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Introducing the boasblog Co-Producing Knowledge



1. Why Co-Producing Knowledge? Why the Blog?

Participatory, collaborative, action-based, and shared research practices have gained renewed momentum in anthropology and related fields. These approaches respond to calls for decolonial and non-extractive modes of inquiry, challenging longstanding hierarchies between researchers and those traditionally cast as “researched.” Such approaches are based on ethical and political commitments and have far-reaching methodological and epistemological implications. Research is no longer imagined as a solitary pursuit of knowledge but as a collective, relational, and situated process.

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In a time marked by deepening social and political polarization, these approaches offer more than new techniques: they represent a commitment to conversation, reflexivity and co-production. Knowledge emerges not from a single voice or viewpoint but through ongoing dialogue across disciplines, institutions, communities, and lived experiences. This blog engages with such practices, their potential, and their challenges. It considers how they generate insights, build relations, unsettle assumptions, make space for multiple ways of knowing, and how they have to deal with rigid academic standards, requirements, and power dynamics, including addressing epistemic power imbalances, e.g., between the Global South and the Global North. Most contributions to this blog emerge from anthropological work or work from cognate academic disciplines, such as archaeology and history. However, the blog embraces interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary entanglements. What unites the contributions is an interest in process rather than product, and in knowledge-making as a shared and unfolding multimodal practice (understood as multiple sensory and material modes such as text, image, sound, and movement, see, e.g., Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019) and as a continuous conversation that unfolds across methods, media, and moments of encounter.

2. What is Collaboration and What is Co-Producing Knowledge (Not)?

This blog focuses on “co-producing knowledge”, as a more specific practice than conventional collaboration. In anthropology, the notion of collaboration broadly refers to working with others, both with fellow anthropologists, inter- and transdisciplinary researchers and institutions, and—crucially—with research participants. This entails moving beyond the myth of the lone researcher toward less hierarchical and more equitable forms of knowledge production. Most importantly, collaboration lies at the heart of the ethnographic research process itself. Ethnography has been understood as inherently collaborative and a way to co-

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produce knowledge. However, it is only through a more focused and explicit reflection of the collaborative process that researchers can meaningfully engage with questions of epistemologies, positionalities, and power, opening up the potential for the co-production of theory, analysis, and methods (Lassiter 2005; Homes and Marcus 2008; Estalella and Criado 2018). In recent years, these calls for collaboration (beyond participation) within anthropology haven been heightened by efforts to address the discipline's colonial legacies, its extractive research practices, and the asymmetrical power relations between researchers and those participating in the research. These calls also align with broader demands for epistemic justice, that is, the recognition and inclusion of marginalized ways of knowing and experiencing the world (Fricker 2007). Different strands within anthropology, at least since the 1970s, ranging from feminist, Indigenous, postcolonial, decolonial, and neo-Marxist interventions, have contributed to this broader movement towards epistemic and ethical reorientation (Zenker and Vonderau 2023:,131-132; Pelican et al. 2025).

At its core, collaborative forms of knowledge production challenge the idea that anthropological knowledge is the sole product of the academically trained anthropologist. Instead, knowledge is seen as co-constituted in dialogue with research partners, participants, and communities (Lassiter 2005; Rappaport 2008). In this understanding, co-producing knowledge occurs during the whole process of research—from the formulation of questions to interpretation and dissemination—and entails a shared epistemic authority, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. The power to define what counts as knowledge and how it is understood- does not solely remain with the professional researcher. Furthermore, in post-human, feminist, Indigenous, and STS influenced scholarship, not only humans but also phenomena/things/actants/assemblages beyond-the-human (e.g., technological devices, artificial intelligence, media, methods, spirits, animals, or plants) are considered requisite ingredients for or essential participants in the production of knowledge. All actors are considered as

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knowledge-makers, and their perspectives, categories, and interpretive frameworks are treated as equal (though not identical) to academic ones. This process often involves questioning the boundaries of expert knowledge and integrating multiple ways of knowing: academic, experiential, Indigenous, activist, artistic, more-than human, etc. It furthermore involves acknowledging, involving, and negotiating divergent knowledge systems, navigating ethical tensions, reflecting on power asymmetries and academic requirements, and embracing methodological hybridity. This all moves far beyond the conventional collaborative research as described above and beyond collaboration "in the field."

