of intersectionality highlight its flexible potential; it offers a myriad of avenues of understanding identity, power, and oppression (Rice et al., 2019). To provide some structuring principles for this project, Hill Collins and Bilge’s (2020) six core interconnected constructs of intersectionality have been used as an overarching theoretical framework. Specifically, this includes addressing *power, relationality, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice*.

Power is understood to be dynamic and contested, operating in multiple directions (e.g. emancipatory and/or repressive) at different levels of society. Hill Collins (2000) outlined how power operates within a matrix of domination across various domains, including the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Hill Collins (2000, p. 276) states, ‘The structural

domain organises oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience'. Another key concept in Hill Collins's (2000) thought is *relationality* which focuses on the co-constituting nature of different entities challenging categorical thinking to facilitate new ways of seeing. Hill Collins (2019) offers three approaches which together map how relationality can be considered within intersectionality: 1) additive frameworks, 2) articulation, and 3) co-formation. Critically, across each of these three forms of relationality, is the idea that there is an overlap between different concepts or categories – for example, race, sexuality, and gender – rather than each operating as a distinct entity.

Social inequality rests on the notion that oppression is the result of multiple factors and is layered with complex, overlapping power relations. Social inequality and power relations need to be understood as existing within a specific *social context*. Social context can relate to a geographical, political, historical or intellectual context. Conducting intersectional work is necessarily fraught with *complexity* as researchers seek to understand the diverse, multifaceted nature of reality. A key part of this complexity stems from intersectionality offering both a critical praxis and a form of critical inquiry (Crenshaw, 1989). Finally, *social justice* offers a unifying framework for those doing intersectional research and raises questions about the ethics of intersectional research and practice. Applying intersectional frameworks, such as this, to co-production has significant potential and yet remains underexplored in sport and exercise science.

Methodology

Philosophical assumptions

Co-production is an approach utilised across a range of participatory research and conducted through various methods and methodologies (Pettican et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). To explore our experiences of co-production through an intersectional lens, we determined our study was underpinned by ontological relativism, (i.e. assuming multiple and subjective realities), and epistemological constructionism (i.e. assuming knowledge is constructed and subjective). Our co-production group came to understand these philosophical assumptions as borne out in our belief that disabled people's experiences of co-production are so varied and complex that, in academic language, we might say that there is no 'objective' truth when it comes to our experiences. The way that each of us sees co-production will depend upon what we have lived through. Hill Collins (2000) refers to this as a person's unique 'biography' of experience, assembled through daily experiences, values, motivations and emotions. This does not mean that we cannot know things, or reach conclusions, rather that we set out to listen to what everyone had to say and refrained from making generalised assumptions. We do this by looking at what has been discussed in co-production meetings, reflective diaries, and interviews. What we have learnt and continue to explore comes from people's individual lived experiences, the stories we tell, and from our shared experiences as partners of the co-production group.

Creation of the moving intersectionality co-production group

An intersectional approach for addressing inequalities in physical activity for disabled people was identified as a priority by the Moving Social Work (MSW) Co-production Collective. MSW is a co-produced project with disabled people and social workers in partnership with Disability Rights UK (DR UK). The broad aim of MSW is to provide structured training and education for social workers to promote physical activity for disabled people see (Monforte et al., 2023). To recruit disabled people from multiple minority groups, DR UK advertised a call for co-production participants entitled, 'Let's make a difference together!' in their monthly newsletter emailed to subscribers. This call for action outlined the aim of the project, what we meant by co-production, and what participation would

involve. Anyone interested in taking part was invited to email the lead researcher at Durham University and partner at DR UK.

Individual online meetings were held by both the lead researcher and partner at DR UK with all potential co-production participants prior to our first group meeting. These meetings were vital in understanding people's motivation for joining the project and ensuring they had relevant lived experience and/or experiential knowledge. We also asked people if they had any specific needs to support their inclusion in the project. This forethought later became an established co-production principle for our project (see co-production principles below). Through this process we were able to recruit 10 disabled people who varied in age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, and education to the Moving Intersectionality co-production group. These participants are termed 'co-production partners' to reflect our principles of equitable and experientially informed co-production (see below). In line with the broad aims of MSW, social workers will be involved in the latter stages of this project to action *how* inequalities in physical activity can be addressed for disabled people.

Co-production meetings

Co-production meetings took place online to accommodate everyone's preferences (including balancing competing responsibilities around work and reducing screen time). Dates and times of meetings were decided using a poll system. Most people initially indicated that hour long meetings were ideal. However, given that our first one-hour meeting overran by half an hour, we moved to two-hour meetings with a 10-to-15-min break in the middle, every 2 months. Through the meetings, the aim was to collectively establish an approach for a research project that would address questions of physical activity, co-production, intersectionality, and disability. Our first few co-production meetings focused upon getting to know each other, creating our co-production principles, and exploring the process of taking an intersectional approach to co-production. We considered the question 'What methods would help us capture the process of doing this co-produced research?' and discussed what each method would tell us about how effectively we were working together. We decided to utilise reflective diaries and interviews throughout the research project in a process known as collective reflexivity. McGrath et al. (2025) propose that practicing collective reflexivity may help address power differentials, build trust and rapport, and manage expectations in a co-production group.

