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Failures in Cultural Participation

Leila Jancovich · David Stevenson

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Palgrave Studies in Cultural Participation

This series will provide a platform for contributions to a newly defined field of 'participation studies' (Miles and Gibson, forthcoming 2021). Participation in cultural activities is a research subject within a number of disciplines and fields, ranging from sociology to cultural studies, incorporating tourism, leisure heritage, museum, media, theatre, and cultural policy, to business and management studies. This series will bring together debates across these disciplines to consider the subject of cultural participation in all its dimensions.

The series brings together research on traditional cultural tastes and practices with research on informal 'everyday' activities. In doing so it broadens our understanding of cultural participation, focusing on participation as a pluralistic concern, exploring the links between the cultural, civic and social dimensions of participation, and reconsidering its framing in time and space by political economy, material resource and cultural governance.

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Failures in Cultural Participation

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FAILURES IN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION BOOK SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This book series provides a platform for contributions to a newly defined field of "participation studies" (Miles and Gibson, 2017 & 2016). Participation in cultural activities is a research subject within a number of fields, ranging from sociology to cultural studies, incorporating heritage, museum, media, theatre, tourism, leisure, cultural policy, and business and management studies. This series brings together debates across these disciplines to consider the subject of cultural participation in all its dimensions.

The series addresses research on both traditional cultural tastes and practices and the cultural significance of informal "everyday" activities. In doing so it broadens our understanding of cultural participation, focusing on participation as a pluralistic concern, exploring the links between the cultural, civic, and social dimensions of participation, and reconsidering its framing in time and space by political economy, material resources, and cultural governance. The series' focus on all forms of cultural participation provides a venue for research which acts to provide alternatives to or additional perspective on standard and more traditional studies of participation, such as those framed within audience or visitor studies, arts marketing, or audience development approaches.

The series will be grounded in three interrelated commonalities of approach:

1. Contributions to this series are interested in all practices of cultural participation regardless of the domain—state funded, commercially supported, communal, individual, and so on—within which the practices take place.

2. Contributions to the series are all concerned in various ways with the 'stakes' of participation or the cultural, economic, political, and social consequences of different types of participation in different places and at different times.
3. Contributions not only include but also move beyond a focus on the individual to address the operations of cultural and power implicit within the structures and relationships which enable some forms of participation while disabling others.

Leila Jancovich and David Stevenson's contribution is a fitting inauguration to the series. *Failures in Cultural Participation* explores the phenomenon that despite years of rhetoric to provide "access and participation" to "the arts", state cultural funding structures and budgets are still dominated by a concern with particular types of culture and that participation in these offerings is still predicated on social class.

Lisanne Gibson and Andrew Miles
Series editors

Acknowledgements

Praise for *Failures in Cultural Participation*

"Decades of cultural participation policies have failed to make any sustained difference to participation. As the authors of this book clearly show, too often in the cultural sector there is an unwillingness to look honestly at the individual, organisational, and systemic shortcomings that are inevitable in participatory work. In an enquiry characterised by depth, rigour, nuance, and insight, Jancovich and Stevenson take a long hard look at a system in which it is dangerous to admit failure; where the consequence is an environment of over-claim and mediocre performance, and where 'the biggest policy failure is the failure to learn.' The authors persuasively argue that change will never be achieved by 'sharing feel-good narratives and defending the status quo'; and they show how a 'failure framework' can improve learning.

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in how the cultural sector functions—and for everyone who wants to make it work better."

—John Holden, *Cultural Fellow at Kings College London*

"In the early days of arts subsidy, grant recipients often associated their funding with the "right to fail". This was synonymous with the right not to have to succeed and was a rational response to the Arts Council's rhetoric of supporting of artistic freedom. That understanding was largely unchallenged.

These days, funders are more likely to want to ensure that "everyone's creativity is given the chance to flourish". This calls for artists and organisations to deliver the broad spectrum of benefits associated with cultural participation. More fundamentally, it requires considerable understanding of the impacts of cultural activities and a preparedness to learn from failure. But fear of losing funding promotes the opposite effect—inhibiting transparency, critical accountability and sharing experiences.

This book not only shines a light on that state of affairs, but also addresses what it would take for the sector to seriously tackle the social and instrumental learning it lays claim to. As such, it is long overdue. One can only hope that it provokes decision-makers and funding bodies to look to, and learn from, their own failures."

—Sara Selwood, *Cultural analyst and researcher*

"The Failspace project provides an accessible way to shift the conversations about evaluation, particularly between funder and funded, to be less about accountability, impact, and demonstrating success and be something more reflective that opens up the opportunity to consider the spectrum of failure and success across a number of different domains."

—Kirsty Gillan-Thomas, *Head of Evidence and Learning,*
Paul Hamlyn Foundation

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About the Authors

Leila Jancovich Having worked in the cultural sector for many years, as a producer, policy maker and research consultant, Leila entered academia in 2007. Since then, her research has examined power and decision-making within cultural policy with a focus on the implications of participatory governance for the cultural sector. She is particularly interested in the relationship between theory, policy, and practice, to which end she sits on several policy advisory boards and is an Associate Director of the Centre for Cultural Value, based at the University of Leeds. She has also developed a master's programme in Audiences, Engagement and Participation and teaches modules in cultural policy and cultural participation.

David Stevenson Drawing on his academic research alongside a decade of management experience in the public and private sector, David has taught arts management and cultural policy for over ten years. His research concentrates on questions of cultural participation, specifically focusing on relations of power and the production of value within the UK cultural sector. Previous research has considered topics including cultural 'non-participation', the contingent value of museums, the nature of organisational success in the arts, cultural 'placemaking' and localism in cultural policy. He is an Associate Director of the Centre for Cultural Value, based at the University of Leeds, and a member of the National Partnership for Culture that helps to inform and influence cultural policy decisions in Scotland.

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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 oversubscribed, 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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Histories of Failures

Introduction

The belief that civil society plays a part in supporting the cultural lives of its citizens has a genealogy that emerges as far back as Greek and Roman civilisation (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010). The same belief also preoccupies academics, with scholars as distinct in era and philosophy as Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, William Morris, Karl Marx, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Angela McRobbie, and Claire Bishop producing works that explore the nature, scope, and purpose of cultural participation. Within the sphere of public policy, cultural participation is, for many countries, a legitimate site of state intervention. From the commitment in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and one's right to participate in existing cultural provisions (the democratisation of culture) to UNESCO's definition of participation as the process of redistributing power over what constitutes valuable culture (cultural democracy), there has and continues to be an international drive both to increase equity and equality within the cultural sector and to use culture itself to create greater equity in society at large.

Cultural policy in the United Kingdom has, to a greater or lesser extent, exhibited a concern with determining who participates in what cultural activity since the middle of the twentieth century. For most of this time, scholars have construed non-participation as a "problem" that society needs to fix (Stevenson, 2013). As Brook (2013) explains, "the factors

that influence whether individuals attend the arts have been the subject of a considerable amount of research [with a focus on] how individual demographic and socio-economic characteristics influence engagement in cultural activities" (p. 145). Despite decades of research, policies, and promises, though, cultural policymakers in the UK have failed to make any significant or sustained changes at a national level regarding who participates in subsidised cultural activities or the organisations that receive the most public subsidy. At the same time, these policymakers have also failed to direct subsidies to the types of cultural activities that attract the largest or most diverse levels of participation. As we mentioned in our introduction, this discrepancy has led to a "crisis of legitimacy" for the cultural sector (Holden, 2006), with surveys indicating a decline in support for public investment in the arts and cultural sector (Comres, 2015; Keaney et al., 2007).

This chapter begins with a discussion about how academics, artists, and policymakers have understood cultural participation and how these different understandings have shaped different perspectives about the role of the state in supporting the cultural participation of its citizens. The chapter then discusses how a concern regarding who participates in what culture has become increasingly prevalent in recent decades. Namely, an audit culture of accountability combined with a growing focus on equity and inclusion has resulted in a proliferation of measurements and debates on what sort of cultural participation should "count". The chapter concludes by reflecting on how much this data indicates the existence of a policy failure given that despite almost fifty years of focus on tackling the "problem" of cultural participation in the UK, policymakers, funders, and the organisations they support have neither fully democratised culture nor delivered a cultural democracy. Finally, this chapter examines why there appears to be little desire to acknowledge the scale of these policy failures or to deliver meaningful or sustainable change.

Cultural Participation and the State

Although cultural participation has a long intellectual history with strong links to ideas of civic engagement, community well-being, and prosperity (Belfiore & Gibson, 2019, p. 4), until the late nineteenth century there was limited state intervention in a sphere that supposedly depended on "individual taste and fashion" (Gray, 2000, p. 38). But as in other Western countries, lobbying on behalf of some within the professional arts sector

has led to the belief that the private cultural lives of citizens are a legitimate site of government intervention (Toleda Silva, 2015). In the UK, attempts to define a shared culture (Appleton, 2007) were led by "academy-trained gentleman artist[s] of the middle or upper classes" (Upchurch, 2016, p. 510). These men argued that granting the majority of society access to the fine arts would establish and reproduce learnt sensibilities and moralities, which, in Europe, was a situation that the legacy of the Enlightenment heavily informed. Many scholars associate this perspective with the reformist ideas of Matthew Arnold and his seminal 1869 work *Culture and Anarchy* (2009). As Peterson (1963) notes, Arnold reflects on what culture is and what good it can do for society. Arguing that it is a humanising, harmonising, and ultimately civilising agent of modern society, Arnold contrasts culture with anarchy (the latter of which he associated with the mood of unrest and uncertainty that the seismic societal changes of the Industrial Revolution brought about as he was writing).

From the middle of the twentieth century onwards, casual patronage of the arts by wealthy individuals developed into direct state intervention. At this time, Governments across Europe and beyond established Ministries of Culture and/or other semi-independent bodies, the latter of which were to ensure that state funding was spent independent of political influence (Landry & Matarasso, 1999). What both models of governance share is the logic of culture as a social utility through which societies agree upon their shared values. In doing so, society might prevent social fragmentation and anarchy either by challenging traditional values, as in the Cultural Revolution in China, or by preserving them through the European focus on a shared heritage in the classical civilisations of antiquity.

In the UK, what Minihan (1977) calls an act of cultural nationalisation operationally took the form of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB). Formed in 1946, the UK government set up the ACGB based on an arm's length principle, while at the same time granting permission to local authorities to support the cultural and entertainment needs of their constituents. This approach saw access to state-sanctioned arts as an inalienable democratic right. The UK thus adopted subsidies as part of an egalitarian process of democratising what was presented as both cultural excellence (Landry & Matarasso, 1999) and part of the intangible wealth of the nation. But as we have argued elsewhere, this model heavily directs cultural policy in the UK towards "supporting artistic independence for a professional class of artists, rather than the universal creativity or

participation of society in general" (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019, p. 174). While political science understands participation in terms of one's ability to exert power over decision-making processes, participation in the democratising agenda of cultural policy has only been a priority in so far as it supports the preservation and development of a professional artist class.

The dominant model of cultural policymaking in the UK for most of the twentieth century has been one of democratic elitism (Gray, 2000). As Hewison (2013) argues, this model "consigns the management of cultural policy to a group of experts who know transcendence when they see it" (p. 57). This is a situation that arises when society perceives such elites as being equipped to know what sort of cultural participation is more valuable than other forms. This patrician perspective has not been uncontested. The growth in higher education throughout the 1960s also saw the development of cultural studies as a discipline that challenged the hegemony of the cultural canon (Williams, 1983). Academic attention transcended debates over the intention of the artist and the aesthetic quality of the work to include examinations of how the public received, interpreted, and reproduced the work. This change took place against a background of broader social, political, and cultural changes including those of immigration and emigration that made the UK a progressively multicultural society. Increasingly, academics recognised the multiplicity of cultures that made up Britain's cultural landscape. More voices wanted to be heard, and these voices had different cultural traditions from those that had thus far exerted the most influence over Britain's cultural policy (Khan, 1978). At this time, the UK also started to adopt a less centralised approach to arts funding, with Regional Arts Associations exerting their influence (Hutchison, 1982) and local authority funding for art and culture matching, and often exceeding, that of the central government.

At the same time, a new generation of artists began to explore new art forms and challenge what it meant to be an artist. Community arts became more prevalent (Jeffers & Moriarty, 2018) partly in response to a reduction in opportunities for workplace-based creative activity that occurred as the UK closed or privatised traditional industries. Indeed, many of these industries had been significant supporters of creative activity among the working classes (Ashworth, 1986). Artists working within community arts at this time comprised what critics such as Kelly et al. (1986) describe as a cultural democracy: a democratic form of participation that requires a pluralistic system of values. In terms of participation, cultural democracy moves policy focus from one that manages the vertical relationship

between the participant and the public institutions of the state to one that values a more horizontal form of social participation between peers. As Belfiore and Gibson (2019) note, this approach sees culture not as the professional arts but as "everyday vernacular practices" (p. 166). Proponents argue that cultural democracy better meets the needs of a diverse and pluralistic cultural landscape rather than focusing narrowly upon the professional "high" arts. This perspective challenges the construction of cultural non-participation as a "problem". Instead, it questions the legitimacy of the taste hierarchies that policymakers traditionally refer to when constructing cultural policy, allowing non-professionals to participate in decision-making processes (Stevenson, Balling, & Kann-Rasmussen, 2017; Jancovich, 2017).

Yet as an increasingly neo-liberal approach to government saw the decimation of local power along with community cultural infrastructures, changes in the wider political landscape towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s significantly constrained the advance of this alternative perspective (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019). The reduction in local support for everyday culture alongside a reappraisal of all state responsibilities shifted the political logic of all cultural policy bodies. From the 1980s onwards, the logic of economic development and, since the millennium, the logic of social development became increasingly more important than those of art form development. As a result, the Arts Council, which in 1994 devolved into the different nations that make up the United Kingdom, was also forced to shift from a focus on "supply to demand" (Bunting, 2006). Thus, a logic of participation increasingly took centre stage. This change, as we discuss below in further detail, led to the growth of audience development initiatives such as outreach programmes that aimed to address education deficits or concessionary ticket schemes intended to reduce or remove the barrier of low income. But as Hadley (2021) notes when discussing the history of audience development: "it remains the single biggest demand-side initiative ever undertaken by the Arts Council […] and yet it was simultaneously a remarkably small undertaking with a tiny percentage of overall Arts Council spend allocated to it" (p. 193).

The lack of financial commitment indicates the extent to which, despite the rhetorical shifts, little has fundamentally altered regarding the dominant logic of what national cultural policy should be or how the government should execute it. For example, participation has been far more evident in the shifting language of policy documents in England than

through changes to the distribution of Arts Council England (ACE) funding. While ACE policy documents promised to end the historic funding patterns of the past, in 2004 for example 76% of those already funded gained increases to their allocated money (Jancovich, 2017). Since then, and despite growing policy rhetoric about a shift to place-based investment, critics have accused funding distribution of becoming more centralised rather than less (Stark et al., 2013). Despite the swell of enthusiasm for the idea of a cultural democracy across all four nations of the UK, most policymakers continue to understand cultural participation as participation in those activities that receive subsidies rather than adequately resourcing what people already participate in.

Furthermore, the sort of policies and projects commonly pursued under the banner of cultural democracy (64 Million Artists and Arts Council England, 2018) fall far short of the radical proposals that the original manifesto for cultural democracy outlined (Kelly et al., 1986). This proposal included the recommendation that the UK should disband the "oppressive" Arts Councils of Great Britain and abandon the idea of "the arts" as an exclusionary label that diminishes the value of other creative acts. Against these aims, advocates for cultural democracy have arguably failed as much as those who hoped to democratise "high" culture for the masses.

Measuring Cultural Participation

While, for much of the twentieth century, the legitimacy of cultural policy decisions rested on the expertise of the so-called great men of culture (and they were mostly men), the new principles of public management that arose towards the turn of the century increasingly called upon policymakers to justify their decisions with evidence as part of a new "audit society" (Belfiore, 2004). Despite their arms-length distance from central government, the fact that arts council and local authority spending comes from the public purse and not wealthy philanthropists means that those distributing public subsidy to the arts must provide evidence that the system is not simply an elite that "defend[s] their own tastes and status in the name of the masses" (Charles Paul Freund; cited in Jensen, 2002, p. 197). Rather, they must prove that this funding provides positive societal impacts. This directive has resulted in an ongoing dialogue with politicians that many arts sector workers, along with some academics, refer to as "making the case" for public subsidy for the arts. Indeed, as we discuss in

Chaps. 4 and 5, the perception that there was a need to constantly justify and defend funding for the sector was a major reason why those we interviewed felt uncomfortable about acknowledging failure publicly.

The need to "evidence" the value of state subsidies for culture has led to a significant body of work on "capturing" the impact and value of culture and cultural participation (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016) as well as the rise of what Prince (2013) calls calculative cultural expertise. Although value, impact, and benefit are closely related and even interchangeable terms, they are not wholly synonymous (Carnwaith & Brown, 2014). Scholars generally refer to benefit in terms of a wide range of positive outcomes (both tangible and intangible) and associate the term with cultural activity in relation to both communities and individuals (Brown, 2006; Mccarthy et al., 2005; Ruiz, 2004). Unlike benefits, impacts are both positive and negative and tend to refer to changes that occur through the virtue of interactions with an activity or organisation (Brown, 2006; Leadbetter & O'Connor, 2013; Matarasso, 1997). While scholars use the term "cultural value" in economics to refer specifically to the non-economic value that arises from goods and experiences (Throsby, 2001), beyond this discipline it primarily refers to the process through which cultural activities produce benefits and impacts for the individual, institution, and society (Holden, 2004, 2006). Scholars also tend to draw distinctions between instrumental and intrinsic value (Belfiore, 2012; Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2013; Holden, 2006; Mccarthy et al., 2005; Orr, 2008). Regardless of which term we use, the focus of contemporary research (both within the cultural sector and within academia) has tended to involve clarifying the positive effects of cultural participation with relatively little consideration of the negative effects. As we discuss in subsequent chapters, this asymmetry in research also appears in the narratives that artists, organisations, and funders are most likely to adopt when talking about the projects and policies that support cultural participation.

No matter the claimed impact, almost every claim relies on participation in some form or another. As Pinnock (2006) notes, "art which no-one wants to use is *not* an addition to the nation's wealth" (p. 175; emphasis in the original). Although arguments exist about the value of public subsidy, and which do not appear to depend on use, such as option, existence, or bequest value (see, e.g., Holden, 2004), these arguments still rely on the presumption of use by somebody at some point. For example, if you value an art gallery not because you use it but because you want future generations to be able to use it (bequest value), then your

valuations of this place assume that someone else will value using it in the future. However, a perennial problem for the subsidised cultural sector has been that much of what supposedly provides value to society appears to be irrelevant to the majority and only of benefit to a minority. Thus, such organisations face consistent challenges to legitimise their claims on the public purse of a liberal democracy. Indeed, various individuals, from across the political spectrum, have voiced this challenge over the last fifty years. Community artist Su Braden (1978), for instance, argued that local authorities should redistribute subsidies to community-led cultural activities at the grassroots level. Conservative MP Norman Tebbit, too, contended that state subsidies for the arts were elitist and politically biased and should thus be reduced or even removed entirely (Dodd, 1995).

For policymakers, academics, and artists who are committed to a more equitable cultural sector, the supposed elitism of cultural policy has remained a considerable concern, especially given the level of government intervention in the arts. Evidence that supports the "elitism hypothesis" (Courty & Zhang, 2018) is long-standing and global in scope. Throsby and Withers (1979), for example, show that the wealthiest proportions of households benefit the most from public subsidy for the arts, a finding that the Warwick Commission (2015) has recently corroborated. Initially, this sort of demographic data was limited (Hadley, 2021). Over time, however, these critiques have led to a significant focus on generating evidence about what sorts of cultural activities people are involved in and how regularly they participate.

Most research into patterns of cultural participation is empirical, descriptive, and survey-driven and comes from one of three sources. First, arts organisations gather an increasing amount of data about their members and audiences as well as from organisations whom they commission to produce studies, such as the Audience Agency in England (2021). Second, statistics derive from academic studies that often undertake secondary analyses of existing data sets or attempt to aggregate the figures (e.g., Taylor, 2016). Finally, and despite the acknowledged difficulties (Schuster, 2007), the largest body of quantitative data comes from national and/or regional level studies that various countries have undertaken. They include Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, the United States, and Uganda as well as many countries in the European Union. Some of these studies now provide a time series of data that stretches back over several decades (see, e.g., UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012 for international approaches). The United Kingdom is no exception here. All four nations

monitor rates of participation in and/or attendance at arts, cultural, and heritage activities. Since 2005 in England, for example, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport in partnership with Arts Council England, Sport England, and English Heritage has undertaken the yearly *Taking Part* survey (see Keaney, 2008 for a discussion of *Taking Part* and its relative merits). Likewise, the *Taking Part in Scotland* survey of 2004, 2006, and 2008 studied participation with culture in residents north of the border. This survey built upon those that the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) had undertaken in 1991, 1994, 1998, and 2001. Although this survey is no longer conducted, the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) still measures cultural participation (see McCall & Playford, 2012 for a discussion of the SHS and its relative merits). Since 1993, the Arts Council of Wales has measured cultural participation as part of the broader *Omnibus Survey*, whereas the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's *General Population Survey* has reported biennially on rates of participation with art and culture since 2004.

However, the above surveys are not without their critics; many scholars have questioned the quality and value of the accumulated statistics (Madden, 2005; Schuster, 2007; Selwood, 2002). Moreover, the data provides few details that would allow policymakers to draw a satisfactory disaggregation and thus highlight the level of cultural participation that relies on government subsidy. Furthermore, the data does not clarify the degree to which policy interventions make tangible differences over those that one would find in any market. For the above reasons, other scholars have highlighted the shortcomings of the data for policymakers (Brown, 2006; Keaney, 2008). Despite these weaknesses and the inherent difficulty in measuring something as contested as culture (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007; Gray, 2009; Roodhouse, 2008), most scholars appear to accept that agencies at the local, national, and international level can and should monitor cultural participation.

In general, the above surveys present an uneven picture and show little evidence of sustained progress. For example, if we take the figures from England that track public engagement with the arts between 2005/06 and 2018/19 (see Fig. 2.1), a policymaker might claim "success" at noticing a rise of engagement by 3% over that period. However, the year-to-year changes do not indicate a consistent upward trend. Indeed, in half of the intervening years, engagement dropped below those levels seen at the start of the survey period.

