What’s the problem again? The problematisation of cultural participation in Scottish cultural policy

David Stevenson

School of Arts, Social Science & Management, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland
dstevenson@qmu.ac.uk

This is the Author’s Original Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Cultural Trends on 20th March 2013 available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09548963.2013.783172
Abstract

Increasing cultural engagement is one of the Scottish Government’s fifty national indicators, resulting in ‘non-participation’ being seen as a problem that should be addressed. However, what is not questioned is the extent to which this ‘problem’ is an endogenous one that has taken shape within the policies that have been developed to tackle it. Utilising Bacchi’s (2009) interpretive method for analysing and critiquing policy, this paper considers a range of Scottish cultural policy documents and the research that informs them in order to consider how the ‘problem’ of non-participation is represented. It is argued that although policy documents represent the ‘problem’ as the existence of barriers that cause unequal access to culture, nested within this problem representation is a further, but less explicit one: that the problem is the failure to engage with those cultural activities that receive state support. It proposes that if the ‘problem’ was understood as a need to provide equality of access to culture rather than state funded culture, then those who implement policy, would be free to focus less on maximising access to those organisations and activities which, for other valid reasons, the Government funds, but that the majority of the public are not interested in attending. Instead they would be able to think creatively about how to facilitate the democratisation of an already present cultural democracy. It is suggested that the creation of Creative Scotland has provided the potential to disrupt the extant problem representation, but only if they transition from being the funders of ‘legitimate’ culture to becoming the facilitators of an environment in which participants contribute to the legitimation of culture through their choices and opinions.

Keywords: cultural policy; cultural participation; cultural engagement; Creative Scotland; Scottish cultural policy; barriers to the arts
Introduction

“Increasing cultural engagement” is one of the Scottish Government’s fifty national indicators, seen as being a key measure of Scotland’s progress towards becoming “a better place to live and a more prosperous and successful country” (Scottish Government [SG], 2012). The discourse surrounding this desire implies there is a ‘problem’ of under-engagement and as such, increasing and widening participation with culture is a central aim of the Government’s cultural policies (SG, 2012). However there is much which remains implicit in these policies; exactly what sort of culture the Government is keen to increase engagement with is unclear, while it is also uncertain as to whom existing rates of cultural engagement are a problem for. This paper explores how the ‘problem’ of increasing cultural engagement is represented in Scottish Government policy and the research that informs it. Beginning with an analysis of the way in which ‘culture’ appears to be understood in the discourse of Scottish cultural participation, it moves on to consider the concepts and categories that are the result of this implicit definition, in addition to the assumptions that serve to sustain it. It concludes with a discussion of Creative Scotland’s potential to disrupt the existing problem representation, but only if the public gain a greater input into decisions around cultural provision in Scotland.

Methodology

Taking a broadly argumentative approach to its analysis (Fischer & Forester, 1993) this paper draws on Bacchi’s (2009) interpretive method for analysing and critiquing policy. Revolving around six core questions, it focuses on both the meaning-making of policy formulation and the ‘conceptual logics’ that lend those meanings validity. In doing so, the aim is to problematise the problematisations the policy is attempting to address. Influenced by Foucault, this approach is concerned with the governmentality of the modern state; in particular, the way that it establishes norms of desirable behaviour to which people as political subjects are expected to conform. However, unlike Foucault, the instigation of the problematisation is not unfailingly seen to lie in material ‘difficulties’ that provoke a response, but rather, in the assumption of a problem. It argues that although many competing constructions of a ‘problem’ are possible, governments “play a privileged role because their understandings ‘stick’” through an inevitable filtration into
the policies produced (Bacchi, 2009, p.33). In turn, this limits what it is possible to think, say or do about the perceived ‘problem’, and sees conflicting representations become silenced, discounted or marginalised; what Foucault has described as ‘subjugated knowledges’ (1980).

