



## CHAPTER 3

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# Thinking About Failing

### INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 presented the evidence that cultural participation policies in the UK have failed to deliver a more equitable cultural sector despite the stated aims of policymakers. We showed how scholars have attempted both to support the process of democratising access to the types of cultural participation deemed valuable by the state and to gain a deeper understanding of the value of the wider range of cultural activities that people might participate in through choice. Nevertheless, policy interventions have largely failed to significantly alter patterns of either cultural participation or funding distribution. Yet failure as a term is largely absent from the dominant discourses on cultural policy. Our research considers why cultural policy appears to be failing to recognise and acknowledge failure and asks whether doing so might be necessary to disrupt patterns of professional practice that have played a part in their occurrence.

Before examining our analysis of failure within the cultural sector in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6, this chapter assesses the existing literature on policy failure more broadly. In doing so, we provide an insight into how scholars can better understand policy failures and address why these failures are often so hard for policy implementers to acknowledge.

To understand the context in which these failures have occurred, this chapter begins with a brief discussion about what cultural policy is in the UK and who has a role in its creation, implementation, and evaluation.

The chapter then discusses how different disciplinary fields have defined failure and understood its benefits in relation to opportunities for learning. The discussion then considers policy failures and the challenges in identifying when they have occurred, despite all the evaluation that takes place. The chapter concludes by introducing some of the work that has tried to nuance how we think about policy failures, which, we argue, is important for the cultural sector to avoid repeating the failures of the past.

## POLICY

Those who do not study or work closely with policymaking processes tend to imagine that it works in a relatively linear fashion, whereby local and national governments turn their commitments into policy and implement them from “the top” down through a range of government agencies, organisations, and individuals who work for them. Relatedly, what some understand as “good” policymaking involves the idea that evidence informs policies, that policymakers systematically design their policies to maximise their value, and that a process exists for evaluating the outcomes of any given policy (Cairney, 2012; Colebatch, 1998). However, over the course of seventy years, the field of policy studies has shown how policymaking is rarely linear, rational, or evidence-based. Scholars such as Charles Lindbloom, Michael Lipsky, and Frank Fischer have shown how policymaking is seldom deliberate nor orderly but a massively complex process that often results in incremental changes and an acceptance of “muddling through” (Lindbloom, 1959). While governments may formalise policy through statements, these statements are usually the result of negotiations and power games between individuals, groups, corporations, and organisations who often form networks and coalitions in order to advance their own worldview and secure some form of social advantage.

Furthermore, the processes and practices of implementation constantly make and remake policy. Governments do not carry out this implementation through ministers or the locally elected officials who made the original commitment. Rather, a host of government-delegated bureaucrats and organisations implement policies and make sure that the policies “work”. Some of these bureaucrats and organisations work at “street level” (Lipsky, 1979), dealing with the public directly and creating policy by interpreting what the government asks them to do and how they should respond to their context. The UK has thus replaced the idea of centralised control, wherein a limited number of policymakers dictate public procedure, with

a landscape of complexity in which the policy emerges from fragmented, multi-level activity between a large number and range of policy actors.

The cultural sector is no exception, and there is often little explicit national or local cultural policy. Instead, arm's length bodies create policy through the development of strategies and the way they distribute their funding. The practices of these bodies inform and they are informed by local authority departments, trusts and foundations, publicly funded organisations, arts managers, artists, and public opinion. Encouraging cultural participation is one such policy area. As such, the 'policies' that aim to deliver this broad goal range from specific schemes developed by public funders, such as Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme, which we will discuss in Chap. 4, to the creative practices of artists and arts organisations, such as Slung Low. The latter organisation uses participatory processes to create new work, which we will examine in Chap. 5. Participation policy can also be understood as encompassing the everyday cultural practices of amateurs, volunteers, and community activists, as we will see in Chap. 6 in the example of Fun Palaces. We argue that all these individuals and organisations are policy actors with some, albeit varying degrees, of agency in making cultural policy. Each actor is thus involved in successes and failures that collectively contribute towards how cultural policy supports cultural participation. As we will show in these later chapters, however, all these policy actors find acknowledging their failures difficult, with some questioning whether it is even possible for them to fail at all.