Engagement with the arts in the last 12 months
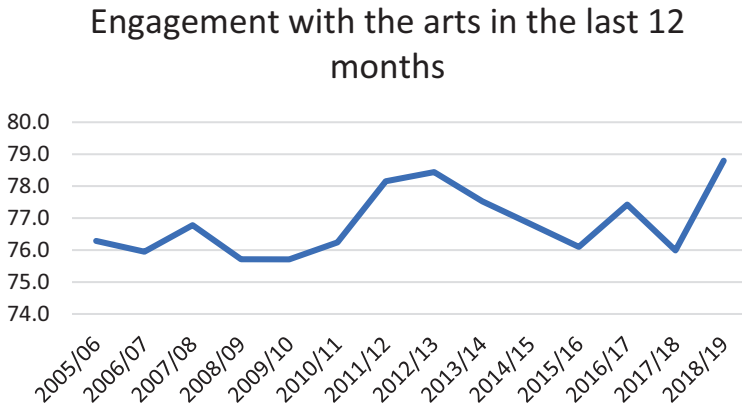
Fig. 2.1 Rates of engagement with the arts in England between 2005 and 2019. (Adapted from data at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201819-statistical-release)

With over three-quarters of the population participating at the baseline, though, some might reasonably ask, "what's the problem again?" (Stevenson, 2013). Is anything less than a 100% level of cultural engagement unsatisfactory? What if people just do not want to take part? What if we define this problem not in relation to how many people participate but in relation to a comparison between patterns of participation among the most and least deprived segments of society? Further scrutiny of the data from *Taking Part* demonstrates this variance, with only 60% of the most deprived participating in 2009/10 compared with nearly 86% of the least deprived. When viewing these figures, policymakers might celebrate the ten-year increase in the rate of engagement for the most deprived and the unchanging levels for those in the least deprived segments of society. Again, though, the rates are not consistently progressive and the most affluent members of society are still some way ahead (see Fig. 2.2).

The above data indicates how much these survey types collectively affirm what Courty and Zhang (2018) call the "elitism hypothesis", where a correlation exists between certain forms of cultural participation and social status, wealth, and education. Related research has also demonstrated that attained characteristics such as education and income are more significant in predicting patterns of cultural participation than determined characterised such as one's age, gender, or place of birth (DiMaggio &

Arts engagement by index of multiple deprivation
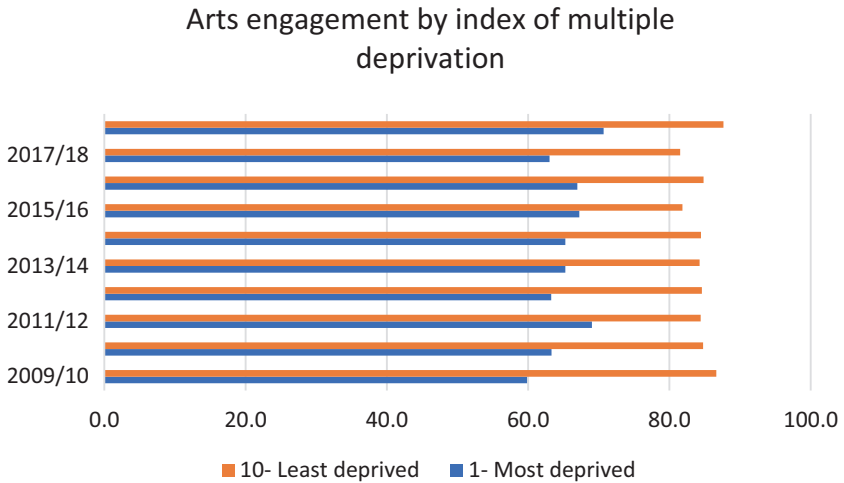
Fig. 2.2 Arts engagement in England in the last 12 months by Index of Multiple Deprivation decile (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201819-statistical-release)

Ostrower, 1992; O'Hagan, 1996; Peterson et al., 2000). Scholars have identified this pattern in the UK (Keaney, 2008), America (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015), Europe (Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016) and China (Courty & Zhang, 2018). In particular, those with degree-level education and/or higher incomes are more likely to participate in so-called highbrow cultural activities that are also more likely to benefit from public subsidies.

However, surveys such as the *Scottish Household Survey* and *Taking Part* are not neutral technocratic instruments (Bunting et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2013). Rather, they are created by, and in turn recreate,

> normative conceptions of desirable cultural participation which are at the heart of the administrative machinery for the promotion of culture and the public's access to it, and the driving ideals behind much of contemporary audience development and 'engagement' work within publicly funded cultural institutions. (Belfiore & Gibson, 2019, p. 5)

This can be seen in the way that some scholars have employed an analysis of this type of statistical data in support of a problem construction

wherein tangible and/or acquired "barriers" prevent certain people from doing things that they otherwise would do, and which would be valuable to them as both an individual and citizen (Stevenson, 2013, 2019). Such scholars suggest that there is the potential for society to remove these barriers. As such, there is an assumed duty for policymakers and the organisations that they support to make such changes wherever public money is involved (Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016). In turn, this assumption has resulted in policies and practices that focus on finding ways to support so-called cultural "non-participants" (Stevenson, 2019) and help them overcome socio-economic "barriers". However, these "barriers" relate only to those cultural activities that societal norms expect them to value. Thus, the above policies do not pursue fundamental structural change to the types of cultural participation activities that receive support. In other words, policymakers represent patterns of cultural participation as a problem of deficit amongst certain individuals and uphold that state intervention must build the capacity for these people to partake in mainstream culture (Miles & Gibson, 2016).

Some, such as theatre director Danny Moar, have argued that this belief has turned into a "remorseless and obsessive preoccupation" of subsidised organisations to "[chase] after new audiences who, for perfectly legitimate reasons, are just not interested" (Culture Media and Sports Committee, 2011, p. 19). Indeed, Keaney (2008) shows that, while a lack of time and money are often the reasons why people do not participate in the type of activities that most national cultural participation surveys monitor, it is a lack of interest in these activities that represents the most significant "barrier".

It is this lack of interest that marks one of the main reasons why the practice of "audience development" (Hadley, 2021) does not lead to sustainable changes regarding those who engage with subsidised organisations and activities (Mandel, 2019). Many professionals in the field acknowledge this issue (Hadley, 2021, p. 193). As O'Hagan in 1996 explains:

> …many arts councils and arts bodies have explicitly adopted a policy of pursuing more equal access to and participation in the arts as a policy objective. [However], it is a picture that has changed little, to the best of my knowledge, in any country in the last forty years. Why then are arts bodies still "going through the motions" of emphasising the importance of access for all to the consumption of the high arts when it is known that so little can be

achieved? […] Arts bodies emphasise the issue of access primarily because it appears their continued public funding sometimes relies on such pronouncements. (pp. 269–276)

What is most dispiriting here is that O'Hagan says exactly the same thing, almost word for word, in a subsequent publication twenty years later (O'Hagan, 2017). Thus, it remains the case that "the wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the UK population makes most use of publicly subsidised cultural organisations and events (and thus enjoys a significantly higher public spend per head on their cultural interests)" (Stevenson et al., 2017, p. 94). Yet this discrepancy should not be a surprise. Time and again over the last sixty years, scholars have argued that state-subsidised attempts to support "access" to culture in the UK have made little difference to the patterns of cultural participation at a national level. Furthermore, "there is no significant indication that countries with different cultural policies are able to attenuate the effect of education and income on cultural participation" (Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016, p. 147).

In reflecting upon this apparent failure, it is important to recognise that much of the existing research into cultural participation "barriers" overlooks an important aspect of social life: the extent to which symbolic boundaries determine what is or is not for you (Lamont, 1992, pp. 11–12). As Holden (2010) states, non-participation is not the same as exclusion. Thus, Stevenson (2019) argues that we should make a distinction between those "who express an interest or desire to participate in an activity but who are hindered from doing so and those who have expressed no interest or desire in the same activity and identify no detriment to their life because of it" (p. 55). It is also notable that policymakers do not deem "non-participation" in state-subsidised cultural activities by some types of people to be a problem at all. For "if someone is not understood as a social or economic problem for the state, then their patterns of cultural participation are of no interest to those acting on behalf of the state" (Stevenson, 2019, p. 60). In practice, this assumption means that an extensively educated or affluent person who does not participate with state-subsidised cultural organisations and activities would not be the target of outreach and participation programmes in the same way that less affluent or extensively educated people would.

There are good reasons to perceive one's refusal to participate in certain types of culture as an eloquent affirmation of their agency, one that may allow them to participate in something else (Harper, 2020). Given that most cultural participation in the UK takes place in the commercial

sector or at community-based events, this "something else" is arguably one of the biggest challenges that face those who seek to defend the cultural policy status quo (Taylor, 2016). Thus, some scholars argue that the participation gap "is not caused by a lack of demand among the public for cultural and creative expression" (Warwick Commission, 2015, p. 33). Rather, cultural policy values different forms of cultural and creative expression to various degrees.

Indeed, a significant body of scholarship in the UK has considered the rich and diverse nature of "everyday" participation (Miles & Gibson, 2016). If we widen our understanding of cultural participation or allow respondents to self-define the term, then scholarship shows that people participate in culture at much higher rates across all demographics (A New Direction, 2014; Public Perspectives & Middlesex University, 2015; Walker & Scott-Melnyk, 2002). While most of the UK population has low levels of participation in the type of cultural activities and organisations that are most likely to receive public subsidy, they are "nonetheless busy with everyday culture and leisure activities" (Taylor, 2016, p. 169). A recent Eurobarometer survey points to similar findings across Europe (European Commission, 2017).

Nevertheless, the dominant discourses regarding cultural participation in post-war UK cultural policy have focused upon social deficit rather than inequitable distribution, accessibility rather than relevance (Belfiore, 2019; Warwick Commission, 2015). There has been a consistent failure to respect or even recognise the value of some forms of cultural participation. The prevailing discourses thus limit any concern about equitable access to those areas of the arts that already receive large public expenditure. As a result, these discourses do not result in equitable help for people to overcome any barriers they face when pursuing their cultural lives, irrespective of the form this participation may take.

For all the work that has examined the value of cultural participation, none has involved comparative research into the relative merits of different types of cultural participation. As such, there is no evidence, for example, about why the government should fund outreach projects to encourage people who are already regular cinema attendees to go to the ballet. Likewise, there is a lack of evidence on the additional benefits that someone might gain from going to a gallery rather than listening to live music at their local pub. The focus on encouraging some forms of cultural participation over others thus raises ethical questions about whether contemporary liberal democracies should try to change individual tastes and

cultural preferences without clear evidence as to why such changes would be desirable.

Likewise, as Ruiz (2004) acknowledges, scholars have paid little attention to the relative impact of cultural participation compared to other types of activity. For example, current research has not considered whether cultural participation has a greater or different impact on community cohesion over participation in sports, or whether cultural participation is more likely to increase a teenager's self-efficacy than gardening or volunteering. Despite the significant amount of research time and expense that scholars have directed towards the question of cultural participation, researchers have arguably failed to provide insights that have fundamentally altered how the state supports cultural participation. Over forty years after the work of Braden (1978) and Throsby and Withers (1979), research continues to tell us that different people participate in different activities, that governments appear to value some forms of cultural participation more than others, and that state subsidies for culture continue to disproportionally benefit the most affluent and socially advantaged members of society. Scholars have paid far less attention to why decades of cultural participation policies and projects in the UK have failed to make any sustained difference to the "problem" that academics, artists, and policymakers have been attempting to address for at least half a century, if not longer.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, cultural policy in the UK has been preoccupied with the "problem" of cultural participation for decades and has coalesced around two primary perspectives. One regards the problem of participation as being about access and opportunity. Proponents of this perspective thus seek to increase the number of people who regularly participate in those organisations and activities that cultural professionals identify as being of greatest value to society. Another perspective regards the problem as one of redistribution, representation, and respect. This alternative perspective seeks to increase the diversity of those involved in decision making, recognise that the fullest spectrum of cultural participation is societally valuable, and reallocate public subsidies accordingly. Yet contemporary research would suggest that cultural policy has failed to deliver on either perspective.

Where policymakers face "wicked" problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973), they often attempt to address the symptoms rather than the causes

(Stringer & Richardson, 1980). Furthermore, policymakers tend to adopt "placebo" policies that underplay or remove difficult issues from the political agenda (Gustafsson, 1983). Cultural participation is one such "wicked" problem given that so much debate exists over what the phrase constitutes in terms of policy, why participation should represent a state concern, and how cultural policy should address the issue. As such, many of the associated policies and projects are primarily symbolic. Despite delivering little or no objective long-term change, such policies demonstrate governmental, institutional, and individual commitments to address cultural inequities and inequalities. At the same time, ever more eloquent evaluations employ the same narratives of either individual transformation and empowerment or social and economic impact. While these narratives justify public funding for policies, organisations, and projects, many of these policies and projects continually fail to change existing patterns of cultural participation, diversify the voices who make significant decisions or increase the breadth of activities and organisations that benefit from public subsidy.

The primary motivation of this research has thus been the task of understanding the dissonance between stories of success and the UK's history of failure when delivering meaningful change in this area. In the next chapter, we will consider some of the literature on policy failure that explains why it is so hard to recognise and why it is so difficult for policy implementers to acknowledge failures when they do occur. We will also consider the potential for learning that policy failures can provide if there is a culture of talking about them openly and honestly.

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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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The Failures of Policy

Introduction

As we showed in Chap. 2, the idea of access to a shared culture has always been a central component of legitimising funding for arts and cultural activities. In the UK, the first trusts and foundations were set up in the nineteenth century to share the collections belonging to the wealthy in museums and libraries. In the twentieth century, the formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, as well as the permission for local authorities to fund the arts and entertainment, both introduced public money from taxation, which likewise assumed some public benefit. It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, that an explicit drive to increase participation has been a growing part of cultural policy discourse.

What has been defined as a shift "from supply to demand" (Bunting, 2006), in other words, from a focus on support for the artist to support for the participant, is in part a response to a failure of cultural policy to equitably address the cultural needs of the wider population. Academics have accused cultural policymakers of perpetuating elite hierarchies of taste (Bourdieu, 1984), which can be witnessed in many countries through a focus on funding specific art form practices while excluding others or supporting professional practice at the exclusion of amateur cultural activities. On a global scale, data from surveys has further demonstrated an "elitism hypothesis" (Courty & Zhang, 2018) based on a correlation

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between those who take part in subsidised culture and their wealth, education, and social status. Cultural policymakers have therefore increasingly been under pressure to justify the legitimacy of their decision-making processes (Holden, 2006a).

Despite these apparent failures, both to distribute funds equitably and to legitimise cultural policy, the language of policy documents more commonly focuses on narratives of success rather than acknowledging failures. As we argued in Chap. 3, this resistance to discuss failure reduces the potential for the kind of learning which is necessary to facilitate the changes that might create a more equitable cultural sector. Furthermore, we argue that the language of participation has taken a performative turn, through the use of multiple and at times even contradictory definitions, which obscure its meaning, making meaningful change even more difficult to achieve. We also demonstrated in Chap. 2 how policymaking is not just written but enacted by people with power to not only speak but also to be heard. This chapter therefore draws on data collected from workshops and interviews with policymakers in the UK, as described in detail in the Chap. 1, to examine how the meanings they give to participation affects policy development and the extent to which acknowledgement of failure contributes to policy learning.

In defining policymakers, we acknowledge that the word policy suggests two meanings: the politics of decision making and the policing of those decisions. Policymakers may therefore be defined as the preserve of what politicians decide, or as something enacted by anyone with the power to do so within the cultural sector. One local authority officer we interviewed said, "politicians get very jumpy about the use of the word 'policy' because they believe that's their domain and their domain only". But in this chapter, as cultural policy is said to be delivered at "arm's length" from the government in Britain (Madden, 2009), while we consider the influence of politics on policymaking, we have defined policymakers as those who police the sector: in other words, anyone with control over the funds to which organisations and individuals apply in order to undertake cultural participation work. In this chapter, we therefore focus on those working for local authorities, arts councils, trusts, foundations (who, through dint of the independent funds they receive from endowments, also distribute funds), and the consultants who advise them. We then discuss the influence of practitioners on policy in Chap. 5 and participants in Chap. 6.

In the workshops we undertook as part of this research, we asked policymakers to discuss the meanings they give to participation and what both

success and failure look like from a policy perspective. We conducted these workshops within a safe space among their peers. The aim of this process was to test the level of agreement over how the purpose of cultural participation policies are understood, as well as observe variances in attitudes to failure regarding the implementation of these policies. The follow-up interviews we undertook with these policymakers then explored their personal attitudes to failure and the processes of both policymaking and review within their own organisations. We asked each of them to share specific examples of policy learning and to reflect on what part acknowledging failure played in that learning process. In completing this work, we identified Creative People and Places (CPP) (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-0) as a policy intervention that was frequently cited as a success story not only by policymakers but also in the national media. Through interviews with staff from CPP and "deep hanging out" (Walmsley, 2018) with participants in one CPP area, we explore what might be learnt from re-examining its perceived successes through the alternative lens of failure.

The chapter therefore begins by exploring the different meanings that participation has for policymakers. It then examines the attitudes to talking about failure among our sample and suggests what barriers may be preventing them from doing so. The final section then considers where they locate the failure of participation policy, as described above and the extent to which cultural policy not only learns from this but acts upon this learning. Throughout the chapter, we illustrate key points with reference to CPP and, unless otherwise stated, all quotes come from the policymakers in our sample.

Meaning of Participation

Through our research, we observed a clear consensus among policymakers, whether from arts councils, local authorities, or trusts and foundations, that "participation" was a policy agenda which they all saw as one of their priorities. While one member of staff from Arts Council England defined participation in artistic terms as "a cultural form […] a practice", most defined it in relation to phrases such as "social justice", "the cultural rights argument", or "our equalities work". In other words, participation was seen as a duty or responsibility to ensure universal and equitable opportunities to take part in cultural activities, rather than as a separate form of cultural practice.

As we show in Chap. 5, the idea of participation as a form of artistic practice, undertaken specifically by participatory artists, is more common among practitioners, and draws heavily from art theory (Bourriaud et al., 2002; Ranciere & Schad, 2004) which shifts the focus of attention from art as an object to art as a relational process, between the artist and the audience or viewer. In such a conception, there is space for "agonism" (Miller, 2016) or dissenting voices to challenge the status quo. For most of our policymakers, however, participation was described as a way of "fitting in" to systems far more than challenging them. All saw participation as a public benefit, which promised positive outcomes for both society and individuals and they supported claims in the literature that participation plays a key role in the creation of healthy individuals and sustainable communities (see e.g., Keaney, 2006). Words and phrases such as "social inclusion", "wellbeing", and "personal development" were commonplace.

In such a conception of participation, there is an implied assumption that people do not naturally choose to participate, and the role of policymakers is therefore to persuade them to do so for their own good. Success and failure therefore relate to whether people take part in the activities prescribed for them by policymakers, as well as the benefits that participation brings to them both socially and personally. This framework ignores the "everyday participation" that has been identified by other writers to be more prevalent (Taylor, 2016) and which we shall show in Chap. 6 to be most important to participants.

The majority of our sample agreed that one of their primary interests therefore was in "who" participates in what they fund, and this is at least influenced by the type of surveys, such as Taking Part (DCMS, 2018) and Active People (Sport England, no date), which we showed in Chap. 2 to have supported the elitism hypothesis. Many also stated that this evidence placed a responsibility to increase participation on the whole cultural sector, rather than being the preserve of those who define themselves as participatory artists. It is therefore common practice for policymakers to ask the organisations or artists they fund to report on rates of participation in their funded activities, particularly from what the surveys suggest are under-represented groups. When pushed to consider why, despite this policy focus, these surveys suggest that rates of participation have failed to increase, these same tools were accused of measuring the wrong criteria. Policymakers therefore seemed happy to use such surveys to inform policy development, but were less keen on using them to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions.

An Acknowledgment of Failure Or a Failure to Acknowledge?

Creative People and Places (CPP) is an Arts Council England (ACE) initiative that was launched in 2012 as a response to data from the Active People Survey. This survey was devised by Sport England to obtain a granular analysis of participation in different types of physical activities or sport at a local level, but Arts Council England augmented a lengthy survey about different physical activities with only one additional question about "attendance in arts, libraries and participation in any creative, artistic, theatrical or musical activity or crafts in the last 12 months" (Sport England, n.d.).

The results found significant differences in rates of participation between different locations, which were seen by some as "an acknowledgement of failure" in participation. From the outset, however, there was disagreement within ACE about whether this failure should be understood as a social failure on the part of those not participating or a failure of policy to distribute funding equitably. Many people with whom we spoke acknowledged a correlation between places that the data suggested had low rates of cultural participation, areas of socio-economic deprivation, and low levels of public investment. As a result, an ACE senior manager said: "[…] we had a long debate when we were setting up Creative People and Places about what is the data that we should use. You know, should we use deprivation, should we use our own funding levels blah blah blah—and in the end we came down to the cultural engagement stat, just because we're saying all of the others are not ones that I think we can claim the territory to try and shift".

But while ACE might not be able to eradicate social deprivation on their own, there seems no reason they could not address the unequal levels of their own funding in different parts of the country. As we have written elsewhere (Jancovich, 2017a), however, internal opposition to owning the failure within ACE meant the only way to get internal support to release money to these areas was to use the narrative of social rather than policy failure. This was said by some to have "enforced a kind of deficit model about certain places and certain communities which was really unhelpful" in supporting people's participation.

ACE initially discussed whether to use the data to "level up" their funding by giving all the underperforming areas more significant investment.

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Instead, however, it was decided to develop CPP as short-term action research, making £37 million available by competitive application to a small number of locations whose residents were in the bottom 20% of participation in the country (this was an arbitrary cut off which has since shifted to the bottom 30%). In so doing, it may be argued that they continued their long-standing logic of funding "few but roses" (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1951, p. 51) which we argue has contributed to inequality between places. We therefore support the view that, as one policymaker said, the failure to acknowledge, "people have got a right to that investment" meant the policy was flawed from the outset

Furthermore, despite basing their criteria on the data from the Active People survey, ACE removed their investment from the survey and thereby limited the possibility of measuring the programme's success or failure against the very outcomes it was set up to address. As one policymaker stated, this was because it was believed that it would be "setting the projects up to fail", which ACE could not countenance. This clearly demonstrates a reticence to acknowledge even the possibility of failure to reach the very "non-participant" whom the policy was designed to target and undermines their claim that it is evidence based policy in action.

While there was consensus among our sample of policymakers about the importance of who participates in these initiatives, there was less consensus on what they were being asked to participate in. Those from arts councils and some local authorities, who directly spend money obtained from taxation, most frequently defined their goal as increasing participation in the activities they already fund. This relates to the democratisation of culture, or public participation (Brodie et al., 2009) discussed in Chap. 2. Both employ a model of participation based on the relationship between the public and the institutions of state, which assumes that the institutions currently funded are the best mechanism to achieve any policy goal. Success and failure are therefore defined by whether people engage with these cultural institutions, and how they feel after doing so. Since the publication of Arnstein's ladder of participation in 1969, however, many theorists from other disciplines have questioned whether participation in pre-determined activities by state-sanctioned institutions should be

described as participation at all. For Arnstein, only control over the decisions about the types of activities, services, or cultural projects offered should be defined as participation.

This approach has informed the broader direction of public policy which increasingly defines participation in relation to the level of power and agency that participants have. Many theorists suggest that the opportunity to bring about desired outcomes is directly proportional to the power wielded by the participant (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Dryzek & List, 2003; Ostrom, 1990). In England, this approach was evident in a government edict, or "duty to involve" (DCLG, 2008), the public in decision making about all public services, including cultural policy, which came into force briefly in 2008. In Scotland, this edict remains within the Community Empowerment Act (The Scottish Government, 2015) from which the National Standards for Community Engagement were developed. While the duty was later removed in England, all the policymakers across England, Scotland and Wales, to whom we spoke, did refer to the idea of participatory decision making, and in principle, many supported the view that "if you say you want to reach everyone, then what you fund in terms of the type of cultural activity needs to shift". This approach defines participation in relation to notions of cultural democracy or social participation and horizontal relationships between peers. In line with theories on everyday participation, this challenges the assumption described above that the role of cultural policy is to persuade people to participate in activities in which they do not currently participate. Instead, it posits that culture is something we are already all part of, and that cultural policy fails to provide adequate resources to the diverse cultures and cultural activities in which people take part (Miles & Gibson, 2017).