Bacchi’s systematic method utilises six questions in order to analyse the chosen policy. This paper has utilised Bacchi’s approach in the analysis of Scottish cultural policy texts and the research that underpins them. In addition to the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), that McCall and Playford (2012) have highlighted as the main source of data used by the Scottish Government to inform its cultural policies, the research has considered texts relevant to the creation of Creative Scotland, and those related to the National Indicator of ‘Increasing Cultural Engagement’. Although the analysis has been conducted by systematically following the six point approach suggested, the insights provided are presented as part of an integrated critique; utilised throughout as the discussion occasions their use.

What is the problem represented to be?

The Government states that it “is fully committed to widening engagement with culture for all communities and individuals across Scotland” (SG, 2010). Their policy is “for access to, and participation in, cultural activities to be as wide as possible” (SG, 2010). Indeed, the act that established Creative Scotland stated that one of its core functions was “encouraging as many people as possible to access and participate in the arts and culture” (SP, 2010). Statements such as these constitute the problem as one of equality, and equality in a neo-liberal political state is seen as being a matter of access to opportunities (Kantola & Squires, 2010). Thus the Government’s policies represent the ‘problem’ as the existence of barriers that cause unequal access to culture and limit citizens’ exposure to its supposed transformative power. However, nested within this problem representation is a further, but less explicit one: that the problem is the failure to engage with those cultural activities that receive state support.

Definitional difficulties and implicit distinctions

As Gray (2009) has argued, there are considerable definitional difficulties in relation to cultural policy, and of particular importance here are the ambiguities surrounding the terms ‘culture’
'participation' and 'engagement'. ‘Engagement’ is a particularly difficult term to operationalize, but the way in which the SHS seeks to measure it indicates the manner in which it appears to be understood. The SHS asks two separate questions in order to measure cultural engagement, one about *attendance* and one about *participation*. The first relates to activities in which the individual is more passive; consuming a cultural product offered by others. The later refers to those activities in which the individual plays a more active part, such as reading, writing or giving a performance. The apparent conceptual logic of these questions is that if an individual has undertaken any activity in either of these two categories over the previous twelve months then they are ‘engaged’ with culture. Although the extent to which there is a direct relationship between ‘participation’ or ‘attendance’ and ‘engagement’ can be questioned, it is not within the scope of this paper to do so and therefore, ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ will be understood as synonymous in regards to the policy documents considered.

Barker describes ‘culture’ as a “mobile signifier” (2004, p.44) and as such, the debate about what culture is understood to be is complex, and something that this paper has no wish to resolve; a sentiment supposedly shared by the Scottish Government:

“...the Government sees no advantage in a statutory definition of “culture” [...] even if it were possible to agree a definition of “culture” in the Parliament; it seems inevitable that it would very quickly become redundant. Ministers therefore consider a statutory definition of the “arts and culture” inappropriate and generally undesirable” (SP, 2008, p.6)

Yet despite this, the necessities of policy creation and the requirement for tools to measure success result in an implicit definition of what culture can and can’t be and the manner in which one can take part in it. In a literature review conducted for the Scottish Government, Ruiz sees cultural and arts activities as mainly falling into the following categories:

“Museums, Galleries, Libraries, Theatre, Literature, Music, Dance, Festivals, Crafts, Exhibitions, Film/Video, Art Classes (i.e. in schools), Design (i.e. in hospitals) and Leisure activities (i.e. reading, playing a musical instrument, going to cinema etc.)” (2004)
At first glance, these broad categories appear coterminous with the manner that culture is implicitly defined by the SHS, in which respondents are presented with a list of what cultural activities are understood to be. However on closer inspection, certain activities that could fit within these broad categories have in fact been excluded: buying a book is cultural engagement, but buying a CD isn’t. You participate in culture when purchasing a work of art for yourself, but not when viewing that same work of art at home. Going to a craft exhibition is, but not going to buy craft at a market. A visit to the records office would count, whereas going to see a comedian wouldn’t. Although McCall and Playford (2012) also question the extent to which the activities asked about accurately capture ‘cultural participation’, their concern appears to be the inclusion of activities many would not consider cultural, rather than any omissions that may have occurred.