Adopting a longitudinal integrated methods approach (Williams, 2018), this paper draws upon seven sets of co-production meeting notes, 36 reflective diaries, and nine interviews as research data over the course of 1 year. After receiving ethical approval, all co-production partners consented to use these data sources for the project. In line with our principles of equitable and experientially informed co-production (see principles two and six below), two co-production partners were employed as co-researchers to support data generation and analysis to explore our experiences of intersectional approaches to co-production. These two co-production partners are referred to as co-researchers throughout the manuscript when it is necessary to distinguish their roles within the co-production group.

Establishing our co-production principles

In our first co-production meeting, partners were introduced to the six equitable and experientially informed co-production principles outlined by Smith et al. (2023). The Moving Intersectionality co-production group adapted these six principles to guide the way we worked together. These were: 1) co-production is adequately resourced; 2) power is shared through equitable partnerships which include those with relevant experiential knowledge, expertise, and assets; 3) different knowledge bases and contributions are respected, valued, and blended; 4) relationships are built and maintained based on mutual respect,

dignity, trust, transparency, humility, and relational ethics; 5) diversity is important and supported when agnostic pluralism is practiced; and 6) to practice reciprocity and mutuality (Smith et al., 2023). Our adaptations to these principles included the use of more inclusive and accessible language, as well as specific actions we aimed to take as a group to meet each principle.

Through further discussion and reflection as a group around intersectionality and co-production, we adopted two additional principles that captured the essence of our work to ensure inclusivity, develop supportive relationships, and cultivate safe spaces for discussion. These were as follows: 7) partners' needs are recognised and met; and 8) partners are called in, rather than called out. Calling in refers to offering an invitation to an individual or small group for a private conversation that gently brings attention to words or actions perceived as harmful (Harvard, 2023). This differed from calling out which would involve bringing public or group attention to the harmful words or actions. These two principles were raised by our partner at DR UK in initial meetings with the co-production group as they aligned with DR UK's approach to working with Intersectional Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). It was felt by the group that such principles should underpin work with disabled people and those experiencing multiple forms of oppression. A brief description of each adapted principle, as well as questions to assess whether we were meeting the principle and examples of the principle in action, are included in Table 1.

Reflective diaries

Reflective diaries offered a versatile way for co-production partners to document and reflect on their experience following each co-production group meeting (Izzidien et al., 2024). This was especially important as some co-production partners expressed that they needed time to process questions raised at the meetings but would forget these questions in between meetings. For others, the gap of time between meetings to reflect enabled further recall and interpretation of the meeting discussion. The reflective diaries were shared between the project lead and two co-researchers, which offered a more private space to raise concerns, address issues, and propose topics to be included in future meeting agendas.

The structure of the reflective diaries was co-designed by the co-production group and organised in two parts. Part A served as a framework to ensure co-production principles were met during each meeting in line with our guiding actions (see Table 1) on a simplified scale of Yes/Sometimes/No. Part B comprised open questions about the partner's experience of the meeting, what went well, and what we could do differently. To ensure inclusivity, co-production partners could complete part B, however, they chose (e.g. drawing, writing, singing, rapping, poetry, or other creative responses). Consideration was also given to having an anonymous feedback option to minimise power imbalances. Yet through further discussion, we concluded that we would be able to identify any anonymous feedback through deductive disclosure given the small size of the co-production group. As a compromise, all co-production partners could speak to the project lead or partner at DR UK to raise any issues in confidence.

The diaries were introduced after the second meeting, in month 3 of the project. Co-production partners provided written or verbal reflections, and 36 written reflective diaries were compiled from nine co-production partners following six meetings in the first year of the project. The open questions in Part B of the reflective diaries ranged from 30 to 1109 words. Completion of the reflective diaries was optional for those who were able to attend each co-production group meeting. Any co-production partner unable to attend the group meeting was offered a catch-up conversation with the project lead and/or co-researchers to ensure their ongoing contribution to the project. All co-production partners were compensated for their time completing reflective diaries or in catch-up conversations. Further verbal reflections were captured in regular meetings between the lead researcher and co-researchers throughout the project.

Table 1. Moving intersectionality co-production principles.

