



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is based on the findings from a two-year Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project that we undertook between 2019 and 2021. It examines how and why the UK's approach towards increasing cultural participation has largely failed to address social inequality in the subsidised cultural sector despite long-standing international discourse on this issue. It further examines why meaningful policy change has not been more forthcoming in the face of this apparent failure.

Our book fills a gap in research by examining the nature and extent of failure in existing projects and policies. It further addresses not only the failure within current approaches but also the failure to acknowledge this failure. It describes the extent to which a culture of mistrust, blame, and fear between policymakers, practitioners, and participants has resulted in a policy environment that engenders overstated aims, accepts mediocre quality evaluations, encourages narratives of success, and lacks meaningful critical reflection. We argue that this absence of criticality, transparency, and honesty limits the potential for “social and instrumental learning” (May, 1992). Such learning is a precondition to any radical policy change and is necessary for developing a greater understanding of the social construction of policy problems. Indeed, our book's main thesis is that the biggest policy failure is, in fact, the failure to learn. We therefore offer a framework we believe can encourage more open and honest conversations about failure. In doing so, we aim to advance greater equity in the cultural sector by addressing learning strategies that can help avoid failures in the future.

MEANINGS OF PARTICIPATION

As early as 1948, the International Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the democratic right of every citizen to partake in society and culture (United Nations, 1948). As a result, the universal right to access public services became a founding principle in welfare states across Western countries during the post-war period. Under this conceptualisation, participation denotes the act of taking part in the activities or services of the state. It therefore becomes a policy problem when people cannot exercise their rights or benefit from these opportunities, whether through lack of access, education, or choice. Since the late 1960s, theories such as the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) and public choice theory (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971) began to conceptualise participation not just as the act of partaking in available services, but in relation to a person's agency in determining what is provided, by whom, and how. Arnstein challenges the assumption that merely taking part in an activity constitutes participation at all. Instead, she argues that such actions offer only tokenistic opportunities. For Arnstein, true participation is about control and ownership. Similarly, public choice theory, which informed later work on co-production (Moore, 1997; Ostrom, 1990) defines participation in relation to the democratic functioning of decision-making units.

The above theories of participation, whether as the right to partake in society or as the process of distributing power, lie at the heart of debates within both academic disciplines and policy environments. These debates encompass public policy, economics, political science, and development studies (see e.g., see Gustafsson, 1983; Newman et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2011)—and, as we shall see later, cultural studies.

The term “participation” itself became a buzzword in the twenty-first century, due to a growing “crisis in legitimacy” (Holden, 2006) between the public and the state's public institutions. Around the same time, some scholars claimed we are facing a decline in our social relationships as human beings (Putnam, 2000). This double crisis is demonstrated both by an international decline in “public participation” (Brodie et al., 2009) in democratic rights, such as voting, and “individual participation” in the voluntary social and cultural activities that the state prescribes as valuable (and thus often funds).

The resulting focus of public policy, from a local to global scale, became the means of increasing participation, whether in terms of who is partaking in activities deemed valuable, or in terms of how these participants

engage with power. (See, e.g., UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Nevertheless, some have argued that the prevalence of this discourse has led to a “tyranny of participation” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). While this “tyranny” assumes the positive value of the action or the processes of participation, it too often ignores more meaningful questions about who frames the action, or who can take part in the processes. Without addressing who or what frames the participant and how one can argue that questions of power and equity become meaningless.

Alternative evidence further suggests that when looking at “social participation” between peers, there has not been the same decline across all countries and contexts. While Putnam revealed a crisis in social participation in the United States, for example, this crisis has not been so dramatic in Europe where community-level participation is still strong (Keaney, 2006). Furthermore, opportunities provided by technology in the twenty-first century, both to access and disseminate information and opinions, mean that we live in a more “participatory culture” than ever before (Jenkins, 2009). In such a culture, we can bypass the institutions of power and thus develop agency for ourselves. The mass protests across the globe that emerged as we drafted this book (from pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong in 2019 to those who sought to overturn the democratic process in the 2020 US Presidential election) suggest that people are willing to participate in actions of personal importance. The issue of participation is therefore less a problem of people not partaking in social or cultural activities. Rather, it is that some people seem less inclined to take part in activities sanctioned by the state, within state-supported organisations, or in processes where they feel they have no power or voice. Indeed, participation in the above protests indicates evidence of the failure of policy to increase the legitimacy of institutional structures or to distribute power more equitably.