Although the inclusion of activities such as pantomime and live DJ events does not immediately indicate the existence of the ‘typical’ distinction between high and low cultural activities that Griswold argues remains prevalent (2008), it is clear that distinctions have been made. Indeed even amongst those activities that are measured, distinctions are evident: pantomimes and musicals are labelled as ‘other’ theatre performances, discrete from drama and opera. Furthermore, the results of the survey are reported with specific statistics that exclude rock, pop, country music and going to the cinema (SAC, 2008). Perhaps the greatest evidence of an implicit distinction is that a discourse exists around increasing cultural engagement at all. The most recent figures indicate that 87.3% of Scottish adults are engaged with culture (SG, 2012), hardly the sign of a problem, and that is leaving aside the fact that those who access culture through the television, radio or internet are not included. Rather than a lack of engagement with culture, it is arguably more accurate to state that there is a lack of engagement with specific genres of culture. The most recent report showed that only 19% of people had been to a play, 4% to ballet and 5% to opera (SG, 2008). As will be discussed below, the policy priorities of the Scottish Government suggest that it is engagement with these forms of mainly state supported culture that they are primarily concerned.

If “maximising participation” is a primary objective of the Government’s spend on culture (SG, 2011a), then the way in which they target spending is indicative of how they perceive this ‘problem’ can be solved. Despite “enhancing the population’s quality of life” being a stated aim of cultural spending (SG, 2011a), and cultural participation, rather than attendance,
being shown to be a more effective route to this end (Knell & Taylor, 2011, p.30), there is a preference to subsidise large scale professional organisations (SG, 2011a; CS, 2011) whose primary output are cultural products for passive consumption. In the 2012-13 draft budgets, of the 149.2 million pounds set aside for culture, 65% is to support the provision of 14 national bodies” (SG, 2011a). Of the remaining 35%, distributed through the ‘arms-length’ body Creative Scotland, the majority primarily funds a network of theatre companies and galleries (CS, 2012a). Although each of these organisations is required to actively pursue the development of the broadest possible audience as part of their funding agreement, Creative Scotland dedicates only 2.3 million pounds or 3% of their total income to specific access and audience development work (CS, 2011); work that has a greater flexibility to be more responsive to the interests of those not engaging with the type of culture provided by the organisations detailed above.

Furthermore, amongst the participative arts activities that are funded a distinction is once again evident: it is the provision of one year’s free music tuition to all school children that receives by far the greatest monetary support (SG, 2011b). The SHS may classify craftwork and creating computer animation as cultural participation, but the Government is not investing 8 million pounds a year to facilitate children participating in it. With the vast bulk of Scotland’s cultural spend already accounted for, the majority of activity to encourage greater engagement with culture is limited to a ‘product-led’ approach (Kawashima, 2006) that seeks to find ways to increase participation with those cultural institutions and forms of culture that have been pre-selected for subsidy by a narrow group of decision makers. This paper is not suggesting that the cultural preferences exhibited by the Government are less valid than the alternatives; indeed the author is a fan of much that receives subsidy. Rather it seeks to emphasise that preferences do exist, especially in an area as subjective as culture, and that as such there may be those who would gladly welcome support to participate in culture, just not the particular culture that is on offer.

It can be argued that the sort of implicit distinctions made in the SHS are a pragmatic necessity of measurement; but in doing so the negative effects created by the resultant implicit definitions are often overlooked. They legitimate certain activities as being ‘valid’, at the same time as relegating others to a secondary position and implying that engaging with them does not ‘count’. Although the reasons for this are never made explicit, the rhetoric surrounding the benefits of cultural engagement implies that these secondary activities are incapable of providing
those beneficial side-effects that “enhance the quality of life for Scotland’s communities” (SG, 2011a).