Principle from Smith et al. (2023)	Adapted principle	Brief description	Example guiding questions	Practical example(s)
1) Co-production is adequately resourced	1) Partners are fairly compensated for their work	Co-production partners are compensated fairly for time in meetings and other activities such as completing reflective diaries or interviews. A choice between receiving a voucher or financial payment is offered at a rate in line with policies (e.g. DRUK Standardisation compensation for Disabled People's Organisations).	• Have partners been involved in decisions about compensation? • Do partners feel like they have spent more time or energy on the project than they have been compensated for?	Co-production partners compensated for their time in all research activities with a voucher of their choice (e.g. specific supermarket, multi-use). Rate of £30/hour requested and budgeted for.
2) Power is shared through equitable partnerships which include those with relevant experiential knowledge, expertise and assets.	2) Power is shared between partners	Sharing power means partners are involved in making decisions throughout the research and are involved in different parts of the project (e.g. planning, gathering data, analysing data, and writing publications).	• Are the issues being looked at important to partners, or to their communities? • Do partners feel like their contributions have made a difference to the research project?	Co-production group defined key terms (e.g. physical activity, disability, intersectionality) and determined data collection methods. Co-researchers undertook data collection and analysis.
3) Different knowledge bases and contributions are respected, valued, and blended	3) Different kinds of knowledge are valued and included	By actively listening and responding to everyone we can create a space where different kinds of knowledge are valued and included. Partners contributions during meetings, in individual conversations and in reflective diaries are documented.	• Do partners feel like certain kinds of knowledge are more valued than others? • Have we come up with ways of including different kinds of knowledge in the research?	Numerous ways for co-production partners to contribute (e.g. meetings, reflective diaries). All feedback from co-production partners responded to and actioned.
4) Relationships are built and maintained based on mutual respect, dignity, trust, transparency, humility, and relational ethics	4) Relationships are built on mutual respect	Authentic and collaborative relationships between partners are essential. This means treating each other with dignity, being open and transparent with each other and acting ethically towards each other. Building relationships based on these values aims to foster and maintain mutual respect and trust.	• Do partners feel like they are being transparent with others, and that others are being transparent with them? • How would partners describe their relationships with others?	Meeting openers (e.g. What has made you smile this week? Is there anything you would like to share with the group?) to engage group and encourage general conversation to build rapport over time.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Principle from Smith et al. (2023)	Adapted principle	Brief description	Example guiding questions	Practical example(s)
5) Diversity is important and supported when agnostic pluralism is practiced	5) Conflict is unavoidable and can be useful	Conflict is unavoidable when people have different backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions. It can be useful in developing balanced relationships where everyone feels valued and respected and help us understand how our assumptions, power and lived experience influence the research.	• How were differences in opinion dealt with? • Are conflicts or tensions beneficial or harmful to the research, and relationships between partners? In what ways? Why?	We are still navigating how to deal with conflict. When meetings have become tense the lead researcher has followed up with those involved individually to see if any further action is needed.
6) To practice reciprocity and mutuality	6) Everybody benefits from being involved	Everyone should benefit in more than one way from being involved in co-production. This includes sharing knowledge and perspectives, providing training, support, and other opportunities.	• Who benefited from the research, and how? • What did partners get out of this experience?	Two co-production partners employed as co-researchers. References provided for employment, volunteering, and education.
N/A	7) Partners' needs are recognised and met	Individual's different needs must be catered for to ensure partners are able to fully participate in the research. Barriers to accessing or using research spaces, forums, tools, and resources must be removed.	• Do partners feel that they can participate in the research fully? • Do partners feel comfortable saying when their needs are not being recognised or met?	Documentation (e.g. meeting notes, reflective diaries) printed and posted for those without access to IT software. One to one meetings offered at any time.
N/A	8) Partners are 'called in' rather than 'called out'	Partners can potentially cause harm or distress to each other through bias, prejudice or microaggressions. Calling people in using small groups or individual meetings rather than calling out in large groups may create a safe space and encourage people to speak out.	• Have any harmful, offensive, or derogatory words or behaviours been addressed in an appropriate way? • Has this practice created a safe space for people?	We wanted to create a space where people could be educated on mistakes concerning language etc. That said, some co-production partners stated they would call out any blatant discrimination. This principle draws upon the 'Calling In and Calling Out Guide' (Havard, 2023)

Interviews

After an initial series of meetings and establishing the groups' working co-production principles, all co-production partners were invited to take part in an online semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences of being involved in this research. Interviews were carried out by the co-researchers to better facilitate equitable relationships between partners and share power in the research process as outlined in our co-production principles (Smith et al., 2023). The interview guide was piloted by

the co-researchers who first interviewed each other. A further seven online interviews were then conducted in the first 6 to 9 months of the project with the rest of the co-production group, including the lead researcher, each lasting 45–60 min. Nine interviews were undertaken in total as one co-production partner was unable to participate at this stage of the project due to health reasons. The semi-structured interview format and open-ended questions were intended to facilitate rich conversation, and in doing so encourage co-production partners to share their experiences in more depth than was written in reflective diaries and discussed in meetings.

