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Facilitated participation: cultural value, risk and the agency of young people in care

Lisanne Gibson and Delyth Edwards

School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

ABSTRACT

Since the mid-nineteenth century, cultural practice and its management have been attached to a discourse that constructs participation, in particular kinds of cultural activity, as “beneficial” to individuals on the basis that its effects have resonance beyond the cultural sphere. More recently, “leading edge” cultural practice and programmes have been based on the notion that benefit from such participation occurs via the facilitation of the active agency of participants through the making of their own meanings through co-curation and co-creation. Enlistment and involvement in, what we have termed “facilitated participation”, is, in Nikolas Rose’s terms, a tool of “advanced liberalism” whereby the governance of individuals operates on the basis of the governance of their “freedom”, through making them self-governing subjects [Rose, N. (1999). Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought. Cambridge University Press]. In the particular case of young people living in care, we have found that the facilitation of their agency through cultural programmes is limited by an assumption that such groups’ everyday cultural choices lack value and to facilitate them (and thereby their agency) would involve risk. Through a discussion of research undertaken with this group, this paper will explore how different domains of participation are understood by both the facilitators and the facilitated.

KEYWORDS

Cultural value; participation; young people in care; agency; risk; advanced liberalism

Introduction

This article presents research undertaken as part of the “Understanding Everyday Participation-Articulating Cultural Values” (UEP) project. In summary, this 5-year research project brings to bear a mixed-method research approach to understanding the cultural and leisure choices people make in their day-to-day lives (see Miles & Gibson, 2016, this issue for detail on the project). The focus on “everyday participation”, including where, how and with whom it takes place, is motivated by a desire to understand what cultural, social, political and economic significance people attach to their participation, and how the domains of this informal participation and formal participation (cultural forms supported through direct State subvention) are (dis)connected. This article discusses “facilitated participation” both in relation to the larger UEP research aim and to contemporary cultural policy and practice.
By “facilitated participation”, we are referring to programmes that aim to effect individuals social, economic, mental, physical, educational and/or emotional state or status and where the individuals enlisted are deemed to be in need or amenable to “betterment” through such participation. We are particularly interested in programmes where the facilitation of cultural activity is exercised as the means through which this “betterment”, however that is articulated, will occur. The cultural programmes devised to benefit such individuals have for at least 30 years been operated on the basis that good practice involves enrolling/recruiting/engaging the individual in “co-production” rather than what has been argued to be the less democratic model of the “transmission” of cultural information (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). For instance, in museum practice, the museum audience is now constructed as a participant in the meanings made within the museum space, rather than a mere receptacle for information delivered (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Sandell, 2007; and see Dibley, 2005, for a critique of a “redemptive” tendency in museum studies). It is via this facilitation of the active agency of participants in cultural programmes – the creation of their own meanings through co-curation and co-production – that participants are deemed able to draw benefits which have resonance beyond the cultural sphere. But what can be the agency of individuals in such cultural programmes when there is (at the very least) an uneven field in the consideration of what are valued forms of cultural activity and what are not? This is an especially significant issue when one considers that it is the cultural forms and institutions supported by the State (through direct funding, tax exemption and so forth) that are generally the cultural tools utilised for the facilitation of participation. It is, then, important to consider how the different domains of participation – facilitated and everyday – are understood by both the facilitators and the facilitated.

In the first section of this paper, we will briefly explore the utility of a particular way of thinking about facilitated and everyday participation in terms of the relationship between “the social” and “the State” and as a feature of what Nikolas Rose has described as “advanced liberalism” (1996). The important feature of Rose’s conception, which we find useful here, is his understanding that tools typical of “advanced liberalism” are predicated on the governance of individuals through the governance of their “freedom”, thus, making them self-governing subjects (1992, 1999). We recognise this feature, this aim to produce “self-governance”, as being at the heart of contemporary “leading edge” cultural practice. As stated already, in such programmes, it is via the facilitation of the active agency of participants – that those participants are deemed to draw benefits, which have resonance beyond the cultural sphere, for instance, through their social inclusion (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). However, we have found that for certain groups, practices remain grounded in an older “liberal” discourse, a discourse in which some groups’ everyday cultural choices are viewed as lacking value or risky and thus their agency must be managed directly, rather than through inculcating techniques of self-governance. It is in such domains, for instance the domain of young people in care, that culture is directly “brought to bear” and utilised as a “corrective”. We will explore this in the third section of this article, where we will discuss fieldwork undertaken with a group of young women in foster care in which we sought to understand the ways in which they value their everyday participation in relation to the facilitated participation activities in which they take part. In conclusion, we argue that the investigation of the relations between the ways in which
this particular cohort’s everyday participation is valued in relation to its facilitated cultural participation is revealing more broadly in relation to both cultural practice and cultural policy. Beyond the particular case of young people in care, we argue more generally that (despite the claims of “best practice”) the dominance of a hierarchised discourse of cultural value places limits upon the choices available in the facilitated participation exchange, thus undermining the agenda of such work to facilitate agency or the capacities of self-governance.