There is much which is problematic here; firstly, there is the implicit presumption that the ‘affordances’ (Sutherland & Gosling, 2010, p.21) gained through an interaction with culture are fixed. The manner in which Scottish cultural policy bluntly implies a causal relationship between improved quality of life and encounters with a homogenous, yet implicitly delineated, ‘culture’ suggests an underlying belief that the same affordances will be evident irrespective of the cultural activity, the individual who is participating or the context of their participation. This fails to consider the extent to which individuals construct their own knowledge and experiences, a process that DeNora calls ‘world-making’ and in which “culture in and of itself does not do anything […] but acts as a dynamic resource for activity based on the way agents respond and orient themselves, i.e., how they appropriate culture” (DeNora, in Sutherland & Gosling, 2010, p.21). Findings from the Cultural Pathfinder Project (Crighton & Willis, 2008) showed that in relation to cultural resources, many individuals considered a much broader range of activities than policies concerned with increasing cultural participation currently address vi. If, as the Government acknowledges elsewhere, activities such as sport share the capacity to have a positive impact on an individual’s quality of life (Ruiz, 2004), why does it matter if they participate in the specific cultural activities that the SHS measures?

The narrow definition of ‘culture’ implicit in the SHS is further problematized by the existence of the ‘creative industries’ and the Government’s enthusiasm for advancing their growth. Creative Scotland’s corporate plan indicates that they will support TV production, fashion, digital technology and the games industry (CS, 2011). While these activities have arguably been embraced by policymakers for their potential economic impact, the implicit distinctions in the ring fenced funding and system of measurement continues to represent them as secondary activities and as such, the extent to which the public engage with them is not of national concern. Moreover, retaining these distinctions will become increasingly problematic as new technology diversifies the ways in which culture can be encountered, produced and shared. Indeed, the Scottish Arts Council supported the creation of the online arts site Central Station as part of a funding stream intended to provide “more, wider, better participation in the arts (SAC, 2009). However, despite being promoted as cultural participation, it is unclear if watching streamed theatre on a tablet, or viewing the National Museum’s digitised archive will count as
cultural engagement at a national level or if it will join television and radio in being overlooked. If it does, it places the Government in the position of supporting cultural engagement activity that will not directly alter the measure they use to monitor progress.

**Concepts, categories and assumptions.**

While this paper is not suggesting that those who make policy are undertaking intentional cultural hegemony, it does believe that policy makers’ particular a priori interpretive perspectives, combined with the actions that flow from them, create an implicit definition that includes a host of binaries and concepts. The result is that those choosing not to partake in ‘legitimate’ culture are represented as being outwith the parameters of society; in need of inclusion through the facilitation of a behavioural shift. This is an example of how problem formulations will often result in the subjectification of certain individuals through the acceptance of uncontested categories (Bacchi, 2009). In this particular problem representation it is the labelling of individuals as ‘cultural non-participants’ (McCall & Playford, 2012; Ruiz 2004) that is unquestioningly accepted by those trying to target them. ‘Non-participants’ are represented as a ‘problem’ category in binary contrast to those members of society who do ‘participate’. However Miles and Sullivan have shown that this “‘deficit’ model of participation, which views non-participants in legitimate culture as an isolated and excluded minority, is misplaced” (2010, p.19).

Furthermore, those who are labelled ‘participants’ are equally likely to be ‘non-participants’ when participation is considered at genre level. Going to the theatre does not mean someone will go to the ballet, yet their rationale for this decision appears less contested than those whose cultural participation does not include at least one of the activities measured. While it is problematic for a ‘non-participant’ to state that the cultural activities supported by the Government are ‘not for the likes of them’, the same cannot be said of those from the dominant ‘interpretive community’ (Yanow, 2000), who see certain other cultural activities in the same light. It appears to be of no concern to policy makers if white, middle-class, educated individuals fail to engage with video games, nor the fact that those over 35 are more likely to be ‘non-participants’ of live rock and pop music (SAC, 2002, p.21).
The use of the prefix ‘under’ is also a common feature amongst the texts considered. Certain groups are seen to be ‘under represented’ (Ruiz, 2004) or ‘under participating’ (CS, 2011) suggesting an insufficiency or inadequacy in the numbers taking part. However, what ‘adequate’ would be is never addressed, and therefore becomes measured by the participation rates of those making most use of the cultural provision on offer. There appears to be a belief that equality of opportunity will result in parity of uptake, and that ‘success’ should be measured as such. What is not considered is the extent to which certain individuals may be faced with an under-provision of the cultural activities that they want to take part in; just the type of structural inequality that Levitas (2005) argues the discourse surrounding ‘inclusion’ obscures.