### IDENTIFYING POLICY FAILURES

While there is a growing interest in academic work on policy failures, academic literature pays far more attention to policy successes. There is even less research that specifically considers failures regarding cultural policy. Since we began researching this project, though, there has been a notable increase in work that considers the extent to which specific, publicly funded cultural policies or projects have failed (Cartiere & Wingate, 2020; Farley & Pollock, 2020) with some of these studies emerging as a result of our own enquiries (e.g., see Bradby & Stewart, 2020; Rimmer, 2020).

In general, wider public policy literature remarks that the governments, agencies, organisations, and individuals that help to create and implement policies have little understanding about whether any given policy has been successful (Dye, 2005). However, this limited understanding has not stopped these bodies from labelling their actions as successes (Fischer,

2003) despite there being more ways and reasons for policies and projects to fail rather than succeed (Kerrigan et al., 2020). Indeed, academics have argued that for a policy to be truly successful, it must achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, attract no significant criticism, and/or secure virtually universal support (McConnell, 2010, p. 351). On this basis, the absence of failure in some form or to some degree is unlikely. However, notwithstanding what Gray and t'Hart dubbed “policy disasters” (2005), policy outcomes are also rarely, if ever, outright failures. Given that policy success and policy failure most likely exist simultaneously, seeking to assess the impact or value of a policy must consider the possibility of both outcomes. But in practice, this approach appears difficult. Precisely because policy has multiple dimensions, contentious disagreements frequently arise over whether we can deem any given policy to have failed outright (McConnell, 2015). While policy may fail from one perspective, it may equally succeed from another (McConnell, 2010).

Adding to the difficulty in answering any question about the extent of a policy's failure is that “no commonly agreed-upon definition of ‘failure’ has emerged in either academic literature or in practitioner circles” (Newman & Head, 2015, p. 343). Of those who have attempted to do so, Lee and Miesing describe failure as “a state where reality is inferior to the goal” (2017, p. 159). Bignell and Fortune (1984) offer a more extended description, arguing that failure arises over disappointment when assessing the outcomes of an activity. Failure could be a shortfall in performance below the desired standard or the emergence of undesirable side effects. It can occur in a variety of forms, to differing degrees, as well as in the past, present, or future. It is often multicausal and produces multiple effects. For Bignell and Fortune, the assessment of failure also depends upon the values of the assessor. As such, it is likely to vary from individual to individual and is liable to change with time and context. Therefore, as McConnell (2015) argues, “any search for a scientific, unambiguous and value-free definition of policy failure would face serious difficulty in being able to cope with the complex, contested and often ambiguous realities of policy outcomes” (p. 230). In practice, this statement means that:

... arguments relating to policy failures are not only ambiguous, but they also tend to conflate forms of failure that are actually discrete. This imprecision has led to confusion in theoretical debates as well as uncertainty in policy evaluation, as opposing voices tend to talk past each other rather than contest well-defined positions. (Newman & Head, 2015, p. 343)

Each of the above issues makes judgements difficult. For as Bignell and Fortune (1984) make explicit, failure is not a unitary, incontrovertible phenomenon that either does or does not exist. As such, labelling a policy intervention as a failure is not as simple as identifying the gap between the outcomes and the stated aims (McConnell, 2015). When judging the extent to which a policy has achieved its intended impact, there is also debate surrounding the optimum time to conduct reviews or evaluations (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002; Linder & Peters, 1987; Matland, 1995). These issues mean that it is not uncommon for policymakers to perpetually defer judgments about a policy, as they often assume that success will emerge at a later date.

Where judgments do appear, there is a bias towards considering the success of policies and projects based on how much they have delivered the intended outputs through an efficient process, not whether they solved the problems that merited intervention in the first place (Andrews, 2018). In our own research, for example, we heard stories about successful cultural participation projects that involved large numbers of participants who took part in well-organised projects. However, when we pressed these cultural professionals, they were often unable to confirm whether those large numbers of people were any more diverse than the average arts audience was or to what extent the project resulted in a permanent, observable change to the cultural participation patterns of those in attendance. As discussed in Chap. 2, this finding echoes our previous research, which found that the so-called cultural “non-participants” in participation projects were already taking part in other forms of culture regularly (Stevenson, 2019). As such, while such projects might indeed have artistic value, they would not contribute towards the stated aim of increasing the number and breadth of people who partake in culture.