Many of the policymakers to whom we spoke saw this as the inevitable direction of travel for cultural policy, and some cited a significant shift in language within the national policy bodies as an example of this. The change from the Scottish Arts Council to Creative Scotland, for instance, was described as moving the emphasis from the professional arts to wider definitions of creativity. Similarly, the change in title between Arts Council England's ten-year strategies, from "Great Art for Everyone" (2010–2020) to "Get Creative" (2020–2030), was seen by many as part of this shift. Furthermore, under the banner of supporting cultural democracy, each of the public bodies supporting arts and culture in England, Scotland, and Wales have developed schemes, of which Creative People and Places is one, which invest directly in communities and allow them some form of participation in decisions about what cultural activities are funded.

The Shift from Participation in Art to Participation in Decision Making

From the outset, Creative People and Places aimed to "test new approaches" to increase participation, including participation in decision making about the types of cultural activities people want to see funded locally. As a result, one of the conditions of funding is that areas are managed by consortia of local groups, and many have programming panels made up of local residents.

The intention is that including those outside of the cultural policy sector will challenge what might be defined as cultural participation, and many of those working for CPP said that this was influencing thinking across the cultural sector.

They also claimed that it was clear when working in these areas that the barriers to participation implied by the Active People survey, which define eligible places as having low levels of cultural participation, are not in fact present. Instead, most of the CPP staff we spoke to acknowledged a desire to take part in local activity, whether that activity was what ACE deemed to be culture or not. This clearly supports the idea that the failure in cultural participation may be more to do with what is funded and measured as participation rather than a social failure in these places.

Despite this, however, CPP staff said they felt limited in how radical they could be in terms of redefining cultural participation because they were under pressure to achieve ambitious targets in terms of the number of people they engaged, and to report on the "quality of art as much as the quality of participation". This was said to lead them to put on crowd pleasers rather than take risks with their programming or provide the space for a deliberative decision-making process. Some of the participants we spoke to also expressed anger that it often resulted in bringing in high profile artists, many of whom were not from the area, rather than adding resources to existing cultural activities.

A requirement from ACE for "arts expertise" within the governance of CPP and the exclusion of local authorities further means that, in practice, arts organisations hold the majority of places in the consortia (Fleming & Bunting, 2015), and although local panels might have influence over the artistic programme, they have little

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power in terms of managing the programmes themselves. The staff we spoke to from local authorities said their exclusion risked the sustainability of these activities.

As a result, we argue that while CPP may have raised the profile of participatory decision making, rather than solely participation in cultural activities, it has left power very much with professional artists and established cultural organisations.

It should be noted, however, that the shift from defining participation in relation to taking part in cultural activities to defining participation in relation to power and decision making was not universally supported by the policymakers we interviewed. Many also expressed concern that once this shift occurred, questions such as "where is the art in all of this?" abounded. Furthermore, even those who supported this shift questioned whether it was more than rhetorical and whether there was any real evidence of change in the distribution of funding.

Arts Council England's strategy, for example, states that "we only have limited investment available to support new initiatives…this means many of our arts organisations… will need to change [how they operate]" (2020, pp. 3–6), thus placing the onus on funded organisations to change rather than changing what they choose to fund. In Scotland, the leadership of Creative Scotland attempted to redistribute funds but failed to deliver real change in the face of opposition from those already funded, who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo (Stevenson, 2014). Some of those we interviewed from local authorities also claimed that it is difficult to reallocate funds to support people's participation in their own cultural practices within a context where officers are fighting to safeguard any funding for culture, and where any suggestion of change is more likely to see reductions in funding rather than reallocation. Even for some of those working for trusts and foundations, which are less affected by variations in government funding, there was acknowledgement that they continue to focus funding to deliver participatory activity via professional cultural intermediaries rather than resourcing the everyday cultural activities in which people might already be engaging. We argue, however, that it is this gap between cultural policy discourse and a "failure to follow through" in terms of funding that perpetuates inequality and is at the

heart of the crisis of legitimacy that policymakers claimed the participation agenda aimed to address. As our primary interest in this book is to consider how such failures inform policy learning, the following section explores the attitudes to talking about and learning from failure among our sample of policymakers.

ATTITUDES TO FAILURE

As we have demonstrated above, the disparate meanings of participation make this a nebulous area of public policy. Some policymakers claimed that this situation was exacerbated by shifting political priorities between different governments and that it was particularly acute in a context where most agreed that governments, of all political shades, want "quick results". As a result, although most of the people in our sample believe that they are personally open to talking about failure, many felt that the context within which they work makes it difficult to do so in practice.

This is supported in the literature by those who argue that policymakers and funders closest to government are often least honest, as success stories are politically expedient (Howlett et al., 2015). We found this assertion to hold true, at least in part, in our own research. There was more evidence of organisational discussion about failure and what can be learnt from it by those working for independent trusts and foundations, as compared to those working in arm's length bodies or local authorities. Many supported the view that those who "don't have that accountability […] to the public and to the politicians" therefore have space to be more reflective. The representatives of trusts and foundations to whom we spoke were all part of a peer network in which they openly discuss failure by constantly "asking three questions. What's gone well, what's gone wrong, what have you learnt?"

Despite the fact that the Arts Councils of both England and Wales and Creative Scotland are all notionally shielded from direct government interference through the arm's length principle, they were no more confident in openly discussing failures than those working directly for local authorities. Those working in the arm's length bodies were particularly conscious of "[…] managing a delicate balance with national politicians. Both for us as an organisation and for the sector as a whole, being honest about when things do or don't work can have consequences".

This made them particularly reticent to talk about failures. In fact, some of those from local authorities claimed that because they had a more direct relationship with local poiticians in some cases, they could be more honest

and open. Unlike the trusts and foundations whose money, as well as governance, is independent of government, however, both the representative of local authorities and arm's length bodies said that it was their dependence on non-statutory government spending that meant they were always in "lobbying mode". As such, the desire to review and learn from the policies they implement and the projects they fund is replaced by a desire to please those who provide the funds they distribute. As a result, success and failure are often defined more by the ability to raise the profile of the work that they fund rather than the delivery of stated policy goals.

Peer Learning Or Controlling the Narrative

Creative People and Places (CPP) was said to be the first instance in which Arts Council England (ACE) employed an action research approach to test new ways of working, and therefore a large emphasis was initially placed on learning and knowledge exchange. A budget was allocated for a peer learning network as well as an independent evaluation, and both were supposed to identify "what worked and what did not work" (Ecorys yr. 1). Through these mechanisms, most of those directly involved in the programme felt that there was more honesty about failure internally than elsewhere in the cultural sector. Many practitioners outside of CPP questioned whether this was in fact true, and if it was, they wondered how this was shared. Some of the practitioners we spoke to said that the communications promoted a celebratory tone, which "offer PR for the CPP brand" rather than critical reflection of learning or comparison between different approaches.

While some of the CPP staff claimed this was because ACE "keep a tight control over the narrative" about CPP externally, when asked to talk about what they saw as the successes and failures within the programme, both policymakers and CPP staff were reticent to compare different approaches. Instead, the responses largely related to the programme as a whole and its success at raising the profile of the initiative rather than any evidence that it had succeeded in increasing participation, which was its stated aim. For ACE, CPP was said to have helped persuade politicians of the value of the arts in general, and some staff from CPP defined their successes in relation to the fact that their funding had been renewed, rather than whether or not they had succeeded at raising rates of participation in their town.

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It was acknowledged that none of the areas receiving funding had moved up to, let alone above, the national average of cultural participation as defined by the survey through which they were originally identified as being eligible for funding. Rather than viewing this as a failure from which something might be learnt (whether that be about the design or the implementation of the initiative), alternative measurements were employed to create narratives of success. Box office data and postcode analysis celebrated the increased number of participations (not people) and likelihood of them being new to the arts based on where they lived, and case studies tell stories about how the arts have changed the lives of individuals, rather than celebrating the fact that individuals might have already been participating in their own cultural activities, something the data overlooks.

Significantly, despite Arts Council Wales and Creative Scotland also developing place-based approaches to funding after CPP was established, there remained a sense of competition rather than collaboration between countries. Different approaches taken in each country were said to be the result of different nations wanting to own their own policy rather than policy learning to avoid repeating past mistakes. This suggests that where profile, and the ability to advocate, become the main criteria of success for policymakers the impetus to learn from failure is reduced.

The desire of policymakers to advocate for the cultural sector, rather than reflect on its success and failures, was not seen as solely a feature of the relationship with politicians as mentioned above. Some of the policy consultants to whom we spoke saw the barrier to acknowledging failure as having more to do with the level of familiarity between policymakers and those they regularly fund. This was seen as particularly prevalent in arms-length national bodies, where, despite some supporting the view that "the way we're funding things at the moment isn't working [so we] need to be more comfortable about a higher turnover of organisations", many still firmly see their priorities as supporting the "long term stability of the cultural sector". This was defined in relation to protecting the existing organisations they fund. As a result, despite the prevalent discourse surrounding participation, as one policymaker noted, it was simply "a veneer, and there

was no real will to make a difference". This, we argue, reduces the value placed on honesty about failure.

Those we spoke to from trusts and foundations, however, said that their charitable status requires them to have narrow remits and more clearly defined goals than arms-length bodies or local authorities. This was seen by those working within trusts and foundations as helpful in maintaining their distance from politicians and practitioners alike. Some argued this means they have a clearer understanding of their purpose in relation to cultural participation as well as a clearer sense of how to evaluate success or failure. They therefore saw the openness to discuss failure among themselves, as mentioned above, to not only stem from their independence but equally from their clarity of purpose and the value they place on evaluation. Conversely, some of those from trusts and foundations criticised the cultural sector for "want[ing] the right to fail without taking responsibility for learning to prevent repetition of mistakes", which should be the true purpose of evaluating success and failure.

Many theorists have also claimed that the level of confidence in acknowledging failure is related to the function evaluation plays, and whether accounting for money spent or improving services provided are most valued by policymakers (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021). Where evaluation is aimed at improvement, it is argued there is a more open attitude towards failure, and more willingness to change, while a focus on accountability encourages success stories that support maintaining the status quo (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). Both the policymakers and policy consultants we spoke to felt that the audit culture which predominates in the public sector in the UK has encouraged a focus on "monitoring backwards not evaluating forward", or "a prove [rather than improve] agenda" in which the priority is accountability rather than learning. As a result, "[…] it wouldn't be in anyone's interests to stand back and go 'I'll tell you what, it's not really working is it, can we do this differently."

This suggests therefore that the lack of a learning culture may make acknowledging failure difficult for certain policymakers. At the start of our interviews, most policymakers agreed that the aim of the participation agenda is addressing inequality, and they expressed an openness to acknowledge failures, but it was apparent in many of our conversations that as the interviews progressed, they became less comfortable with the idea of acknowledging failure, especially when confronted with the idea that this might mean significantly changing their policy or funding decisions.

When asked about the nature of the policy learning that had taken place, or to provide specific examples of changes in policy in response to failure,

policymakers were vague, and most admitted that there remained a gap between acknowledging failure and learning from it: "I really recognise when things haven't worked. I think probably the area where we don't then sort of go forward on is […] what then should we do differently?"

For many, this had less to do with a lack of will, and more to do with the fact that the practical process of policy making is difficult, as you "need to align so many different forces in order to make policy in the first place". Identifying a problem, holding a consultation with stakeholders, and reformulating the programme design are lengthy processes which require much negotiation and persuasion to convince anyone to act. As a result, policymakers "[…] do a lot of work upfront when things are very hypothetical, and analysing applications and things like that, and less work on analysing the reality of what really happened and what we learnt".

The fear that these efforts would be unpicked, thus returning them back to square one, seemed to be the most unifying factor in rendering policymakers averse to admitting when their policies or projects were failing to deliver the results for which they had hoped. Furthermore, many policy bodies were described as not being set up to capture learning for the long term, and that "when staff change … very often a lot of that knowledge base goes with the person who leaves, rather than being embedded in that cultural body". We therefore support the view that policymakers must improve at reviewing their own policies and challenging themselves by asking, "not what's the evidence to do something new [but rather] what's your evidence for doing it exactly the same".

Locating Failure and Learning from It

As we have already shown, there exists an acceptance from policymakers that the participation agenda is in and of itself an acknowledgement of a failure to address the inequalities in participation, both in terms of audience and workforce. Everyone we spoke to uses the statistics from surveys as evidence for these observations and tend to see addressing this as at least part of their mission. As we discussed earlier, however, there exist differences of opinion about where this failure is located.

Some of the policymakers to whom we spoke saw the failure of cultural participation as related to wider social problems and "a whole dynamic to that which is about social economic class". They therefore felt it was unrealistic to suggest that cultural policy could ever "see a shift in that data", but rather cultural participation offered an escape for those who chose to participate despite their circumstances and embrace the possibility of

transforming their lives. The responsibility of policymakers was therefore to ensure that people had the opportunity to participate in the cultural sector. Failure was thus seen as not having articulated well enough, to both politicians and the public, what cultural participation could do, and a failure to convince these same groups about the value of the cultural sector.

A larger number of the policymakers to whom we spoke, however, as discussed in Chap. 2, supported the findings from the everyday participation research (Miles & Gibson, 2017) that people are already active participants in their own cultural lives. One of the failures is therefore the very measurements commonly cited as evidence of a problem, which defines those people as cultural non-participants. Many agreed that the survey data only captures participation in specific artistic practices, mainly those currently subsidised by cultural policymakers. Some suggested this means that the problem of participation is overstated, and the failure is that policymakers have been pulled too far into focusing on participation at the expense of artistic practice. This also supports the view that it is not cultural policy that is failing which we argue limits learning, let alone change.

Some of the policymakers to whom we spoke, including some who were no longer working within the institutions concerned, claimed that they had wanted cultural policy to shine a light on the greater diversity of cultural participation experiences. For them, the failure was in not redistributing funding accordingly. Some policy consultants suggested that this was not happening because the increased interest in cultural democracy, discussed above, and the desire to capture the wider range of activities in which people participate had more to do with a desire for "more pleasing statistics" than changing the direction of policy or funding decisions. As such, some consultants claimed that policymakers are less interested in learning from failure and are instead more interested in disguising it. Some further argued that the diverse interpretations of participation employed by policymakers contribute to this by rendering the term meaningless, enabling practice to remain unchanged. This supports our argument in Chap. 2 that broad definitions make participation become an empty signifier where different approaches are not acknowledged as such.

The majority of policymakers, however, saw these variations in meaning as important to providing space for a diversity of approaches and cultural practices. Even those who showed an interest in the public policy discourse that defined participation in relation to power and agency preferred to see participation as a continuum, inclusive of everything from being an audience member to a creative participant through to having a say in decision making, rather than as a hierarchy in which some forms of

participation are more valued than others. They were not interested in comparative analysis of their varying benefits, impact, or value. Indeed, many policymakers stated they sought not to define participation at all but preferred to leave it for practitioners to define for themselves. We argue that employing such broad definitions and this hands-off approach makes honesty about failure more important rather than less. Without comparison between different practices and an understanding of their different purposes, it is not possible for them to be contrasted, or discussed in terms of the extent to which each advances equity in the cultural sector.

The Failure to Compare Different Approaches to Participation

One of the biggest challenges for Creative People and Places (CPP) was understood to be how they would achieve the policy aim of increasing participation while also allowing for bespoke approaches in each local area. It is clear from our research that CPP areas are free to follow their own approaches to defining participation. Some areas work hard at involving the community in decision making, while others claimed that they did not see this as their role whatsoever. While some defined their target participants as those who had not previously engaged in the arts, others discussed engaging the artist or business communities within their locations. As action research with the objective of attempting different approaches, this is key to learning what can be gained from each approach. The reliance on self-reporting on the successes and failures of each location, however, was seen by many to limit understanding about which approaches achieve which aims.

Rather than CPP leading to a change in understanding, many of the practitioners we spoke to saw it as "Arts Council England's defence" against accusations of elitism, and rather than being the vanguard of greater change, one staff member of CPP acknowledged that "there can be a danger in thinking that CPP is the box that ticks cultural democracy" to avoid further change. Despite CPP being cited as a success story, at time of writing this book it only accounts for 2% of ACE's spending, and the overall budget has decreased from £37 million when it started in 2012 to £25 million in 2020. As a result, one person argued, "[…] when you hear senior figures in the Arts Council standing up and saying Creative People and Places is the best thing the Arts Council's done, as the chair said recently, and then you look at where their resources are going and you think, well, how can that make any sense—how you can stand by that decision?"

While there were differences of opinion concerning the value of defining different approaches to participation in order to facilitate comparative research, there was broader acceptance about a failure in the processes of cultural policy and the need to change these due to the fact that "[…] we've done equalities this way for a generation […] so obviously if you keep on doing the same things you're going to get the same results, so I think we're recognising we've got to do that sort of thing in a completely different way".

Many accepted that the nature and structure of funding applications reinforces inequality, and that "funders kind of set the tone for a lot of the bad practice that goes on because of what we ask for, how we ask for it, who the calls go out to". Most application processes were said to be biased towards those who were already part of the system and excluded newcomers. Furthermore, participatory processes specifically were seen to require policymakers to be more comfortable with funding having "no outcomes defined". Some policymakers, including those from national arms-length bodies, cited examples where they had attempted to provide funding without pre-established targets, but all agreed that they found it difficult to give away that much control: "I tell you what I think was the failure, was not to let go fully, you know, we were really bold and innovative, and we're doing exactly the right thing, but then we'd get cold feet at the end, and that that was what led to the failures".

Some policymakers claimed that this was because there was a lack of confidence that they could encourage deliverers to undertake any evaluation or learning without targets or objectives to measure against. Most policymakers blamed the lack of honesty about failure on the fact that individual organisations, rather than they as policymakers, were uninterested in learning, and objective setting was thus their way of trying to embed practices of reflection and knowledge generation. As we have shown above, however, there is little evidence that policymakers themselves do in fact prioritise learning, and this suggests a potential case of blame avoidance, discussed in Chap. 3. One consultant suggested that the model of reporting against objectives or targets encouraged the problem of putting more importance on accountability rather than improvement, which we have argued limits discussion about failure. Instead, they suggest a "patient capital model", which would allocate money without time scales or outcomes attached and is instead a process to devolve budgets in response to learning what intervention work was needed. This would also

begin to address what was agreed by all to be the biggest failure of the policy process: the short-term project mentality built into the funding system.

All the policymakers to whom we spoke accepted that short-term project funding meant that there was often no space for reflection and learning, and more significantly that "creating that kind of systemic or long-term change is not going to be possible". In other words, short-term projects are inherently counter to the aims of the participation agenda. Everyone agreed that participatory work was slower than other creative goals, and it therefore follows that it should require more, not less, long-term investment. Yet policymakers recognised that short-term funding was not only endemic in the cultural sector in general but was at its worst in participatory work.

The Failure of Short-Term Funding

Applicants for Creative People and Places (CPP) originally applied for "3 years funding for a ten-year vision". The Arts Council England (ACE) staff to whom we spoke claimed that they could not promise longer term funding because of the nature of their own funding from government, but that they did recognise the importance of a long-term commitment to embedding systemic change. As we have written elsewhere, however, according to internal minutes of meetings, the programme was also seen as high-risk internally, and senior management themselves were loath to sign up to taking responsibility for a long-term commitment (Jancovich, 2017a). Instead, they put the onus on the areas in receipt of funding to consider how to create practices that could be self-sustaining from the outset, even though, as one ACE staff member acknowledged, "we don't expect that at all for our NPO's [national portfolio organisations]".

They did, however, give significant levels of investment to successful areas (between £1–3 million each) to demonstrate what one called their "serious intent". In reality, at the end of the first three years, all the areas who successfully applied in phase 1 had their funding extended but significantly, despite the prevalent rhetoric about how successful it had been as a policy initiative, they were all offered a decreased level of funding.

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All the CPP staff to whom we spoke stated that having large investments upfront meant that they were under pressure to deliver activity at speed, and the expectation to make these practices self-sustaining made it harder to test out new approaches which require time to experiment. It is also counter to the aim of involving people in decision making, which all acknowledged takes time to develop the necessary contacts and build trust.

Action research requires the ability to test and adapt approaches in much the same way that theories of fast failure do, which were discussed in Chap. 3. Many areas said they assumed that this was how they would work: by experimenting and learning about what works, they would then have the space to build on that learning in their own areas, as well as share that learning further afield. This would require an increase in the level of CPP investment to both allow for growth within existing areas while also bringing in new locations. Instead, the fact that funding decreased over time was said to be deeply problematic as it meant CPP "raised expectation they could not sustain". This further created a competitive mentality in which the CPP staff we interviewed said the activities they continued to fund were not chosen based on learning what approaches were successful, but rather on what was most cost efficient.

As a result, everyone we spoke to, including those from ACE, supported the view that, in hindsight, it would have been better to give smaller amounts to begin with, "[…] adding on a little bit extra each year rather than trying to have a big burst which then you can't sustain […] that's not the way to do it, to throw large amounts of money at [something]—it's to grow something, learn from it".

Despite recognising this, ACE has not changed this approach. We argue therefore that the problem is not simply the short-term nature of investment from government to the Arts Council, but also the project mentality in the Arts Council that perpetuates the problem.

Another recognised failure was that policymakers "are very removed from the recipients or beneficiaries or participants". As a result, although they might claim to be able to learn from what works, they are reliant on what those funded (and therefore with most to lose from any change in funding) tell them. Many policymakers claimed that one of the failures was that the evaluations they receive are too reliant on "self-reporting", but some, particularly those from the local authorities that we spoke to, also acknowledge that despite (or maybe because of) their close accountability to an electorate, they do not "do as much as we should do in terms of reflecting with our communities". Both the arms-length bodies and trusts and the foundations further questioned how they would do this when working on a national scale. We argue that it is the reliance on a single narrative from the sector which is most dominant in informing policy, and it is this failure to hear other perspectives by policymakers themselves that contributes to what all accepted was a breakdown of trust between policymakers and the public they serve.

Despite the wealth of data those in receipt of funding are asked to produce by policymakers, there exists nevertheless a scepticism among practitioners about whether this was ever even looked at, let alone used for policy learning. If the data is used to improve policy decisions, many said that they did not know how these insights and the changes they had brought about were shared. As one practitioner said, "[…] if [policymakers] were actually interested in learning anything […] what they should be doing is hiring somebody […] to read all the evaluations […] and tell us what pattern is emerging from that […] that would challenge practice, but none of that happens".

There were differences of opinion among policymakers about whether it was true that evaluations were largely unread. While most of the policymakers we spoke to claimed to support the view that "we want people to evaluate in order that they learn", and therefore acknowledging failure should be part of that learning and something which funding bodies should encourage and exemplify, some acknowledged "how rare it is that funders learn from their own projects". This suggests that learning is devolved to the sector rather than something that policymakers feel they should do themselves. Some did say, however, that they both read and used the evaluations they received for policy learning, but either way most acknowledge there is a problem with the communication of their learning: "[…] we read everything […] we shaped and developed new funds based on the learning […] but we didn't share it publicly you know, it was very much within the team […] that is a big gap actually, particularly for major funders".