Rather than safeguarding universal rights or championing increased equity, scholars have accused neo-liberal agendas of appropriating policy measures and limiting the availability of public financing (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). These agendas advocate not only the rights but also the responsibilities of citizens to actively decide how their state designs and delivers services as well as to take up the opportunities that the state offers to them (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This approach lays the blame for any participation failure not on the institutions with whom people may have lost trust but with the participant who supposedly requires “fixing” so that they can “better” participate. Indeed, the very concept of participation as

a responsibility assumes that the role of the state is merely to provide access to opportunity. In this way, it is the sole responsibility of individuals to take up the opportunities on offer.

Despite all the rhetoric, this book starts from the premise that the agenda to increase participation across public policy is failing to address the rights of everyone to take part in culture and support an equitable redistribution of power. Nevertheless, most of the available literature presents participation as a necessary good and fails to critique these policy failures. This book therefore examines the concept of participation through the lens of failure, asking whether this failure is one of theory, policy, or practice. With reference to cultural participation, the response of cultural policy, and the practice of the above agenda, our book narrows its focus from the wider field of public policy to address specifically these questions.

OUR RESEARCH, METHODOLOGY, AND BOOK STRUCTURE

The research that informs this book addresses theories in public policy studies that prioritise the value of recognising, understanding, and learning from failure (Fung & Wright, 2003; Newman et al., 2004; J Newman & Head, 2015) and an emerging interest in narrative methodologies in cultural policy studies (Bilton, 2019; Meyrick et al., 2019).

The literature, which we will explore in more detail in Chap. 3, challenges the focus on so-called evidence-based policy making that places significant importance on quantitative facts and figures. Such a slavish commitment to supposedly “objective” and “rational” decision making can lead to a predominance of “technical learning,” where policy often “[repeats] over and over again the errors of the past” (Howlett, 2012, p. 550). Instead, “social learning” (May, 1992) and “critical reflection” (Hanson, 2013) involve deliberation and dialogue among a range of different interest groups, which, we argue, is a more effective way of addressing the issue of “who learns? Learns what? To what effect?” (Howlett, 2012, p. 540). While narrative methodologies are of use when addressing such questions, our research highlights not only the narratives that matter but also who gets to tell their story. Our research thus involves data capture and analysis from multiple perspectives as well as multiple methods across various stages, each of which will be described below.

Over a period of two years, we examined a breadth of literature from the field of policy studies that covers the policy-making process, policy

evaluation, and policy failure. We also ran workshops, conducted surveys, and undertook interviews with policymakers, consultants, cultural practitioners, and participants. In addition, we undertook “deep hanging out” sessions (Walmsley, 2018) at two community centres, where one of the research team acted as a participant in the cultural activities of the resident groups.

In the first phase of our data collection, we held eight workshops in different locations across England and Scotland. We advertised the workshops on social media and through the mailing lists of cultural organisations. We invited different interest groups such as policymakers, staff from cultural organisations, artists, and cultural participants to discuss “failures in participation.” We held these discussions in separate sessions according to whichever self-defined identity group the attendees belonged. Our aim in keeping these interest groups separate was to create a safe space that encouraged people to talk freely among their peers without fear of judgement from other stakeholders. To respect this intent, those involved in the first phase of our research are all anonymous in the findings. In addition, we delivered three workshops to community activists who were attending learning events organised by the Local Trust for their community programme, the Big Local (<https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/>), and their new cultural programme, Creative Civic Change (<https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change/>). In this way, we reached both those who expressed a specific interest in cultural participation and those with a more general interest in community participation, whether cultural or not. Altogether, over 150 people took part in our workshops.