Data analysis

To make sense of our experiences of co-production collected through meetings, reflective diaries and interviews, we drew upon reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA was chosen to analyse data as it was suitable to address our research aims and aligned with our philosophical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The accessibility of RTA also meant that the two co-production partners who were employed as co-researchers were able to partake in analysis with the lead researcher with little prior experience of qualitative research (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). To facilitate their contribution to analysis, they read and discussed key articles with the lead researcher and engaged with the content of the thematic analysis website (www.thematicanalysis.net). Co-researchers had some confidence in RTA following these exercises, but there were lots of questions about the practicality of *doing* RTA and concerns about ‘getting it right’. To address their questions and alleviate their concerns, the lead researcher and two co-researchers undertook the analysis together as described below. Undertaking analysis together was also crucial for ensuring that power was shared during the process, in line with our second co-production principle. This helped prevent the lead researcher from being perceived as having the ‘right’ answers regarding coding or theme construction.

Following guidance from Braun and Clarke (2019) and Trainor and Bundon (2021), the initial phases of RTA involved familiarisation and coding. To begin, we started analysis with the interview transcripts given the depth of data here compared to shorter text segments in reflective diaries and meeting notes. We read the interview transcripts and engaged with the data analytically by making notes of ideas and concepts relating to experiences of co-production. We then took one interview and began inductively coding it together by identifying and labelling segments of data with words that captured the content and/or meaning of the text. Most of our codes at this stage were semantic as they closely captured the content of the comments. The co-researchers then proceeded to code the interviews they had each conducted, before reviewing the transcripts and codes of each other’s interviews. Throughout this stage, the co-researchers and lead researcher met regularly to collectively discuss the analysis and act as ‘critical friends’ to one another (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This reflexive analytic process was not to check that the ‘right’ code was used. Rather, we reflected upon our own interpretation of the data based upon our background (e.g. Degrees in Art and Philosophy) and experience of disability and physical activity.

The next stage of RTA comprised theme development, refinement and naming (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Through this iterative process, we returned to the interview transcripts and codes to generate initial candidate themes that captured patterns across co-production partners’ experiences. We first undertook this task individually and then met as a group to discuss our theme generation and the essence of each theme. Following this reflective exercise, we applied our agreed candidate themes across the dataset. We then reviewed and refined our analysis to ensure that our themes moved beyond descriptive domain summaries. This higher-level analysis ‘moves your analytic narrative beyond simply summarising and describing your themes to providing some kind of commentary on their implications and importance’ (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198). To achieve an integrated methods approach (Williams, 2018), next we coded and themed the meeting

notes and reflective diaries to include in our candidate themes. We then reviewed the whole dataset considering existing literature and theory to construct our final three themes. We ensured each theme had a central organising concept, that there was a clear boundary between other themes, and together themes told a coherent and compelling story regarding doing co-production through an intersectional lens.

Results and discussion

Through the process of RTA, we constructed three discrete but interconnected themes: 1) The paradox of co-production: promise versus reality; 2) Negotiating power and conflict in relationship-building; and 3) Transformations through shared learning. Our interpretation of these themes has been linked to existing literature, our theoretical framework, and our broader understanding of intersectionality and co-production. As the Moving Intersectionality co-production group are also authors of this paper, we have chosen to uphold anonymity as far as possible by including limiting identifying information when presenting research data.

The paradox of co-production: promise versus reality

This theme reflects two contradictions experienced by co-production partners in relation to the aspirational potential of co-production in contrast to the reality of being involved in the research. The first contradiction was between academic leadership and group-led decisions. This was experienced at the outset when discussing the aims of the project. Naturally, everybody in the group had questions about the direction of the project, their own aspirations for the group, what we were collectively aiming to achieve, and the process we would take to get there. Yet, the project lead was hesitant to answer any specific questions about the project design because she felt the co-production group needed to have the opportunity to contribute to each decision regarding the research process:

One of the biggest things was my fear of doing co-production right or wrong and making sure that people had a chance in driving the research project. I felt like I had to make absolutely no decisions. And in those early meetings I was a bit like, well, this is kind of what we want to do, but you're the co-production group. So, you tell me.