**Cultural value and freedom**

Since the mid-nineteenth century, cultural funding and management have been attached to a discourse that constructs participation, in particular kinds of cultural activity, as beneficial to individuals (Gibson, 2001, 2008). Tony Bennett has argued for the utility of this way of understanding the history of relations between culture and the social in his Foucaultian influenced work on culture and government in which he argues that public cultural provision is part of the mechanisms of “governmentality” designed to make up the civic subject (Bennett, 1998). It is the making up of the *self-governing* citizen that is at the heart of such programmes, whether thinking of the implementation of centralised cultural funding as part of the Welfare State settlement in the UK after the Second World War, in Australia as part of post-war reconstruction or in America as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal (Gibson, 2001, 2002).

Nikolas Rose has argued that we can think of contemporary forms of government as a political rationality which is “advanced liberal” (rather than “neo-liberal”) in the ways it conceptualises the moral justification for the exercise of power. Under “advanced liberalism” “power is not so much a matter of imposing constraints upon citizens as of ‘making up’ citizens capable of bearing a kind of regulated freedom” (Rose, 1992, p. 174). This conception of “advanced liberalism” posits contemporary cultural programmes as part of a complex of governmental technologies, a “complex of mundane programmes, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions” (Rose, 1992, p. 175). For cultural programmes, more recent forms of cultural practice have been based on what has been termed “the participatory imperative”, described as “the morally prestigious conception of community participation as the political or collective equivalent of moral self-governance” (Besch & Minson, 2001). The representation and involvement of community in cultural programmes have driven the diversification of the cultural forms which those programmes encompass, the representation and facilitation of diversity (Bennett, 2001). Above all, in such programmes, “best practice” is envisioned and measured as that which facilitates an active agency in an extended range of participation choices. However, despite this diversification of the cultural forms (and “ways of living”) that are now accepted as appropriate forms for representation and participation in cultural programmes, cultural practice (no matter how “leading edge”) still operates on the basis of a narrow set of activity forms. In cultural policy, we can see the operations of this constraint through debates on cultural value. It has long been established that to support some cultural forms is not to support others and that the operation of social, political, and perhaps even economic power is implicated in these decisions (see Miles & Gibson, 2015, this issue for a summary of this discussion). In seeking to understand the
power effects of “facilitated (cultural) participation” the case of young people in care throws into high relief the assumptions which underpin contemporary cultural practice focused on the facilitation of agency.

For the care community, it is, in turn, the operation of risk which plays at least as fundamental a role in the underpinning logic of these programmes as does the logic of self-management. However, as we understand cultural programmes which aim to facilitate “agency” as an advanced liberal tool of government, so too risk is a technique of government. Thus, risk is not “intrinsically real, but is a particular way in which problems are viewed or imagined and dealt with. What is specific to risk [as we use it here] is that it is a probabilistic technique” (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006, p. 95). Nigel Parton, NSPCC Chair in Applied Childhood Studies, argues that

not only can concerns about risk be seen to characterize contemporary child welfare policies and practices, but also, following Foucault, risk provides a small but significant instance of the important changes in the government of freedom in, and of advanced liberal rule. (1998, pp. 21–22)

It is in the entwinement of the concern with “risk” in child welfare policies and practices with the uneven field of cultural value in cultural policy and practice that, we find and as we go on to discuss below, constrains the “facilitated participation” activities which young people in care are involved in, thus limiting the extent to which such programmes can be considered enabling.

**Participation and young people in care**

In 2015, there were 69,540 young people being looked after in England, which amounts to a 30-year high; numbers of young people in care in the rest of the UK are also rising (Yahed & Harker, 2015). In the twenty-first century, children in the UK come in to the care of local government for a variety of reasons but most often in order to safeguard their physical and mental well-being. Whilst in care they may live with foster parents, at home with their parents under the supervision of social services, in residential children’s homes, in other residential settings like schools or secure units, or they can be adopted.