Debates around how best to overcome the ‘problem’ of under-participation often centre on the presence of ‘barriers’ (CS, 2012c). The concept of a ‘barrier’ evokes the idea of an obstruction to passage, something preventing a desired movement from taking place. It projects an image of potential participants eager to take part but being prevented by something that they require help to overcome; yet a barrier arguably only exists where a desire does. The existing problem representation obscures the existence of an alternative persona that perceives no barriers to attendance yet still chooses not to go. The SHS found that 48% of those not currently engaged were not interested in participating, and 35% were not interested in attending (SAC, 2008). The argument that these people must be facing a psychological barrier presumes that their opinions are wrong, and fails to consider the validity or benefits of the activities they actively engage in through a genuine interest. Being prevented from doing something you want to do because of tangible barriers such as lack of transport or finance is not the same as choosing not to do something in which you have no interest.

The way that cultural engagement statistics are used, and their combination with the concept of ‘barriers’, conditions the way in which the public are perceived in their relationship with state supported culture. It suppresses the recognition of a sizeable majority who are uninterested in the culture receiving subsidy and who currently enjoy little influence over the way in which their taxes are spent on cultural provision. Instead, it creates the image of an excluded minority, keen to participate in the same way that a supposed majority does, but stopped by barriers that the Government, mindful of its duty to ensure equality of opportunities, is working to eradicate.
The potential for disruption

The establishment of Creative Scotland did however provide an opportunity for change. Its creation, through the merger of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, alongside a change in the size and make-up of its budget, resulted in decisions that could have begun to disrupt the current problem representation. Andrew Dixon, the first CEO, spearheaded the removal of specific art form budgets in favour of funding based on strategic themes (Jewesbury, 2011). Most noticeably, this was intended to result in the removal of ‘flexible funding’, a scheme that had supported approximately 60 organisations, most of which had been galleries and theatre companies (Jewesbury, 2011). This was to be replaced with a strategic commissioning programme requiring arts organisations to tender for projects that “produce, promote or deliver services in the arts and creative industries” (CS, 2011, p.35 emphasis added). The choice of ‘creative industries’ rather than ‘culture’ suggested an openness to the types of activities that would receive funding, since Creative Scotland’s definition of ‘creative industries’ includes computer games, TV, film and fashion (CS, 2011). This observation is further supported by the guidelines for the ‘Public Engagement Investment Opportunity’ funding stream, in which they state they are seeking to “increase participation in creative activity” (CS, 2012b, emphasis added).

However the bulk of these planned changes met with vociferous hostility from prominent members of the artistic community in Scotland, leading to Andrew Dixon’s resignation. Issuing a public letter to Creative Scotland’s chair (BBC, 2012) they protested against what they saw as “ill-conceived decision-making; unclear language, lack of empathy and regard for Scottish culture” (BBC, 2012). This highly public rift has highlighted the difficulties in attempting to alter the manner in which cultural funding is distributed and an underlying reticence for expanding the type of culture supported beyond what those critical of Creative Scotland’s approach continue to call ‘the arts’ (Miller, 2012; BBC, 2012). In proposing a way forward, the artists involved also exposed another implicit assumption: that audience participation in decisions regarding the supply of subsidised culture is not desired, as they believe that “existing resources are best managed in an atmosphere of trust between those who make art and those who fund it” (BBC, 2012, emphasis added). In their response, despite reaffirming their commitment to “increasing public engagement and participation” (CS, 2012d), Creative Scotland’s board appear to agree
with this assumption. Although committing to the establishment of forums that will feed into any future policy development, it appears that these forums will be limited to “artists, creative practitioners and staff” (CS, 2012d) and not include representatives of the communities they wish to engage with.

