

The role of arts and culture in addressing poverty and social exclusion

Professor Morag McDermont (Professor of Socio-Legal Studies, University of Bristol Law School)

Dr Eva Elliott (Honorary Research Fellow, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Data and Methods, Cardiff University)

1 Background

Both contributors were involved in a five-year research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 'Productive Margins: Regulating *for* Engagement.'¹ Professor McDermont as Principal Investigator and Dr Elliott as a Co-investigator. The primary aim was to explore the question: How can we design regulatory regimes that begin from the capabilities of communities at the margins, finding ways of powerfully supporting the knowledge and passions of citizens? The programme involved academic researchers from the universities of Bristol and Cardiff and community organisations in Bristol and south Wales (South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC) and the 3Gs Community Development Trust in the north Merthyr Tydfil). Through the Productive Communities Research Forum (a multi-disciplinary collaboration working together with the seven community organisations) seven research projects were co-produced as a way of seeing regulatory systems from the bottom up.

Dr Elliott was also the Principal Investigator on a three-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), 'Representing Communities: Developing the Creative Power of People to Improve Health and Wellbeing.'² The aim of this project was to establish how community representations produced through creative arts practices (e.g. story-telling, performance, visual art) could be used as forms of evidence to inform health-related policy and service development. The case studies were rooted in five areas across

¹ <https://productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>

² <http://representingcommunities.co.uk/>

the UK: Butetown in Cardiff, North Merthyr Tydfil, Hodgehill in Birmingham, Dennistoun in Glasgow and Cromarty in the Highlands and Islands.

Both projects were part of the AHRC-led Connected Communities Programme,³ and involved community organisations (and communities themselves) in co-producing different aspects of the research (design, data production, analysis) and dissemination processes.

Dr Elliott led 'Strong Communities, Healthier People',⁴ one of Cardiff Universities' Flagship engagement projects which ended in December 2017 . As part of this Dr Elliott also led one of the Fusion projects in the first two years, *From Fort to Pit to Port*, leading to the creation of Cardiff University's Cultural Participation Research Network which currently has about 120 active members involving university researchers, people working in arts and heritage, and community organisations.⁵

Together we have accumulated a wealth of experience on the role of arts and heritage in addressing issues associated with poverty and social exclusion. Our evidence is primarily based on the value of arts and culture as part of a research process (not just in terms of the production and consumption of cultural products), which may also have an impact in terms of social action. All our community partners are rooted in communities that experience poverty or social marginalisation of some kind.

2 How effective has the Welsh Government been in improving participation in and access to culture for people in poverty?

Our research has facilitated engagement with arts and culture in a number of ways:

- Through networks or forums to create spaces for reflection, innovation and relationship building
- Through co-production of the research process
- Through the co-production of dissemination

There are however, profound barriers for community members to participate in any new arts or research project, including:

³ <https://connected-communities.org/>

⁴ <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/strong-communities-healthier-people>

⁵ <https://wiserd.ac.uk/research/research-projects/cultural-participation-research-network>

- a) Time. People living in poverty rarely have the time to participate in activities that appear, at first hand, to have little relevance to their everyday lives. If out of work, they may have obligations associated with job seeking and related training. Others may also have more than one low paid job, and many have caring responsibilities.
- b) Money. People in poverty rarely have the finance required to cover incidental costs such as transport, childcare, out-of-home food.
- c) Transport. Getting to places can be a problem, particularly in rural or post-industrial areas where there may be distance to travel.
- d) Fear/unfamiliarity. For some anything to do with 'art', 'culture', heritage, can seem alienating and 'not for them'. The power of art is not always apparent and can be seen as a way of creating distance. Much depends on how arts and cultural organisations (or artists themselves) reach out to audiences, or how these encounters are mediated.
- e) Resentment. People in marginalised communities are used to short-time projects being parachuted in with little positive legacy. There is a parallel response to researchers who collect their data and disappear. They feel that they are being exploited to tick boxes or develop somebody else's agenda or CV.