The project lead experienced a sense of conflict and struggled to know how to ensure that decisions were made to provide a sense of direction for the group, whilst minimising any oppressive or hierarchical relationships of power that may ensue if she directed the approach more clearly. This concern was amplified by the intersectional focus of the research which necessitates greater attention to and disruption of hierarchical power dynamics (Hill Collins, 2000). By conceptualising decision-making as a means of sharing power between partners in the co-production group (Smith et al., 2023), she was overly concerned with how to reach decisions. This was informed by Hill Collins's (2000) understanding of oppressive relationships of power, particularly within the hegemonic and interpersonal domains. The project lead sought to follow an equitable research process, attentive to the core principle of social justice, and address the conventional neglect of marginalised voices in the research process. Whilst well intentioned, this resulted in a perceived lack of leadership and created some confusion among the group about the purpose of the project. One partner of the co-production group explained:

The first half [of the project] I had no clue what was going on ... in the beginning parts, when it was evolving. And I think that's potentially a drawback of co- production ... I prefer a sense of direction because I get stressed when I don't know where we are going ... I want to contribute, but at the same time, I don't know what's going on and I don't want to just be talking just for the sake of it.

Another partner questioned whether her response to the initial lack of structure and feeling out of control in the co-production group stemmed from her own experience of loss and trauma:

Maybe for me, there is a little bit of trying to get control, clawing back to the person I was. I think there's been a bit of loss. There's been a lot of trauma ... maybe there's a fight to place myself ... To regain some of my identity that I felt I might have lost through this injury.

This individual's past experiences of trauma, disability and gender, form parts of their biography which they uniquely bring to the co-production group. Each person's biography influences relationships of power, particularly within the interpersonal domain (Hill Collins, 2000). Our co-production principles sought to enhance the positive benefits of being involved in the research process rather than perpetuating or reinforcing any past trauma. This resulted in a caring and compassionate approach but intensified the complexity of negotiation that was required to overcome the contradiction of decision making within the co-production group. To overcome these challenges, the project lead used partners' knowledge and experience shared in meetings and reflections to inform decision making. Partners reflected positively upon this approach with one person commenting on feeling '*empowered*' to contribute to decision making. The project lead has also been transparent about their role in the decision making. Here it was necessary to balance the co-production group's expectations of our research, with the logistical limitations of the project as it operates within a specific social context (e.g. funding and budget constraints etc.).

The second contradiction lay between partners' hopes for the project and their scepticism regarding its potential to create meaningful change. Aspirations for the project were closely tied to their individual and interpersonal reasons for taking part in the co-production. All partners particularly related to two of Hill Collins and Bilge's (2020) core principles of intersectionality: social inequality and social justice. On an individual level, hopes related to tackling personal barriers to physical activity that were largely overlooked and misunderstood (e.g. the sensory overload experienced by neurodivergent people when exercising to music in commercial gyms). On a collective level, aspirations of the project heavily focused on social transformation by resisting systems of oppression and their effects. This aligned with partners' backgrounds in disability advocacy. All co-production partners described different modes of activism they undertook in transforming discourses, policies, and structures that oppress disabled people. They discussed how they brought these values and intentions into their work with the co-production group, with one partner stating:

I'd like to see that we take into account the moral injury of excluding disabled people ... I think that is something that people don't really like or want to talk about. That being excluded or being seen as less able to me is a moral injury. And psychologically, that's a very debilitating frame of being to be in.

Whilst partners felt strongly about their intentions to challenge power dynamics and their aspirations for the project's potential to disrupt systems of oppression, hopes that the project would meet these aspirations were often accompanied by scepticism. For some partners of the co-production group, their scepticism was founded on negative perceptions of academia due to a lack of genuine collaboration with disabled people. Scepticism also arose from experiences of discrimination in broader society despite advances in anti-discrimination law. As another partner described:

It's a big issue ... to make people feel included but you've got to accommodate as much as you possibly can. And if you can't, then you really need to know why ... I always think the Disability Discrimination Act [now the Equality Act 2010] is a good example of this. It's 30 years old now and how many shops that I can't get into in my wheelchair? It hasn't altered much in that time. Legislation is there, but there's no appetite to back it up.

Hill Collins's (2000) matrix of domination can aid in interpreting scepticism of this kind. Legislative and political relationships of power are deep-rooted and operate across the structural and disciplinary domains of power. Enacting resistance or opposition across these interlocking domains is very challenging. This is particularly the case in the structural domain, where change tends to require a complete transformation of societal systems, which is rarely possible for individuals or groups. Across the four interlocking domains, Hill Collins's (2000) understanding of power demonstrates how multi-level power relations create a web of interrelated policy, practice, law, surveillance, ideas and beliefs that impose and reproduce societal norms. In spite of this, co-production does have the

potential to be impactful and result in concrete action and social transformation (Smith & McGannon, 2023). Co-produced research responding to the needs and priorities of research partners and their communities, and aligning with social justice goals, is more likely to make a significant and wide-reaching difference. Through partnership with DR UK, other disability and physical activity charities and relevant social work organisations, we are fostering change in line with the broader aims of MSW. MSW is already embedded in the Government Disability Strategy (2021) as well as the Department of Health and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity (2023–2027).