The matter of whether identifying cultural policy failures is a matter of interpretation or fact provides a further complication (McConnell, 2010). This issue raises the question of how judgements are made and who is making them. When someone evaluates a policy or project that has succeeded for one group or community but failed for another, they must explicitly or implicitly make decisions about whose lived experience of the policy matters the most. Different actors and interest groups are interested in different policies to varying degrees. This variance can result in policy actors framing the dominant narrative about the success or failure of any given policy or project in line with the interests of those who are most able to exert influence over the policymaking process (McConnell, 2010).

Controlling the narrative allows policy actors to build strong advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1988), sustain issue networks (Travis Bland & Abaidoo-Asiedu, 2016), and maintain existing policy monopolies (Cairney, 2012). As McConnell (2015) notes:

...to engage in a more meaningful way with the real-world complexities of policy failure, we need to accept that failure is bound up with issues of politics and power, including contested views about its existence, and the power to produce an authoritative and accepted failure narrative. (p. 222)

From this perspective, we can understand failure and success as constructions formed by those with the social power to articulate and secure a dominant narrative about any given policy or project (Taylor & Balloch, 2005). While policy opponents will be keen to emphasise those elements that have failed, supporters will focus on those which they can present as a success (McConnell, 2015). As framing is a “mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals” (True et al., 2007; cited in Cairney, 2012, p. 193) the process of evaluation can play a significant part in attempts to gain control of how a cultural policy and its related projects are framed. As such, policy actors tend to focus their attention on political learning (May, 1992) which includes how they can produce ever more eloquent evaluations that present their work in the most positive light.

### FAILURE IS THE HARDEST WORD TO SAY

Even though the participants in our research recognised the above definitional complexities, there was also a shared sense that attributing the label of “failure” to a project or policy felt too definitive and absolute, and thus something that they tried to avoid. In particular, and as we will discuss in more depth in later chapters, participants believed that doing so publicly would risk reputational damage and, for those who had received funding, potentially risked their future work. While some artists suggested that failing is not only acceptable but also an integral part of artistic practice, they also acknowledged that this awareness tends to be private and is even harder to recognise if they received public subsidy for their work. This case is especially pertinent if the artist received their funding with the aim of delivering social as well as artistic outcomes (Schrag, 2020, p. 114). As one of the artists who participated in our research admitted, “Saying you had this fantastic failure doesn’t really wash very well in the public

domain.” This statement relates to a wider fear of judgement and punishment that affected many of those who had received funding in the past, which is something that we will discuss further in Chap. 5.

Additionally, there is a wider social stigma that culture-sector workers associate with failure (Singh et al., 2015). Many of those whom we spoke to found it difficult to separate their professional identity from any failures that occurred in their projects; cultural professionals tended to fear that acknowledging their failures would result in others judging them for “[doing] something wrong.” As Kerrigan et al. (2020) note in their analysis of success and failure in the creative industries, one must avoid their peers seeing them as “a loser” (p. 5). We can interpret this individualisation of failure as part of a wider societal shift where individuals are “required to take sole responsibility for the consequences of choices made or, indeed, not made” (McGuigan, 2014, p. 233). For McGuigan, this condition represents the neo-liberal self. We can recognise this concept in the extent to which those who work in the cultural sector and academia regularly valorise case studies of supposed individual “successes” without properly considering the social, cultural, and economic contexts that make some people, projects, and organisations more likely to succeed than others. In turn, this incomplete analysis perpetuates a cultural myth, for when

... failure is masked by success, it is more difficult for others to replicate the success as success is seen as something that occurs to an individual through happenstance or serendipity. The myths around success have a tendency to de-emphasise the hard work and unsuccessful endeavours that were previously carried out by those who have recently become successful. Therefore, it is rare that hard work and failure are seen as a precursor to success, and it is the latter that is lauded in all forms of media making, consumption and promotion. (Kerrigan et al., 2020, p. 3)

These factors mean that failure is a very difficult word for cultural professionals to use in a public context, especially when the discussion relates directly to their own projects, practices, and policies. Those who participated in our research told us that the tendency is to frame things in more positive language because there is always a possibility to acknowledge a degree of success. Participants spoke of obscuring any failure that does occur with softer or kinder phrases, such as “we’ve had a rich learning experience” or “things could have been better”. The prevalence of this synonymic reframing of failure was evident throughout our fieldwork,

with many of those whom we spoke to offering a “preferred” term, such as “challenges” or “issues”. Otherwise, they adopted alternative words and phrases such as “things not necessarily working out as you planned”, “good mistakes”, “things we might have done a little bit differently”, “not achieving the degree of success you had aspired to”, or “a bit of a misfire”. Some participants even appeared to be more comfortable when describing their work as “a bit shit” rather than using the *f*-word.