In Productive Margins we worked directly with community organisations that had deep contextual knowledge of the people they worked with. All were grassroots organisations created to address particular concerns or to improve the circumstances and wellbeing of people they represented. They were place-based, community anchor organisations that emerged from the community, for the community. These organisations were expert in anticipating how the processes of working with arts based research may or may not work.

In Representing Communities, the researchers spent time connecting with different groups of people in the case study areas. Arts interventions emerged rather than being imposed.

2.1 Creating networks or forums to create spaces for reflection, innovation and relationship building

Networks and forums can create spaces in which people from different sectors (cultural, academic and community) can begin to understand each other and to identify productive ways of working together. It takes time for these networks/forums to break down barriers as the sectors have different terminologies, interests, agendas, capacities and resources. However, networks/forums can provide the spaces for reflection that drive innovation, provide ways of sharing resources and facilitate productive ways of addressing common concerns.

2.1.1 *Productive Communities Research Forum*

The Research Forum was predominantly a space to bring academics and community partners together, enabling academic expertise to be in dialogue with expertise-by-experience as equal partners to examine the possibilities for redesigning regulatory processes. The day-long Forum meetings provided opportunities to experiment with arts-based research practices as way of generating new ways of doing research, reflecting on how arts could be brought in, ideally at the very early stages of design, into the research process of each project. All the working groups that emerged from this process involved arts practitioners in a variety of ways to create the research projects. Embedding arts practice in co-production was a critical innovation in enabling those traditionally excluded from knowledge generation to become key knowledge producers. As a consequence, new ways of thinking, seeing and knowing emerged.

From the outset it was recognised that buy-in and commitment from the community organisations could not be assumed. Becoming involved in a research programme with no clear final outputs, outcomes or benefits for the organisations or the communities they represented was high risk. Participation in the research programme was funded with remuneration to the organisations and resourcing engagement was a feature of the Productive Margins programme throughout.

2.12 Cultural Participation Research Network

The CPRN was created out of the Fusion⁶ programme based in Cardiff and Merthyr. The initial project, *From Fort to Pit to Port*, involved the Communities First areas of Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown (BRG) and Ely and Caerau in Cardiff and North Merthyr Tydfil. In all areas Communities First activities were delivered by community anchor organisations (BRG: South Riverside Community Development Trust; Ely and Caerau: Action in Caerau and Ely (ACE), and in North Merthyr Tydfil: the 3Gs Community Development Trust). Arts and Heritage partners were numerous and included: National Museum Wales (particularly St Fagans National Museum of History), the Glamorgan and Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT), Glamorgan Archives, the Millennium Centre, Literature Wales, and Head for Arts. *From Fort to Pit to Port* was an unusual project as, first, it was university (rather than Local Authority) led and second, it involved communities living at some distance from each other. It is our belief that the latter was a strength in that it connected these communities and, through the activities, realised heritage and cultural connections as well as differences. Following Fusion, many of the partners wanted the partnership to continue. We now have around 120 university, cultural and community partners which meet quarterly and is usually hosted by a community or cultural partner. New partnerships continue to evolve (eg most recently the National Trust and the newly funded Caerau heritage project based in ACE) and we are frequently asked to host events (eg from Westminster's All Party Parliamentary Group on arts and health and wellbeing to discuss the report in relation to parallel developments in Wales⁷). The network receives a small amount of money from the Cardiff University led *Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods* (WISERD), to cover costs, and there are intentions to extend the network beyond the Cardiff Capital Region to include other parts of Wales.

As this network is demand-led there is no remuneration for partners to participate. It is possible that money to fund deeper community participation (ie residents) will be sought in the future.

⁶ At the time it was called the Pioneer Programme

⁷ http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf

2.2 Arts based co-produced research

Here we provide a number of examples; others are mentioned on the research websites (see footnotes, p1).

