CULTURAL PARTICIPATION
STORIES OF SUCCESS, HISTORIES OF FAILURE

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

THIS EDITORIAL INTRODUCES A SPECIAL EDITION OF CONJUNCTIONS THAT EXPLORES HOW CULTURAL PARTICIPATION POLICIES, PROJECTS, AND PRACTICES COULD BE IMPROVED THROUGH RECOGNISING THE PERVASIVENESS OF PAST FAILURES. IT INTRODUCES CURRENT POLICY DEBATES ON CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND POSITS THAT THE DOMINANT FOCUS ON 'CULTURAL DEFICITS' AND 'NON-PARTICIPANTS' RATHER THAN ON HOW ACTIVITIES ARE CURRENTLY FUNDED HAS RESULTED IN A FAILURE TO INCREASE THE NUMBER AND DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN STATE SUBSIDISED CULTURAL ACTIVITIES. IT FURTHER SUGGESTS THAT A CULTURE OF EVALUATING SUCCESS, RATHER THAN CRITICALLY REFLECTING ON FAILURE, RESULTS IN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION POLICIES AND PROJECTS THAT REPLICATE PAST FAILURES AND MAINTAIN AN INEQUITABLE STATUS QUO.

THIS SPECIAL EDITION ATTEMPTS TO CHALLENGE EXISTING NARRATIVES OF UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS BY OFFERING ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES THAT CONSIDER FAILURE FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND AT DIFFERENT POINTS IN THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION POLICIES AND PROJECTS. IN DOING SO IT HIGHLIGHTS THE EXTENT TO WHICH SUCCESS AND FAILURE COEXIST AND THE RICHNESS OF INSIGHT THAT COMES FROM CONSIDERING BOTH. THIS MATTERS BECAUSE IT IS ONLY SUCH OPEN AND HONEST CRITICAL REFLECTION THAT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO FACILITATE THE SOCIAL LEARNING NEEDED FOR THOSE WHO CAN EXERT THE MOST POWER IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXTENT OF THE STRUCTURAL CHANGE REQUIRED FOR CULTURAL PARTICIPATION TO BE SUPPORTED MORE EQUITABLY.

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PROFESSOR DAVID STEVENSON IS DEAN OF ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND MANAGEMENT AT QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY, EDINBURGH. HIS RESEARCH IS CONCERNED WITH TWO DISTINCT, BUT INTERRELATED AREAS OF ENQUIRY. THE FIRST FOCUSES ON RELATIONS OF POWER AND THE PRODUCTION OF VALUE WITHIN THE CULTURAL SECTOR. THE SECOND SEEKS TO PROVIDE INSIGHT AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE CONTINGENT AND CONTEXT DEPENDENT NATURE OF ORGANISATIONAL SUCCESS IN THE ARTS AND CULTURAL SECTOR. DAVID IS AN ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE UK CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE AND A MEMBER OF SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR CULTURE, WHICH ADVISES THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ON THE DELIVERY OF ITS CULTURAL STRATEGY.
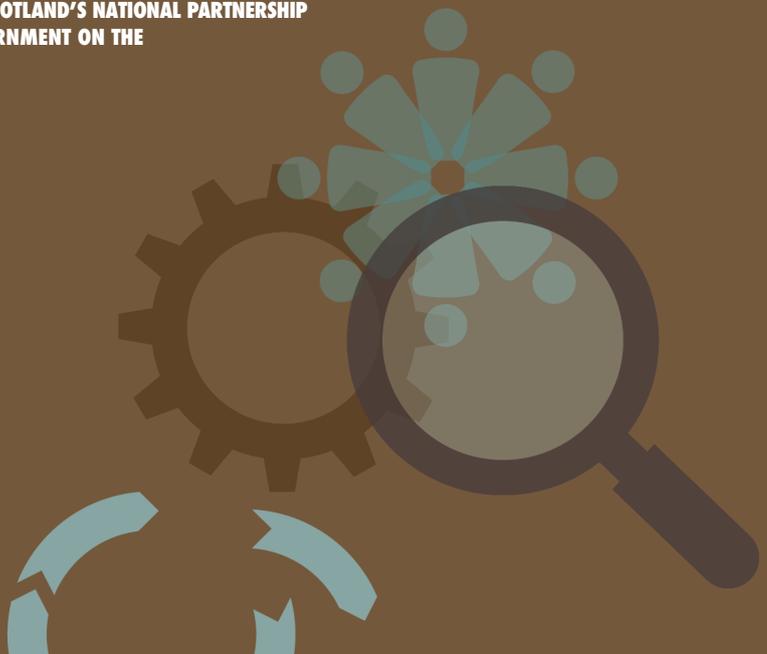
This special edition of *Conjunctions* is part of a two-year, UK based research project,[1] which has considered how cultural participation policies, projects and practices might be improved through recognising the pervasiveness of past failures. Our research began with the observation that despite the ubiquity of policies and projects to address the 'participation deficit' (Miles & Gibson, 2017) the same 'problem' appears to endure in regard to the diversity of people who engage equitably with state supported cultural organisations and activities (Warwick Commission, 2015). For example, in England the headline rate of engagement with such activity has changed little despite twenty years of policy intervention (Neelands et al., 2015). Likewise, in Scotland, the recently published cultural strategy indicates that diversifying the cultural sector remains a priority (Scottish Government, 2020). Indeed, despite all the policy rhetoric, the European commission has claimed that Europe is becoming a "less cultural continent" (European Commission, 2013).