Young people face a number of challenges whilst in care and also when they become “care leavers” (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1995; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006, 2007; Stein, 2005). Experiences of care can vary; some young people experience stable and positive placements. With the support of carers, such young people are able to overcome past traumas to become adults with fulfilling lives. However, others are four times more likely than their peers to experience mental health difficulties (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005); are more likely to suffer from poor health due to poverty (DfES, 2007); to have low academic outcomes and higher levels of offending behaviour (Yahed & Harker, 2015); and to experience “higher rates of substance misuse and teenage pregnancy than those in the non-care population” (DfES, 2007, p. 88). Such disadvantages can affect their transition to adulthood and lead to problems in adult life.

The DfES Care Matters (2006, 2007) green and white papers attempted to tackle this disadvantage and improve the life chances of care experienced young people.² For our
research on participation and young people in care, the most relevant recommendation of these papers was their pledge to improve the health and well-being of young people in care by securing “attachment, friendship and engagement in positive leisure activities” (2006, p. 10). Research shows that participation in “positive activities” plays a significant role in improving or ensuring the well-being, personal development and future outcomes of “looked-after” young people (for instance, Gilligan, 2007; Hollingworth, 2012; Quarmby, 2014; Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 2000). As a result of this, the participation of young people in care in a range of extra-curricular activities is legislated as a responsibility of the “corporate parent”.3 English local authorities have responded to the Care Matters policy agenda by devising strategies to facilitate the participation of young people in care, including improving the availability and access of out-of-school social, leisure and cultural activities and facilities.

Our research focused on the participation of young people growing up in foster care. In this work, we wanted to understand the ways in which the facilitated and everyday activities of young people are valued by them, their immediate carers, and the representatives of the corporate parent. We asked: what is the nature of the participation that is facilitated and how does this complement or sit outside of care experienced young peoples’ everyday participation; what are the cultural and social values at play in facilitators choices around what is deemed to be of “positive value”; and, how are the identities of these care experienced young people facilitated through different acts of participating and how do they value these different participation domains – facilitated and everyday?

The project involved ethnographic work by and with young women living in foster care, focus group discussions with foster carers and independent visitors, and workshop discussions with professionals involved in delivering social and cultural services to young people in care.4 Ethnography typically involves the researcher participating in the daily lives of those being researched, as a way of getting direct and first-hand knowledge of everyday practices and meanings. Researcher participation can involve observation, photography, film, autobiographical diaries and formal or informal interviews. Safeguarding issues meant that this approach to ethnography was not possible, and instead, we used auto-ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006; Thompson, 2008). On our behalf, young women involved in a local authority run group for young women in care aged 12–19 carried out auto-ethnographies. Having spent a number of weeks at the group conducting participant observation, we invited three members of the group to explore, through film, using iPads we provided, their participation, whatever that was or meant to them. The participants then edited their individual films into a group film (for full details of the research and its findings, see Gibson & Edwards, 2015). We facilitated a workshop with a professional filmmaker at the outset of the project, the filmmaker trained the members of the group on how to make and edit films using the iPad. The auto-ethnographic nature of the approach successfully gave the young participants the freedom to choose what activities to document and share with us; thus providing evidence of the types of participation they considered most meaningful and important to them. The glimpses the film provides into “the girls” (as they preferred to be referred to) everyday participation are examples of what Hart (2009, p. 4) would call the “cracks between adult-organised events” (facilitated activities).

Our research supports arguments that participation in social, cultural and leisure activities improve, at least, the self-reported well-being of young people growing up in care.
(see, for instance, Gilligan, 2007; Hollingworth, 2012; Quarmby, 2014; Säfvenbom & Samdahl, 2000). However, little is known about the complexity and diversity of activities and everyday interests young people are offered, where and whom they participate with, and the values that influence their everyday choices. The findings of our research are important in revealing some of the opportunities and barriers young people in care face with regard to participation in a broad range of cultural and leisure participation. We found that different types of participation are valued differently by carers, representatives of corporate parent and the young people themselves. Following this, we found that the everyday participation preferences of young people in care are often overlooked. This is surprising, given that standard practice in youth work is to put participants’ “voices and experiences at the centre of their provision” (Batsleer, 2011, 2012; Hart, 2009; Kellett, 2011, p. 227).