Several of our interviewees told us that they had the Samuel Beckett quote “fail, fail again, fail better” pinned on their office walls. But this was seen as more of a rhetorical aspiration than something they were comfortable doing in practice. To “fail better” requires learning, and while our research participants commonly felt they could not label something as a failure if they had learnt from it, it was often unclear who had learnt anything from the failure and to what ends. Few could describe in any detail what they had learnt from past failures or, more importantly, what they had substantially changed about their practice or that of their organisation because of such learning.

### LEARNING FROM FAILURE

The relationship between failure and learning was a concept that many participants in our research were aware of at least in a rhetorical sense. The concept arguably stems from scholarship within the field of business and management studies that addresses the relevance and place of failure regarding a variety of practices. These practices include project management (Avots, 1969; Pinto & Mantel, 1990), strategic management (Knott & Posen, 2005), venture capitalism (Kibler et al., 2021), and, most extensively, entrepreneurship (see Eggers & Song, 2015; Cacciotti et al., 2016; Lee & Miesing, 2017). Work in this area has particularly sought to understand the reasons for failure (Hyder & Lussier, 2016), fear of failure (Cacciotti et al., 2016), learning from failure (Coelho & McClure, 2005; Fang He et al., 2018; Matson, 1991), how business people make sense of failures (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Singh et al., 2015), as well as the ways in which entrepreneurs undertake impression management to maintain personal and professional credibility after organisational failures have occurred (Caldwell & O’Reilly, 1982; Kibler et al., 2021).

Some of this disciplinary interest can be traced back to the work of Dr Jack V. Matson, who initially coined the concept of Intelligent Fast Failure (IFF) in a series of publications in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Matson,



1991). At the core of this work were two assertions: first, that one must seek to understand and overcome their fear of failure by acknowledging the relationship between risk and failure. As one of the participants who took part in our research said, “If everything always worked perfectly, you’re probably not taking as many risks as you might be”. Second, that one must make the active decision to learn from failures, openly examining what went wrong, recognising weaknesses, and changing practices accordingly. IFF does not, however, present failure as a goal to be sought after, but rather a potential outcome of risking both effort and valuable resources. The goal is thus to continually “learn the unknown and what works and what doesn’t [... for] going through failure is how we learn” (Matson, 1991, p. 3). Advocates of IFF argue, “avoiding failure is not an option. If you accept this premise, the choices before you are simple: continue to use practices that limit what you can gain from failures—or embrace the concept of intelligent failure, in which learning can create substantial value” (McGrath, 2011, p. 83).

The idea that learning from failure should be embraced has become increasingly widespread through popular texts written to inspire and motivate those working in business (e.g., see Heath, 2009; Lim, 2018), as well as a recent growth in podcasts where people share how learning from failure has benefitted their careers or their lives more generally (e.g., see *Failure—the Podcast*, no date; *Spectacular Failures*, no date; *How To Fail With Elizabeth Day on Apple Podcasts*, no date). Common among these media is a focus on the individual (often famous and either implicitly or explicitly presented as “successful”) and the way in which they have learned from a failure to “succeed better”, a variation on the idea of “failing better” about which several of our respondents spoke. The core message of this discourse around embracing failure appears to be that one’s failures are one’s own, and consequently any learning and resultant changes are also for individuals to enact.

But when it comes to policy failures, it is not enough for the learning to take place at an individual level. Doing so upholds the practice of individualisation discussed above, in which the responsibility for delivering structural change in the cultural sector is devolved outwards from institutions and organisations to lone artists or even participants. This obscures the extent to which individual practice is part of a system (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Kerrigan, 2013; McIntyre et al., 2016) in which failures are inevitable and can occur at any point. Solutions, therefore, will often require whole system thinking (Bignell & Fortune, 1984). It is “illogical to argue

that the responsibility for failure lies only with individual agents”, and we “need to concentrate our examination on the relationship between structural factors and individual agency as they interact” (Kerrigan et al., 2020, p. 7) when bringing policies into being.