The idea that cultural 'non-participation' is a 'problem' requiring state intervention has a well-established history in literature (Stevenson, 2013) much of which draws on discursive logics that are a legacy of the Enlightenment in Europe (Stevenson, Balling & Kann-Rasmussen, 2015). But the expectation that governments, and in particular the cultural organisations to which they provide subsidy, should be responding to this 'problem' has grown, particularly since the turn of the millennium (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019). Internationally, numerous studies have sought to identify patterns of cultural participation, primarily through quantitative data collection, in regard to who is taking part in certain types of cultural activities (see, for example, UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). In response to the findings from such work, many governments have committed to increasing rates of participation with subsidised organisations amongst what are often labelled as 'under-represented groups' of 'cultural non-participants' (Stevenson, 2019).

However, the data that supports the discourse of 'deficits' and 'non-participants' have been problematised by those who have conducted detailed analysis of the breadth of people's 'everyday participation'. Such work demonstrates the value that people place in their own active participation in a much broader range of creative practices than are normally captured by cultural participation surveys (see, for example, Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016; Ebrey, 2016; Matarasso, 2019; Miles & Gibson, 2017). Rather than a policy focus on increasing participation in those activities that are currently funded, the findings from such studies support an asset-based approach to participation, that recognises and resources the cultural lives people already have. Rather than a deficit, those shaping policy should recognise the abundance of different forms of cultural participation that exist in our societies, for "there is no problem if we adopt a notion of cultural participation that extends beyond the arts into spheres of everyday creativity and participation" (Belfiore, 2016). Such perspectives have increasingly coalesced around calls for cultural policy to better support the creation and preservation of a 'cultural democracy' (Gross & Wilson, 2018; Jeffers & Moriarty, 2018).

However, the deficit approach to cultural policymaking remains prevalent and the cultural participation preferences of some continue to be valued and supported to a greater degree than others (Jancovich, 2017). As such, the majority of public funding in many countries continues to support the same organisations that have been subsidised for years but whose commitment to 'inclusion' and 'widening access' is performed through numerous 'outreach' and 'audience development' projects (Hayes & Slater, 2002; Kawashima, 2006; Kemp & Poole, 2016; Lindelof, 2015). Yet as there is little evidence that this activity has made a significant difference to the constituency of audiences at these organisations (Taylor, 2016; Warwick Commission, 2015), it is not unreasonable to suggest that many subsidised cultural organisations are not only failing to diversify whom they are engaging with but also failing to learn from the failings of previous cultural participation initiatives.

