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COMMENTARY

The Nature and Value of Cultural Policy Research for Early Career Researchers

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The last five years have seen an increase in the number of UK-based funding opportunities for early career researchers in cultural policy. The prioritisation of public engagement by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) speaks to the public dimension of cultural policy research, and has been realised in several initiatives aimed primarily at early career researchers. The Understanding Government and Engaging with Government schemes and the Collaborative Skills Development (CSD) Award are all cases in point. The first two specifically focused on opening up a dialogue between researchers and policy-makers, and two-thirds of the funding for the student-led strand of the CSD scheme (2013-14) went to projects that emphasised co-production and collaboration, in line with the AHRC's objective to attend to the wider impact of arts and humanities research in a policy context.

The workshop series we organised was one such project¹. Called Co-producing Cultural Policy, it was primarily driven by the disparity between policy-making processes and academic research, particularly at the early career researcher level. Given the observation that policy research should be undertaken "not as a detached academic exercise but as a process co-produced with practitioners and their 'case work'" (Blackman, 2013), co-production was chosen as the theme of two AHRC-funded workshops for postgraduates and early career researchers at the Universities of Leeds and Warwick. Bringing together universities, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England, these workshops explored collaborative approaches to the formulation of cultural policy. They identified and addressed two skills gaps in particular: developing cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, and framing co-produced research in response to policy challenges.

The first workshop focused on cultural policy decision-making and the second on cultural value - issues that were topical and resonated with the target audience of postgraduates and early career researchers. Within the last 10 years, the introduction of collaborative doctoral funding has led to new research practices, many of which raise questions about cultural democracy and participatory decision-making. Likewise, the AHRC's Cultural Value Project funding (2012-2014) provided post-doctoral opportunities for early career researchers to engage with concepts relating to the value of cultural engagement. Given the nature of cultural policy research, workshop participants spanned a range of academic disciplines, including heritage and museum studies, media and communications, art, education, economics sociology and politics.

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The workshops encouraged partnership building and peer-networking, and were structured around the relationship between research, public engagement and policy-making. For early career researchers, the networking aspect of the project was particularly valuable: it allowed participants to develop academic and sector-based contacts, and to begin to position themselves in the field. Panel debates that facilitated reciprocal dialogue between participants and invited speakers proved very successful and led to further conversations and, in several cases, follow-up meetings. The links between organisational processes, grass-roots activities and the evidence base for cultural value emerged as important issues in these debates. An overarching concern in both workshops was whether academic work was useful to policy. The majority of funded research projects currently highlight knowledge exchange and transfer as key components, as well as impact, which Research Councils UK defines as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy' (Research Councils UK, 2014). Participants were, therefore, interested in exploring strategies for co-production, partly in order to develop relationships with non-academic partners. The dynamics of these partnerships are significant, especially when the goal of the research is to inform the policy context. Recent work in this area has noted the problem of resistance to research and measures of value based on pre-existing policy objectives (see Williamson, Cloonan and Frith, 2011). However, some at the workshops articulated a desire for alternative models, derived from bottom-up processes. For these participants, the idea of co-production was a potential mechanism for fostering alternative decision-making processes.

The project, *How Should Decisions about Heritage be Made?*, funded by the AHRC under the Connected Communities programme, is exemplary in this regard. The project's aim was described in the first workshop – this was to collaboratively develop research that would produce insights into heritage and decision-making, and challenge the means by which decisions about heritage are made. Recognising the sticking points and exclusions in current practices was the basis for beginning to develop new decision-making processes to reshape understandings of heritage. Action research methods established how and in what ways people interact, and how the boundaries between heritage and other aspects of daily, social and political life are delineated. While these interventions related to the heritage sector, the project raised wider questions about decision-making and provided participants with pointers to consider when developing their own research approaches.

This special issue, dedicated to early career researchers, reflects on some of the questions that characterised both Co-producing Cultural Policy workshops. These are summarised in the following paragraphs.

As the description of the project above outlines, strategies for engagement and approaches to participation were among the key concerns and challenges identified by those who attended the workshops. **Novak-Leonard, O'Malley and Truong** investigate the topic of arts participation in terms of the tools commonly used to measure and quantify it. The authors' study of the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, the main source of arts participation data in the USA, assesses its inadequacies as regards ethnic minorities. Many of the arts activities that one particular community engaged in are not accommodated by the survey, which defines arts within a narrow and potentially elitist frame. The problem of exclusion is also addressed in **Morgner's** article about cultural diversity in the visual arts, which uses several biennial events as case studies to test and challenge the theory that these show bias towards specific cultural trends.

Cultural value, and the nature of cultural value, was another central theme of the workshops. The educational and therapeutic benefits of the arts and culture are discussed by **Neal** who analyses the restorative value of engagement with the historical environment.

She emphasises its positive impact on the wellbeing of community archaeology participants, and establishes the need for further research in this area. Her project, which was commissioned by the Heritage Lottery Fund, provides an example of early career researchers being encouraged to engage with communities and to work in cooperation with cultural policy agencies.

Other contributors focus on the economic value of culture, especially in the creative professions. **Phillips** reflects on the lack of regulations for intellectual property in the game sector, and on the consequent informal strategies that professionals from the industry have developed to protect their work and confront the problem of cloning; **Woronkiewicz** studies the professional life of artists in the USA before and after the Great Recession of 2008-2009. Using cross-sectional data, she explains how the American creative sector responded to the crisis and how it affected artists' work. Finally, **Kelly and Champion** examine the policy definition of screen talent, as compared with the multiplicity of working processes in the screen industries, and argue for more complex definitions of terms across the creative economy.

These nuanced and varied research approaches span a range of contexts in the cultural and creative sectors, and offer insights into some of the most significant issues currently facing cultural policy. The value of these researchers' contributions is demonstrated in the variety of their empirical approaches, which range from quantitative and qualitative data collection to critical policy analysis. Their different methodologies explore the various ways in which academic research sheds light on new and existing concerns in the field. For early career researchers the challenge and the opportunity are to make the most of dedicated funding initiatives and to find effective strategies to engage, and develop sustained collaborations, with those individuals or organisations that their research addresses.

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Note

¹ The workshops were co-organised between the authors and a long-standing policy practitioner, Leila Jancovich (Leeds Beckett University).