

EDITORIAL

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Beyond the horizon: new directions in research coproduction

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Abstract

Research coproduction is no longer a subordinate approach; it is reshaping how health research is conceived, conducted and applied. Integrated knowledge translation (IKT), the Canadian term for coproduction, champions researchers and knowledge users in producing research that is relevant and actionable. In 2018, the Integrated Knowledge Translation Research Network (IKTRN) launched its first concept paper series, emphasizing methodological foundations. In 2024, a second call invited deeper theoretical engagement, resulting in this collection, which addresses structural and relational dimensions of coproduction. Across the 17 papers in this series, 3 themes dominate: power, partnership strategies and infrastructure. Several papers interrogate power in research relationships, noting conceptual inconsistencies and proposing strategies such as reflexivity, culturally responsive approaches and inclusive language to mitigate inequities. Others examine partnership management, emphasizing trust as a dynamic process and recommending actions, such as continuous communication, to strengthen engagement with Indigenous communities, migrants and ethnically diverse populations. A third theme addresses infrastructure, highlighting the need for resources, leadership and tailored training to sustain coproduction, particularly for trainees. Collectively, these contributions signal an evolution from methodological concerns towards systemic considerations of equity and sustainability. They underscore that coproduction is not merely a set of techniques, but a structural and relational endeavour requiring institutional commitment and adequate resourcing. This collection invites researchers, funders and policy-makers to reflect on their roles in advancing these priorities.

Keywords Integrated knowledge translation, Research co-production, Collaborative research, Participatory research, Research co-design

Background

In 2018, the Integrated Knowledge Translation Research Network (IKTRN) put out a call to its members for concept papers focused on advancing theoretical foundations and elements of a research agenda for research

coproduction [1]. Integrated knowledge translation is the Canadian term for research coproduction, “a model of collaborative research that explicitly responds to knowledge user needs in order to produce research findings that are useful, usable, and used. Collaboration in coproduction research is characterized by shared decision-making between knowledge users and researchers, mutual learning, and respect” [2]. Knowledge users are those who will use the research to inform their decision-making. What resulted from that 2018 call was a Springer BMC cross-journal collection of 17 papers entitled *Exploring the Frontiers of Research Co-production* (2019) [3].

The concept paper series inspired us to publish *Research Coproduction in Healthcare*, an edited volume,

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in 2022 [2]. Just as we were making the final edits to the book, we found that the contributors had reinvigorated our thinking, and we had more to say. We published our thoughts in an editorial last year, hoping to stir fresh dialogue and debate [4]. Since then, that journal has published six commentaries that engage sincerely and thoughtfully with our editorial.

Clearly the field was ready for additional reflection, so in 2024 we launched a second IKTRN call for concept papers. The articles in this collection have undergone each journal's standard peer-review process and the participating journal editors declare no competing interests. To date, the journals that contribute to the collection are *Health Research Policy and Systems*, *Implementation Science Communications* and *Research Involvement and Engagement*.

This second concept paper collection offers, we believe, a set of papers that are innovative, reflective and highly relevant to current discourse around research coproduction. This collection engages deeply with research coproduction and the research ecosystem, process issues (e.g. challenges and sustaining research coproduction), trainee considerations, implementation and impact and application of decolonization, equity, diversity and inclusion.

Several papers revolve around IKT theory and methods:

- Review articles to understand the published discourse about power in the literature [5, 6]
- A commentary that raises the profile of power in IKT [7]
- A critique of IKT with respect to equity-deserving populations [8]

Other papers discuss IKT processes, impacts and capacity building:

- Strategies for working with Indigenous partners [9], migrants [10] and ethnically diverse populations generally [11]
- An examination of implementation science frameworks and establishing partnerships [12]
- A commentary about the process of feedback and mutual learning for successful IKT [13]
- A look at the need for and experiences with IKT capacity-building amongst trainees in primary care research [14]

We were excited to see several common themes emerge across the papers in this collection; three of these are highlighted because they resonate with the IKTRN members and are frequently mentioned throughout the collection.