Yet despite this there is an ever-burgeoning body of evaluation reports and impact case studies that seek to 'make the case' for existing recipients of cultural subsidies by celebrating the 'success' of these types of cultural participation projects. However, such evaluations will often measure 'success' against a range of criteria that have little to do with dismantling the structural inequities in cultural participation, which is ostensibly the ambition of such activities. Indeed, our current research has shown that the criteria for judging success and failure in such work are most commonly framed in relation to the number (and not diversity) of people who take part; the immediately perceived benefits to those who take part (rather than consideration of those who do not take part); and the ability of the artist or organisation to gain subsequent funding to continue their work (rather than the progress towards creating a more equitable cultural sector).

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Such evaluations, that primarily report success against measurable short term outcomes, place their "emphasis only upon technical learning [that] may not lessen, but in fact contribute to a continued lack of policy success; that is, repeating over and over again the errors of the past" (Howlett, 2012, p. 550). Many of our interviewees spoke about the way in which they would ensure evaluation reports were 'framed' so as to present their work in as positive a manner as possible. Evaluating in this way is arguably more of an exercise in public relations than a process of critically reflective learning undertaken to inform and improve the ways that policies support the cultural lives of every citizen. This is unsurprising given the extent to which the industry of evaluation in the cultural sector has contributed to failure being seen as individualised blame (Bilton, 2019). Our own research shows how the fear of being blamed for failures, or being perceived as a failure professionally, reduces risk-taking, encourages uncritical reporting, and ultimately limits the capacity for 'social learning' (May, 1992) to take place, without which structural change is far less likely. For if cultural professionals keep telling themselves publicly that they are delivering success, they will never acknowledge the scale of change required to create a more equitable sector.

Our research project has been informed by theories about the necessity and value of recognising, understanding and learning from failure in policy making (Fung & Wright, 2003). Over the course of a year we engaged with policy makers, evaluation consultants, participation workers, cultural practitioners and participants through a series of eight workshops, over one hundred online survey responses and seventy in-depth qualitative interviews. The aim of our work has been to encourage more open, honest and critical reflection by both those who fund and those who deliver cultural participation projects. We argue that this must begin with explicit acknowledgement that outcomes are rarely, if ever, outright successes or failures but contain elements of each (McConnell, 2010). Something that is made more complex by the extent to which different stakeholders, with differing value systems, will construct 'success' and 'failure' in different ways. Therefore, "neither success nor failure is absolute. One does not make sense without the other. Rather success and failure are relationally constituted" (McCann & Ward, 2015, p. 828). As such, policy learning must consider both and instead of seeking 'evidence' we believe that policy and project evaluations should help to foster understanding.

There is a growing interest in narrative approaches to evaluation in the cultural sector, which recognise the potential for stories to persuade more effectively than data (Meyrick, Barnett, Robinson, & Russell, 2019). However, despite criticising advocacy research, Meyrick's article and its focus on 'persuasion' still speaks to the value of narratives in helping to 'make the case' for existing approaches to cultural policy and state subsidies. In so doing it overlooks questions of power in regard to who creates, who tells and who receives the narrative. In contrast, Bilton (2019) offers an alternative analysis of narrative in cultural policy, recognising its potential as a process of collective sense-making, when informed by a wide range of perspectives and embracing dissent, critical reflection and relativism. Our research therefore attempts to challenge existing narratives of unqualified success by capturing alternative narratives that disrupt the taken for granted knowledge upon which current cultural participation policies and practices are sustained and reproduced.

What we found was that many cultural professionals were initially extremely uncomfortable in talking about failure in relation to their work. It was seen as too negative, too absolute, too critical a term for them to use publicly. Some even questioned whether it was even possible for a cultural project to fail, as you can always find something of value within it. However, it was also apparent that there was an appetite for a more honest dialogue, both among peers and between artists, the organisations in which they work and their funders. What they were less clear on was how and where they might do this. Few of those we spoke to could point to examples of where failures were publicly acknowledged, discussed and learnt from. It was clear that the pressure to 'celebrate success' and share 'best practice' was crowding out the opportunity to talk about failures, to reflect on why they had occurred and to change practice accordingly.