For these reasons, we zoom in on the term co-producing knowledge against the backdrop of the broader notion of collaborative research to highlight not only the shared nature of epistemic labor but also the entanglements of multiple actors, methodologies, and power dynamics in the ongoing making of knowledge. Co-producing knowledge involves co-theorization, co-authorship, shared ownership of findings, mutual accountability, and acknowledgment of all entities/networks (human and more-than-human, past and present) involved in knowledge production. For instance, paying attention to citational politics, including marginalized, silenced, collective, or non-academic ways of knowing, recognizes intellectual lineage and reflects an ethical and political commitment to knowledge production (The River and Fire Collective et al. 2021; Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research n.d.).

Importantly, co-producing knowledge should not be understood as an idealized, harmonious process of symmetrical working-together. On the contrary, co-producing knowledge begins by acknowledging the structural asymmetries, institutional constraints, frictions, and potential conflicts that shape any research relationship (see e.g. the contribution by El Mentawi and Pfeifer to this blog). These challenges include differences in access to resources, recognition, and safety, as well as historical legacies of extraction and mistrust. Rather than seeking to erase or deny

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these asymmetries, an approach that aims for co-producing knowledge takes them as a starting point of critical reflection and negotiation.

3. What Forms of Knowledges?

Knowledge is a broad and contested concept, with meanings that vary widely across cultures, worldviews, and epistemological traditions. Its definition depends on foundational assumptions about reality (ontology) and about how we come to know (epistemology), reflecting the diverse ways people experience and engage with the world. Just as knowledge emerges through social and political relations, it also takes shape through multimodal, visual, sonic, embodied, spatial, and digital forms which carry their own affordances, limitations, and hierarchies of legitimacy (see, e.g., Dreschke et al. 2023).

In dominant Western and scientific traditions, knowledge is often conceptualized as distinct from belief—understood as objective, empirically verifiable, repeatable, and falsifiable and typically situated in the individual human mind or brain. However, many scholars from various disciplines have critiqued this perspective as Eurocentric or androcentric. They argue that it neglects the social embeddedness, contextual situatedness, and relational dimensions of knowledge as well as its entanglement with power, identity, and positionality (see, e.g., Haraway 1988; Todd 2016; The River & Fire Collective 2021; Hird et al. 2023; Pratt and de Vries 2023).

Moreover, this framework fails to account for the forms of knowledge held by people whose ways of knowing and being lie outside academic discourse and Western epistemological paradigms. Knowledge, in this broader sense, is not limited to textual or representational forms and can emerge from embodied practice, emotional and mental insight, spiritual experience, and other non-discursive modes of understanding.

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As the editors of this blog, we acknowledge the plurality of knowledge systems and the diverse ways of knowing they entail. Co-producing knowledge—or, more precisely, co-producing knowing—invites recognition of multiple epistemologies and the varied paths through which people come to understand the world.

As used here, co-producing knowledge both recognizes and critically engages with the power dynamics embedded in knowledge production, interrogating whose knowledges are validated, marginalized, or silenced. This perspective also foregrounds the agency of non-human actors not only as participants in the co-creation of knowledge but also as holders of knowledge in their own right who are embedded in relational, material, and ecological entanglements (see, e.g., Rigby et al. 2015).

While certain forms of knowledge rooted in distinct philosophical, scientific, or cosmological frameworks may initially appear incompatible or even contradictory, the call for co-production seeks to move beyond the notion of singular, objective, and universal knowledge. It is an effort to embrace the multiplicity of onto-epistemologies (Barad 2003) that underlie different knowledge traditions as well as to recognize the divergent norms, values, and ethical frameworks that inform them.

Co-producing knowledge, then, is not necessarily about merging or synthesizing different knowledges into a unified whole . Instead, it calls for sustained communication, dialogue, multimodal articulation, and mutual learning among knowledge-holders from diverse positionalities. This approach demands reflexivity around power structures and challenges the hegemonic hierarchies that often define which knowledges and which modes of expression are considered legitimate.

4. Who Collaborates to Co-Produce Knowledge?

As mentioned above, symmetry and inclusion are frequently cited ideals of

collaborative approaches in an attempt to decolonize research. The River and Fire Collective is an inspiring example for writing and thinking together about decolonizing potentialities, questioning exclusionary and colonial structures and legacies within anthropology. Inclusion is also a frequently mentioned motivation for contributors to this blog. Valence Silayo, for instance, describes the inclusion of source communities as a shift from “doing for” to “doing with” and as empowering. However, even the most well-intentioned co-production efforts remain shaped by structural inequalities: institutional hierarchies, career precarity, epistemological authority, language barriers, and geopolitical asymmetries. To understand such dynamics, it is first of all important to be transparent about who the collaborating partners are in specific projects and about the power relations that continue to play a role in the collaboration. Secondly, the role of external actors (such as funders) in shaping the context and conditions for collaboration should be taken into account. Context affords who can collaborate, including the possibility of continuing exclusion of certain perspectives.