It was therefore broadly accepted that policymakers themselves must improve at both modelling a spirit of learning from failure and being "clear that if we ask organisations to provide us the information, they're clear on how we will use it" if they expect those they fund to be honest.

Through our interviews, it became clear that this is a two-way problem. It was seen as inevitable that the public and practitioners would not trust policymakers because of the "power imbalance, because you know obviously we hold the big power chip of the money", but it was also seen as related to their failure "to walk the walk, so that if we're asking people we fund to talk to us about failure, we need to evidence that we're prepared to be vulnerable in that way too". The main reason this was proving so hard to do, however, was a lack of confidence among policymakers about being able to bring about necessary, but difficult, change. Most policymakers accepted the view that one of the biggest failures "was to keep pushing money at those same organisations and say to them, 'you must widen participation', and that just didn't work". Despite this view being widespread, nobody believed this would change, and most supported the view that "it would be really difficult to get out of the cage that we're in" because nobody wanted to be blamed for defunding those already funded. There was thus a resignation to the fact that it is easier not to do something new than to actively change the way they currently operate, and it was accepted that this was the primary reason for the "failure of follow through" in terms of redistribution of funding.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated a gap between the values that are said to underpin the participation agenda in cultural policy and policymaking. We have shown how policymakers acknowledge the importance of survey data that demonstrates inequalities in who participates in certain activities only when it suits their purposes to do so, and then question the efficacy of those very same surveys when they do not suit their narrative. We have also shown how goals concerned with addressing such inequalities are used interchangeably with those focused on providing aspirational experiences for individuals.

This was shown to be the result not only of the relationships between policymakers and politicians, but also of those between policymakers and those they fund. The structures within public administration encourage vested interest in maintaining the status quo from those currently in receipt of funding, and this has contributed to a lack of trust and respect

which we argue makes it difficult to acknowledge, let alone learn from, failure. Instead, a focus on accountability to justify expenditure replaces any desire to learn from what has gone wrong with a view to improving services offered to the public. An acceptance of all definitions of participation in practice, moreover, contributes to rendering the word meaningless. We argue that the combination of these factors makes it impossible for policymakers to create the legitimacy that would facilitate their purported aims.

We have identified tensions between those who define participation as taking part in existing cultural infrastructure and those who define it as having agency over what they get to participate in. Despite almost universal acceptance that current methods are not working, we have shown how patterns of professional practice and funding are replicated at least in part by a lack of confidence among policymakers that they would be able to bring about significant change.

While policymakers all claimed that they valued the importance of learning and acknowledging failure, the tendency to devolve this responsibility to those they fund limits the potential for policymakers to learn themselves. Instead, policymakers were more comfortable when discussing the failures of others, of politicians, participants, and in some cases their funded practitioners.

We have also shown that policymakers describe the success and failure of policies very differently from how they define their purpose, often highlighting the profile and reception of funded projects more than any evidence of sustained change. Similarly, while the purpose might be to increase participation in the cultural sector, the success is often measured in relation to the quality of the artistic product. We argue that evaluations focused on outcomes and end results fail to learn from the processes that inform and shape them. We argue, therefore, for a more nuanced understanding of success and failure that considers different facets of a policy or project separately. We will discuss this in more detail in Chap. 7, where we introduce our new framework for talking about failures in cultural policies and projects. However, we will first explore the implications of the cultural participation agenda for artistic practice in Chap. 5, before then considering the participant perspective in Chap. 6. In doing so, we will also show how success and failure mean different things to different people, and thus also the value in seeking out different narratives when designing, implementing and evaluating cultural policy and projects.

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Failing at the Frontline

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we considered how a legitimacy crisis in the public sector has created a participatory turn in policymaking. This has been broadly based around a cultural rights definition of participation which champions universal access to public services. There has also been a growing discourse around participation in decisions about the type of cultural services provided at a local level, which relates to broader trends within public policy. Despite this policy interest, as we showed in Chap. 2, successive initiatives have failed to address inequalities and inequities in both how funding is distributed within the cultural sector and who participates in activities subsidised by the state.

While Chap. 4 explored these failures from the perspective of those employed as policymakers involved in cultural sector, we argued in Chap. 2 that a fuller understanding of how policy operates must not only consider a top-level imposition on delivery. To do so gives too little recognition to the role that service providers, and, in the case of culture, professional cultural practitioners, play not only in delivering cultural policies but also in shaping them. We argued that policy is informed by those most able to exert power within the cultural sector, including the organisations funded by the state. As one practitioner said, "it's like the dictum,

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that if you owe the bank £100, the bank owns you. If you owe the bank £100 million, you own the bank, right? In the same in the arts world, there's a lot of people who own [policy]".

In this chapter, we examine the meanings given to cultural participation by those working at the frontlines of delivery within the cultural sector (who we will collectively refer to as practitioners) as well as their attitudes regarding failure. We do this in order to consider how the narratives they tell about their work inform or challenge both their own practices and the policies that seek to foster a more equitable cultural sector.

As in the previous chapter, we invited people to participate in workshops and interviews to self-define as practitioners, but we also asked them to state whether they were working in cultural organisations or as freelance artists. The aim of this was to examine whether attitudes differed within and outside of an organisational context. As with the policymakers in the previous chapter, we asked all those involved to define participation, locate why they believe it is important in the cultural sector, and then explore their attitudes to success and failure in relation to cultural participation projects and policies. Through these interviews, as well as through an anonymous survey, we also asked practitioners to share stories of failure and explore the extent to which such stories are not only privately acknowledged but also openly shared.

Among our sample, the theatre company Slung Low (www.slunglow. org) was repeatedly cited as an example of success in participatory arts. They were therefore selected as an illustrative example of professional practice through which we could explore the extent to which failure and success coexist, and we interviewed staff and participants involved in the company's work. These included participants in *Flood*, a large, site-specific participatory performance piece commissioned for Hull City of Culture (Culture, 2018), located about an hour from the company base. We also interviewed those who participated in community workshops at their base in Leeds. In addition, we undertook "deep hanging out" (Walmsley, 2018) at several community and cultural events and interviewed a number of people involved in the wider Hull 2017 programme to obtain external views on Slung Low's practice.

This chapter follows the same structure as Chap. 4. It begins by explaining the meanings of participation for practitioners and then considers how

these relate to the definitions used by policymakers in the previous chapter. It then explores the attitudes towards failure among practitioners before finally observing where they locate the failures of cultural participation. As in the previous chapter, key points are illustrated with reference to the example of practice, in this case Slung Low. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes come from the practitioners in our sample.

Meanings of Participation

While the discussion in the previous chapter concerning participation policy drew largely on definitions from public policy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the discussion within practice also draws from art theory and aesthetics. This means that although some practitioners supported policymakers who talked about cultural participation as an action or goal in which the whole cultural sector is engaged, others were more interested to talk about participatory art as a creative process. Those who defined themselves as participatory artists, as well as some of those who worked for participatory arts organisations (rather than arts organisations with a participation department), tended to support the view that participation is an art form in its own right, delivered by professional participatory artists. Many, however, also supported the concept from relational aesthetics that all art is participatory as it only exists when an audience engages with it (Bourriaud et al., 2002).

We argue, however, that if any act of engagement is participation, the word takes on a symbolic function, providing a flexible ambiguity which allows much of the cultural sector to rebrand their normal practices as participatory without challenging the structural inequalities acknowledged by policymakers. As a result, while most practitioners felt participation was a useful umbrella term, some reject the word in favour of what they see as more specific terms such as socially engaged practice, public art, and community arts. Broadly, the practitioners in our sample adopted one of three positions regarding participatory practice described in our illustrative example of Slung Low and discussed below: participants as the material of the artwork, as audiences for an artwork, or as producers of their own culture.

Forms of Participation

Slung Low are a professional theatre company funded by Arts Council England (ACE) to create participatory performance work. They also receive funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to provide a community resource and cultural skills programme in the local community that surrounds their base at the Holbeck, Leeds.

Since 2000, they have created "epic productions in non-theatre spaces, often with large community performance companies at their heart" (https://www.slunglow.org/slung-low/). In 2020, they moved into the Holbeck, which they claim is the oldest working men's club in Britain and which they run as a community asset with a bar, food bank and room hire. They also run workshops as well as provide a theatre production space and performance venue for touring theatre companies.

Their activities therefore straddle the three different forms of participation most discussed by practitioners in our sample: engaging participants as the material of the artwork in their own theatre productions; increasing audiences for the arts through the programme of visiting artists they show in their venue; and providing a cultural resource for the community's own activities. For the staff at Slung Low, it was argued that "cultural participation is but one of the agendas we're fighting" to obtain funding. They believe that their core purpose, as a professional theatre company, is to make great art, albeit by challenging the definitions of what great art looks like. As a result, there was some resentment from the Artistic Director that the company weren't recognised as much for their artistic successes as for their "good works" in participation. He stated that it hurt, for example, when another cultural professional said to him that "you work in the bits of industry no one cares about mate".

The variety of approaches Slung Low employ may therefore be argued to either demonstrate the success that might be achieved by engaging with participation in all its forms or the failures inherent in having to constantly shift artistic and/or business models to obtain funding or recognition from organisations with other agendas, which many of our sample acknowledge is prevalent in the arts.

The idea of participation that "involves people as the medium or material" for an artwork was employed by many artists in our sample. From this perspective, the participant contributes to the creation of a work of art,

but the artists retain their autonomy and authorship of the work. Many of the artists we spoke to claimed this was necessary in order for them to take an "agonistic" approach (Miller, 2016) to challenging social norms, rather than being a tool of social policy. The participatory process for some artists was therefore more important than the outcome of increasing participation in culture, which, as we saw in Chap. 4, was the aim for policymakers. For other artists, however, the focus on process in participatory art was seen to undermine the quality of the artistic product. Some artists and most representatives from arts organisations shared the perspective that "too many participatory projects do not have a high-quality outcome […] without powerful art, projects may disappoint participants".

The critique about a perceived lack of quality within participatory arts has come from within the art world and is based on aesthetic judgements that place more importance on product than process (Bishop, 2012). As a result, product-based participatory work, particularly of the kind that involves large numbers of volunteers like Slung Low's site-specific work, has become increasingly popular with policymakers as well as established cultural institutions and city event programmes. An example was used to introduce Arts Council England's ten-year strategy, where Jeremy Deller's "We're Here Because We're Here" was described as "crowds of volunteers […] standing as one of the tremendous achievements supported by the Arts Council's last 10-year Strategy, under which we were able to invest in two exceptional artists to create a work of scale and ambition" (Arts Council England, 2020).

Many of the representatives from organisations in our sample claimed that such work met two criteria of participation: involving the participants as the material of the artwork and increasing audiences for the arts. This approach has since been criticised by art theorists and practitioners alike for being little more than hollow spectacle (Lawrence et al., 2020) and reducing participants to the role of unpaid labour for the artist's vision (Miller, 2016). Among our sample, some argued that in such work "participants are used as commodities" or that the artists "never [think] how do we support these people/projects but [rather] how do these people support our project". It was further argued by one practitioner that there is little evidence to suggest that such work attracts new audiences and that it may in fact perpetuate inequality by "allowing privileged access to the elite space of a professional production" for those taking part. The reason "the art of spectacle" has become so popular with practitioners and policymakers may not be because it addresses inequality, but instead because it legitimises professional practice.

Participation as Spectacle

Slung Low's production *Flood* (https://www.slunglow.org/flood/) was a large-scale, site-specific performance commissioned as part of Hull City of Culture which involved hundreds of participants in its staging and as audience members. The company acknowledge that the script writer determined the narrative, and the director instructed the participants on what to do. As a result, a staff member said that "the failure [was in not giving participants] any ownership over the creative process". They argued, however, that as a professional theatre company first and foremost, its success was providing space for "the exceptionality of the artist".

Many of our wider sample also cited *Flood* as a successful participation project, but when asked about the nature of this success many acknowledged that they had not been involved in the process or seen the finished product. "They seem successful" and "I've heard good stories about them" were recurring responses. This suggests that, for these individuals, it was the profile of the work and the company that marked it out as a success rather than anything about either the process or the product.

Among those we spoke to who had seen or been involved in *Flood*, the reception was mixed. While one reviewer said "there aren't enough superlatives" to describe their work, one practitioner in our sample described it as "boring […] pretentious […] cliché". One of the participants who took part in *Flood* also questioned whether "anybody watching it […] would have a clue what was going on […] even though I was in it I was thinking I'm not following this". This negative response, however, did not necessarily undermine the success of the project in their eyes. The reception of the finished work is "a quality issue, not so much a participation issue", and as such one participant challenged what they saw as the cultural sector's notion of quality, feeling that "the failure is that people in the professional world […] didn't value [the participation] enough".

But, what all these different perspectives fail to consider is who gets to participate in their creative works, which is central to the policy aim of increasing equity in the cultural sector. The company acknowledge that the opportunity to take part was only offered to

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those who were already part of the volunteer programme of Hull 2017, which one participant described as "retired, rich guys who have made it in life". Therefore, while the experience might be deemed a success for those who took part, it cannot be seen as contributing to the policy goal of increasing equity.

This demonstrates that success and failure can occur simultaneously across different facets of a policy or project. Thus, for example, the relative success or failure in terms of process, practice, and profile of the work must be considered separately from the purpose or level of participation that has occurred.

Many of those who worked for cultural organisations did say that, like the policymakers in the previous chapter, the purpose of participation was, for them, to combat social and cultural inequities by diversifying audiences. One artist even suggested that "the definition of participation […] is working with people who are not [like you] […]; that's almost the methodology of participation". Despite this view, there was little consideration among any of our sample of how practitioners attracted diverse participants. There was also little support for measuring success or failure in relation to who participates, rather than what they participate in. Most of our practitioners opposed definitions of participation focused on "the numbers game" of how many and how diverse participants are and instead defined it in relation to the benefits for individuals who had taken part, using words such as "empowerment", "transformation", "confidence", and "well-being".

We argue that the use of such words describes individualised benefits which support the neoliberal personalisation of success or blame (McGuigan, 2014), whereby lack of power, confidence, and well-being are the result of personal choices about what to participate in rather than the result of inequitable structures and the distribution of resources. This evokes a hierarchical approach to participation in which the artist has the skill and capacity, while the participant must be "fixed" or granted agency in some way. This in turn perpetuates the idea that professionally mediated cultural activities are of greater value than other forms of cultural participation. As one practitioner acknowledged, "to empower and to enable is

really assuming that [participants] don't have that power or they don't have the ability". For one practitioner, defining participation as something "coming out of artists' practice is at the route of the historic failure of cultural participation".

Particularly for those who located their practice in relation to the community arts tradition, participation was not defined only in relation to professional practice, but as a collaborative process in which the participant co-authors the work (Matarasso, 2019). This often, but not always, relates to the theories of participatory decision making discussed in Chap. 4. From this perspective, the purpose of participation becomes about hearing the voices of communities with different cultural traditions, not only to value their everyday cultural participation but also to provide resources for participants to produce their own culture.

Valuing Everyday Cultural Participation

The purpose of the work Slung Low do at the Holbeck was said to recognise the value of everyday participation. The ethos and atmosphere of the place was described as somewhere you can "come in, get a burger […] come and see [what's going on]". As a result, people use the space as a bar without having to engage in the arts, they come to see shows without having to be a participant in the artwork, and they attend workshops on topics ranging "from stargazing to south Indian cooking, from carpentry to singing in a choir" (https://www.slung-glow.org/slung-low/) according to their own personal interests. This approach defines participation as an act based on the participant finding "resonance" (Burns, 2007) or an interest in participating, rather than the policy approach which persuades people to participate in activities that policymakers have deemed to be of value for them.

The staff members we spoke to, however, said that they did not define their approach in line with theories of participatory decision making, which we suggested in Chap. 4 are being adopted in public policy to allow for a broader understanding of participant needs. One member of staff questioned the idea that decisions can be reached by rational consent, pointing to the complexity of managing different local interests when the company are located "within six or seven communities [of interest] some of which are racist, some of which are homophobic, some of which are all sorts of unpleasant

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things—and all of whom have been ignored and all of whom have been delegitimised […which means] sometimes in order to stand here and make sure everybody gets what they want and nobody is without you have to be in meetings that are really unpleasant".

The company therefore describe their approach as providing a resource to their geographic community based on "a policy of saying yes you get what you want [but] you don't get to decide what other people don't get". This relates to the idea of a "do-ocracy" (as opposed to democracy) (Verhoeven et al., 2014) where participation is defined by active citizens "doing" rather than through a deliberative process of discussion, which underpins participatory decision-making processes (Newman et al., 2004). Ostensibly, this means that Slung Low allow participants to use the building for whatever they want so long as they do not make others feel excluded. But, as the staff we spoke to acknowledge, such an approach risks legitimising some voices over others, either by only engaging those who have the loudest voices or share the interests and values of those organising the project. Such processes may therefore replicate inequality in who accesses and make use of the resources as easily as eradicate it. This raises questions about how the participants, rather than participation, are defined, which will be explored in more detail in Chap. 6.

While there were differences of opinion among our sample about which definition of participation exerts the largest influence on policy and practice, there was a consensus that the policy context of the past ten years has given participatory work an increased profile in the cultural sector, higher than it has had for several decades. It was said it has even become the "flavour of the month" in certain areas, though this was not always seen as being good for practice. Both artists and those working for arts organisations acknowledged that the focus on participation meant that many practitioners working in this area now saw it as "what you're doing until you get a proper job". Coupled with the precarity of being an artist, this meant many felt that a lot of artists and organisations are "prepared to call [their work] anything to get funding", thus claiming themselves to be participatory artists or undertaking participatory work without having an

understanding of participation as a methodology or specific form of creative practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, among those who self-defined an interest in participation, none of our sample recognised themselves in this description, but many expressed strong antipathy towards those cultural practitioners who they felt didn't "give a flying fuck about participation". In particular, cultural organisations with participation departments were accused of being "[…] in direct competition for resources with smaller grass roots community arts organisations […despite] the work that the community engagement departments do usually having no impact on the main programmes of the large art organisations, they just use it as a tick box exercise".

This distrust, bordering on antagonism, between practitioners working in different contexts is neither conducive to acknowledging failure nor to sharing learning across the sector in a manner that will engender change. The following section therefore explores the attitudes to failure expressed by practitioners before considering where they see it occurring within the cultural sector.

Attitudes to Failure

While policymakers, as we discussed in Chap. 4, claimed that they were personally comfortable talking about failure but were constrained by the context in which they work, when we asked practitioners to consider both the meaning of failure and their attitudes towards it, their initial reactions were largely defensive. Failure was seen in pejorative terms, linked to ideas of judgement and punishment rather than learning and improvement. As a result, many felt that discussing or exploring the concept of failure made them experience discomfort "like trauma". Some thought that this was particularly the case for freelance artists, who occupy the most vulnerable or precarious positions in the sector. Others, however, felt that funded organisations stood to lose the most from acknowledging failure in terms of "reputational damage" that risked "toppling the whole a deck of cards" on which the cultural sector was based.

While the literature discussed in Chap. 3 suggests that a resistance to talking about failure is prevalent across public policy, it was seen by some of our sample as particularly acute among cultural practitioners who "can get carried away with their own narrative of success, which is actually a narrative they have manufactured themselves". This was seen by some to discourage innovation and create a "dangerous delusion" that ultimately

leads to overstating the impact and importance of the arts. For others, however, this defensiveness was described as "basic psychology in that we want to please, and we want to be pleased", which affects everyone and is built in from childhood. Or, as one practitioner said, "[…] it's a morale thing […] I don't want to write what I thought was wrong—I just don't want to—and I don't know if that's just a very British thing and about being polite and all of that".

Some therefore questioned the value of thinking about failure at all, suggesting that it can "make you more cautious" and thereby inhibit risk taking and experimentation, which are seen as a necessary part of the creative process. This tension between whether discussing failure facilitates or hinders both policymaking and practice are central to the focus of our research, and we therefore encouraged practitioners to discuss failure even where it created some discomfort.

Conflicted About the Value of Talking About Failure

Despite being cited as a success story among our sample, Slung Low acknowledge that their success is "not because we're better [but because] we play the game better". This "playing the game" includes blog posts and social media interventions by the Artistic Director which have championed both "relevance" and a "belief in service" since their inception in 2010 (http://alanlaneblog.wordpress.com).

These blog posts position the company in relation to the current dominant discourse within the cultural sector which foregrounds the importance of more participatory ways of practising art. Their presence has helped the company generate a powerful profile. It is not possible to determine to what extent the company's interventions have influenced cultural policy or been influenced by it, but what is clear is that their success is strongly related to their ability to maintain control over a positive narrative about their work. It was perhaps for this reason that, when asked to speak about the failures in their practice, some members of the company to whom we spoke were conflicted.

On the one hand, they were happy to participate in our research to explore their failures, but on the other, they expressed a desire to keep "control of the narrative so that our failures are not the reason why we become defunded". As they explained, this was also why they did not normally share their failures with others outside of the organisation. This defensiveness about failure is born out of a precarity

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which Slung Low believe is a larger concern since becoming more established and securing increased levels of funding. Put simply, they stated that the more they had, the more they had to lose, and therefore the more important it became to differentiate between the stories they tell internally and those they share externally. They acknowledged, however, that this can limit their own learning, the extent to which others in the sector can learn from their experiences, and the extent to which the cultural sector addresses the repeated failures that sustain its structural inequity.

As with policymakers in the previous chapter, when practitioners did talk about failure, there was often a reticence to take responsibility for failures in which they had been involved, and many exhibited a tendency to pass on responsibility to another artist, organisation, or funder for both the cause of the failure and preventing it reoccurring in the future. It was not an uncommon response when asking practitioners to share a story of failure for them to explain that "that was absolutely nothing to do with me and everything to do with [someone else]". In some cases, "someone else" was the commissioner who was often presented as failing to understand how creative projects operated "on the ground" for artists delivering projects. In others, organisations blamed the fact that "there are very few artists who can really work in this way", suggesting a lack of competence on the part of the artists delivering this type of work. It was also not uncommon for artists and organisations to blame the participant, who was presented as failing to understand how to "properly" take part in this type of work. One interviewee who had worked in community development before coming into the arts, however, questioned the reticence to take personal responsibility for failures. They told us that in their previous role, they would regularly focus "on what didn't work and how [they could] do it better next time". They believed that talking openly about failures "normalised the discussion" and helped to avoid repetition of past mistakes, a perspective that aligns with the literature on policy learning discussed in Chap. 3.

Many practitioners did agree that a lack of open discussion about failure was part of what made it difficult to take responsibility and supported the

view that having more frequent discussions about failure would make it a productive experience. This was also shown to be the case through our research: many who took part in our workshops and interviews described the process as cathartic. Despite feeling discomfort at the beginning, many practitioners grew increasingly comfortable talking about their failures at the end of our session with them. There was a sense of relief in thinking about the ways in which they could discuss failures and have difficult but necessary conversations both within their organisations and with their partners and funders. Interviewees began to challenge their own initial reactions to failure as being "too absolute" and "too final" by differentiating between failing others, for which they took personal responsibility, and being failed, which often related to systemic or structural problems within the cultural sector. Similarly, people began to differentiate between failures from which they could learn something and those that caused harm but often could not be rectified.