In cultural policy terms, this means that failures need to be recognised and understood at each point in the system if substantial changes are to be enacted. It is not enough for governments and funders to devolve the responsibility for learning to those they fund without committing to both engaging in their own learning and creating the conditions in which each part of the cultural sector can learn from each other’s failures. In doing so, they stand to gain a greater, shared understanding of how the current structures fail to deliver greater equity. An important part of this process is to ensure that the evaluation of projects and policies engenders critical dialogue, and is not simply used as a monitoring tool, as focusing evaluations on accountability risks reducing the honesty needed for collective learning to occur (Howlett et al., 2015).

### EVALUATING FAILURES

As we have discussed elsewhere, “assumptions about both the prevalence and desirability of evidence-based policymaking has remained widespread” (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021, p. 3), and the need for ‘robust’ evidence is still commonly presented as being fundamental for ‘good’ policymaking (Sanderson, 2002). As such, any attempt to implement evidence-based policymaking assumes an important role for formal evaluation (Colebatch, 1998). Cultural policy has not been immune to this, and as we detailed in the previous chapter, cultural participation policies have, in part, been a response to evidence that indicates there exist differing and unequal patterns of engagement across certain cultural activities in the United Kingdom. The exact nature of the problem to be solved, however, remains unclear (Stevenson, 2013). This situation is not unusual or unique to the “problem” of cultural participation, as the way in which policies develop often involves relatively little concern about generating a rich understanding of the needs of those whom the policy intervention is ostensibly intended to benefit (Sanderson, 2002; Stevenson, 2019). Given the extent to which the “allocation of resources follows the image of the policy problem” (Cairney, 2012, p. 197), this lack of insight can have far reaching implications for the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies.

Furthermore, if cultural policy is to be truly evidence-based, “there should be as much concern with gathering data and evidence of the extent to which policy interventions and projects are, or are not, delivering policy goals as there was in establishing the original need” (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021, p. 1). As Sanderson explains:

... rationality is enhanced by being clear about the objectives we wish to achieve and by evaluating the extent to which the policy as implemented actually achieves these objectives. If policy is goal-driven, evaluation should be goal-oriented. Such evaluation completes the cycle and provides feedback to improve the policy. (2002, p. 7)

It is not enough, then, to merely identify whether the intention behind a policy was achieved. Evaluation should also seek to understand and explain how and why a given policy does or does not achieve its desired outcomes. As such, an evaluation should explain not only what works, but also for whom it works and the circumstances in which success is most likely. Such evaluations, as they seek to gain understanding of how to minimise the risk of similar failures in future and ensure that the benefits of a policy intervention are distributed equitably, should therefore be as interested in what does not work as what does (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984).

It is particularly challenging, however, for researchers seeking to evaluate cultural policies and projects to gather data about failures, given that cultural professionals are far “keener on discussing stories of success rather than failure” (Redvall, 2013, p. 193). As we discuss in greater detail in Chap. 5, their reticence to be open and honest concerning failures is not surprising given that they work in a sector where reputation can play a significant part in one’s career longevity, and where many organisations and individuals exist in a state of persistent financial precarity. As one of our anonymous respondents stated, “I lie on my official evaluations all the time. It’s bullshit. I lie to get money; I think everyone does”. What is clear from our research is the extent to which the need for professional self-preservation and the concomitant desire to shift and avoid blame hinders the creation of honest and rounded evaluations.

Yet, blame avoidance is one of the largest barriers to the type of policy learning and change to which so many of our respondents also claimed to be committed. Blame avoidance “can amplify policy failures rather than correct them as energy and resources are spent on avoiding blame, denying the existence of failure [...] rather than on improving policy” (Howlett

et al., 2015, p. 218). It manifests itself in defensive evaluations that reinforce “feel-good” narratives about success (Stone, 2012) while failing to explore the “root causes” of problems or even acknowledge persistent failures (Howlett et al., 2015), thus resulting in policies and projects that continually repeat the errors of the past (Howlett, 2012). Indeed, several of our interviewees cited examples of cultural projects they knew had not delivered meaningful or enduring change, yet saw the same organisations awarded new funding to repeat the same types of projects. For example, one respondent spoke about a theatre company who had continually received funding to carry out outreach and engagement projects to develop new audiences for their main stage work, despite previous projects failing to change the demographic make-up of their core audience. Likewise, one of the funders we spoke to told us of their frustration that other funders continued to fund audience development activities that had been shown not to deliver sustainable, long-term change in audience diversity.