We creatively facilitated each of our workshop sessions. Furthermore, we ensured that each session focused on the meaning of the word “participation” and the reasons why people typically feel motivated to talk about it. In addition, we explored the meanings and narratives of success that participants were most familiar with and discussed the value of our own approach to talking about failure. As many of the workshops were over-subscribed, we added an anonymous online survey to provide an opportunity for others to have their say. The trade press promoted this online resource. Unlike the focus on success stories in the workshops, the survey specifically asked people to talk about failures. From the one hundred and twenty-seven responses that we received, we developed greater understanding of the relationship between success and failure for our participants and the barriers that some believed hindered their ability to talk about failure regarding cultural participation.

From both sets of data, we analysed the similarities and differences between the perspectives of the different interest groups. We then conducted over eighty in-depth interviews with individuals who represented each of the interest groups that we identified in stage one. The interviewees included seventeen policymakers from England, Scotland, and Wales and five consultants who had experience of advising both policymakers and practitioners. The aim of these interviews was to consider the different contexts within Great Britain, which is the specific geographic focus of this book. We did not include Northern Ireland in our research due to political circumstances at the time that rendered static the country's cultural policy itself.

We also interviewed forty-two cultural practitioners who either attended the workshops or were cited by workshop participants as being “experts” in participation. In addition, we interviewed twenty-two participants who nominated themselves from our fieldwork or who were recommended by the professionals within our case studies. One of the artist-researchers who worked on the project also undertook field work in “deep hanging out” sessions (Walmsley, 2018) at two community centres, one in Hull and one in Wakefield, to capture the attitude of participants through a more informal, conversational approach. Through these methods, we considered the extent to which cultural professionals take participant perspectives into account when reflecting upon their successes and failures. However, we also examined the successes and failures within participant-led practices.

From the workshops and interviews, we also identified several illustrative examples of professional practice that interviewees regularly referred to as successful responses to address inequitable participation in the cultural sector. Representatives from three of the organisations involved in these projects agreed to reflect upon their practice with us and, through the lens of failure, consider what they might learn from acknowledging their own failures more openly.

In the spirit of openness, we asked the chosen organisations to waive their anonymity so that we could share their stories in our book. As a result, although we had initially planned to choose case studies from England and Scotland, we failed to find an organisation from Scotland that was willing to waive their anonymity. The three examples that we chose are thus all from England:

- **Creative People and Places** (<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-0>) This is an action research programme initiated by Arts Council England. The project seeks to address the failures in cultural participation through place-based

funding to locations with the lowest participation rates. As such, they offer an illustrative example of policy design. We interviewed nine Directors of CPP projects, four critical friends involved in their peer learning programme, and five policymakers who had worked on the programme at various points from conception to delivery. We also spent time at a CPP hub for participants to get a sense of how the participants perceived the policy.

- **Slung Low** (www.slunglow.org) This is a professional theatre company that at the time of our research co-managed an old working men’s club as a performance venue and community space. For over ten years, the company has tried to change theatre from being a “benefit [to] the select few [to] a part of public service” by modelling new ways of working with their participants (<https://alanlane-blog.wordpress.com/2012/04/>). The company offers an illustrative example of participatory arts practice. We interviewed two key staff at Slung Low, including the Artistic Director, along with eight people who had participated in the company’s work. These interviewees included participants in Flood, a large, site-specific participatory performance piece, as well as those who participated in community workshops at the company base. We also spoke to people who had worked with, funded, or commissioned the company.
- **Fun Palaces** (<https://funpalaces.co.uk>) This is an initiative created by two arts activists who sought to challenge the deficit approach to cultural participation. The project illuminates the skills and everyday creativity that already exist in communities by promoting local DIY cultural events. The project offers an illustrative example of everyday culture, one that professionals neither define nor lead. We interviewed the two founders of the organisation along with ten individuals who were either volunteer makers of local Fun Palaces or ambassadors for the campaign.