Despite initiatives such as the Maxcard, through which (depending of your geographic location) young people in care can access a wide range of cultural and leisure activities, the majority of cultural initiatives for young people in care focus on a limited range of activities provided on the basis of “the significance creativity and artistic practice” can have for enabling the agency of young people (Batsleer, 2011, p. 425). As we have established, the participatory agenda of best practice youth work posits that activities should be led from the interests of the participant rather than the practitioner (Batsleer, 2011, 2012; Hart, 2009). We have found that in work with young people in care, there are two primary discourses which in fact limit the two key approaches of youth work – the significance of participatory and creative practice – for the facilitation of agency. We found that, especially from the corporate parent, there was in operation a hierarchised understanding of cultural value such that some activities were seen as better than others regardless of the individuals’ interests; secondly, we found that there was a dominating conception of risk which placed limits upon what these young people are able to do. These discursive constructions around cultural value and risk call into question the emancipatory agendas informing cultural practice, at least, with young people in care.

Building on the value of young people’s everyday participation

The everyday participation of young people in care can be a source of worry for social services and in particular the youth and social workers responsible for those young people. Issues around safeguarding can sometimes be raised and used as a way of regulating behaviour outside facilitated activities. However, our research found that everyday participation is an important domain through which young people learn about the social world and their place in it, and was a domain within which they felt empowered to express themselves. This finding is in common with research in the field of youth studies, which finds that young people learn from participation which is absent of adult supervision (Hart, 2009). We were able to talk to “the girls” about the participation they chose to capture in the films they made for us. One of our participants, Sarah, spends a lot of her free time with her cat. The films she made during the course of the research showed her dancing and talking with the cat. She told us that she enjoys caring for the cat. Sarah also enjoys caring for herself and documented herself straightening her hair and wearing make-up. However, Sarah’s social workers were uncomfortable with Sarah’s choices of the footage of herself she wanted to include in the group film. This footage
included Sarah dancing with her cat and of her playing darts in her bedroom (and hitting the wall). Her preference to include these activities as well as the more formal cultural activities she had been involved supports Hart’s argument as to the importance of “hidden times” for young people (2009). But Sarah’s social workers felt that these activities were not quite “right” and were not the activities they felt she should be represented by. Here, the imposition of external values (what is designated as “appropriate” behaviour) undermines the aims of participatory programmes to provide young people in care with opportunities for self-expression.

Concerns over safeguarding also limit participation in activities with young people in other settings. During a craft session in the girls’ group, one of the youth workers brought up the subject of care and how being in care affects what they can and cannot do. The field notes for this session capture the following conversation:

Jessica told me of her frustration that being in care means she is unable to participate in activities that may be filmed or photographed. She said that she “wasn’t allowed” to take part in a performance at school because the event was being filmed and she felt it was “unfair because it’s something she really wanted to do”. (Field Notes 16th April 2014)

Safeguarding can also limit young people’s participation in everyday activities at home. In the focus group discussions with foster carers, one carer described how when his foster son began riding a bicycle, they had a “legal obligation” to ensure that he wore high visibility clothing and a helmet. The foster son refused to wear these as none of his peers did and thus did not take part in bike rides with his friends around the local estate. The carer admitted that he would have been more relaxed with his birth children. This inevitably creates discrepancy in conduct and identity between how birth children and foster children are treated in families and the types of everyday participation they can engage in. Such “risk management” of everyday participation, not only limits the agency of carers, but also the opportunities for young people to make decisions about their own everyday lives which allow them to develop a sense of their own agency.

A significant finding of our research was that the facilitated and everyday participation of young people in care is more connected than is recognised. For instance, the participation facilitated through formal settings such as a weekly project with a social worker, independent visitor or carer in turn influences the choices young people make in their everyday participation. Enjoyment of cultural activities carried out when attending weekly projects, such as singing, can encourage young people to sing and dance within the home and in other informal everyday settings. In turn, some young people choose to engage in activities facilitated for them because of their everyday interests. Sarah, for example, participates in a weekly arts programme for young people in care where she can sing and dance. Her films suggest that this is a form of participation which is important and which she gets enjoyment from in her everyday life as well. As well as dancing with her cat, she also likes to dance in her bedroom and sing, usually along with the pop music that she plays on her phone. Sarah has developed a wide range of interests that she draws from her facilitated participation in formal environments and applies informally in her everyday participation. Thus, facilitated engagement can be an opportunity to further develop skills and interests already established in the everyday. It is the young person or their carers who are best placed to identify such interests. For instance, Sarah’s carer took her to an amateur dramatic and operatic performance. Contact details were
exchanged with the amateur dramatic group after the performance, so that Sarah, who has an everyday curiosity and interest in performance, could perhaps join the group at a later stage. Sarah received encouragement from her carer to explore her cultural interests outside those directly facilitated by the care system. This example of the carer taking note of the young person’s everyday participation and facilitating her participation in these interests illustrates how cultural and social capital and cultural value can be developed out of the young person’s own interests.

