EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION AND CULTURAL VALUE¹

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The articles in this special issue present some of the early findings of Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values (UEP), a 5-year large grant project, which began in 2012 and is part of the AHRC’s Connected Communities programme, receiving supplementary funding from Creative Scotland. The project starts from the proposition that the orientation of cultural policy and state-funded cultural programming towards cultural participation and value is in need of a radical overhaul. We argue that there is an orthodoxy of approach to cultural engagement which is based on a narrow definition (and understanding) of participation, one that focuses on a narrow set of cultural forms and activities and associated cultural institutions but which, in the process, obscures the significance of other forms of cultural participation which are situated locally in the everyday realm.

Drawing together a large interdisciplinary team of researchers, which meshes interests across the humanities, social sciences and the policy sector, UEP’s research seeks to identify and apprehend everyday cultural participation and the values people attach to this, especially in relation to the social sphere. Our aim in doing this is to re-orientate the focus of both academic and policy work on ‘cultural value’ and thereby to cast fresh light on the nature and significance of cultural preferences and activities in the UK in the 21st Century. We can already, part way through the project, point to the consistency of findings across the methods used in our research, which reveal: 1. the rich variety of cultural participation activities, the vast majority of which lies beyond the orbit of State cultural support; 2. the importance of these everyday forms of participation for developing social capital and sustaining social networks, and for defining the parameters of ‘community’.

As Norbert Elias (1998) reflected, working with the concept of the everyday implies the mobilisation of its opposite, which in this case is the ‘official’ framework of cultural participation and value in the UK (Griffiths at al 2008). This can be defined as the largely formal and traditional practices, venues and institutions funded by government through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Following Pierre Bourdieu (1984), this framework can be seen to reflect a series of historical and cultural assumptions about certain tastes and forms of activity being canonised by the State as more valuable than others, and which can act as powerful symbols of social distinction. As Miles and Sullivan (2010, 2012) argue, the operationalisation of this framework by
the State under the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 involved a decontextualisation of cultural value that was accompanied by the mobilisation of a ‘deficit model of participation’ reflecting midde class norms and understandings of what was to count as ‘legitimate’ culture. Here, policies that prioritised access to culture in the name of reducing social exclusion were at same time part of a process of discrimination, marking out and marginalising those people and places that did not associate themselves with established culture as passive, isolated and in need of (remedial) attention (Miles 2013; Gibson, forthcoming). The logics of the ‘social inclusion’ narrative within cultural policy and across cultural practice have recently been extended through discourses of ‘access’ and ‘participation’ into collaboration, co-production and co-curation; although arguably there has not been a real expansion in the cultural activities which are the focus of co-production practices (Gibson and Edwards, this issue).

UEP’s frames of reference in academic research and theory are multiple. Most obviously the project reflects a revival of interest in the study of everyday life and the significance of apparently mundane routines, activities and interactions (Scott 2009), which as the recent special edition of the journal *Sociology* (Neal and Murji eds 2015) on the same subject indicates, shows no sign of abating. Meanwhile most recent accounts of cultural taste and consumption in Anglophone countries and Europe have been developed within, or with reference to, a Bourdieusian framework and as such fix on what Alan Warde (2013) calls the ‘high culture system’ and its commonly accepted transformation by the rise of the ‘cultural omnivore’ (Peterson and Kern 1996). While the notion of omnivorousness brings popular culture into view within this framing, the focus of attention remains on its role in the repertoire of elite cultural practices (see Miles, in this volume).

The influential study *Culture, Class, Distinction* in the UK by Bennett et al (2009), based on the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion Survey, is no exception here. Pointing usefully to the importance of age and life course effects, together with gender

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2 There is a wealth of academic and practice based studies and reports across the arts and cultural sector articulated in these ‘co-production’ terms. In relation to museum practice, for instance, see *The Participatory Museum* (Simon, 2010) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation project *Our Museum: Museums and Communities as active partners* (2012-2015), [http://www.ourmuseum.org.uk/](http://www.ourmuseum.org.uk/)
and ethnicity, alongside and in combination with the role of class, in shaping cultural engagement, it nevertheless pays little detailed attention to the world of ordinary consumption. A second notable absence in this study is its failure to consider the spatial dimensions of participation (Gibson, 2010), in the process reproducing the methodological nationalism that characterises Bourdieu’s own work in Distinction (1984). In contrast, UEP seeks to re-mobilise the central concepts of field, habitus and capital in Bourdieusian theory as a broad theoretical frame through which to explore the dynamics and stakes of everyday participation as a both a relational and a situated process.