Negotiating power and conflict in relationship building

Our second theme encapsulates two challenges we faced in establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships as we developed our co-production group. The first challenge was navigating the power of academic voices within the meeting space. The initial call for co-production partners attracted many people who were formally educated to a high level (with three partners having completed their PhD). Partners who did not share this background but had a wealth of experiential knowledge expressed initial feelings of being overwhelmed, intimidated, and finding it hard to vocalise their opinions in the group setting. This had a negative impact on their confidence despite the centrality of addressing power dynamics within intersectional approaches and the researchers' efforts to reassure the group that everyone's opinion was equally valued. Following these revelations, co-production partners were invited to individual conversations with the project lead to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and how it could be resolved. This helped them build a sense of confidence in their own opinion and feeling that their experience and knowledge was valuable. We also utilised breakout rooms following a request to ensure more voices could be heard in each meeting. One partner described how their initial sense of intimidation had changed:

I was overwhelmed with . . . the people with strong academic backgrounds. It was quite intimidating. And I was too worried that I might say something wrong or, you know, come across as stupid . . . This has evolved through one-to-ones with [the project lead]. I definitely feel less intimidated. I don't have to compete with people at all or try and be on their level, I just need to say how things are for me.

To navigate this tension, in subsequent co-production meetings we began by underscoring the importance of intersectionality and reminding everyone to reflect upon their positionality and the power they have when they speak. As part of this process, we developed the following positionality statement:

We come together as a group of researchers, activists, community members, and practitioners, whose lives are shaped by different intersections of privilege and oppression. We represent a range of identities, with varied disability, race, age, gender, class, sexuality, and professional identities. We acknowledge that some of us sometimes benefit from institutional power, economic stability, and additional forms of systemic privilege, while at other times some are navigating the daily realities of marginalisation and precarity. We recognise that uneven power dynamics are structural and cannot be erased through collaboration but rather require ongoing negotiation, reflexivity, and accountability. We understand this co-production process as political and intellectual and have focused on developing a space where care and intellectual thought can coexist. This positionality statement is not a fixed description of who we are, but a collective commitment to how we work together: reflexively, relationally and with attention to the multi-directional flow of power. This statement will evolve as the process unfolds, and our understandings shift.

This statement is situated within the historical development of intersectionality, drawing on the landmark document "The Combahee River Collective (1977) which is widely regarded as a powerful and intersectional expression of collective positionality in an activist context. Rather than stating their positionality, they performed positionality in action. We asked the co-production group to think about our co-production principles of sharing power, valuing different kinds of knowledge, and reciprocity (Smith et al., 2023). We explained that if people do not recognise how their social context, experiences, and identities give their voices more power, we risk silencing and excluding people and reproducing epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007; Haynes et al., 2020; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020), the very

inequalities we sought to challenge through intersectional approaches to co-production. Questions the group were asked to reflect upon included: Do we make sure that the language that we use is accessible to everybody? Do we invite other people to respond, and, perhaps more importantly, to disagree with us? Do we make space for them to do so? Do we actively listen and take on board what they say? Cultivating self-awareness of power and positionality, in particular in comparison with other contexts of partners' lives enabled them to reflect more deeply on their own epistemic power. As one partner explained:

Thinking about my position . . . there's a lot of discrimination, being a Black and disabled man, but understanding that I'm actually in a position of power when I'm in these settings as well, as being a Black academic, because . . . being an academic and having qualifications is a form of power. Which I don't always realise that in my other settings, but in these settings it's quite clear because we have people that are not academics.

Adopting intersectional perspectives enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the flow of power and identity in these moments. For this individual, at times his identity as a Black disabled man who faces racism and ableism was at times more salient than his identity as an academic, creating a sense of disempowerment. Within the co-production group, however, his identity as an academic was more prominent, as was his sense of holding power. This demonstrates the dynamic and changeable nature of identity (Nash, 2011).

The second challenge we faced in building relationships was our ability to navigate conflict within the group. Our co-production principles state that conflict is unavoidable and can be useful in developing balanced relationships where people feel valued and respected. Whilst this was the case for some partners, others felt there was an ongoing lack of trust and confidence in the group. This was evidenced by one partner in her description of our group dynamic:

We're all being rightly careful to say things which we feel are intellectually challenging yet without being unintentionally offensive. I think if we had that social bond, we'd be a little bit more relaxed about saying stuff without thinking about it so carefully first . . . I don't feel yet that we will be comfortable in revealing our innermost thoughts or things that move beyond the bound of social politeness.

It was unsurprising that the group felt it was challenging to '*move beyond the boundaries of social politeness*' as each partner was approaching the co-production process from a very different social context and were not known to each other beforehand. Some partners found the online nature of the group meetings and having different people attend various meetings based on their availability (due to caring responsibilities, work, health, etc.) placed further barriers on inter-group connections. As Black feminist and theorist Audre Lorde (1984) argued, acknowledging the barriers to connection and the differences between individuals is key to intersectional work.