2.2.1 *Productive Margins*

PM innovated in the co-production of artist briefs and artist contracts and in the involvement of artists at the earliest stages of research co-design. Artists often participated as part of the research team and were seen to be knowledge producing rather than simply knowledge communicating.

Each project could call upon a central pot of funding to bring in artists as collaborators in the research. In some projects researchers had existing relationships with artists through which they involved community members. In these cases, it was clear that developing those relationships further would be preferable to instigating new, high-risk artist relationships within short-term projects. In others, however, projects developed collaborative open calls to involve professional artists in the role of community co-researchers.

Mapping, Making and Mobilising Merthyr

The artists involved were ones that the researchers (Professor Gabrielle Ivinson and Professor Emma Renold) had long-standing relationships. The research included a series of twelve arts-based workshops designed by sound, visual and filmmaking artists and offered to young people in a local youth centre and a school. Through working with artists, young people found new ways to express and reflect on their experiences of growing up in Merthyr. The workshops also facilitated the creation of a new film – ‘Graphic Moves’⁸ – featuring artistic outputs created in the workshops. The artworks celebrated young people’s relationships with their place, its people, and its landscape. Towards the end of the project researchers, artists and young people and workers from the Youth centre made a film showing what the centre meant to them in responding to some of the feelings of anger they experience in everyday life.⁹

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVVkxmva3w>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVVkxmva3w>

Following interviews with young people, in which some young women discussed everyday sexism and gender-based violence, one of the researchers (ER) worked with six young women at Pen-Y-Dre High School around such issues during weekly 'Relationship Matters' lunch-clubs. The young women organised school assemblies, created artwork for exhibitions, completed a public action (in collaboration with Citizens Cymru Wales) on sexual harassment/everyday sexism by delivering a message (via Valentine's Day cards) to Assembly Members in Cardiff, and appeared on the radio and television. The work was key to strengthening the education section of the ground-breaking 'Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence' Act.

Life-chances

This project examined the needs of low-income families in modern urban settings, seeking to enable communities to imagine how community needs could be met inside and outside of existing regulatory frameworks. Residents and workers from South Riverside in Cardiff and from the Single Parent Action Network in Bristol collectively commissioned artists Close and Remote to co-produce the project. Methods included:

- fictional characterisation for a collaboratively-written novel: participants developed fictional characters based on their own factual stories of life on low income.
- jewellery making, created a supportive environment for diverse participants (some with limited or no English language) to talk about fictional characters and so participate in a more equal way.
- The Game of Life Chances: based on an adaption of 'transactional analysis' the Game, enacted in public places, allowed people to inhabit different characters from the novel in a playful way.
- Visual deconstruction of political propaganda. The participants worked with the artists to de-construct the Coalition Government's 'Life Chances' imagery and to re-envision this with different family forms.

The novel is published and available on Amazon.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Chances-Remote-Poulter-Sophie-Mellor/dp/1527203743>

2.22 Representing Communities

In north Merthyr Tydfil we worked directly with local schools and different groups of people to challenge negative media and policy images and stereotypes. The researcher, Dr Ellie Byrne, co-designed a number of projects working with materials with which different age-groups felt comfortable. Artists were brought in to work alongside with residents to produce stories, songs, photography, film, and memory jars. Films included a response by young people to the Welsh Government's own animation of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act¹¹ and a film by older people about the importance of the community centre in bringing people together.¹² A group of young people were also trained up by a professional photographer to create photographs of how they saw their community. Artistic outputs were displayed and performed at Theatr Soar and the Redhouse and attracted over 200 people.