Creative Scotland has made much use of the undefined phrase “cultural ecology” (CS, 2011) that evokes imagery of an ecosystem that must be nurtured so as to maintain its natural balance and facilitate growth. Yet, as with nature, a balance cannot be found by focusing solely on selected aspects of the ecological lifecycle. However both Creative Scotland and the artists they supportvi exhibit a continued preference for focusing on the supply side of the equation; taking the established approach of strengthening the legitimised providers of culture “to meet the twin objectives of artistic excellence and extending public reach and participation” (Knell & Taylor, 2011, p.21). In apparently excluding the public from any dialogue about how cultural provision in Scotland should be developed, they continue to overlook the agency of those they wish to engage with; seeing the goal of ‘participation’ as being in relation to the product and not its production. Similarly to Holden (2006), this paper argues that in order to establish what Moore (1995) has called an ‘authorizing environment’, closed conversations between policymakers and practitioners must be rejected in favour of three way dialogue that includes the priorities of the public.

**Conclusion**

The way in which the ‘problem’ of cultural participation has been represented and the conceptual logics which underpin that representation have produced a number of silences which are too often ignored for the sake of pragmatic necessity when constructing evidence-based policy. This paper has argued that there is no certainty that an exogenous ‘problem’ of poor cultural participation exists, and that what policies to increase cultural participation are tackling is an endogenous ‘problem’ that exists because the Government subsidises certain cultural organisations, and in evaluation of this subsidy has conflated parity of uptake with equality of access. If the ‘problem’ was understood as a need to provide equality of access to *culture* rather than *state funded culture*, then those, such as Creative Scotland, who implement policy, would be free to focus less on maximising access to those organisations and activities that, for other valid
reasons, the Government funds\textsuperscript{viii}, but that the majority of the public are not interested in attending. Instead they would be able to think creatively about how to facilitate the democratisation of an already present cultural democracy, in which everyone has equity of access to the cultural life they desire. To create an arts policy paradigm in which the full spectrum of cultural possibilities are actively encouraged and levels of engagement with all the creative industries are celebrated as part of the ‘solution’. This is not to suggest that the state should not be involved in funding cultural activities; those whose cultural interests could only be met through state subsidy could continue to be provided for; albeit at a level that ensures their access is not supplied at a personal cost vastly preferential to that faced by those whose needs are met by the market. In Creative Scotland there could be the potential for such a paradigm shift to begin taking place, but only if they transition from being the funders of a ‘legitimate’ culture defined by a narrow group of decision makers, to becoming the facilitators of an environment in which alongside policymakers and practitioners, participants contribute to the legitimation of culture through their choices and opinions. Perceiving success not through numerical targets, but through the satisfaction of the public in regards to the cultural provision available to them, irrespective of who provides it, or of what form it takes.

\textbf{Acknowledgements}

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of the three anonymous reviewers who provided an insightful critique on an earlier version of this paper.
References


---

1 The main text used when analysing the SHS was the Scottish Government’s 2009 report, *People and Culture in Scotland 2008: Results from the Scottish household survey culture and sport module 2007/2008.*
2 The question related to attendance is: “Did you attend any of the following events during the past 12 months”
3 The question related to participation is: “Have you taken part in the following cultural activities (in the last 12 months).
4 Although there was the opportunity to indicate ‘other’ none of the respondents did.
6 These included activities such as shopping, bingo, sport and parks.
7 It should be noted that there is no evidence as to the extent that the opinions of the artists in question represent the majority of those working in the sector.
8 This paper is not arguing for what may be dismissed as a populist approach to providing cultural provision. It accepts that there are many other values and benefits that are equally important and may not correspond to the type of cultural opportunities that the public wishes to engage with. As such it acknowledges that any strategy must balance the priorities of policymakers, practitioners and the public.