It also became easier to talk about failure when differentiating between various criteria or facets of success and failure, while also acknowledging that failure in one area could coexist with success in another. In the example provided by Slung Low described above, for instance, staff said they felt able to admit that they had failed to provide agency to participants in *Flood* because a partnership with the BBC meant that they still succeeded in gaining profile for both the company and the city. In another example, a practitioner described "[…] a project which was great in its conception and its delivery and got loads of coverage on national media but didn't really engage with the communities at all […] it was a great project from an artistic perspective, it was a great project from a media perspective. In terms of the actual fundamental idea that sat behind it, which was about participation and engagement of communities, then it failed".

It is the coexistence of success and failure that leads us to argue that rather than creating "a definite shared understanding of what success and failure is all the time", it is important to consider the different facets of any project or policy. This then encourages asking questions such as success and failure to achieve what? Failing to deliver the intended objectives outlined in a funding application does not necessarily mean the project itself failed to raise the organisation's profile. Likewise, a policy that failed to increase rates of cultural participation need not necessarily have failed to develop the artform that was involved.

Yet, most practitioners still said they felt more comfortable discussing the value of their work rather than the extent to which it was succeeding

or failing against any set of criteria. Some made the case that all work has some inherent value, and, as one person said, "what's wrong with good enough?" We argue, however, that just as success and failure can coexist across different facets, they also need to be understood as existing to different degrees, with "good enough" being one stage on a continuum from outright success to outright failure.

Central to the premise of this book and the perspective on participation that informs it is that success and failure, in any element of a project or policy, is more often than not perceived differently by different people. As one consultant acknowledged: "the artists will be looking at things very differently to the way the participant will be, and you have to look at it through both lenses and all of the others, the lenses outside the room as well".

But there was little indication, based on our conversations with practitioners, of how actively or how often they sought and shared narratives of success or failure that differed from their own about the projects on which they worked. Most of those who were willing to reflect on failure still claimed that the process of reflection was something they did on their own or with those closely involved in their work. There was little evidence of inviting those who might hold a markedly different perspective to take part in these processes and even less evidence that these alternative narratives about failure appeared in official evaluations. This relates to the observation from policymakers, discussed in the previous chapter, that most feedback they received from practitioners in their evaluations was little more than "self-reporting". The examples which provided instances of capturing alternative perspectives were largely superficial, such as mood boards where "we get participants to fill in stars and stick them on the wall [both] negatives and positives" or ubiquitous satisfaction surveys. It was acknowledged that both of these approaches encourage positive comments, because "if somebody [is] asking you very nicely if this is working, you're going to say yes". As a result, the cultural sector was described as "a very difficult environment for anyone to actually hold their hand up and say, 'well actually we've not done this very well'".

While some practitioners acknowledged that, when it came to evaluating their work, they needed to "try better ways to engage with people […] and not be lazy or scared of that bit", recognising the importance of being "prepared to be challenged". In practice, however, many felt that most of those working in the sector consistently "don't ask the right questions" to

foreground these kinds of alternative and potentially uncomfortable narratives about the failure.

This is why we argue that deeper conversations in which participants set the agenda rather than respond to one set by the professional is central to success in participation, but there is little evidence of it in practice. Instead, the cultural sector's focus on defining success based on benefits to the artist or organisation, whether in terms of artistic process or product, or the building of audiences or profile to increase their legitimacy, exacerbates the problem by failing to give due consideration to the inequities in determining who participates at every stage of the process from planning through to delivery and evaluation. This, in turn, fails to locate the true nature of failure in cultural participation policies.

Locating Failure and Learning from It

Many practitioners supported the view that the lack of cultural participation suggested in government surveys, as we discussed in Chaps. 2 and 4, has informed how the "problem" of non-participation has been constructed. This was, in their eyes, the result of a failure to recognise and record the range of things in which people did, in fact, participate. As with the policymakers in Chap. 4, however, this was as likely to mean that practitioners thought that the focus of participation was overstated as they were to think that policy must be redirected to support a wider range of practices.

Many also showed an awareness of the growing body of evidence that not only do those who participate as consumers of subsidised culture come from specific socio-economic groups, but so too do those who participate in its workforce (O'Brien et al., 2016). As a result, there was acceptance that the cultural sector and the organisations it funds fail to reflect the diversity of society without which it is difficult to justify public investment. There was therefore broad acceptance that the sector must change. Some felt that the solution was further participation within cultural institutions in order for more people to "infiltrate the industry", while others felt that the failure was to expect change within the current system. As one practitioner said, "we cannot have a revolution of participation unless it is led by the people, it's not going to be led by a bunch of fucking artists". This tension is central to understanding whether the failure in cultural policy will be best addressed by existing organisations or whether policymakers should change where they place their funding in the first place.

While most practitioners blamed policymakers for not making the case for increased funding to support both professional and amateur practices, several said that it is the vested interests among practitioners as well as the professionalisation of participatory art as a practice that meant cultural policymakers consistently fail to recognise everyday cultural participation. This ultimately holds policymakers back from changing their approach to participation and funding to include resourcing local cultural activities. We have written about this elsewhere in relation to the resistance to changing funding priorities in Scotland (Stevenson, 2014) and in the setting up of place-based funding through Creative People and Places in England (Jancovich, 2017). In both cases, existing funded organisations with most to lose from such change hindered policymakers from redistributing funding.

We argue that this vested interest explains why the practitioners in our sample were more comfortable talking about the value of their work and the benefits to themselves as artists or organisations. These benefits included developing their practice, growing their audiences, generating additional funding, or increasing their legitimacy. Concurrently, they avoided discussing its successes or failures in relation to the stated purpose of participation: to address inequality.

When asked to consider what people did see as failures in cultural participation policies, many identified specific examples where processes had failed. There were many examples, for instance, of participatory projects that they believed to be too pre-determined. It was recognised that "there's value to approaching projects without knowing what the outcomes are going to be". Rather than seeing this as a failure worth reflecting on in order to make processes more open-ended, many saw this as a reason to resist any criteria whatsoever for judging success and failure. Some expressed a concern that although the sector is increasingly "talking about co-creation, or shifting the power, or shifting agency", this was not evident in practice.

Those practitioners with the longest track record in participatory work argued that power was increasingly vested in what one person described as a "Clore Mafia [of] very nice middle-class women often […] very nice leaders who want to work with their community very nicely". As a result, many practitioners discussed community and participation as uncontested

sites. For some, this was seen as leading to a kind of "happy clappy" activity which appeals to audiences but which "squeezes out dissent and the opportunity for learning". This is counter to the stated aims of participatory work which uses agonism to challenge social norms, for example, in Slung Low's recognition of the tensions within their community and the need to work differently with different groups.

Practitioners also referred to the failure of short-term projects that raise the profile for the artist or organisation, but which appear "project-led instead of mission-led". It was widely acknowledged that work could only be "transformational" if it was carried out in the long term, yet many felt that the nature of funding arrangements forced them to suggest that short-term work was delivering equivalent results. This then perpetuates a lack of honesty throughout the system. There were differences of opinion, however, about the source of this dishonesty. For some, the policy focus on participation led to inauthentic practitioners seeking access to ring-fenced funds. For others, the pressure to deliver impact and a lack of time and space to reflect before moving on to subsequent projects, made worse by the precarious lives that many in the cultural sector experienced, has "forced them into a crisis mindset". It was also acknowledged that a further difficulty in considering failure was identifying at which stage this should be carried, as what might be a success on the day might leave no impact, while what might feel like a failure at the time can develop significance further down the line. It is therefore necessary to consider success and failure across different time scales.

Some also argued that there was a creative drive to move on to the next project, meaning that practitioners were simply not critically reflective people when it came to thinking about the outcomes of their work. We argue that this is not suited to long-term interventions seeking to address social inequality and bring about social change. This was countered by others who claimed that "creative people are good at self-reflection" and that the creative process inherently involves "reflect[ion] on what didn't work [and] how we can change it". This reflection, however, was described as personal and private rather than something done collaboratively with participants in which differing narratives about what is and is not working, and what changes are necessary, are seen as equally valid.

The Limitations of the Project Mentality and Personal Reflection

As a company, Slung Low have been creating short-term, project-based work for twenty years, and their commissions or collaborations with larger arts organisations (e.g., the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Barbican, and Opera North) have contributed to their profile. The company, however, also take pride in setting themselves apart from these collaborators.

The members of staff we spoke to said that it was a recognition of the limited impact they could achieve from short-term, site-specific interventions that led to them take a more embedded approach by moving into the Holbeck in Leeds and making a long-term commitment to producing work there.

When asked how and with whom they reflect on the long-term successes and failures in order to learn and develop their practice, however, one member of staff said that as artists "the way we learn is just by doing". Although they added that "I guess it wouldn't hurt to sit down and look at how that's happened", they did not suggest a real desire to do so in the company.

Evaluation was described as a monitoring requirement rather than as something from which they or their funders might learn, and despite having a long-term commitment to working in the area, the work itself was still described in project terms as a list of activities rather than a joined-up strategy. It was therefore acknowledged that despite the company wanting to be seen as a learning organisation, demonstrated by their commitment to organising conferences for participatory organisations to share practice, "we're just not very good at capturing feedback" from others. Any reflection which does occur is most likely to be done individually, and any sharing is based on the company's own self-reporting of their successes or failures.

This is not to suggest that learning does not take place within the organisation, but that this is limited by a desire to move on to subsequent projects, which we argue limits the ability to not only learn but also change in response to this learning.

Whatever the attitudes to or perceived causes of the resistance to critical reflection, all agreed that the project mentality and relatively introspective approach to reflection within the cultural sector was perpetuated by artists, organisations, and funders alike. This in turn meant that many accepted the view that the greatest failure in the cultural sector was a collective failure for sector-wide sharing or learning to take place. Even within contexts where people said that they were engaged in "open sharing and learning", they also recognised that they did not "know what happens [to the learning] beyond the room" in which it takes place, which points to a disconnect between learning and informing practice.

Many felt that, as a sector, there is "little interest in learning really", and "our evaluation system is really about showing off […] we don't often pause to reflect". One practitioner even acknowledged that "I've never met a learning organisation, I have not met an organisation which takes seriously the process of reflecting on the information that it gathers, either at a staff or at a board level, and reflecting on that in a way that would lead to action".

As discussed in the previous chapter, some practitioners criticised policymakers for devolving the responsibility to learn to organisations when they failed to learn themselves. One person argued that if we expect action from learning, this "only happens if it happens in a system". Policy change, and not organisational change, were therefore seen as what could make a difference. Others claimed that this allowed organisations off the hook and that they had a responsibility to make "small change" where it could lead to better outcomes. The theory of "small change" argues that the act of participation and taking agency itself can bring about systemic change, though many felt that there was a lack of willingness from cultural practitioners to "be the change". Furthermore, despite the prevalent discourse surrounding giving agency to participants, it seemed that cultural practitioners fail to take that agency for themselves, as demonstrated by the tendency to blame others without situating themselves as part of either the problem or the solution. As a result, some saw the failures of the cultural sector perpetuated by the way fellow practitioners talk about "this kind of, you know, amorphous system, which is somehow separate from them, or in which they are not aware of the power that they might have in terms of how they go about changing, or even a desire to do that".

While many artists also agreed that "we have set up a system where we're like beggars" and "as a sector it's not a very confident sector", others saw this as a strategy of "just not being willing to change". This is supported by the high level of acceptance of dishonesty among practitioners. "Everyone

lies to get money" was a recurring trope across all our data. It was even seen as a virtue that "arts organisations in general are very good at bending, if not the rules, then the parameters of funding for a project to fit what they want to do". When failures were, in fact, acknowledged, it was generally a case of "sharing the failures that we believe will help get us to the next stage of funding". This clearly suggests a failure to learn arising from a lack of desire to change. It is indicative of what we found to be a lack of open and honest dialogue between practitioners, policymakers, and participants.

We argue that these attitudes prevent collective learning from taking place, for, as one practitioner said, "within a system that lies, talking about failure is extremely dangerous". As we have argued throughout this book, it is only through being able to identify, acknowledge, and learn from failure that the sector will become more equitable and inclusive.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have demonstrated that not only do practitioners draw on different meanings of participation than the policymakers in the previous chapter, but that there are also considerable differences in perspective between the practitioners themselves. These range from those for whom participation is defined by the relationship between the professional artist and the participant to those for whom it is defined by the participants having the resources to define culture for themselves. As a result, any consideration of successes or failures in cultural participation policy must consider the different priorities, perspectives, and experiences of artists, organisations, policymakers, and participants. We have also demonstrated that an unhealthy animosity exists within the cultural sector which is sustained by a lack of trust and openness. This is compounded by a focus on generating narratives of success, as well as a creative drive to move on to subsequent projects, preventing practitioners from undertaking critical reflection that could lead to personal learning, let alone sharing what they have learnt from failures with others.

We also argued in support of the view of some of our sample that a lack of reflection on the different forms that cultural participation can take results in a policy focus that predominantly uses participation to legitimise rather than challenge the status quo. This is also demonstrated in the previous chapter by the tendency for policymakers to ask existing funded organisations to take on increasing cultural participation as one of their objectives, rather than addressing it through a redistribution of funding to

alternative organisations and different communities. This is also evident among the practitioners in this chapter who spoke of creating opportunities for participants to infiltrate the system rather than change it. While many practitioners describe a feeling of being beholden to funders, we contend that, based on the findings in both this and the previous chapter, practitioners influence policymaking as much as they are influenced by it. Despite this, we encountered a lack of confidence among practitioners in their own agency in making change. This is in part a result of a personalised fear of failure. We further found that where failures were acknowledged by practitioners, just as with the policymakers in the previous chapter, blame was often devolved to others, further reducing the likelihood that they will actively avoid repeating the same mistakes in future. We argue that this could be addressed if the cultural sector accepted a collective responsibility to learn.

Through our research, we demonstrated that the process of talking about failure increased a willingness to undertake critical reflection, a process which was described as cathartic by many of our sample. We therefore argue that continuing such conversations about failure may reduce the fear factor and normalise a critically informed learning approach in the cultural sector, but this can only happen if practitioners are willing to do the hard work of seeking out alternative narratives rather than self-report feel-good narratives of their own making. We further challenge practitioners to see that agonism only has meaning if the artist is willing to be challenged as well as to challenge.

As we have stated in previous chapters, this requires a different approach to identifying success and failure in cultural participation projects and policies, one that considers the relative success and failure in different facets of the work and continually reflects on whose perspective is informing the judgements made. It is this approach that informs our framework of failure discussed in Chap. 7.

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Failing the Participant

INTRODUCTION

In the previous two chapters, we considered failures in cultural participation from the perspective of those who work as professionals within the cultural sector, whether that be those who fund these types of projects (Chap. 4) or those who work at the frontlines of delivery (Chap. 5). Within wider public policy literature, academics have shown how the meaning of participation assumes that the participant is not just the receiver or consumer of services, but instead has agency in making decisions concerning and evaluating the public services for which they are the intended beneficiary (Ostrom, 1996; Dryzek & List, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). Therefore, any consideration of either the successes or failures in participation must also consider the perspective of the participant themselves.

Within cultural policy, both as a practice and as an academic discipline, while there has been growing acknowledgement that the participants' (or public) viewpoint is important, there is also recognition that it is too often overlooked (Holden, 2006; Keaney, 2006). To address this, bodies such as Arts Council England and Creative Scotland have conducted public value surveys to test public opinion about the direction of cultural policy (see for example ICM Unlimited, 2015). Arts Council England also created a quality metrics framework for organisations which aimed to move beyond the tendency to self-report successes and failures, discussed in the

previous two chapters, to include the perspectives of both peers and the public (Bunting & Knell, 2014). Many local authorities have also consulted their residents when developing cultural strategies, for example, Leeds City Council whose 2017–2030 strategy claims to be their "first co-produced strategy" (https://leedsculturestrategy.co.uk) or Glasgow City Council who employed community engagement specialists to help inform the consultation on the draft (https://www.glasgowcultureplan.com/draft-culture-plan.html). Despite these admirable intentions, the national surveys have been shown to have failed to inform policy change (Lee et al., 2011; Jancovich, 2017), and, in the case of the co-produced cultural strategy in Leeds, several people we interviewed questioned what was different as a result of the process. In terms of the quality metrics framework, while it allows peers to submit open responses, public feedback is reduced to tick box answers to pre-set questions. We argue therefore that most of the approaches that have been adopted to increase wider engagement in cultural policy constitute consultation exercises rather than processes that might allow for participatory decision making. As such, they do little more than help policymakers change the language of their communication.

Likewise, in previous chapters we showed how practitioners are increasingly conscious of trying to provide more agency to their participants, whether that be through decisions on programming within Creative People and Places in Chap. 4 or providing resources for people to deliver their own cultural activities, for example, at Slung Low in Chap. 5. We found little evidence, however, that either of these cases involve participants in defining the organisational purpose or evaluating the project from their own perspectives. What feedback practitioners do capture from participants is largely through either satisfaction surveys, the structure of which encourage positive responses, or through informal and ad hoc means. The voice of participants is used to support narratives relating to the transformation of individual lives, and to celebrate the success of initiatives, rather than to reflect on what might be learnt from hearing alternative points of view that dissent from these core narratives. Among our wider sample, there were few examples where the participants' perspective was allowed to truly challenge that of the professional. Without this potential for dialogue between alternative perspectives, it is difficult to see how the participant might influence judgements about the relative success or failure of participatory activities, let alone the policies and strategies that underpin the goal of increasing equity in the cultural sector.

Despite recent research into everyday participation (Belfiore & Gibson, 2020) and cultural democracy (Gross & Wilson, 2018) (highlighted throughout this book) that demonstrates the range of amateur- or volunteer-led cultural activities in which people are actively engaged, the majority of academic and policy literature still focuses on professional practice, leaving a significant research gap in relation to participatory activities that are volunteer-led. We also argue that the literature which does consider voluntary or amateur arts activities, while making an important contribution to demonstrating the value of such work, tends to demonstrate the same problem as that which is focused on the professional sector: it often makes the case for work of this kind rather than critically examining its successes and failures in practice.

This chapter therefore aims to challenge the narratives that are predominantly employed by both academics and professionals seeking to evidence and defend the "value" of participation by considering how participation is defined by participants themselves and their perspective on the relative successes and failures of both professional and non-professional cultural activities.

In differentiating the participant from the professional, we draw on the definition provided by individuals based on workshops for which they signed up and how they described themselves in interviews. From this, we noted that, as one practitioner said, "[…] the vast majority of organisations, funders, commissioners [and artists] will not or don't feel that they should also participate in the project, everyone else should do the participation".

In other words, the participant is seen as separate from the professional, and this embeds a power relationship between policymakers and practitioners, who we will refer to as professionals throughout this chapter. This was demonstrated by our sample of professionals, who discussed their role in "developing active citizenship" or creating "a change of habit or change of attitude" among their participants rather than seeing a duty for themselves, as a professional, to participate as an active citizen or to question their own habits or attitudes. In contrast, many of those who led cultural activities in a voluntary capacity, such as the makers of Fun Palaces (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/) or the community activists within the Big Local (https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/) and Creative Civic Change (https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change/), saw themselves as participants in much the same way as those who turned up to participate in activities on the day.

The participants' views expressed in this chapter therefore represent a spectrum from those actively involved in designing participatory programmes in a voluntary capacity to those taking part in that participatory activity. This includes those participating within the professional-led practices of Creative People and Places and Slung Low, which were used as illustrative examples in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, we also focus on Fun Palaces, a national programme of local, volunteer-led cultural events, to ascertain the perceived successes and failures in cultural participation within volunteer-led approaches. We spoke to national organisers, who are paid for their work, as well as local organisers, who are not.

As in the previous two chapters, all the participants to whom we spoke were asked to discuss what participation meant to them and how they defined it. We then asked them to consider "failure" both in relation to what the word evoked for them in general, but also what they saw as the failures they had experienced within the cultural sector, particularly in relation to volunteer-led work, working with professionals, and cultural policymaking in general. From this, we demonstrate points of confluence and divergence both among participants and between them and professionals, which we argue demonstrates the value in hearing a range of different perspectives. All quotes in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, come from participants. The central premise of this book is that this process of hearing alternative perspectives and narratives is an essential component in critically reflecting on success and failure with a view to avoiding the repetition of past mistakes.

Meanings of Participation

In the previous two chapters, we saw how policymakers largely define participation as a duty to provide equal opportunities to take part in cultural activities, while practitioners define it both as an issue of equity and as a creative process. While both of these groups acknowledge the everyday participation that might happen in a voluntary or amateur capacity, there remains an overriding concern with non-participation in professional-led activities and an implied deficit on the part of those who, as one practitioner said, "don't get culture" and opt not to participate. Such perspectives reflect the "public participation" model (Brodie et al., 2009) which we associated with the democratisation of culture in Chap. 2. This assumes that the aim of the participation agenda is to reduce barriers to engagement with professional arts practice, whether that be within institutions or with community artists.

Most participants in our sample agreed with the view that cultural participation is an important feature of life, the value of which is not reduced to having access to fun, social activities, but also contributes to individual well-being and community building. But, unlike professionals all adopted a "social participation" definition, which assumes a more horizontal relationship between peers in which, as demonstrated by how our sample self-selected, those organising or facilitating an activity are as much a participant as those taking part in someone else's activity. While a small number of participants did suggest that, although they were active themselves, they were aware of others who chose not to participate in these types of activities, most did not see this as the problem policymakers needed to deal with. In fact, the majority believed that regarding the place where they lived, there were "a lot of people who are doing all kinds of things" if you included volunteer-led and amateur cultural activities in the definition of cultural participation. From this perspective, the very idea of the non-participant who needs to be persuaded to participate or educated on how to do so was seen as either nonsense or insulting, and many supported some variation of the view that "people are happy here. We need more resources, more places to be. But we don't need fixing". The perspectives of the majority of participants in our sample aligned with the notion of cultural democracy, which sees the act of participation as a matter of individual choice, defined in relation to resonance (Burns, 2007), and an expression of agency. Such participation is based on finding shared interests, whether that be professionally mediated or not. It is less concerned with "equal representation" regarding who is participating with any given activity.

In terms of the resonance for participants who choose to take part in activities led by professionals, it was clear they do so for a range of reasons. Some value the social aspect of participating and meeting "like-minded people". Some talked about the creative skills they learned from professionals, while others spoke of the pride they felt in being involved in a high-profile activity. While these were important to them personally, most did not think that everyone should be persuaded to participate in such activities, nor did they believe that their participation contributed to increasing equity, the overriding aim of cultural participation policies. There was antagonism from some at the fact that they had heard themselves or the people in their area described by professionals as being "hard to reach" or "non-engaged", when in fact they took part in projects because of a pre-existing interest in the arts. Most were also already active in local amateur activities and while they valued the professional projects

they had experienced, those in our sample did not suggest that these had any greater value than the amateur activities in which they already participated, nor than what other people might choose to participate in instead.