The re-inclusion of place as a frame for analysis provides a way of locating participation as a set of processes, relationships, and structures of feeling, which enact, define and discriminate communities (Williams 1978, Savage 2010). It also allows us to consider how cultural and social capital is produced and mobilised contextually through participation (Frow 1995), and how these assets might be translated into value in the vernacular dimension to effect civic capacity and quality of life around alternative value sets (Edensor et al 2010, Gilmore 2013). Our other frame for exploring everyday participation as a situated process derives from an identification of the ways in which ‘community’ and ‘place’ have, since the late nineteenth century, come to operate as central logics in the governance of ‘culture’ (Amin 2005, Osborne & Rose 1999). UEP’s focus on the concept of the cultural ecosystem (see below) is designed to contextualise and examine the impact of these logics on the socio-cultural constructions of places and communities and the relationships between formal and informal participation, both historically and in the present day.

Questions of method and methodology are central to the issue of cultural participation because they simultaneously help define both what it is and how much of it there can be. Here we draw from work in the CRESC³ tradition on the politics of method, which insists that methods need to be understood in terms of their ‘social lives’ (e.g. Law et al 2011); that they are loaded with assumptions about the world in their design, and in the process of their application, help to re-enact it. In the case of data instruments used

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³ The ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change, 2004-14, located at the University of Manchester and the Open University (www.cresc.ac.uk)
in cultural policy, for example, the prioritisation of quantitative methods based on the sample survey - such as the UK government’s national Taking Part survey – involves the reduction of the cultural field to a partial and specific set of measurable indicators that both represent and help to reinforce particular ways of ‘seeing’ participation (see Taylor, this issue and Bunting, Gilmore and Miles, forthcoming).

Accordingly, UEP’s work is set out according to a non-hierarchical, mixed methods design, in which different approaches, offering different lenses and therefore fields of view on the domain of cultural participation, are brought into dialogue with one another (Mason 2006). A set of macro-level histories examining the terms, narratives and assumptions constructing present day notions of participation, value and cultural governance (Belfiore and Gibson eds, forthcoming) is being mobilised alongside the reanalysis of existing participation data (Taylor this volume; Leguina and Miles, forthcoming) to frame an extensive programme of new empirical work in six UK locations. The findings from this research then become the subject of re-investment in a series of community-focused application projects (e.g. Gilmore, forthcoming; Milling and Schaeffer, forthcoming) and, it is intended, will ultimately provide the foundation for a new cross-sector dialogue in cultural research and policy.

Case studies of situated participation are the empirical focal point of the project, where we investigate how participation is articulated by location and by the relations and boundaries within and between places and communities. To do this we use the concept of a ‘cultural ecosystem’: defined as an historically wrought, physically situated assembly of formal and informal cultural resources, participation contexts, practices and communities, which reflect the interplay of local structures of investment, supply and demand, and as such constitute distinct economies of participation. Here we have chosen six contrasting location to work in – Manchester/Salford, Gateshead, Dartmoor, Aberdeen, Peterborough and the Outer Hebrides - framed in the first instance by their ‘official’ profile as more, or less, cultural places based on the ratio of investment in formal cultural provision to rates of formal cultural participation and attendance at the local authority level (for further detail on the geographic focus of work in each of these places see http://www.everydayparticipation.org/eco-systems/).
In each ecosystem the project adopts a largely grounded, inductive approach which begins with scoping exercises, such as community meetings, and is then organised around the same suite of largely qualitative and descriptive methods: local histories of participation, value and governance; longitudinal in-depth life history interviews, probing issues of participation practices and belonging, identity, friendship and places; ethnographies of participation contexts, which have so far included parks, a charity shop (Edwards, forthcoming), social clubs, a village hall (Miles and Ebrey forthcoming), and the participation of young people in care (Gibson and Edwards, this issue); the mapping – from official sources but also research participants’ vernacular maps – of local cultural and leisure assets and participation activities (Gibson and Delrieu, forthcoming); and in some ecosystems, social network analysis of participation communities and cultural intermediaries.

Papers in this first volume (issue 3, September, 2016) of the Special Issue, present and discuss project work that addresses the theoretical and methodological framings for understanding cultural participation and value. Papers in the second issue (Issue 1, March, 2017), which focus more specifically on research in the cultural ecosystem case study locations, will address the vernacular components of cultural value, issues of creative economy and the cultural signatures of place.

First in the current issue, Jill Ebrey’s article provides us with a broad theoretical framing of the notion of ‘the everyday’, in which she unpacks and relates central themes in historical and sociological writing on everyday life. In doing so, she discusses the ways in which the quotidian became a subject of scrutiny and analysis and then a space of political resistance and change. Subsequently, the sociological focus on everyday life made the cultures and experiences of marginalised groups central to its analysis. In documenting this important theoretical background to the UEP project, Ebrey draws us back to our concern with cultural policy and practice by arguing that more recent developments in thinking about the everyday – such as practice theory – offer an important practical tool for understanding the lived experience of participation, and thus for more democratic models of policy-making.
The next three articles provide a snapshot of the multimodality of the UEP project. Reporting on elements of the quantitative, ethnographic and interview-based components of our research, they all reveal some of the variety and richness of people’s everyday cultural participation. Crucially, however, they also show the ways in which these forms of participation are embedded in value systems that work to relegate, obscure or deflect attention from their importance in negotiating personal relationships and shaping social life.