Despite our desire to facilitate a productive tension and open communication that might accommodate diverse beliefs and points of view, partners noted that we were not creating a safe enough space to deal with conflict. This was exemplified by another partner who described how she felt unsure about how to deal with conflict:

Based on my role and also my nature, I tend to want to be very protective of people . . . if it feels like it's edging towards something that could be harmful, that I find quite challenging because it's hard for me to interpret, you know, 'Is this something I should cut off now? Should I give this person the benefit of the doubt?' I'm not walking on eggshells but there's a sense of being slightly on edge, because you don't want anyone to be harmed in these exercises and they can be really harmful.

Tensions around conflict may be due to partners' having previous experiences where conflict caused harm. Many partners worried about causing offence to others, a worry that was compounded by our principle of calling people in. This is not how conflict is described or understood in the co-production principles proposed by Smith et al. (2023). As this project continues to unfold, we are grappling with distinguishing between our principle of calling people in to reduce harm and distress (e.g. dealing with micro-aggressions), and our principle for dealing with conflict and tension (e.g. differences of opinion). Ongoing, open, compassionate, safe, and transparent conversations continue to help us understand how

to navigate the line between conflict and harm to maximise the transformative potential of co-production.

Transformations through shared learning

Our final theme centred on transformations partners experienced through their engagement in co-production and peer-to-peer learning within the group. Partners recounted a range of learning moments, spoke of improved confidence following group meetings, and felt a renewed sense of purpose as they sought to contribute to society in a meaningful way through this co-produced project. Other transformations involved more tangible or practical skills, such as networking, and improved transferable skills. This has included writing skills, as described by one participant who is currently working towards an academic qualification,

I think the way I think about things in my essays is very different. It's, there's been like a fundamental shift in terms of how I approach my essays. Because of this group ... I think that's why I've been able to access a lot of the higher marks.

This quote clearly demonstrates the reciprocal benefits possible through co-production research and group conversations. Partners further spoke of transformations in their understanding of central concepts related to the project – disability, physical activity, intersectionality, and discrimination, among others – many of which were brought about by listening to others share knowledge or experience. It was raised in early group meetings that we needed a working definition of such concepts that reflected shared meaning among partners. These definitions were shaped in co-production meetings and our individual understandings shifted through dialogue with others in the group.

An example of a key term that needed defining was 'physical activity'. Many of the partners were concerned that physical activity for this project meant sport, and particularly competitive sport. Given the dominant media representations of 'supercrip' para-athletes and our funder being Sport England, this was unsurprising. This provoked feelings of uncertainty for some of the partners. Although physical activity meant so much more than sport for all partners, some were still challenged to broaden their definition of 'what counts'. In line with a holistic definition (Piggin, 2020), we defined physical activity as movement of any kind. Creating space in early co-production meetings to share stories related to this definition took group conversations beyond exploring what physical activity 'is' to shed light on a multitude of related experiences of marginalisation. This cultivated a deeper sense of shared understanding across the group, for example when one partner highlighted how they had taken their understanding of physical activity for granted:

I definitely came in with a much more rigid idea of what physical activity is ... it's revealed huge [misunderstandings] for me. I work with a lot of people who have various physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, wheelchair users ... I can see the relationship between ADHD and physical activity clearly, but in terms of the barriers that I face [to being physically active], it's much more in relation to being trans or in relation to other things than it is disability, although it does come into it.

This quote related to our conversation on defining physical activity but also illustrates how disabled people's lives cannot be fully understood by studying one dimension of identity alone, nor can they be homogenised to assume shared experiences of oppression (Richard et al., 2023). The co-production process allowed the group the opportunity to better understand both the unique and the shared nuances of each other's biographies and how this impacted their understanding of physical activity. Partners suggested that allowing time and space at the start of the meeting might help everyone engage in the project and forge connections through sharing thoughts, experiences or having an informal conversation. The value of this exercise was captured in co-production meeting notes as *'When facing discrimination in other areas of life, it was noted that it is nice to enter a space like this with people "who get it".'* This sense of collective knowing resonated with the

concept of ‘prehension’ explored by Manning (2013) to help understand specific communities’ affective experiences that are unavailable as conscious articulation. This deeper level of shared understanding and appreciation of individual biographies alongside collective experience better enabled us to arrive at a working definition that represented the whole group.

Exploring key concepts and the transformational potential of learning from each other was also important when dealing with the complex theoretical term ‘intersectionality’. It became clear through reflective diaries that many words and phrases associated with intersectionality theory created misunderstanding, and that using them made several people feel alienated. We sought to make the definition as simple and accessible as possible, whilst also ensuring it still had the complexity of meaning that the term entails:

Intersectionality is not an easy concept to understand ... I can’t say that I do understand it fully, because there’s so many different people that talk about what intersectionality is. But I think in order to try and understand it, you have to, not get to a certain level, but you have to have these discussions as to what it is. Otherwise, if it’s too basic, we’re going to all misinterpret it and we’re not going to really understand what intersectionality is about.