Failing to openly acknowledge failures in favour of creating feel-good evaluations may be good politics in that the organisations and artists producing these evaluations are bolstering their reputations or profiles in ways that will support them to secure further funding and continue their work. Our research suggests, however, that these voluntary omissions fuel bad policy in that, finite resources continue to be committed towards activities that do not make a significant or sustainable contribution towards delivering a more equitable cultural sector. We therefore believe it is vital that the cultural sector sees evaluations as opportunities for learning rather than tools of accountability, and in doing so normalises the acknowledgement and analysis of failures in the narratives they present about their work.

## NUANCING HOW WE TALK ABOUT FAILURE

Over the course of our research, it became clear that part of what is required is to shift failure from being seen as a verdict on the work of individuals or organisations to being seen as an opportunity for the type of collective, social learning that has the potential to result in rapid change (May, 1992). Social learning is not simply sharing insights with those with whom you work closely and who share opinions and perspectives similar to your own. Rather, it is a kind of learning that takes place as a critical dialogue between all the stakeholders involved in a piece of work, including those with differing perspectives. In so doing, the aim is to reach a new

understanding about what failures occurred, who they affected, and how they might be avoided in future. In part, this can be achieved through developing a culture of truly “critical” reflection (Hanson, 2013) in the cultural sector that is more nuanced in its language and exhibits more rigour in evaluation design so as to better “identify which aspects of a policy have failed and to explain why these aspects ought to be considered to have failed” (Newman & Head, 2015, p. 343).

In seeking to address this need, we initially explored research that had sought to classify the types of policy failures which can occur. We also sought to reflect on the ways in which such classifications might be employed to help those working in the cultural sector consider failures with more honesty and nuance. For example, Bovens et al. have argued that any evaluation of policies should consider its performance against intent in two separate but related realms: that of the programme and the politics (Bovens, 2010; Bovens & ‘t Hart, 1996). Regarding the former, evaluation is concerned with effectiveness, efficiency, and resilience. This might include, for example, the ways in which a nationwide project to place community artists in healthcare settings was operationally executed. The latter is concerned with how policies and policymakers are represented and evaluated in the wider political arena. This can include the amount of media coverage the art in healthcare project receives and the extent to which the artists and organisations involved gain reputational enhancement. Neither of these facets, however, address the success or failure of achieving specific policy goals, which was the purported purpose of the work.

Newman and Head address this shortcoming in part through their examination of the range of extant literature that has considered policy failures. Their thematic analysis identifies narratives across four realms of failure:

- **Objective attainment failure:** Observers interpret failure when policy objectives are not met. For example, a cultural participation project intended to increase the number of young people playing a musical instrument for pleasure that does not result in any sustained change to the number of young people taking up a musical instrument in that area.
- **Distributional failure:** Observers interpret failure when certain stakeholder groups are significantly negatively affected by the policy. For example, the distribution of large amounts of subsidy to cultural

organisations with relatively narrow audience demographics at the same time as reducing subsidy to cultural organisations with a specific focus on underrepresented groups.

- **Political or electoral failure:** Observers interpret failure when a government, opposition, or political party is negatively affected by the policy. For example, when a national cultural participation project receives significant negative media coverage for being parochial and out of touch with what “the public” is interested in doing.
- **Implementation failure:** Observers interpret failure when, because of organisational or other obstacles, the policy cannot be effectively implemented. For example, when a cultural participation project is not accessible to disabled participants due to a lack access, equipment, resources, or other adaptations. (adapted from Newman & Head, 2015, p. 345)

They also note, however, that analyses frequently merge two or more of these ideas, which confuses any attempt at understanding any failures that may have occurred. Because failure in different realms may have varying causes, Newman and Head suggest that any conclusions, recommendations, or remedies should be considered in relation to each individual realm, although they argue that this rarely occurs in practice. We observed one cause of this failure to consider the different realms of a project independently in our own research, when interviewees would regularly counter any discussion of failure in one realm of the project or policy with a success story located in another. For example, if an interviewee was asked about the failure of a project to attract a diverse range of participants—what might be understood as a distributional failure using the categorisation above—they would highlight the quality of artistic output (implementation success) or the wider, public reception of the work (political success). The effect was thus to present success in certain areas of the work as being representative of success overall.