Mark Taylor’s piece reporting on his interrogation of the cultural participation survey *Taking Part* finds that 8.7% of the population is highly engaged with state-supported forms of culture, and that this fraction is particularly well-off, well-educated and white. However, in contrast to the ways in which such findings are generally viewed by the cultural policy and practice community, as a call to arms to get more people ‘engaged’, Taylor finds that the half of the population which has fairly low levels of engagement with state-supported culture is nonetheless busy with everyday culture and leisure activities, such as pubs, shopping, darts, and gardening. In fact only about 11% of the population could be described as ‘disengaged’; that is, detached from mainstream pastimes and social events outside of watching television. As Taylor argues, these findings challenge the basis on which policies seeking to manage cultural and leisure participation are made.

Andrew Miles also finds evidence of a rich world of participation outside the realms of state supported cultural activities, arguing that the domination of survey approaches in research has limited understandings of the everyday cultural field in both sociology and policy. Drawing on in-depth interviews undertaken in UEP’s Aberdeen, Manchester and Gateshead case study locations, Miles explores the content and form of individual ‘participation narratives’ in order to understand how far participation is implicated in various types of boundary work; around age, class and gender in particular. His readings of people’s life stories illuminates that while participation practices are strongly rooted in mundane contexts of friendship, family and the life course, they nevertheless remain charged with social and cultural tensions. The drawing of boundaries around participation may have become more indirect, nuanced and distributed with the demise of the high cultural system but they are particularly
evident privately, in the gendered dynamics of family formation, and in the public sphere, over territorial struggles for identity and belonging in the cultural city.

Lisanne Gibson and Delyth Edwards develop the issue of how participation is bounded by an hierarchical understanding of cultural value, focusing on the particular case of the cultural activities of young people living in care. This is a group whose participation is ‘facilitated’ for them, with the aim that this will effect positively their cultural, educational, emotional and social capital. Gibson and Edwards find that a restrictive conception of cultural value on the part of the facilitators places limits on the activities available, arguing that the development of agency through cultural programmes is constrained by an assumption that young people’s everyday cultural choices lack value and that to promote them (and thereby their agency) would involve risk. Through a discussion of ethnographic research undertaken with young people in Gateshead, this paper explores how different domains of participation are understood by both the facilitators and the facilitated. Gibson and Edwards conclude by considering how these understandings contribute to the development of forms of cultural practice that reveal, recognise, interrogate and challenge the relations that inform participant’s autonomy, as well as the relations that inform the roles of the facilitators themselves.

Finally, Eleonora Belfiore’s article addresses the UEP project’s engagement with the ‘research-policy-practice nexus’ in the cultural sector, through which we are self-reflexively exploring relations in this field as we experience them as researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds and orientations. Belfiore’s contribution to this issue is a first attempt at thinking through some of the project’s aims in this respect. In it she documents the trajectory of one of the initial findings of the UEP project - that only 8% of the population take part in funded cultural activities in any regular manner - (Taylor this issue), to reveal its reception in English cultural policy debates. She argues that while researchers cannot control the use (and misuse) of their data, nevertheless it is still a ‘realistic objective’ for cultural policy researchers to hope and aim for influence on policy, especially if they understand that the influence can be, and is perhaps more likely to be, ‘conceptual’ rather than direct.
Recent work attached to cultural policy studies, such as that connected with the AHRC’s Cultural Value project (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; O’Brien and Oakley 2015), together with studies of regional disparities in arts funding conducted by Stark, Gordon and Powell (2013 and 2014), have begun to highlight more clearly the ways in which the operation of the formal cultural realm is implicated in the making of economic, social and geographical inequalities. Given the association between the possession of established cultural capital and life chances in societies such as the UK (Bennett et al 2009, Scherger and Savage 2010), it has been argued that by focusing on everyday activities we risk neglecting the consequences of unequal access to the arts in divided societies (Crossick 2015). Yet, whilst it remains the case that only a small, affluent minority of the UK population⁴ is regularly engaged in cultural practices which are effectively subsidised by the less affluent majority of non-participants in these same practices, issues of equity loom large for a cultural policy that fails to challenge the status quo. In this context, by reversing the deficit model underlying official cultural policy and starting from what people themselves value about their own everyday participation practices, UEP’s research raises both an epistemological and political challenge to policymakers. It suggests that by focusing on the demand side of culture we are more likely to uncover evidence of resources and assets which could be mobilised to effect the kinds of recalibration – in understandings of value but also in the social relations of participation and production - necessary to accredit and generate engagement with cultural opportunities of all kinds.

⁴ Although Taking Part is not unusual in revealing the white, educated nature of the majority of participants in the cultural activities supported by the State. See e.g. in the USA DiMaggio and Muktar 2007, in the UK more broadly Bennett et al 2009, and in Australia Bennett et al, 1999.
Bibliography