For intersectionality to be useful for the group and to enable us to move forward with the research, we defined it in the context of social justice. This brought together both the political activist identities of the group and the calls for social transformation at the centre of intersectional research (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Rice et al., 2019). Our shared definition stated:

Intersectionality has lots of different definitions and uses. Our understanding comes from social justice. It may change over time. For us, intersectionality means recognising that people have lots of different identities, experiences, and characteristics. Some of these can bring benefits, which some people call privileges. Others can mean that we can and do face discrimination, exclusion, or violence. Intersectionality is a way of looking at people’s lives that recognises that all of these different parts of ourselves come together, or ‘intersect’, to give us unique privileges, barriers, and experiences of discrimination. (Moving Intersectionality Co-Production Group, 2024).

Developing this conceptual clarity has been key to moving our research process forward, from navigating ways of working to developing the research project.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore our experiences of adopting an intersectional approach to equitable and experientially informed co-production. We have responded to calls for more reflexive accounts of co-producing research in sport, exercise, and health (e.g. Pettican et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023), to produce new knowledge of the practicalities, to examine how intersectional approaches can be operationalised (Dahan et al., 2025), and drawn attention to the opportunities and challenges of integrating intersectionality with co-production. We have outlined three key areas of both tension and potential that we have grappled with in our co-production process. Namely, the promise verses the reality of doing co-production, the tricky negotiation of power and conflict, and the transformation that is made possible by shared learning. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that taking an intersectional approach to co-production has the potential to foster equitable relationships for research if it is foregrounded in extensive collective reflexivity. This reinforces recent calls for greater reflexivity when taking an intersectional approach (e.g. Brazier et al., 2025; Marks et al., 2025) whilst additionally highlighting the need for a collective approach.

In this paper, we have evidenced how engaging in collective reflexivity throughout the research process through co-production meetings, reflective diaries and interviews, enabled us to identify and navigate challenges. Reflexive consideration of the power dynamics between researchers and marginalised groups is fundamental to both intersectionality methodology (Haynes et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2019) and equitable and experientially informed co-production (Smith et al., 2023). Yet we would advocate for the use of collective reflexivity to critically evaluate how power *between* co-production partners shapes the research process. Reflective

diaries and interviews illuminated the contradictions people were experiencing from the outset of the project and the negative impact of dominant academic voices upon other co-production partners. They also revealed an underlying tension we are still grappling with between our fifth co-production principle for dealing with conflict, and our eighth co-production principle of calling people in.

Ultimately, it was through practicing extensive collective reflexivity that we have been able to hold ourselves accountable for upholding our co-production principles. That said, a collective reflexivity approach is not without its challenges. For example, challenges to managing equitable power relations will always exist (McGrath et al., 2025). In this project, the power dynamic between the lead researcher and co-researchers undertaking data collection and analysis may have influenced what the co-production group shared in their reflexive accounts. To minimise this power imbalance, co-production partners could raise issues with our partner at DR UK who was not an active researcher in this project.

We have also evidenced how the use of Hill Collins and Bilge's (2020) six core constructs of intersectionality relate to our co-produced approach. Critically engaging with issues of *power* and shifting power dynamics was essential to establishing and maintaining co-production principles. *Relationality* was important as we sought to better understand how the complex and overlapping nature of our own identities and those of others within the group influence our lived experience. Our broad commitment to addressing *social inequality* offered significant potential for our thinking and helped align our work with co-production partners' previous or ongoing activist work. We also explored how our individual *social contexts* shaped our perspectives and could inform the future direction of our research. *Complexity* was evident through tension and debate as we navigated the process of getting started, established ways of working, and moved forward with our research. This complexity was, and continues to be, necessary; as Hill Collins and Bilge (2020) remind us, difficult and complex research is often the most meaningful. *Social justice* offered a unifying framework for doing intersectional research and closely aligned with the priorities of the co-production group.

Sharing our experiences and the challenges that we faced will support other scholars to adopt intersectionality and co-production as complementary approaches to address social inequalities and promote social justice in sport, physical activity and beyond. In particular, by centring marginalised voices and fostering more equitable power dynamics throughout the research process. Challenging power dynamics and attending to affective experiences through feminist, decolonial theories (Munro-Cook & Fullagar, 2025; Nachman et al., 2024) alongside innovative methods and methodologies such as creative approaches (e.g. object and photo elicitation, arts-based practices, storytelling) and co-approaches to analysis where lived experiences are centralised should be considered in future research that adheres to social justice goals and praxis of intersectionality and co-production.

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