The resonance for those who organise or take part in voluntary or amateur activities, in contrast to those that were led professionally, was also often socially oriented, and they equally demonstrated a sense of pride. This, however, related more to the pride they felt about participating in, or contributing to, their local geographic community rather than the profile of the activity or the prestige of the organisation or artist delivering it. As a result, for some, there was a stronger focus on reaching out beyond those with similar interests to their own. Several said the aim of these types of activities was to connect the different people who make up their community, though this appears to be less about representing the whole community and more about skills and perspective sharing. Instead of the "duty to involve", which was the focus for policymakers in Chap. 4, for participants, the desire to involve seemed to come from a belief in the different expertise that people with varying perspectives could bring to bear on any project. This relates to an asset-based approach to participation, which recognises and values the skills and interests that people already have (Lloyd & Reynolds, 2020), something that is central to the concept of cultural democracy.

An Asset-Based Approach to Participation

Fun Palaces was cited by a number of people in our sample, both professionals and participants, as a model of success in volunteer-led cultural participation that takes an asset-based approach by "sharing and celebrating the genius in everyone" (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/). It operates both as "a campaign for cultural democracy", lobbying for greater recognition of everyday participation, and as a facilitator of locally run events that take place over one weekend a year in locations across the country. Their purpose is to create something that is "more than the sum of their parts" and thereby has the same profile as professionally run activities. For many, the nature of its success was defined in relation to the profile it has achieved rather than in relation to either the activities delivered or the levels of participation at the events they produced.

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Significantly, while Fun Palaces describe their process as "by the people, for the people, with the people", they do not define who the people are, nor claim that everyone should participate in a Fun Palace or that every neighbourhood should have one. As such, they define participation in relation to the concept of resonance described above, encouraging activism rather than a concern with achieving representative equality at their events. Some of the participants from Fun Palaces said the process was about "getting people in a room who wouldn't ordinarily be in a room together from different sectors with different motivations, different backgrounds, different experiences".

However, Fun Palaces evaluations suggest that their participants are more diverse than is the norm in the professional cultural sector (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/evaluations-2014-2019/), a fact that our own research corroborated as the participants from Fun Palaces were also more culturally and economically diverse than the participants who took part in the professionally led initiatives we have considered as part of this research. This diversity was therefore also cited as an indicator of success by the founders of Fun Palaces and its funders.

Yet it was notable that many of the local organisers we spoke to expressed a resentment towards the expectation present in the national evaluation to measure their success in relation to the diversity of who takes part. It was said that actively seeking to increase cultural equity in an area takes more time and resources than is possible for an activity that only happens one weekend per year and that they as volunteers were not able to put in the development work needed for this year-round. As a result, some questioned the honesty of the data presented in the evaluations and claimed that simply putting on an event is a success in itself, without the need for other expectations to be laid on top.

An asset-based approach that acknowledges these different perspectives is central to conceptions of participation that define it not just in relation to the activities in which people participate, but in relation to their involvement in decision-making processes. Many participants supported the view that cultural policymakers "need to hear what I've got to say otherwise

what are they basing decisions on?" The idea of "cultural rights" expressed by professionals as the right to take part in their work was therefore seen by the participants we spoke to, both those who engaged in professional activities and those who did not, as a right to decide which activities they wanted to undertake and to have them resourced accordingly. This might or might not involve cultural professionals.

Such an approach to participation shifts the focus of policymaking from a centralised process primarily conducted by cultural "experts" and professionals to a devolved, dialogical process that involves beneficiaries as well as deliverers. Therefore, for most participants, a significant component of judging the success or failure of any cultural participation project or policy was in relation to the level of power they had in the decision-making processes and/or the outcomes of the decisions taken through this process. This stands in contrast to professionals whose criteria for success and failure were more commonly based on the quality of the activity they deliver or the diversity of participation in these projects.

As the focus of this book is to consider what might be learnt from reflecting on the different facets of failure, the following section examines the attitudes to talking about failure from participants before then considering the nature of the failures they perceive to be occurring most often.

Attitudes to Failure

In Chap. 3, we demonstrated a resistance to talking about failure across public policy, and in Chaps. 4 and 5, some professionals suggested a fear of acknowledging failure is prevalent in the cultural sector. At first glance, however, our participants demonstrated a desire to talk about failure, at least in theory. In some cases, there was joyful laughter as they recounted a disaster on a project in which they were involved. In other examples there was defiance against situations where they felt work had been imposed on them which failed to take their interests or skills into account. Most supported the view that "anyone who says they've managed their work perfectly…. they're a liar", and all felt that being honest about failures was a valuable part of the process.

Several participants did, however, recognise that the education system can "instil a strong paradigm of failure equals bad", which in turn creates a fear of failure, fostering a culture that "does not encourage learning but

rewards success and punishes failure". In our sample, this appeared to be most evident among those who would traditionally be understood as having been successful in education and felt a pressure to maintain a self-image of themselves as someone who succeeds. Those that said they had "failed" at school were instead more likely to reflect on how learning from that experience facilitated other successes in life. A number said that they were open to the value of learning from failure in everything they did and enjoyed the opportunity to do so with us. Some participants suggested that as professionals also face the pressure of managing their reputation, participants are "better placed to recognise failure" when it occurs in cultural participation projects. This supports the findings outlined in Chaps. 4 and 5 where we discuss how professionals do indeed fear the reputational damage of talking openly about failure and feel pressured to celebrate their successes instead. We argue this contributes to the "self-reporting" of successes which too often squeeze out participant perspectives from evaluations, especially those that run counter to the official narrative the organisers of the project seek to portray.

For some participants, the narratives that are often told by professionals actually perpetuates problems of cultural participation and reinforces inequities. Several talked about how policymakers often stigmatise the places where they live, presenting them, and by inference the people who live there, as failures. They felt that the categorisation of certain places as being "in need" of the intervention of cultural professionals makes people "feel like failures pretty permanently" and cited this as a reason why people become disengaged. Many participants said that it was not surprising that repeated policy interventions had failed to change patterns of cultural participation, because they were built on a "deficit" approach that treated them as failures to be "fixed". Other participants said they either rejected the definitions of success imposed on them by policymakers or chose to "embrace failure" and challenge dominant narratives. Either way, most participants we interviewed instinctively recognised that success and failure may be perceived differently by different people. As one participant said, "it's not the word that is the problem, it's what people associate with failure". This also presents problems in determining how to learn from success and failure, for if they are entirely contingent on personal perspectives, then it becomes impossible to undertake comparative analysis.

The Plurality of Definitions of Success and Failure

Fun Palaces was described as a response to what is seen by the organisers to be a failed policy discourse that defines certain places as failing and the people within them as cultural non-participants. Its aim is to challenge these narratives by putting on events that foreground the skills that exist within all communities but are often invisible. As such, its purpose is to reject the implicit and explicit definitions of failure imposed by others and "champion cultural democracy" as an alternative narrative.

All agreed that definitions of success and failure must be "tied to the things that I'm trying to change within our local context" and not what others decide. As a result, many recognised that "what might be a success for one, might not be for another". For example, some of the organisers saw the numbers who turned up to their Fun Palace event as a measure of success or failure, while others did not. Some saw the quality of the event they delivered as important, while others focused on the level of "community development" that happens in the process of planning the event throughout the year.

For some, the acceptance of this plurality of approaches was itself a measure of success, praised for giving real power to local participants to create work that "expands into whatever space and capacity people have". Others, however, voiced concerns that the variety of approaches meant "a lot of people are failing on the same thing or perhaps running into issues that other areas have overcome". While some participants thought it was vital that people were allowed to make their own mistakes, others claimed that this perpetuated a failure to learn, which presented some with "a challenge [in] having clarity over what I'm trying to do".

It was also clear that while participants in Fun Palaces appeared comfortable when talking about the systemic failures which led to the creation of the initiative, they still showed some discomfort discussing failures within the programme itself. They were particularly uncomfortable calling out the failures of others, as this was seen as undermining the hard, voluntary work people put into organising the events. Despite having annual peer learning events, most participants of Fun Palaces agreed that "everybody wants to be, you know,

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yeah, be nice to each other and get on" which they believed would be undermined by discussing failure. We argue this reticence makes it even more difficult to share learning between places. As a result, some participants felt that Fun Palaces was falling into the same trap as the professional cultural sector of "lobbying not learning" at these peer learning events, reducing the potential that the initiative could develop and improve, and meaning that Fun Palaces was increasingly becoming "cleverly branded but superficial".

For most participants in our sample, despite an openness to thinking about failure in theory, it was uncommon for them to be provided with opportunities to do so in practice. In a small number of examples, participants described processes of reflection based on a shared responsibility for learning, where a funder, cultural organisation, or their peers demonstrated a desire to review their actions with a view to changing things in future. In most cases, however, participants said that whatever they might think personally, when it came to evaluations, they felt pressured to portray the event positively and to "give [the organiser] what they want to hear".

Many said this was particularly the case when working with cultural professionals, who many described as being "too sensitive" to speak honestly with or as having "a lot of self-doubt [so] they don't like talking about failure". It was also common for participants to perceive a "politeness" in the cultural sector that made them more reticent to discuss failure than they would be in other contexts. We found, however, that it is not only professionals who can appear sensitive or defensive: the same relationship appears to exist between the participants who organise voluntary activities and their peers who take part in what they have organised. There was greater openness to talking about the failures that may have occurred at these events from those whose involvement was limited to participation compared to those who also had some degree of organisational responsibility. This suggests that the fear of talking about failure might have more to do with the level of responsibility one has rather than their identity as a cultural professional, for it was felt that "it's more difficult [to talk about failure] where it has consequences".

The idea of "consequences" has been a recurring theme across all our data, whether it came from a policymaker, practitioner, or participant. That idea is also reflected in the policy literature on failure discussed in Chap. 3, which suggests that a feeling of being accountable and the neo-liberal personalisation of blame (McGuigan, 2014) contributes to a climate in which public honesty becomes more difficult. It was also apparent that the extent to which different people perceive success and failure to different degrees in relation to various facets of projects or policies may also limit the potential for shared learning. If everyone defines success and failure differently, then, as we have also argued has become the case with the term participation, the words success and failure also risk losing any meaning unless these differences are acknowledged and understood in the context of a shared framework for learning. The following section therefore considers where participants locate failure in cultural participation in order to inform the framework that we present in our final chapter, Chap. 7.

Locating Failure and Learning from It

As shown throughout this book, much of the policy focus on participation stems from the statistical evidence of inequality regarding who takes part in professional cultural activities. This is despite widespread recognition among professionals and participants that such data fails to recognise high rates of everyday cultural participation. For many of the participants in our sample, the fact that narratives of cultural non-participation persist, and the extent to which they are bound to assumptions of social failure, was seen to reinforce the sense that "our stuff is not culturally valued by funders", and without changing this perception, it was believed that cultural policy will continue to fail to address issues of equity.

Participants more commonly defined participation not in relation to who takes part in what, but in relation to the level of agency and involvement in decision making that the participant has. While professionals claim there is a policy shift towards this approach, however, very few of the participants in our sample said they could see much evidence of this in practice. Instead, most agreed that there remained a "paternalistic attitude that [professionals] are the experts and that no-one else could make a qualified decision", even about things that affect their own lives. As a result, many said there was a breakdown of trust between the public and the professional cultural sector. Many participants supported the view that

"artists are often viewed with suspicion as they are seen to be promoting their own agendas…or working to the funders' demands rather than the communities they purport to be empowering".

Far from being open-minded, provocative, and engaged, as many of the artists we spoke to described themselves, participants often described them as having closed minds, being wedded to narrow forms of creative practice, and creating "processes that treat [participants] with disdain". This was demonstrated by examples of "so-called co-creation" or collaborations between professionals and amateurs, where the processes employed were perceived as having failed to deliver an equitable relationship between parties, because "professional artists don't want to be mixed up with amateurs". This was seen by participants as a failure on behalf of the artists to recognise the opportunity for the exchange of ideas or learning, and they said it left them less likely to want to engage with cultural professionals in the future. In this context, non-participation in professional practice was seen by some as an active choice, and it was a failure of policymakers to see it as such.

Boundaries Between Amateur and Professionals

The aim of Fun Palaces is to recognise the expertise in everyone: "the motto is everyone's an artist". In many of the locations where Fun Palaces take place, there is a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional. Activities take place in a range of settings, from established professional arts organisations to community venues. Similarly, these activities might be led by professional artists volunteering some of their free time to their community or by amateur creatives wanting to share their skills.

This relationship was not always an easy one. Several participants provided examples of working alongside professionals where they felt disrespected throughout the process. One told us about an instance in which they offered their expertise only to be told "you're not an artist", to which they responded, "no, but I'm an everyone, and when people concentrate on artists, they forget the word everyone". Another participant said that their local cultural organisation indicated they wanted to bring the Fun Palaces audience to them, but when they were invited to participate in the community activities happening elsewhere, they only sent leaflets and were unwilling to

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"meet, have a chat, and [find out] the sorts of things we're interested in". In another example, a participant organiser set up a "Create Night", where local creatives could meet on a regular basis to develop local practice and "break down barriers between fine artists and crafters". They described it as "a kind of show and tell thing where you sit in a circle and say this is what I've been doing this week and there might be somebody who's been doing some abstract sculpture out of cardboard boxes sat next to somebody who's been knitting, next to somebody who's been writing a piece of creative writing". While these events carried on for quite a while, the organiser found that "the people who were the professional 'fine' artists wouldn't come". The feedback from participants indicated that they got a lot out of this experience and developed their practice, but the organiser claimed that the professional artists felt "they were being taken down by being compared with amateurs", and it appeared as though they thought they had nothing new to learn.

   For the participants involved in these experiences, the relationship between Fun Palaces and the professional sector was seen as replicating a failure they had experienced previously. This meant that the participants involved felt less inclined to contact professional artists or organisations, let alone try to find ways to work with them in the future. It was also seen to demonstrate the failure of many cultural professionals to demonstrate a willingness to work in different ways and to learn from doing so.

In Chap. 5, we showed that some of those who labelled themselves as participatory artists distanced themselves from what they saw as the patronising attitudes of other cultural professionals, though they stopped short of seeing themselves as participants. We argue that the growing interest in the idea that everyone is an artist (see, e.g., Fun Palaces and sixty-four million artists) rather than defining everyone as a participant, including the professional, perpetuates this problem rather than eradicate it.

Significantly, when asking participants about different types of participatory practice, they did not tend to differentiate between them. None of

the participants we spoke to supported the view that participatory art was a practice in its own right. Instead, most believed that all art was participatory. In fact, some saw participatory art as perpetuating the problem by still being mediated by the professional, and for many this equated to middle-class interests and values. As one participant said, "[art] wasn't only created by those that were socially privileged. So why maintain it that way? Why keep it that way? I think it's unfair. I think it's really unfair".

A small number in our sample recognised that artists themselves had precarious work lives and often self-subsidised their own practice, acknowledging that "the ability to [be an artist] is a privilege that is not open to those on low incomes/without independent means". This, however, served to demonstrate the inevitability that professional artists would always come from a particular class background. Indeed, the very term "artist" was seen by some as a way of valuing differently what the primarily middle-class, white professional does from the creative activities or cultural lives of everyone else. Informed by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), we have written elsewhere about how the institution of the arts was established to do just this (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019). The fact that this is legitimised by cultural policymakers primarily funding the artistic professional while claiming to be concerned with equity is what made many participants angry.

Most participants thought that policymakers should focus less on the equality of participation in professional practice and more on equitable resource distribution for everyday practices. Many supported the view that "the community buy-in is there, but we need more resources to make the things happen", whether that be about spaces, equipment to hire, or even employing professional artists. In other words, as one participant said, rather than "the artist being funded to find the community, it should be *vice versa*".

Many also supported the view that when it came to participation in activities, "people would still prefer to just stay local if they could". In practice, however, most said their lived experience is of cuts to both local authority budgets and adult education services. Many provided examples of how community cultural resources in the places they lived were diminishing, while they felt that the professional sector was being protected. This was said to be having "a massive effect on the everyday creatives for want of a better word—versus the cultural professional", meaning that the way funding was being distributed was widening rather than diminishing the gap between the two.

Because they felt that participatory work was being appropriated by practitioners who were soaking up an increasingly large amount of community funding that could have supported voluntary practices, some saw this as the failure of cultural participation. Many participants wanted policymakers to "step back and think a little bit more about whether it always needs to be mediated by [professionals]". For many participants, the benefits of funding professionals were seen to be outweighed by the cost "[…] in terms of value for money, in terms of what you're actually trying to achieve by engaging people in the arts […] the impact you're having on individuals and their health and wellbeing, then I would say, you know, actually the voluntary art stuff, the day-to-day stuff is probably having more impact on people's lives than taking them to the Royal Opera House".

In Chap. 4, we discussed how a place-based approach to funding based on providing more equitable resource to all parts of the country, with decisions on how it was spent made locally, was mooted as a policy approach within Arts Council England. Instead, when Creative People and Places (CPP) was launched, it put places in competition with each other, which we argue reinforced, rather than addressed, the existing inequities between places. Many of the participants we spoke to who had been part of CPP projects also criticised the fact it tended to result in the creation of new professional arts organisations with traditional governance structures in the successful locations rather than devolving the money to existing amateur and voluntary cultural activities.

In contrast, some participants we spoke to cited the Local Trust's Big Local Project (https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/) as being more effective at addressing inequality by distributing equal amounts of funding to all eligible areas, without the level of competition seen in Creative People and Places. Furthermore, eligibility was defined not through a lack of participation, but by a lack of investment that had previously gone into the neighbourhoods from policymakers. Many participants saw this as a positive shift in the narrative as it recognised that the failure lay in the structures of public funding rather than with them.

There were concerns from some participants that too many place-based initiatives, not only CPP and Big Local in England, but also those in Scotland and Wales, were placing too large sums of money in the hands of relatively few people in the communities that received funding. Some questioned the legitimacy of decisions made by small groups of residents who, like cultural professionals, set themselves up as self-appointed experts. It was felt by some that this could perpetuate inequalities in certain places, creating closed groups that can exclude as much as they include.

Others said that the reliance on local people, often volunteers who had varying levels of skills to deliver, engendered a caution in how money was spent due to the very fear of failure we have been exploring throughout this book. Managing such large programmes of work with large budgets, it was said, requires a further level of professionalism that detracts from the voluntary ethos it was supposed to support. As one participant said, funding too often "ties you to a map for your project" that is counter to the generative nature of participatory and community-led approaches. This demonstrates the complexity of policy design and the need to reflect on the successes and failures within processes of delivery, whether these are led by professionals or volunteers.

Funding Everyday Culture

Fun Palaces was established by two individuals who, while coming from professional arts backgrounds, initially set up the campaign in a voluntary capacity. While all local events continue to be run by volunteers, as the campaign has gained momentum, they have increased the funding they receive centrally as an organisation. This money has been spent on paying a part-time salary to the two founders to promote their national brand, recruiting a team of champions to encourage more events across Britain, and to facilitate the work of local activists by providing support and training.

However, some participants expressed real anger that the money raised centrally was not devolved to the local areas putting on events so that they could decide how it was spent. Several people commented that the lack of funding to local areas had a direct impact on the quality of work they offer and that this in turn devalued rather than celebrated local cultural projects. They felt that there would be more local benefit from spending the money on the events rather than building the profile of the initiative at a national level.

Several also supported the view that it was wrong that "other people are getting paid, but they expect me to do it for free", and some challenged the voluntary nature of the events themselves as undermining the value of both creative and participatory work. As one participant said, "one of the frustrations is the expectation for people to constantly do things for nothing." In some cases, artists who were already financially precarious said that the voluntary nature

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of Fun Palaces was encouraging more cultural institutions to think they did not need to pay creatives. Likewise, some participants said the idea that community development could be done by volunteers was not sustainable in the long term.

Conversely, some of the participants we spoke to felt it was important for the ethos of the events to stay voluntary, as being paid "does change the dynamic". Others expressed concerns that devolving all the money locally would inevitably mean that the areas or people who already had resources, capacity, or networks would benefit most, while needing it least. They valued the support and training from the national office and the paid champions. What all agreed on was that more money could be made available to help cover the direct costs of the activities. Most supported the idea of small pots of "micro funding" rather than larger pots of money that stood to distort the way they work, which they had seen happen in cases such as CPP and Big Local.

The tension about how and where money should be spent within Fun Palaces demonstrates the value of local funding, but equally the risks associated with doing so, not least in terms of how such work is sustained over the long term and how policymakers respond to varying needs, rather than simply building on success.

The greatest concern expressed not only about local, place-based initiatives, but about all policy approaches to address the participation agenda, was that they were invariably described as short-term projects or experiments. Participants criticised the fact that CPP was described as an action research programme rather than a commitment to long-term investment in places. Participants in Slung Low's *Flood* said that "the greatest failure was that it didn't keep going", and Fun Palaces was criticised for focusing too heavily on a weekend of events and not enough on the development work and activities that were seen as needing to take place year-round. Many participants said their experiences showed that policymakers were only ever willing to make a time-limited commitment to the places and people among whom they lived.

Despite some of the budgets for participatory work being comparably large for a short-term community project, they were still seen to be relatively small levels of investment compared to previous investments through

local authority community and arts development funds. Many participants therefore questioned the sustainability of cultural interventions once the funding runs out.

Many also described a growing "event culture" that pervaded the way funding was provided. Participants had countless examples of high-profile projects or initiatives that had raised the aspirations of participants and attracted large numbers of people to take part, only for "the circus to leave town". It was often suggested that this meant such initiatives were destined to fail, as everyone knew that they could not be sustained over the long term. The post-funding comedown, or "hangover", as one person called it, made participants feel much worse about their area, not better, than they had before. One participant mentioned the case of Hull City of Culture, where public surveys showed a positive increase in public attitudes during the event, both towards culture and the city, but the statistics suggest that in the following year, they were at a lower point than before the event took place. This was seen as exacerbating the feeling that "[…] things have been done to [us] […] stuff happens, and they disappear. And people like me sit here trying to keep doing it again, and we can't, we can't do it, we can't get on with it […] because the funding goes".

This kind of project mentality was also acknowledged by professionals in Chaps. 4 and 5 as a barrier to embedding long-term, sustainable change in cultural participation. While professionals seemed resigned to the inevitability of this within the constraints of funding, for participants its continuance merely demonstrated that cultural policy was continuing to "make all the same mistakes again and blame it on audiences". Participants did not want to rely on the largesse of arts organisations or constantly seek individual grants; they wanted to be able to build a sustainable cultural infrastructure in the places in which they lived.

The Failure to Sustain

In the case of Fun Palaces' annual weekend of activity, the initial aim was to organise a nationwide event which created a festival atmosphere in locations all across the country, while simultaneously increasing the profile of their campaign for cultural democracy. By linking events throughout the area together under the banner of a single weekend, the founders argued that it provided motivation for different areas to get involved and provided marketing opportunities

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to direct audiences to local activities. The aim was to increase recognition of the brand, because "from recognition follows funding, [and from funding] follows making things happen".

Several local organisers, however, said that the idea of having to limit activities to one weekend, and the fact that this weekend was prescribed by the national office, was in fact limiting opportunities when the aim should be to increase them. Some areas said that the weekend also focused attention too much on the Fun Palace "product" and detracted from the process of local people collaborating in a way that best suits them. As one participant said, "a successful Fun Palace [should be] what has been happening during the year of the making, it's not the event". Others said putting events on at the same time fostered a spirit of competition, and meant that for many, it became about "being shiny [and] about numbers, [when it should be] about that process and how we drive that process forward into the long term".