Our evidence reveals the benefits of encouraging and supporting young people to articulate their everyday interests within the care setting and for such interests to be taken seriously and incorporated into care plans.

**Conclusion: valuing participation**

Encouraging young people to participate in certain categories of activities can help academic attainment, aspiration and help them to overcome the loss and trauma of their past. For instance, research has found that choosing a book and reading for pleasure can be empowering for young people in care, increase their confidence, improve their social skills and access to education (Poulton, 2012). We have argued that valuing their everyday participation can be a way to help young people in care adjust to their experiences of living in and out of care, living between different places, value systems and identities. The challenge is to find structures which support and better understand the values of this participation.

Facilitators agree that the social, cultural, physical and emotional value attached to participation in “positive activities” is beneficial to young people in care. However, this becomes a point of contention when the value of one activity takes precedence over another and unsubstantiated claims are made about which is in the best interests of the young person at that particular time. The “ranking” of activities according to value can undermine and disrupt a young person’s sense of their autonomy and the validity of their cultural and leisure activity choices. This tendency is further exacerbated by the fact that little seems to be known by the corporate parent of the young person’s participation as it exists outside of their facilitated activities, nor to the extent that it is known does this information seem to be valued as it should be. Fong, Schwab, and Armour (2006) demonstrate the importance of maintaining continuity of activities for the well-being of young people in care. In contrast, the carers and Independent Visitors who were part of our research revealed that when a young person comes into their care, they do not inherit any information about the young person’s leisure interests. Collecting and sharing information about the interests of young people during their stay in care with those looking after them would help develop programmes that could be of more cultural, social and emotional benefit to young people.

Facilitated participation and the cultural and social capitals built through these types of participation have been recognised by formal and informal educators as beneficial to participation in society. Evidence suggests that accumulation of these capitals can improve “citizenship learning” and can also “mitigate the effects of a lack of economic capital” (Batsleer, 2011, p. 421). What often gets ignored or undervalued, however, is the role everyday participation has in this development. Our research demonstrates that there is an important continuum between the domains of participation. Above all, the research demonstrates the importance of everyday participation to young people in care and
the particular complexities these young people experience in having their everyday interests supported and facilitated on an ongoing basis. For the institutional structures of care, our research with young people revealed that there should be better systems for taking account of these interests and facilitating them through time in care. For cultural and leisure institutions, the research highlights the potential for supporting young people in care through facilitating participation which connects with and values young people’s everyday participation. It is important to find ways to support young people and the choices they make regarding their participation, rather than only directing them in how they “should” participate.

It is in the entwinement of the concern with “risk” in child welfare policies and practices with the uneven field of cultural value in cultural policy and practice that, we find, constrains the “facilitated participation” activities which young people in care are involved in, thus, limiting the extent to which such programmes can be considered enabling. The limiting effect of these two discourses – risk and cultural value – we argue are at play more broadly in facilitated cultural participation. Our intention in shining a light on this is not to critique these limitations on the basis that there is an unfettered form of agency which can be emancipated if we could only find the right form of (cultural) practice. Rather, following Rose, our aims here are more pragmatic. If the focus of facilitated cultural participation is to assist people to become self-governing in the context of a liberal society of (relative) freedom, then evidence such as we present here of the benefits to personal development of understanding the relationship between different domains of participation in context is important for traditional assumptions about cultural value which can work to fetter rather than facilitating capacities of self-awareness and efficacy among vulnerable young people in care.

Notes

2. Work has continued, trying to understand and improve what statistics tell us is the poor quality of parenting provided by the State; see, for instance, the Narey Review of Children’s Residential Care Inquiry (2016) or the Education Committee’s report on the mental health and well-being of looked after children (April 2016).
3. A “corporate parent” is the organisation or individual representative of the organisation (such as a social worker) who has the legal responsibility for the young person, in the UK that is most usually the local government.
4. The research design was subject to rigorous review by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leicester; in addition, we worked closely with the Local Authority to ensure that the well-being of the young participants was a priority.
5. The Maxcard provides looked-after young people and their families discounted and free access to a range of both government and commercially provided cultural and leisure facilities around England, http://www.mymaxcard.co.uk/.
6. Sarah is a pseudonym; the names of all research participants have been changed.
7. The role of the “independent visitor” was introduced by the Children Act 1989; their task is “visiting, advising and befriending the child”, section 7(2) (a) (cited in Hurst & Peel, 2013, p. 368).

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