2.23 *Trek to Connect*

Trek to Connect (part of the Fusion programme) was inspired by, and built on a project, with a group of unemployed men living in North Merthyr Tydfil. As part of a project aimed at getting people engaged with the outdoor environment the men's group at the 3Gs were introduced to 'Geocaching' (an outdoor physical activity using mobile GPS devices to track local 'caches') through which they created a heritage trail around Cyfarthfa Castle. They noticed that the trail attracted many visitors – putting Merthyr in the spotlight. With additional funding from Cardiff University this was developed when they came together with groups of people from Butetown, Riverside, Grangetown, Caerau and Ely and with museums, archive and archaeological Trust partners. Together they developed a number of local trails as well as creating a 11-cache trail from Merthyr to Abercynon, aimed at re-discovering, recognising and showcasing the history and heritage that Cardiff and Merthyr share. The trail went live in July 2016 and the men from the 3Gs maintain it to this day. *Trek to Connect* involved people of all ages from all local areas, including a group of young people in danger of exclusion from school. Accredited training in archiving skills was provided alongside the development of trails.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1c9Ko8bZD4>

¹² <http://www.breakingbarriers.org.uk/this-place-is-a-godsend-by-cynthia-pat>

2.3 Arts based dissemination

2.3.1 Productive Margins

One PM research project, *Weathering the Storm*, explored the hidden value of community anchor organisations as the existence of the two Wales-based organisations' was threatened by the termination of the Communities First regeneration/poverty programme. The working group felt that interpretive art would be an important mechanism to both present data and be a means of engaging policy and community audiences with the issues it raised. Artstation were commissioned and an immersive art installation was sponsored by Mark Drakeford and shown at the Senedd for over two weeks in December 2018. It included 31 giant pop-up photographs of community activists and volunteers associated with the two organisations accompanied by a narrative soundscape (through headphones) of some of the data. The ideas were co-produced between the artists, the academics and the community organisation representatives.¹³

2.3.2 Representing communities

National Theatre Wales were involved from the outset in thinking how theatre might be used as a way of engaging community participants and audiences with research data. Common Wealth Theatre Company were commissioned to put on a performance, hosted in a local social club, which invited policy-makers to discuss how the community might be involved in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Local people were involved in set building, writing and performing alongside professional actors, and set and sound artists. Local people were trained to facilitate conversations at two points during the performance. A film about the production is available.¹⁴

3 What impact has arts and culture had on tackling poverty?

We suggest the above have had a number of tangible impacts, above and beyond the confidence, and relationship-building, that often comes with engaging with arts and culture:

¹³ <http://www.artstation.org.uk/anchor-peoples/>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH2JwZRdMnU>

- Working with the arts has provided a lens on poverty grounded in the experiences of those who are economically and/or culturally at the margins, and frequently overlooked or misunderstood, for example, enabling a critique of media representations of poverty and of the regulatory impact on families of low pay and unemployment;
- Two Productive Margins projects led to new economic activity in the form of community interest companies, Life Chances and Somali Kitchen CICs;
- Nearly all projects (including From Fort to Pit to Port) facilitated the development of new skills in terms of digital archiving, using archive materials, set building, jewellery making, writing, filming, photography and so on. Some of these were accredited, and schools projects dovetailed with the requirements of the national curriculum;
- The young people's art-work and creative activism in Professor Renold's Relationship Matters work Merthyr Tydfil were used as case studies and embedded in the new whole school approach statutory guidance. They were also cited as best practice in the expert panel's vision for the future of Sex and Relationships Education in Wales (Welsh Government 2018). Two members from the Relationship Matters project formed the core advisory group for the design and development of the co-created resource: AGENDA: A young people's guide to making positive relationships matter.
- The men's project gained recognition for the work that they had done for their community in terms of Best Community Group in Wales as for the Adult Education Inspire Awards in 2017. Their engagement with heritage trails in Trek to Connect was an important reason for winning the award. ¹⁵

4. How effective was the Fusion pioneer programmes have been in stimulating local collaboration?

Early experience of the Fusion pioneer programme demonstrated that it brought partners together and encouraged new forms of local collaboration. However, the imposition of an

¹⁵ <http://www.learningandwork.wales/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/LW-2017-Inspire-Awards-Profile-Interactive-Booklet.pdf> See pages 38 and 39

outcomes approach tended to discourage rather than encourage creative engagement. We would like to discuss this further with the Committee.