The different contributions to this blog are generally based on collaborative projects of scholars, but their collaborative partners are very heterogeneous—as are the scholars themselves. For instance, Gertrud Boden and Valence Silayo both work on the topic of ethnographic collections with source communities: Boden from the position of a German anthropologist and Silayo from the position of a Tanzanian anthropologist. Alestine Andre and Franz Krause combine the different perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars on collaborative research in Gwi‘chin lands within one contribution. Julia Brekl and Mario Krämer both describe the co-production of knowledge on (and the local effects of) environmental protection measures with interlocutors who have different positionalities than the researchers, albeit in highly different ways. Brekl works in a more “traditional” anthropological setting with communities around a conservation area in Botswana and specifically discusses her collaboration with assistants— a topic anthropologists have reflected upon more frequently. Krämer, on the other hand, does not work with marginalized

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or under-represented groups in the Global South, but with interlocutors with a different normative and political positionality within his home country in the Global North. Structural dynamics shape possibilities for co-producing knowledge in all these cases but in highly different ways. Methodological approaches also have to be tailored to these specific contexts.

5. What are Methodological Approaches to Co-Produce Knowledge?

Co-producing knowledge is not a method: it is a shift in how we think about the who, how, and why of research. Above all, it is a call for attention to and ongoing communication with all involved in the research process and product. Methodologically, co-production invites researchers to step into relational, participatory, and multimodal spaces. This foregrounds research as a reflexive process based on situated, embodied, and emplaced practices like collaborative walking (Krämer) and workshops around ethnographic collections (Boden, Silayo). These methods not only focus on the spoken or written but can also include the visual, sonic, tactile, and embodied aspects through multimodal approaches and storytelling (Brekl, Adem, Götze, El Mentawi and Pfeifer). Co-producing knowledge can also be about more reflective and inclusive ways of implementing methods, such as giving interlocutors a say in the process of anonymizing data (Adem) or shared analysis (Ngeh and Pelican).

Finally, co-producing knowledge requires moving beyond conventional academic outputs. The research outcomes must be accessible and meaningful to those involved in the research process and should not be hidden behind paywalls or only available in the academic lingua franca of English. For instance, the (co-)production of booklets as described by both Boden and Brekl are often more than final outcomes as they enable and sustain a continuing process of knowledge co-production. Similarly, we consider this blog not as a conclusive output, but as a continuing

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conversation of ongoing processes of knowledge co-production within our thematic group and beyond.

6. Instead of a Conclusion / Opening the Conversation

This blog emerged from the thematic area “Co-Producing Knowledge” of the Global South Studies Centre (GSSC) of the University of Cologne. Since its launch in fall 2023, the group has explored *co-producing knowledge* as a critical approach to fostering equitable and inclusive research. We gratefully acknowledge the GSSC’s generous support in funding both the group and this blog.

Three of the four blog editors wrote this introductory post together. Writing together, as with other ways of collaboration and co-producing knowledge, is rarely a linear process. Ideas conflicted, priorities differed, and so did the amount of time and energy each of the co-authors of this introduction was able to invest in the process. Negotiating these differences of perspective and availability was part of the co-writing process, starting with brainstorming keywords and topics via a shared online document and online meetings. The list of topics and the conceptualization of issues changed several times. Eventually, we settled on a loose structure with relevant headings, and each of us took responsibility for drafting specific sections. These paragraphs were subsequently commented on, rephrased, shifted, or deleted.

We acknowledge the initial contributions of the fourth blog editor, Hauke-Peter Vehrs, who was not able to complete the writing process with us due to other obligations. We also thank Jonathan Ngeh, the speaker of the Co-Producing Knowledge group at the GSSC, who kindly peer-reviewed the draft; Nico Wilkins, who helped us refine the language; and Marie Thomalla Arellano, who supported us throughout the process of organizing and publishing the blog. Should they be mentioned as co-authors and editors? They were, after all, human beings involved in co-producing this knowledge. What, then, of the other entities essential to this

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process? The desks we work at, the devices we use, the authors we've recently read, the onto-epistemological framework we grew up in, the "fields" we moved through and were shaped by, the friends we discuss our ideas with, and the jobs that sustain our capacity to write? Each plays a part in the broader ecology of knowledge production that often goes unacknowledged.

This blog is an invitation to think, feel, experience, and reflect with others on the conditions and modes of co-producing knowledge. Whom and what are we producing this knowledge for, within anthropology and beyond?

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