Academia appears to have fared no better. There is a scarcity of literature that explicitly considers policy failure and even less that specifically considers failure in regard to cultural policy. As such, this special edition aims to fill a gap in the research on policy learning within the cultural sector by asking authors to explicitly reflect on the failures within the policies, projects and practices they are examining. Demonstrating the international nature of this agenda, with articles from Canada, Denmark, France, England and Panama, each paper considers failure from a different perspective and at different points in the design and implementation of cultural participation policies. Likewise, they variously define participation as taking part in cultural activity through to taking part in policy making. In each case we encourage the reader to consider not only what the criteria for success and failure are but also who decides on these criteria and whose voices are heard in the narratives in order to address what Howlett (2012) suggests are the fundamental questions for policy analysis, namely: Who learns? Learns what? To what effect?

The first three articles explore whose voices are heard in cultural policymaking and evaluation in Canada, Panama and England. The papers ask important questions about what makes for meaningful participation in the policy process, highlighting examples of more tokenistic practices that do little to change the status quo. Reflecting on how participatory approaches may help or hinder policy implementation, the authors of the first two papers share a concern with the ways in which relations of power can significantly influence the success or failure of participatory decision-making processes, while the third highlights the way in which some participant narratives are absent from the dominant discourses of success.

The Politics of Participation in Cultural Policy Making by Malaika Cunningham and Elysia Lechelt explores the gap between the rhetoric of citizen engagement and the actual implementation of 'participatory policy-making' initiatives in the City of Calgary, Canada. They critically examine the city's 'co-produced' Cultural Plan, using a framework based on theories drawn from deliberative democracy. Reflecting on the appropriation of the language of participation, they consider the extent to which the plan's development process has both succeeded and failed in creating meaningful participation in Canada's third largest city.

The next article, *Symbolic implementation of cultural participation programmes: the case of Panama's 500-year fund* by Claire Nevache and Javier Stanziola, explores the implications of managing participatory processes where a fund was created to celebrate the 500-year anniversary of the country. The paper explores how both the institutional frameworks and the conflicting interests of different agents may create "goal ambiguity" and discusses how participatory approaches may address them. The authors challenge the tendency in evaluation to make judgements on success and failure that are based only on socio-economic output models rather than processes of engagement, which they argue, may lead to conflict resolution. In so doing they raise important questions about the nature of consent and dissent in participatory approaches.

Mark Rimmer's article, *Too big to fail? The framing and interpretation of 'success'/'failure' in cultural participation policy*, explores cultural participation through an engagement with matters of discourse. In particular, it focuses on the ways press coverage, policy documents and participant accounts framed matters of 'failure'/'success' in relation to England's version of the Venezuelan *El Sistema* programme. The analysis reveals a number of patterned ways in which influential voices discursively frame this initiative's brand of cultural action. It then shows how the marginalised voices of young project participants challenge dominant accounts and reveal some of the problematic assumptions embedded in them. The discussion concludes with a reflection on the links between the values embedded in this model of cultural participation, the enduring character of 'civilising mission' discourses in cultural policy and the ideological commitments of contemporary neoliberalism.

The next three articles focus on participation in relation to artistic practice, with examples from Denmark and England. In each case the authors have had an embedded relationship within the projects they are analysing, as coordinator or critical friend. What they share is an interest not just in what people are being invited to participate in but how and why this participation is being encouraged. All three papers consider the relationship between the policy imperative and the artistic impetus as drivers for participation, and the inherent failures that this can create. However, each also demonstrates how success and failure can mean different things and have different implications for different stakeholders, be they policymakers, artists, participants or the communities in which the projects take place.

Lawrence Bradby and Judith Stewart's *Drumming up an audience: When spectacle becomes failure* examines public art works in which the participants are contributors or spectators rather than co-designers. They site their study within the broad field of experiential work that creates moments expected to live in the imagination long after they have gone. Their case study of *The History Train*, from the British Art Show in Norwich, examines the implications of bringing together local tradition and contemporary art in order to create a large-scale spectacle. They argue that the myth of participation is created through narratives about the large numbers that such events create. However, they argue that they inherently fail as a transformative participatory experience and by appropriating traditions and denying agency to those involved they merely legitimise the perpetuation of inequalities within the existing art world.