Having completed the first phases of data collection above, we then shared the early analysis of our research findings by developing a small-scale intervention in the cultural sector. This intervention involved developing a new framework to explore the different facets of success and failure. Our artist-researchers also developed a series of creative tools. We conducted another set of workshops to pilot this framework and its associated tools and to explore the workshops’ potential to encourage more openness about failure (both within the cultural sector and in other areas of public policy).

The interest that our research garnered also led us into conversations with several academics who were eager to contribute their own thoughts on the relationship between cultural participation and failure. In response, we developed an open-access special edition journal (<https://sciendo.com/issue/TJCP/7/2>) that allowed us to access new research from an international perspective. While this special edition exists independently of the present book, some of the findings from these articles inform what we discuss in the chapters that follow. Furthermore, these articles confirm our view that our research has international relevance.

We have structured our book into seven chapters, with each providing insight and analysis into the stages of our research. Building on previous work from the authors (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019), the second chapter offers a historical context on the development of cultural participation as a policy “problem” in the UK. Chapter 2 provides more detail on some of the key debates that we introduced in this introduction. Furthermore, it identifies the logic on which policymakers tend to base their cultural participation policy and the assumptions that prevail as a result. Specifically, Chap. 2 looks at the fault lines that have shaped the type of policies, projects, and practices that many agencies see as “necessary” and “appropriate” interventions.

Chapter 3 explores how academic researchers have understood the concept of failure. The chapter focuses on public policy literature to develop an understanding of the relational and contextual nature of success and failure. After a brief discussion on what we can understand by cultural policy and who has a role in its inception and delivery, Chap. 3 considers the ways in which academics have attempted to define what policy failure constitutes and how we might identify its occurrence. Chapter 3 also reflects upon the relationship between failure and learning. Here, we highlight that the fields of business and entrepreneurship have undertaken the most work to understand the opportunities that learning from failure can afford.

Chapter 4 focuses on our own research and explores failure within the narrower field of cultural policy. It examines the purpose of participation policy from the perspective of those who design and deliver cultural policies as well as the logic on which these policymakers work. Chapter 4 then considers whether policymakers are open to the possibility of failure, both in terms of those whom they fund but also in relation to their own work and asks whether the context within which they work may support or hinder this openness. Finally, Chap. 4 considers the types of failure that are acknowledged and how we can address learning from these failures that do

occur. Throughout this chapter, we return to Creative People and Places as an example of policy in practice to illustrate key points in our analysis.

Chapter 5 focuses on the type of failures that practitioners most often recognise. It examines the contested meanings of participation not only between policymakers and practitioners but between different types of practitioners. Chapter 5 considers the levers and barriers in addressing failures of practice and then presents alternative narratives about these failures that may support or challenge those of policymakers. In doing so, Chap. 5 explores the complexity of failure across multiple agendas and for different stakeholders. We offer Slung Low as an illustrative example of practice throughout this chapter.

Chapter 6 then shifts focus from the professional cultural sector towards the supposed beneficiary of this work, the participant. We argue that literature on cultural participation too often overlooks the participants' narratives. Chapter 6 thus considers how the participants frame their own participation and how they define their success and failure in relation to the work that supports it. Chapter 6 examines this situation both in relation to work that professionals facilitate and to the work of volunteers. Finally, it considers the implications of these different working styles for policymakers. Fun Palaces serves as the illustrative example that we use in this chapter.

Lastly, Chap. 7 synthesises the findings from previous chapters and introduces our own framework of failure for cultural participation projects and policies. We argue for the importance of acknowledging that any given project or policy can succeed or fail in different facets, to different degrees, for different people, and over different timescales. We then offer some thoughts about how the policy-making process might adapt to encourage greater recognition of this complexity, including the inevitable presence of failures within cultural policies and the projects they engender. By doing so, we argue for the right to fail. Yet we also uphold that we must openly acknowledge such failure in order to learn, enact change, and make progress towards greater equity within the culture sector.

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