However, McConnell (2010) demonstrates that the problem with discussing failure is not merely identifying the different realms in which failures are located, but also the different degrees to which the failures have occurred. McConnell proposes that a policy can be understood as having succeeded or failed along a spectrum that includes:

- **Tolerable Failure:** Failure is tolerable when it does not fundamentally impede the attainment of goals that proponents set out to

achieve, and opposition is small and/or criticism is virtually non-existent. In essence, tolerable failures are marginal features—a politically realistic “second best”—of dominant and resilient successful outcomes.

- **Conflicted Failure:** Failures to achieve goals are fairly evenly matched with attainment of goals, with strong criticism and strong defence in roughly equal measure. In essence, conflicted failures are dogged by periodic controversy that is never quite enough to act as a fatal blow to the policy, but insufficient to seriously damage its defenders.
- **Outright Failure:** A policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent. In essence, failures outweigh success, and the policy is a political liability. (McConnell, 2015, p. 237)

As we discussed previously, locating any given cultural policy or project in a category of success and/or failure is a matter of judgement rather than scientific precision. Divergent outcomes can exist within and across the different realms of a policy or project, and success and failure will exist both simultaneously and to different degrees. For example, a policy that experienced significant failures of process or failed to deliver its stated objectives can still result in political success by raising the profile of the organisations involved. Likewise, a policy that fully delivered on its objectives can be a political failure because of the absence of any significant public support. Indeed, trade-offs and tensions between these different realms are an integral feature of most policymaking, and the site at which McConnell argues there is the greatest potential for making sense of policy failures (2015). This process of judgement is made more complex by the extent to which success and failure are contingent on whose perspective we consider, as different stakeholders are likely to perceive differently the degree to which a cultural policy or project has succeeded or failed in any given realm. It is for this reason we have argued elsewhere that if cultural policy evaluations are to facilitate social learning, they must address the following questions (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021): Success and failure for whom? In what ways? To what effect? Our framework, discussed in the final chapter of this book, offers a structured method of answering these questions.

## CONCLUSION

As the following chapters illustrate, cultural participation policies and projects are the product of numerous policy actors collaborating and competing. No single person is solely responsible for their creation and implementation, and responsibility for the successes and failures that occur is collective, even if accountability is often individualised. While all policy actors may be keen to highlight their personal successes, it is unlikely that any policy or project would achieve all of its stated aims, and failures should be seen as inevitable. Policy failures can take many forms over the course of implementation, from not investing enough time and resources in consulting with different communities or making the wrong choice about which projects to fund, to an absence of suitable infrastructure or not inspiring participants to continue doing something new over the long term. These failures collectively impact the extent to which cultural policy in the UK delivers on its high-level aim to create a more equitable cultural sector. Addressing their cumulative effects cannot be done in isolation or in private.

Fixing one local failure will have minimal impact if other failures continue to take place elsewhere in the cultural sector. Solving complex, societal problems requires whole systems thinking that critically reflects on the ways in which localised failures interact with, create, are created by, sustain, and reproduce systemic, structural failures. This sort of critical insight and understanding requires social learning to occur, which relies on all those who have a role in the creation and implementation of cultural participation policies and projects to be open, honest, and transparent about the failures they have experienced, including those of which they were a part. As we will see over the next three chapters, however, our research found a cultural policy landscape in the UK that is not conducive to such social learning. Each chapter considers how a different group of stakeholders experiences and understands failures in cultural participation projects and policies, providing insights into why those working in the cultural sector appear to favour reproducing narratives of success over honest, critical evaluation, and prioritise blame avoidance over meaningful policy learning. Based on these analyses, Chap. 7 concludes this book by presenting our framework for discussing and evaluating failures that occur in cultural participation policies and projects.



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