As a result, there was said to be "a lot of push back right now and I think quite rightly around why, if it is completely community led, is it on one specific weekend?" Instead, many local organisers wanted to focus their attention on sustaining activities year-round but struggled to identify ways in which they could do this without the support of the national office. Some wanted to retain the profile of the brand without the focus on events, as they felt that this would help them attract resources and retain interest from participants. Others thought that the brand would be diluted by losing the focus on the national weekend of events and wanted organisers to call their other activities something different.

Throughout this book, we have shown how the profile of participatory actions or activities are frequently the primary measure of how our sample define success. In the case of Fun Palaces, as an awareness raising campaign, profile is necessarily central to the way the organisation themselves define their success. We argue, then, that where there is too much focus on profile, it can start to define activities, as it does here, limiting Fun Palaces organisers to one weekend of activity per year. This may limit not only the opportunities to participate, but also the processes and levels of participation within such activities.

Although the failure to "shift the dial" in the participation agenda has been acknowledged by all those involved in our research, it was clear from our sample of participants that this was understood very differently by them than by professionals. While both policymakers and practitioners commonly define the problem of participation as a social one, for the participants to whom we spoke it was clearly seen as a problem stemming from cultural policy and the way decisions are made about people's cultural lives. Despite the rhetoric of providing greater support for cultural democracy, most participants felt that there were few, if any, funded initiatives that were "truly community-led", and this, many felt, meant they failed to be embedded in the communities who were the intended beneficiaries of the work. This is demonstrated both in relation to the focus on funding a narrow band of professionals and organisations at the expense of equitably resourcing everyday participation as well as the focus on funding activities that will gain a high profile, which necessitate a focus of reproducing narratives of success, that squeeze out opportunities to learn from failure.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to demonstrate the value of hearing the perspectives not only of professionals, who see themselves as delivering the participation agenda, but also of participants, who are the intended recipients and beneficiaries of such work. What was most evident from the testimonies of those we spoke with was that they did not see themselves only as beneficiaries but also as deliverers and decision makers. The failure of cultural participation policy was its inability to recognise this. Many said that being part of our research was the first time they had been asked about their views on policy, and even those who had been asked for feedback on projects they had been involved in previously questioned what had changed as a result of their contributions.

Like professionals, there was consensus among the participants in our sample that cultural participation adds value to both individuals and society, but participants challenged the assumption that a problem of non-participation even exists, instead observing a policy failure to not only recognise but also to value the everyday cultural activities in which people already participate. Many participants made a strong case for shifting the focus of cultural policy from increasing participation in professional cultural activities to increasing the resources directed towards supporting

everyday culture, evoking the principles of an asset-based approach to development. In such an approach, success and failure relate more to the processes of how people participate rather than the nature of the cultural practice in which they are participating or who chooses to participate in what is produced.

Based on our research, we argue that although the rejection of the concept of the cultural non-participant in favour a focus on participation as an active choice may give greater recognition to the agency of any given participant, this does not always address questions about equity regarding who is allowed to participate in decision-making processes. As such, a focus on successes and failures must also remain cognisant of whose voices and narratives are heard within the planning, delivery, and, crucially, the evaluation stages of such processes.

This chapter has also shown that, in theory at least, participants placed more importance on honestly reflecting on success and failure than either group of professionals discussed in the previous two chapters. They also had a more nuanced understanding, from the outset, that success and failure are complex concepts, which mean different things to different people. They were far less likely to see success and failure in binary terms or as final judgements. We also demonstrated, however, that the fear of failure, or at least of openly sharing stories of failure, could be as present for amateurs as it was for professionals if there was a sense of responsibility for the work, as organisers often faced "consequences" if things did not go as planned. This further supports our argument throughout this book that evaluations which hold individuals or organisations accountable for what has been done must be structured so as to limit the sense that people will be personally punished if they admit failure. Instead, the focus should be on critical reflection and learning from the many facets of success and failure, and from multiple perspectives, to consider what might be done differently in the future.

As we showed through the illustrative example of Fun Palaces, most of the participants in our sample acknowledged the success of that initiative in creating a profile for everyday participation, but most also accepted that every place might have a different definition of what a successful or failed Fun Palace would mean for them. There was no consensus among participants about these meanings, nor was there a desire to find one, but there was an acknowledgement of the value of hearing contrasting perspectives and the shared learning that could arise from that process. As such, this chapter has not sought to compare the perspectives of participants with

professionals to claim that one perspective is right or wrong. Neither does it suggest that there is consensus within our different sample groups. Instead, it demonstrates the need to not only ask what the criteria of success and failure are, but also question who gets to decide how those criteria are established. The final chapter will present our failure framework, which we believe can help ensure that success and failure can be acknowledged and discussed in a way that is inclusive of different perspectives and alternative narratives.

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CHAPTER 7

A Failure Framework

INTRODUCTION

In the previous three chapters, we have shown how, for a variety of reasons, it can be difficult for all those involved in the cultural sector, whether as policymakers, practitioners, or participants, to talk openly and honestly about failures. This means that narratives of failure are often absent when cultural professionals speak publicly about their work, whether in person or in written texts such as websites, policy reviews, or evaluations of practice. Even where cultural professionals do publicly discuss failures, they are unlikely to use that term, and they do so strategically and for the most part for their own advantage.

The prevalence of narratives of success means that a sanitised representation of cultural participation work is dominant, one in which the difficulties, trade-offs, mistakes, compromises, and messiness of such activities are primarily kept to the personal sphere of private self-reflection or confessionals between trusted peers and colleagues. Publicly, failures appear to be rare in cultural participation work, and written texts by both policymakers and practitioners focus on communicating competence, efficiency, and results delivered. In doing so, these texts replicate and amplify the discourse that such interventions are consistently working and progressively delivering social change. If these narratives are to be believed, it would seem the cultural sector is transforming lives, diversifying audiences and workforces, and improving social integration and inclusion.

As we have shown in Chap. 2, however, the national picture suggests that such projects have done little to change patterns of cultural participation or the demographic makeup of those benefitting most from public subsidy for cultural activities. Likewise, recent research has shown how poorly the cultural sector has fared in diversifying its workforce (Brook et al., 2020a) despite countless projects oriented towards this issue. Based on the dominant public narratives about the success of cultural participation projects, such findings are ostensibly difficult to explain. However, our fieldwork showed that despite professionals and participants acknowledging that failures are occurring in this work, they are rarely leveraged as opportunities to learn. As a result, common failures are being repeatedly experienced with little to no evidence that anything is being done to eradicate them or to make the necessary changes to increase equity in the cultural sector.

This final chapter argues that rather than being irrelevant to cultural projects and policies, experiencing failure in their design and implementation is inevitable. As the advocates for Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991), which we discussed in Chap. 3, argue, "avoiding failure is not an option. If you accept this premise, the choice before you is 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). Furthermore, we argue that acknowledging and learning from failures in ways that result in meaningful change is a moral and ethical responsibility for any organisation or individual that accepts public funding on the basis that the work they undertake will create a more equitable cultural sector where the benefits of cultural participation are maximised for all those involved.

Instead, the cultural sector has become so focused on proving its "value" and justifying the legitimacy of public subsidies that evaluations have become statements of worth primarily oriented towards recounting positive narratives about short-term successes. This is to the detriment of any learning about where the work failed, why it may have done so, and what impact these failures have on the individuals, groups, and communities the projects or policies were intended to benefit. We propose that if those working in or researching the cultural sector are truly committed to supporting more equitable cultural participation, then they must place far greater priority on sharing learning from, and avoiding the repetition of, failures which limit the ability of the sector to achieve meaningful and sustainable change. We suggest that the first step in this process is to

normalise talking about failures by encouraging those working within the broader cultural sector to share narratives of failure more openly and honestly. To facilitate this, we present a framework that allows for more nuanced conversations to take place. This framework offers an alternative to the false binary between success and failure that appears to be pervasive among professionals when it comes to talking about and evaluating cultural projects and policies. Instead, it encourages a recognition that cultural projects and policies can and do succeed and fail simultaneously, in different elements of the work, to differing degrees, at different stages, and for different people in different ways.

Participating in Failure

The previous three chapters have highlighted the various ways in which policymakers, practitioners, and participants define and relate to the notion of failure regarding cultural participation projects and policies. There exist clear differences between how each of these groups understood the purpose of policies and projects intended to support participation, and, relatedly, the ways in which success and failure might be judged. Likewise, we observed different attitudes towards talking about failures, though there were some shared perceptions about the barriers that prevent open and honest discussion about failure.

In Chap. 4, we focused on policymakers and showed how a gap exists between the values that are said to have shaped the participation agenda and the ways in which participation policies are developed and implemented. We also saw how the historical tension discussed in Chap. 2 between those who understand participation policies as seeking to increase and diversify engagement with existing cultural infrastructure and those who see it as a commitment to support the expression of individual cultural agency persists even today. In turn, this leads to a confusion between whether the core aim of participation policies is to address inequities regarding how resources are distributed or to provide equal access to aspirational "excellence". For some, cultural participation policies should seek to address both, yet we also saw how policies and projects that deliver on neither can still be labelled as a success because of other factors such as the quality of the artistic output, the extent to which they raise the profile of organisations involved, or even if they result in securing further funding. Conversations with policymakers about the potential failures in a particular policy or project in terms of participation quickly become discussions

defending the value and impact of the artistic practice within such work or even the value of art and culture in general.

In Chap. 5, we turned our attention to the practitioners who deliver cultural participation policies and projects. Not only did the practitioners tend to draw on different meanings of participation than the policymakers, but they also exhibited significant differences in perspective. For some, participation was about individual agency and the ability to contribute equally to decision-making processes. For others, participation was about the ability for individuals to be actively involved in working with a professional artist, even if they had little to say in what form this interaction took or what sort of creative practice it involved. In both cases, however, it was notable that for most practitioners, the invitation to participate was an invitation to participate with art and artists, rather than to recognise everyone as a participant in society.

Furthermore, as much as many of the practitioners claimed reflective practice was part of their professional training, there was little evidence of truly critical reflection (Hanson, 2013) taking place, in part because of a creative drive to continue moving on to subsequent projects. Reflection was mostly presented as a private, self-directed process based on their own judgements. This insularity meant that practitioners underestimated how frequently others were experiencing failures and the extent to which these failures were similar to their own. Just as Sousa and Clark have noted about academics (2019), the absence of stories about failure in their professional narratives meant that many cultural practitioners may feel as if failure accompanies them personally, even as they are surrounded by professional success.

Practitioners also tended to be defensive or dismissive of judgements about success or failure which were based on someone else's priorities, whether those were policymakers or participants, or about the need for alternative perspectives to be considered equally as part of a truly critical reflective process. It was clear that many practitioners appeared far more comfortable in presenting themselves as someone whose work challenges structural inequities rather than reflecting and being challenged on their own role within an inequitable system.

Participants were the focus of Chap. 6, where we showed how the majority of the participants we spoke to saw one of the most significant failures as the tendency for policymakers and practitioners to see them solely as the beneficiaries of cultural participation projects and policies rather than decision makers and creators of their own cultural opportunities. They did not feel that there existed a "problem" of cultural

non-participation which needed to be tackled, but rather they felt there was a policy failure regarding the extent to which certain forms of cultural participation continued to be valued by policymakers more than others. They saw their communities as being culturally active but lacking in resources. The participants we spoke to were also most likely to feel that their voices were not being heard in the current system. Despite being asked repeatedly for feedback as part of project evaluations in which they felt pressured to provide positive responses, they struggled to see how their feedback had been acted on or otherwise changed the approach taken to future policies and projects. Participants appeared far less likely to see success and failure as absolute judgements and were relaxed about the extent to which some degree of failure was inevitable. They recognised that different people would value things for different reasons and that this would also mean that they viewed success and failure in different ways. In contrast to policymakers, however, they saw this as a positive dynamic and acknowledged the learning that could come from hearing different perspectives about any given project or policy.

Regardless of whether someone we interviewed was a policymaker, practitioner, or participant, or where they sat on the debate between cultural democratisation and cultural democracy discussed throughout this book, they appeared to broadly agree on two points. Firstly, that cultural participation does have the potential to affect positive, desirable change in individuals, groups, and communities and should therefore be supported and encouraged. Secondly, that there are observable inequities in the extent to which the cultural participation of different people is supported and that the current policies to support greater equity in cultural participation are not delivering the results that they desire. There was also recognition that many of the policies, projects, and the approaches to their development and implementation that have failed to deliver the desired results continue to be repeated. For example, almost everyone we spoke to recognised that short-term funding and a project mentality was failing to deliver any sustainable long-term change, yet it remained the primary way such work was supported.

For all that our different research participants could point towards these sorts of recurring failures, the majority expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding the ability to make change happen. Participants often felt that they had no voice and that their opinions and stories were never properly heard. Practitioners saw themselves as beholden to funders and lacking in agency because of the precarious position in which they perceived themselves to be existing. Policymakers felt that significant change would be too difficult to achieve and that any marked change from the

status quo would face resistance from both politicians and the practitioners who would have the most to lose.

What was also common across all our data was a perceived lack of trust, respect, and openness between the different stakeholders involved in cultural participation projects and policies. For example, while our research participants were uncomfortable using the term failure if they were talking about something they had some measure of responsibility for developing or delivering, they were happy to use it to describe the work of others, especially in relation to the work of another "type" of stakeholder within the sector. Every policymaker, practitioner, or participant we spoke to was able to point to a failure they had experienced or observed and that they felt that could have been avoided if only some other stakeholder had acted in a different way.

There also appeared to be a culture of fear, felt most strongly by the practitioners in our sample, that being open and honest about your failures risked being blamed for them, which in turn put both your professional status and opportunities for future work in jeopardy. It was not failure *per se* that they feared, but rather others judging their work as a failure in absolute terms and as therefore being of little value and unworthy of future support. This was a fear strongly felt despite none of our research participants being able to provide an example of when this had happened either to them or anyone they knew, and even acknowledging the failure of repeating mistakes mentioned above. This fear was, in part, seen to stem from the audit culture of contemporary politics, which cultural professionals felt places an outsized importance on justifying expenditure and "proving" value for money rather than learning for development and enhancement.

This is indicative of the extent to which the publicly funded cultural sector has, for some time, existed in a crisis of legitimacy (Holden, 2006) and a culture of precarity (Brook et al., 2020b) in which many feel the need to constantly and defensively "make the case" for culture. As a result, the "cultural value debate" (AHRC, 2012) is primarily a politicised discussion about the value of state subsidies for certain types of cultural activities. In such a febrile atmosphere, any suggestion that a cultural project or policy may have failed in some way is often assumed to be a challenge about the value of the work and thus also a veiled attack on the use of public and/or charitable funds to deliver it. We argue that this defensive approach to discussing, evaluating, and researching cultural projects and policies places significant constraints on any effort to deliver progress

towards a more equitable cultural sector in the UK. As such, a more critical, reflective, and honest approach is needed, one in which failures are not only acknowledged but learnt from.

Critical Reflection, Evaluation, and Learning

As we discussed in Chap. 5, one of the perspectives regularly shared by the cultural practitioners who took part in our research was that art, and in particular participatory or community arts practice, cannot fail as it is a process and not an outcome. As such, they felt that failure was at best an unhelpful term and at worst irrelevant to this field of activity. Furthermore, as François Matarasso said in reflecting on our research (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021) in a blogpost:

> Whilst I applaud the intentions and values of this initiative, I have reservations about the language of failure itself. It seems to come from other cultures than community art—the mainstream art world that awards stars and prizes, and the public policy world that expects outcomes to be delivered and targets to be met. There are large parts of life where failure is neither a relevant nor a helpful concept. (2021)

We agree that it is important to note that talking about success and failure should not be the same as talking about winners and losers. To do so is to assume that those who have enjoyed successes should be rewarded, while those who have experienced failures should be punished or shunned on the basis that the project or policy in which they were involved was not valuable. The suggestion that we should therefore not talk about the failures in a process or any other part of the design and implementation of a project or policy, however, ignores the potential for learning that failures offer, and risks compounding one failure with another, especially given that, as one policymaker we spoke to suggested, failure is also "when individuals or organisations don't learn from anything that's gone before". You cannot learn from what has gone before by only looking at part of the picture and given that failure is as probable and commonplace a feature as success in participation projects and policies, it is worthy of just as much reflection and analysis. Likewise, you must be open to alternative narratives that challenge your own perceptions of success and failure and which consider the different priorities, perspectives, and experiences of each stakeholder, regardless of what community they come from. Policymakers, practitioners, and participants will all experience success and failure in

different ways, and ignoring the failures perceived by one group, or within each group, in favour of focusing on the successes perceived by another risks failing to holistically understand a project or policy or its place within the wider system of which it is part.

It also ignores the moral obligation to be honest about situations where policies and projects fail to deliver what they set out to achieve. Not every participation project will be successful in making long-term, meaningful change to complex social issues such as the demographic constitution of an organisation's audience, social integration within diverse communities, or the eradication of racist and homophobic bullying within a school. As we have already discussed, this does not mean that such projects were not valuable or that they were not successful in other ways. If the policy intention is that these projects will cumulatively address some of the complex and intractable problems faced by society, and there is evidence that they may be failing to do so, then those delivering and evaluating them must be honest about those failures and explore what is causing them so that both policymakers and practitioners can make changes accordingly. These failures can exist at any level, from localised failures to do with a lack of expertise, underbudgeting, or ignorance about a particular group or community, to more meso or macro failures such as the selection of the lead organisation, the lack of pre-existing local cultural infrastructure, or the prevalence of project-based, short-term funding that makes sustaining any positive impacts virtually impossible.

The purpose of honest critical reflection is not to blame anyone for why a given project or policy failed to deliver greater equity, but rather to ask whether there have been other failures in how the policy or project was designed and implemented that could be addressed in future iterations of such work, thereby increasing the probability of delivering greater cultural equity in the future. It is the same principle that is at the core of the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce's (RSA) "Living Change Approach" to social change (2021), which argues that anyone seeking to affect meaningful, societal change must think like a system but act like an entrepreneur (Conway et al., 2017). In practice, this means that rather than attempt to take on large-scale, social challenges in their entirety, the focus should be on identifying "nimble opportunities for change within the system, seeding innovations, testing prototypes and supporting efforts to grow and influence other parts of the system" (Conway, 2017). As is the case with the model of Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991) discussed in Chap. 3, the aim is to convert assumptions about how change can be delivered into knowledge by testing various approaches, codifying

what you learn, and sharing it with others. Failures are to be expected, but they should be identified quickly, shared with others within the system, and their impact minimised by making changes before the next iteration of the project or policy. To do so requires the ability to identify, categorise, and talk about failures in a manner that supports the ability to engender targeted change.

Complex Projects

At the time of writing this book, Creative Scotland has launched a new fund—the Culture Collective—initially supported by £6 million of Scottish Government emergency COVID-19 funds they said were intended to support "creative practitioners, organisations and communities to work together across Scotland to help shape the future of local cultural life" (Creative Scotland, 2021). This policy intervention resulted in grants of between £100,000 and £300,000 being distributed to several collectives across Scotland. In promoting their inclusion in the collective, these groups committed to a range of outcomes, many of them wide-ranging and oriented towards post-COVID recovery and societal "transformation". For example, one group suggested that their project would make "a long-lasting, positive impact towards a better future for their communities and for Scotland's wider cultural sector" (Creative Scotland, 2021), while another aimed to "inspire and unlock community potential, to create a sense of place, celebrate local identity and renew pride in the area whilst developing a creative vision" (Rig Arts, 2021). These are bold claims for projects with such relatively modest budgets and an initial duration of around twelve months. The sort of societal change they are seeking to achieve requires complex and challenging intersectional work that must engender structural as well as individual change. In such complex work, experiencing failure is inevitable (Omerod, 2005). If these projects fail to have the long-lasting impact for which they aimed, or if they fail to create a sense of place for anyone other than those taking part, or if they fail to celebrate the local identity in a way that does not exclude some, then this should be acknowledged and reflected upon. However, they should be able to conduct this analysis in such a manner as to allow successes in other areas to be recognised, for example, if the policy was successful in providing work for freelance artists whose income had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our research suggests that there exists a general lack of policy learning in the UK cultural sector, and that even where learning is claimed to have occurred, there are often few tangible actions and little evidence of sustained, systemic change. Although everyone we spoke to recognised that learning was important and that failures could provide the opportunity for valuable learning to take place, there was also a general sense that the learning was for someone else to do. Policymakers devolved responsibility to the artists and organisations they fund, requiring regular evaluations but failing to either methodically and consistently evaluate their own policies or share the learning from the evaluations that were returned to them. Likewise, practitioners pointed towards participants who failed to understand how to participate in the "right way" or the value of what they were participating in, placing the onus on them to learn and change their attitudes and perspectives in order that the work might be more "successful".

All too often, monitoring and evaluation were also understood as being synonymous. Evaluations were seen as part of the audit culture that required anyone receiving funding to account for how they spent it, rather than a process of effectively shared critical reflection which leads to insight, understanding, and change. Many organisations receiving funding felt it was acceptable to lie on their evaluations, and many policymakers had little faith in the accuracy of the evaluations they received. Indeed, some said that they lack the time or resources to read them in any depth, and all agreed that they fail to effectively communicate their learning, let alone any actions which may arise from it. No one was able to say whose responsibility it was to make sure that collective insights were effectively identified, shared, or acted upon. Despite this, evaluations were a ubiquitous element of project delivery, taking up significant time, resources, and, in some cases, causing anxiety and stress for those who felt pressured to "prove" the value and impact of their work. These perspectives are mirrored internationally by those who have claimed that "instead of sharing [they] compete with each other for funding and [their] reports, evaluations and hard-earned lessons are lost or end up in binders and basements" (About—Global Grand Central, 2017). It has further been recognised that:

> … it is tempting to only report positive results, claiming our work as an all-out success, with smooth and effective cooperation, that our target audiences were reached, and that the objectives of the [funder] were met. The short-term social consequences of disingenuously upping our impact would

likely be small. And if done properly (with just the right amount of "learning potentials" added into the narrative) we would probably increase our chances of securing new funding. The short-term risks associated with describing failures, however, are much greater—socially, and in terms of chances to attract new funding. However, the chances for learning across peers is significantly larger if we are honest. Focusing on the positive reduces potentials for learning and might have real implications on the lives of people we involve in our work. (Haraldsson et al., 2017, p. 14)

It was evident from our data that the inability to take ownership for failures has meant that the majority of learning taking place in cultural participation policies and projects is political learning (May, 1992) through which certain groups with shared interests (what have often been understood as advocacy coalitions [Matti & Sandström, 2013]) become more competent and increasingly sophisticated about how to advance their own arguments. In so doing, they protect their own position of relative advantage within the sphere of cultural policy. However, for learning to foster sustainable, positive impacts on the lives of those which cultural policy in the UK currently benefits the least, it must be reoriented towards social and instrumental learning (May, 1992).