Power

Power, the first theme, is an emerging concept that researchers are attempting to address in practical ways within the context of research coproduction relationships. In this collection, many authors explore power but, as authors of recent reviews note, there are inconsistencies in definitions and conceptualizations of power [5, 7]. Nevertheless, researchers are reporting their successful power-sharing strategies on a study-by-study basis. Phelan et al. [10] demonstrate the potential of “music-infused participatory spaces” to mitigate participatory inequity and structural bias within health research, and Melro and colleagues [9] focus on safe and ethical spaces to ensure equal research partnerships with Indigenous communities. Several authors are committed to culturally responsive approaches to redistribute power [9, 11], and Gallant et al. [8] call for inclusive and empowering terminology, recognizing that language can reinforce hierarchies. Reflection was another commonly recommended strategy to address power; for example, Cameron et al. [5] encourage researchers to reflect on their own social locations, privileges and assumptions to reduce power imbalances.

The collection authors observe that attention to power is related to several partnership dimensions, such as sustained engagement and trust [8–10]. Another related dimension to power sharing, as argued by Ramage, is equity and inclusion. Finally, in Kothari et al.'s theory of IKT, based on a realist review [6], power sharing influences the use of research findings by the knowledge users.

Partnership strategies

A second theme emerging from the collection of papers relates to strategies for managing research coproduction partnerships in addition to addressing power as noted above. Nurturing trust amongst partners was highlighted by many authors. For example, Chisholm et al. [14] note that not only is building trust crucial, but it evolves over time on the basis of learning from each other. When working with Indigenous groups, Melro and colleagues [9] identify the important role that trust can play in creating and maintaining coproduction partnerships. They suggest that non-Indigenous researchers must repair trust due to Indigenous communities' previous harmful experiences and mistrust in research. They recommend that once established, maintaining trust can be supported by continuous communication, active engagement, building new networks through frequent meetings, and visits to Indigenous sites. They also suggest that trust maintenance should be approached as a partnership outcome.

Several authors highlight these and other concrete strategies for managing relationships such as optimizing team communication and learning from each other through frequent interactions and meetings, as well as inviting all team members to share openly by creating safe spaces [11, 12]. Some authors also note that providing transportation to research partners or overcoming distance by using videoconferencing and other technology, as well as providing interpreters and honoraria, can support participation and ultimately knowledge exchange [11, 13, 14]. Some of these strategies overlap with the third theme, infrastructure, discussed below.

Infrastructure

For a long time, coproduction scholars have argued that partnered research requires more time and resources than traditional research approaches and lamented the lack of adequate support within the contemporary research ecosystem [4]. Several of the concept paper authors return to this theme whilst offering new insights into how and why changes to research infrastructure could catalyse research coproduction outcomes. Funding is a significant limiting or enabling factor for all research, but it is especially the case in coproduction where ongoing face-to-face interaction between researchers and knowledge users is critical to partnership efficacy [9, 11, 12]. Additionally, Chisholm et al. [14] argue that tailored support is needed for the training of new coproduction researchers. Trainees face the same challenges as established researchers when managing their projects, but they are often starting from scratch, without longstanding relationships with knowledge users [14].

In their realist review on how IKT works, Kothari et al.'s [6] program theory postulates that appropriate infrastructure is one of three contextual factors (the others being role clarity and power sharing) required for IKT to be effective. They identify three components of infrastructure – resources, leadership and resource allocation – that when in place “trigger an effective partnership response within an IKT team” [6, p. 9]. Dougherty and colleagues [13] also contribute to coproduction theory in their analysis of the role of feedback between researchers and knowledge users in building trust, improving communication and strengthening team dynamics. They argue that feedback skills are teachable and should be a component of coproduction training programs. They also highlight the potential of new technologies to increase the timeliness and relevance of feedback whilst providing a more flexible platform for team interactions.

Conclusions

Papers in this collection reveal that we are beginning to learn more about the importance and complexity of power relations in research coproduction teams, and there are resource implications when we consider the work of effectively managing power relations and equity concerns. The content of the 2019 collection of concept papers might be described as more “hands on” as it focused on coproduction research methods, coproduction approaches that consider equity-deserving groups (e.g. Indigenous, newcomers/ethnically diverse or patient populations), research impact and international research coproduction support through global health governance and understanding funders' contributions. The 2025–2026 collection of concept papers takes on more of a theoretical lens to issues of power, equity and resources to support effective and sustainable research partnerships, especially with equity-deserving populations. As you engage with these concept papers, consider how you can apply their insights so that research coproduction moves from theory to transformative practice.

Abbreviations

IKT	Integrated knowledge translation
IKTRN	Integrated Knowledge Translation Research Network

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Author contributions

AK, CM and IDG conceptualized the ideas for this Commentary. AK wrote the initial draft. All authors participated in revising the initial draft and approved the final version.

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