Ditte Vilstrup Holm's *Green Aspirations and (Un)sustainable Detours* outlines key concepts in participatory arts theory related to the role of the artist. It raises questions about the tension between the very different aims of creating quality of engagement and quality of artistic product. With reference to *Istedgade Green Spots and Sustainable Detours*, a participatory public art project intended to create community green spaces in Copenhagen, the article offers a reflection on the difficulties faced in generating the consensus the artistic team needed in order to realise their vision of creating a greener environment for the community to live in. Through this experience the author explores the implications of having a pre-set agenda that may not be as important to the participants as the artist might imagine. In so doing the article investigates the role of vision, activism and

'creative agonism' in participatory processes as well as the difficulties of defining success and failure in such projects.

In *Talking, walking and making in Cheetham Park: Reflecting on everyday participation as a method and the failure of an interdisciplinary commons*, Abigail Gilmore and Luciana Lang present a case study of a collaboration in a North Manchester park, between the University of Manchester, Manchester Jewish Museum, local residents, park users and museum visitors. This project involved academic researchers and an artist-in-residence developing a range of participatory methods summarised as 'talking, walking and making'. The article reflects critically on why the project failed to produce its intended outcomes, revealing dissonance between the intentions and expectations of (artist-led) socially engaged practice, (academic) research, institutional knowledge (the Jewish Museum, the local authority who manage the park) and the involvement (and absence) of community participants.

The final two articles come from two researchers who are also artists in the field of participatory arts. While the first reflects on Sarah Harper's own practice in France, Sophie Hope's final piece in this edition is based on a series of performative interviews with social artists in the UK. They both explore the inherent tensions in the role of the participatory artist, operating across the fields of art, facilitation and social work. While the first focuses on the participant voice the latter focuses on the voice of the artist, both of which can offer perspectives that are often missing in policy making and evaluation. What both demonstrate is the potential agency that may be created for participants and artists by acknowledging failure in practices and the value (rather than problem) that may be seen in non-participation as a political act.

Sarah Harper's *Redefining failure: The value of refusal in participatory arts practice in the Paris banlieue* challenges the idea that non-participation is a problem to be overcome by policy makers and artists. She examines her own practice as a socially engaged artist in Paris, working on place-making projects aimed at community cohesion and resilience, which have been considered 'successful' in engaging many people. However here she reflects more deeply on those who did not participate, and asks why that might be. In so doing she re-appraises common assumptions of what 'good participation' looks like, to include the invisible or the conditional. Rejecting the suggestion that such projects should be concerned with getting people to 'participate better' she argues that moments of refusal or rejection may be key to understanding how actions commonly labelled as non-participation might be better understood as eloquent, constructive and valuable acts of citizen participation in something else.

Finally, Sophie Hope's *Unfinished business: Performative Interviews as a method for expressing failure in the socially engaged art job* uses the concept of the individualisation to investigate the barriers to talking about failure within the field of socially engaged art. Highlighting the professionalised, freelance funded form of labour that this sector has become increasingly populated with, the paper supports the argument that the precarious nature of such work creates an imperative to present the work in a positive light, leading to a culture of silence and personalised absorption of failure when things start to go wrong. But far from being fearful of failure, Hope argues it is through reflecting on failure that the freelance artist can regain their sense of agency. As such, she proposes a new methodology for artistic self-reflection that allows for more honest acknowledgement of failure to be shared in a network of peers.

Collectively, this body of work offers insights and understandings about the presence of failure in cultural participation policies, projects and practices. In particular, they highlight the extent to which success and failure coexist and the richness of insight that comes from considering both. Indeed, many of the papers show how putting as much effort into recognising and reflecting on failure as is currently expended on evidencing success may support both artists and participants in gaining greater agency. As such, we want our research to act as a catalyst for the creation of new narratives about cultural participation work that are less concerned with 'making the case' and therefore more candid about the failures that have occurred. To this end we are currently working with the UK Centre for Cultural Value to encourage artists and organisations to openly share their stories of failure. In doing so we hope to continue to facilitate the social learning that needs to take place before those who can exert the most power in the cultural sector acknowledge the extent of the structural change required for cultural participation to be supported more equitably.

For more information or to share a story of failure from your own practice, contact LJancovich@leeds.ac.uk or DStevenson@qmu.ac.uk.

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