Social learning is concerned with better understanding of how different and diverse interest groups experience and understand the cultural participation "problems" that cultural policies and projects are intended to address. It focuses on an appreciation of the complexity of such "problems" and the various factors that can shape their construction such as cultural norms, relations of power, and competing values. Instrumental learning is concerned with learning across and between different stakeholders about how policy interventions work and the ways in which they can be better designed to foster a more equitable cultural sector. To encourage this sort of social and instrumental learning to take place, we believe that a culture of tolerance for failure must be engendered in the cultural sector. It must be accepted that delivering meaningful and sustainable change in a complex system will involve both experimentation and risk, both of which come with a margin of error that makes experiencing failure inevitable. This requires change from everyone involved, from policymakers to practitioners, and from politicians to participants.

Our research process has demonstrated that talking openly about failures not only feels liberating and reduces the fear that one will be judged for failing when everyone else is succeeding, but also aids the ability to

reflect critically upon failure as part of a wider system. This is where the potential for collective action and change may lie. We therefore argue that seeking out and discussing narratives of failure should be as important as recording and celebrating narratives of success. However, we recognise that doing so is not easy, and does not come naturally to anyone, let alone those who feel that their ability to "be creative" relies on the distribution of resources tied to an abstract notion of success. Therefore, to support more open and honest conversations to take place, we have developed a framework for research and evaluation in which success and failure can co-exist, and which encourages more nuanced discussion about the degree to which each was present. The final sections of this chapter will present that framework and explain how it might be applied.

Our Framework

As we discussed in Chap. 3, attempts have been made by policy studies scholars to categorise the different types of failures that can be observed when analysing the implementation of a given policy. Our own research has been informed by these taxonomies and has tested their efficacy within the field of cultural policy to develop a bespoke framework that recognises the different logics, values, and meanings that underpin policymaking in the cultural sector. For example, in applying McConnell's (2011, 2015) categories to the data from our fieldwork, we found that there were some failures that did not easily fit within one of the three realms of failure that he uses (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2021). We found instead that many of our respondents felt the success or failure of the work as a piece of artistic practice tended to be overlooked when evaluating a project or policy because the objectives were often oriented towards some form of social or economic outcome. Likewise, we found that McConnell's political focus did not adequately capture the issues of professional profile and reputation that were clearly very important for the policymakers and practitioners to whom we spoke. Furthermore, we found that neither McConnell's realm of process nor Newman and Head's (2015) mode of distributional failure gave adequate recognition to the importance of the ability for all stakeholders to be able to participate throughout each stage of the policy or project, from conception to design through to delivery and evaluation. This was indicative of the extent to which these frameworks were focused on the actions of the professional, while tending to portray the intended beneficiaries as relatively passive, something we argue perpetuates the tendency to overlook certain failures and in so doing contributes towards sustaining existing inequities.

From analysing our data, we identified five different elements of cultural projects and policies that people would discuss when reflecting on their relative success or failure. We call these the Five Facets, all of which must be examined and evaluated separately if the type of critical reflection (Hanson, 2013) that is a prerequisite to meaningful social and instrumental policy learning (May, 1992) is to occur.

The Five Facets of Success/Failure in Cultural Projects and Policies

- **Purpose**—*the attainment of stated aims, objectives, and outcomes of the policy or project. It also relates to the delivery of intended benefits for target groups.*
- **Process**—*the design and implementation/delivery of the policy/ project. It encompasses all of the actions, activities, and stages of a policy/project from beginning to end.*
- **Participation**—*who participates in the policy/project and how, at every stage from design to delivery and evaluation. It also relates to the development of a sustainable coalition of stakeholders, with different interests but equal influence.*
- **Practice**—*the creative and cultural intentions/aspirations of the policy/project. It also relates to its critical reception as a piece of creative practice.*
- **Profile**—*the reputation and future prospects of the organisations and/or professionals involved. It also relates to control over the policy agenda and the ability to promote organisational or personal interests and values.*

Degrees of Failure and Success

The second key barrier we observed as preventing cultural professionals from talking openly about failures was that they tended to perceive success and failure as a binary opposition. As such, they were unwilling to label their work as a failure for they were fearful of the implications this may have for their professional practice, especially where they were reliant on public finance. However, as we have stressed throughout this book, it is more productive to locate success and failure at different points along a spectrum, because very few of these projects or policies could be legitimately called an outright success or failure.

As was the case when considering the different facets of a cultural project or policy, we found it useful to leverage McConnell's degrees of success (2010) and failure (2015) as a starting point, particularly in relation to the scale of opposition and support from different stakeholders. We support the view that the greatest learning comes from critical reflection that has been informed by a range of perspectives and recognises the legitimacy of divergent narratives offered by different stakeholders. In order to attain the necessary nuance required to account for all of the different degrees of success and failure we identified within our data, we created a more graduated scale that equally balanced both ends of the spectrum from outright success to outright failure.

The Six Degrees of Success/Failure in Cultural Projects and Policies (Substantially Adapted from McConnell, 2010, 2015)

- **Outright failure**—*Even if there have been elements of success, the goals/intentions have fundamentally not been achieved. Opposition and criticism are great and/or approval and support is virtually non-existent.*
- **Precarious failure**—*A number of the primary goals/intentions are only partially achieved. Opposition and criticism outweigh approval and support.*
- **Tolerable failure**—*A number of the primary goals/intentions are only partially achieved. Opposition is small and/or criticism is virtually non-existent, but any support/approval may be limited to specific groups of stakeholders.*
- **Conflicted success**—*The achievement of goals/intentions is varied. Criticism and approval exists in relatively equal measure but varies between different groups of stakeholders. It proves difficult to avoid repeated controversy and debate.*
- **Resilient success**—*A number of the secondary goals/intentions are not achieved. However, none of the failures significantly impede the fulfilment of the primary goals/intentions. Opposition is small and/or criticism is virtually non-existent, but any support/approval may be limited to specific groups of stakeholders.*
- **Outright success**—*Even if there have been some elements of failure, the prevalence of successes resulted in all of the goals/intentions being fully achieved. Criticism and opposition are virtually non-existent and approval and support is almost universal and from a diverse group of stakeholders.*

Wheel of Failure (and Success)

Combined, these five facets and six degrees offer a framework within which we believe nuanced discussion about failure can occur, discussion that recognises and focuses on the different elements of cultural projects and policies and provides the scope for success and failure to occur to differing extents in each of these elements. We have presented this as a "Wheel of Failure" (Fig. 7.1) because we believe it is important that the word failure is normalised in the discourse of cultural professionals, as it is among participants. The Wheel therefore encourages reflection on both successes and failures simultaneously.

The purpose of the Wheel is to encourage a multidimensional analysis of a project or policy's successes and failures which acknowledges that within any given policy or project, one might find it to be, for example:
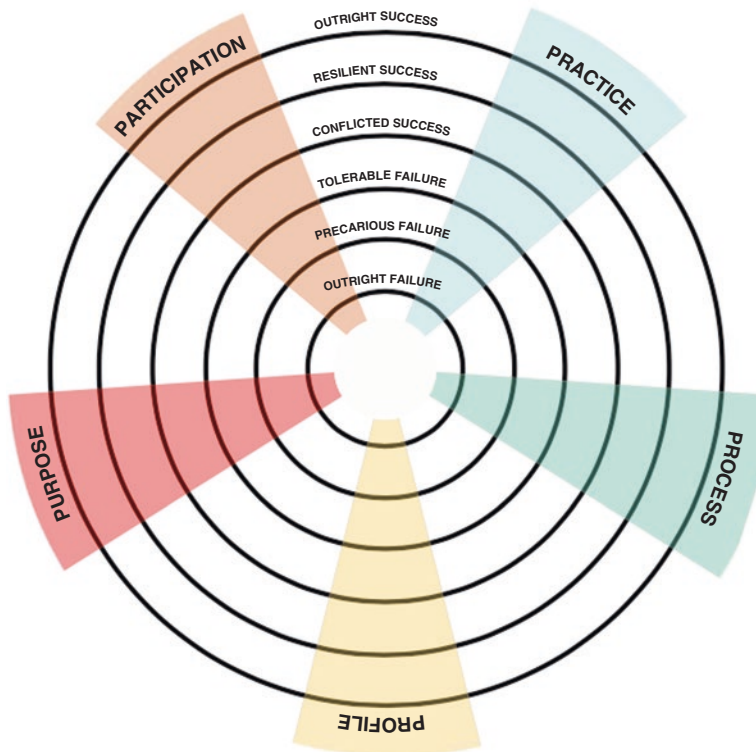
Fig. 7.1   The wheel of failure

- A tolerable failure in regard to purpose
- A resilient success in regard to process
- A precarious failure in regard to participation
- A resilient success in regard to practice
- An outright success in regard to profile

Take a hypothetical policy intended to support young adults living in areas of multiple deprivation to take part in meaningful cultural experiences as an example. The policy received a significant amount of positive media attention and was celebrated by politicians as an example of the transformative power of culture. As such, those involved may categorise it as an outright success in terms of profile. However, the numbers who took part in this initiative were far lower than had been hoped for, and the intended collaborations between national and local cultural organisations were fraught with difficulties. It was therefore felt to be a tolerable failure in terms of its purpose and a precarious failure in terms of process. Despite the difficulties, the creative outputs produced were generally accepted to be both of a high quality and highly representative of the locales in which the work took place. As such, the policy was categorised as a resilient success in terms of both participation and practice.

One of the core principles of Intelligent Fast Failure (Matson, 1991) is to agree what success and failure will look like at the outset of any initiative (McGrath, 2011). Currently, while cultural participation projects or policies might begin with a clear statement of what success would look like from the perspective of the policymaker to which other stakeholders are then expected to align their interests and objectives, less consideration is given to what successes other stakeholders would like to see the project or policy achieve beyond or in addition to that which the policymakers have set out. Furthermore, almost no consideration is given to what any of the stakeholders would perceive as a failure, making it far easier to ignore them if and when they do occur. As such, our framework does not require a consensus between stakeholders about what success and failure will look like for any given project or policy. Instead, it encourages an awareness and understanding at the outset of how different stakeholders perceive success and failure regarding each of the five facets and to use this insight as the project or policy develops to critically reflect on for whom the project or policy is succeeding or failing, in what ways, and to what degree.

Table 7.1 provides an illustrative example of how funders might define the different degrees of success and failure across each of the five facets at

Table 7.1 Illustrative example of how funders might define the different degrees of success and failure across each of the five facets at the outset of a participatory project such as Creative People and Places (CPP)

	Outright failure	Precarious failure	Tolerable failure	Conflicted success	Resilient success	Outright success
Profile	The programme generates primarily negative coverage at a local and/or regional and/or national level	There is little to no awareness of the programme at local and/or regional and/or national level	The programme generates positive coverage at a local level but does not result in a national discussion about the importance of this type of work	The programme generates positive coverage for the funder but does not raise the profile of the organisations or artists	The programme generates positive coverage at all levels, raises the profile of all the organisations and artists involved and leads to new opportunities for them	Increased awareness and profile lead to a national commitment to mainstream the funding to support this type of work
Purpose	Opportunities for people to participate locally did not increase and few of the participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased but few of the participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally did not increase but most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year, but there was little local interest in sustaining the programme in long term	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year, and there was strong local interest in sustaining the programme in long term	Opportunities for people to participate locally increased, most participants had not taken part in cultural activities locally in the past year and were also now participating with other local activities/organisations

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

	Outright failure	Precarious failure	Tolerable failure	Conflicted success	Resilient success	Outright success
Process	Local organisations, artists, and audiences are only collaborating in ways they have done before	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, but with limited effect	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating effectively in new ways but only for work related to this programme	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, but some involved have found it hard to adapt and won't adopt these approaches in future	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways and have committed to adopt these approaches to work together in future	Local organisations, artists and audiences are collaborating in new ways, have committed to adopt these approaches to work together in future and are supporting others to do the same
Practice	Those involved in the programme do not feel that the art created was of quality	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was of mixed quality	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was of quality but did not involve new or innovative practice	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative and of quality, but a significant number of their peers disagree	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative, of quality and most of their peers agree	Those involved in the programme feel that the art created was innovative, of quality and their peers are building upon the work in new ways
Participation	Those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund were not consulted about the design of their local programme	Those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund were consulted but their opinions didn't influence the design of their local programme	Those who are currently least likely to take part in the cultural activities we fund were invited to help design their local programme, but the majority opted not to	The opinions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund informed the design of their local programme, but they weren't involved in decision making	The opinions and decisions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund significantly shaped the design of their local programme	The opinions and decisions of those who are currently least likely to take part in cultural activities we fund significantly shaped the design of the programme both locally and nationally

the outset of a participatory project similar in scope and intention to Creative People and Places (CPP) that we used as a case study in Chap. 4. It demonstrates how the framework can facilitate a more nuanced reflection about what success and failure would look like. It encourages those involved to move beyond setting simple targets to express more fully what they believe to be the aims of the project or policy and in doing so clearly outlining what outcomes would be seen as more of a failure than a success. Other stakeholders in this project may perceive success and failure in some or all the facets differently from the funders, and as such their table may look very different, but by using our framework as the basis for discussion and dialogue at the outset these differences can be foregrounded and understood. The result should be a multidimensional and multi-perspectival framework that can be used to guide the implementation and inform the evaluation of the project in a way that allows for failures and successes to be acknowledged, and learnt from, equally.

Using the Framework at the Outset of a New Project or Policy

The first stage in using the framework is to explore each of the facets in detail, considering how they relate to the project or policy you are working on. At the outset of a new project or policy, you could do this by using the Wheel to facilitate a discussion with everyone involved about what success and failure would look like in each facet. You could have separate discussions with each of your stakeholder groups or one discussion with everyone involved; what is important is that you hear a range of perspectives and treat each equally. You can approach the discussion in different ways, such as by adopting an open space technology (Shaw, 2020) or world café method (Carson, 2011). Whatever approach you take, be sure to keep these points in mind:

- Does every facet matter for this project/policy? Does every facet matter for every stakeholder? Some groups of stakeholders may only be interested in a selection of the facets.
- It is important to discuss what each of the degrees of success/failure would look like for this project/policy in each of the facets that stakeholders feel are relevant. While our definitions of the degrees are there to guide you, do not feel constrained by them.

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The focus here is on creating a more nuanced framework to assess the outputs and outcomes of the project/policy you are working on, and as such your finished framework should represent what you and your stakeholders have agreed that different degrees of success and failure would look like for your project/policy.

- Do not feel constrained by numbers and metrics. While these may feature in your framework, try to think about what each of the different degrees might look or feel like for those involved. For example, might an indicator that a project/policy has been a conflicted success regarding its process be that the artist was not paid for their time when developing the project? This suggests that the project could have been budgeted better. Likewise, an indicator of resilient or even outright success in participation could be that the output of the project/policy changed from what was originally proposed in response to the input of participants. This suggests that the voices of participants were heard and acted upon throughout delivery.
- Are there other facets to this project/policy that any group of stakeholders would add into the wheel? What would the differing degrees of success/failure look like for that facet?

As acknowledged above, success and failure may exist in different ways at different stages, so it follows that the learning from failures and the change this facilitates should also happen at different stages of a project or policy. We therefore argue that critical reflection must be employed at each point in the life of a project or policy, from planning and design to delivery and evaluation, in order to encourage critical reflection on what changes can or should be made in real time, as well as providing learning about what might change over the long term in order to avoid similar failures in the future.

For example, at the mid-point in a project, there might be a large amount of social media engagement that leads organisers to feel that the project will be a resilient success in terms of organisational profile.

Likewise, the commissioned artist may be pleased with the opportunities that the project affords their practice and feel confident that the creative work will be something they have never done previously, which for them would be an outright success. At the same time, however, the level of engagement by participants in the decision-making processes that shape the creative output may be lower than the organisers or the participants had originally planned. This might lead some to feel that the project is a tolerable failure in this regard. At this point, the project team may wish to discuss whether there is a way the artist could adapt their approach to engage the participants more fully as co-creators. However, while this may move the participation in the project into the realms of conflicted or even resilient success, it may equally result in the artist feeling that the creative output will be compromised in some way, garner less interest and publicity, and that both the practice and profile elements of the project would end up as being less successful as a result. In this instance, the project team may also recognise a process failure, in that the way in which they approached commissioning an artist for this project had failed to deliver someone whose creative practice and/or previous experience was sufficiently aligned with the co-creative principles of this work. As such, they may decide to change the way they commission artists in the future, inviting participants into this decision-making process as well.

This example is indicative of the extent to which the framework also invites those using it to consider their priorities when it comes to the different facets of their policy or project. Rather than trying to deliver outright success in every area, trade-offs may often be needed, meaning that some degree of failure in one facet can be tolerated to maximise success in another. Likewise, having an outright success in one facet but precarious failures in all the rest may indicate a need to rebalance what is being prioritised in order to achieve more sustainable outcomes. All too often, there is an implicit prioritisation that places the delivery of success in certain facets above others. For example, in our research we found that maximising the positive profile of work was often seen as a priority and used as one of the main proxies for the overall success of a project or policy. However, as we identified in Chap. 6, many participants felt a focus on profile inherently reduced the quality of the participation they experienced. As such, we also argue that cultural professionals, both policymakers and practitioners, must accept that what might be the best choice to maximise success in terms of participation and increasing equity in the cultural sector may not always necessarily be as successful in terms of the artists' creative

practice or the profile of the project or policy. Therefore, they must consider the balance of their work overall to ensure that there are enough policies and projects in which participation is prioritised, even if it means the outcomes in other facets may be less successful as a result.

Using the Framework for Critical Reflection
As the project/policy is being delivered, return to your definitions of the degrees of success and failure and reflect on where you think your work currently sits. Are you on course? Should you adjust? What have you learnt so far?

At the end of the project/policy, return to the definitions again, ideally with the same stakeholders who helped you to create them, and discuss how they feel the project/policy has gone. Take each facet in turn, look back at what each group of stakeholders said at the start of the project/policy regarding what each degree of success/failure would look like and agree which of those degrees the project/policy ended up most closely resembling. You may want to graphically represent the outcome on a completed Wheel or create separate Wheels for each stakeholder group to allow easy visual comparison between how different stakeholders have perceived the relative successes and failures of the project.

Once you have completed your Wheel(s), talk about those areas where the project/policy failed to some degree and discuss these questions as a group:

- Were these failures inevitable?
- Were expectations too high to begin with?
- Could these failures have been avoided? If so, how?
- What could you have done differently?
- What could others have done differently?
- Are the failures balanced out by successes in other facets of the project/policy?
- What have you learnt from the failures in the project/policy?
- How can you recognise these failures alongside your successes in any evaluation of your project/policy?
- How can you share your learning openly with others to facilitate social and instrumental learning within the cultural sector?

Conclusion

UK cultural policy has tried to address inequalities and inequities in cultural participation for decades. Despite this, evidence suggests that success remains elusive and that the sector remains persistently inequitable. The research that has informed this book set out not only to try and understand why this might be the case, but also why there is so little public acknowledgement of this fact. What we found was a sector that has a problem with failure: a problem in the sense that all those who have a responsibility for the design and delivery of cultural participation projects and policies, whether they are policymakers, practitioners, or participants, find it difficult to talk openly and honestly about any failures that occur. This is in part because of a culture of fear and blame avoidance. In turn, this leads to a lack of critical reflection and shared learning, the absence of which prevents any meaningful, systemic changes from being enacted. As such, projects, policies, and ways of working that have failed to make the cultural sector more equitable in the past fifty years continue to be replicated and repeated, while at the same time, the cultural lives of the most affluent and educated individuals benefit the most from state support. These are the groups who have the most access to cultural resources, who occupy the most positions in the cultural sector, and whose cultural values are granted the greatest status and respect.

We believe that there is a moral obligation to openly acknowledge, discuss, and learn from the failures that have and continue to limit progress towards greater cultural equity. This is not about apportioning blame or questioning the value of state-supported activities. Rather, it is about recognising that if there is a genuine desire to change existing patterns of cultural participation, to diversify the voices of those involved in decision making, and to expand the breadth of activities and organisations that are recognised as culturally valuable and accordingly supported, these goals will not be achieved by ignoring failures and avoiding difficult decisions in favour of sharing feel-good narratives and defending the status quo.

We have argued that the first step is for everyone involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of cultural participation policies and projects to acknowledge that failures will happen, and to normalise talking openly and honestly about them when they do. This cannot be achieved by a single group of stakeholders in isolation. As we have discussed, policy change requires social and instrumental learning to take place between all the agents involved in a complex system, be they policymakers,

practitioners, or participants. This sort of learning does not come about by delegating the responsibility for learning to a single stakeholder group. Focusing on making changes at one point in the system may deliver limited results, but the overall impact will be diminished if those who can exert most power in the system are willing to let significant failures go unaddressed elsewhere. Likewise, celebrating numerous, small-scale successes may have a positive effect in the short term, but if unacknowledged failures hinder those successes from generating greater, cumulative impact, then their potential will not be fully realised. The process also requires each stakeholder to recognise that there will be failures for which they have some responsibility, but which they are currently choosing to ignore because the solution is unknown, unpalatable, or too difficult to implement. Although some failures will indeed be difficult to fix, this does not mean that they should go unacknowledged. Likewise, there will be structural failures that no single stakeholder can solve alone and which will require collective problem solving and shared responsibility for making and implementing difficult decisions where necessary.

This is not a call for greater accountability and more evaluation, especially where they are not used to generate collective insights and are nothing more than monitoring by another name. Instead, we propose that there is a clear need for greater and more honest dialogue between policymakers, practitioners, and participants. Such dialogue can take many forms, and we believe it would be best served by less, but more nuanced, evaluation, evaluation not only of individual projects, but also of the overarching policies to which they relate. In other words, evaluation designed for learning, informed by critical reflection, collectively analysed, and effectively shared. Such evaluations would not only contain narratives of success, but they would also include narratives of failure. They would recognise that success and failure are not mutually exclusive and that both can exist simultaneously across the different facets of any project or policy, for different people, to different degrees, and at different times. These narratives should also be analysed to identify patterns or themes that can highlight where, for example, similar failures at the point of delivery may be the result of systemic failures built into a given policy or project from the outset.

These narratives of failure, however, should not solely be confined to the pages of evaluations. We argue instead that conversations about failures should also become a normal part of ongoing dialogue between policymakers, practitioners, and participants, with each party encouraging the

others to acknowledge when failures do occur, to avoid apportioning blame, and to talk openly about what might be done to limit or even avoid the chances of repeating similar failures in the future. We recognise that talking about failures is difficult, especially where there is a pre-existing lack of trust between those taking part in such conversations. Failure is a complex and emotive term, and it is far more comfortable to talk about success. As such, discussions about failure can easily feel like judgements, or even a personal attack, and the defensiveness this engenders is not conducive to open and honest dialogue.

It is for this reason that we developed our framework, presented above, for talking about failure. We offer it as a method of having difficult conversations in a structured way and employing language that allows for a more nuanced and critically reflective account of where failures may have occurred, for whom, and to what degree. While we have made some suggestions about how our framework might be employed, our intention is not to be prescriptive about its use. Rather, our aim is to embed the principle that conversations about failures are necessary, not only in safe spaces among peers, but also with all stakeholders who have an interest and responsibility for making the cultural sector more equitable. We want to ensure that, going forward, narratives of failure are not overlooked, discounted, or suppressed but are instead foregrounded alongside narratives of success as a vital component in learning how participation policies and projects can result in more meaningful, long-term, sustainable change towards a more equitable cultural sector. If we discuss these failures now, perhaps we will not still be talking about the same problems in fifty years.

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