Citation:
Jancovich, L (2015) The participation myth. International Journal of Cultural Policy. ISSN 1028-6632
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1027698

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:
https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/1271/

Document Version:
Article (Updated Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please contact us and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

The Participation Myth

Leila Jancovich
Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK
Cavendish 211A, Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QS, UK
+44 113 812 3480
L.jancovich@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

The Participation Myth

Abstract

Policy rhetoric around strategies to and the value of increasing participation in the arts has been well documented internationally over more than a decade. But in the UK, which is the focus for this article, targets to increase participation have been consistently missed and there remains a direct correlation between those taking part in cultural activity and their socio-economic status.

The starting point for this article is to examine the barriers to increasing participation in the arts and question the way that such policy has been implemented within the English context, which may have relevance for policy making in other countries. What is demonstrated is that policy implementation is influenced by vested interest of those in receipt of funding and that a narrow range of voices, from a powerful cultural elite, are involved in the decision making in the arts. The article makes a case for widening the range of voices heard in decision making in order to support both artistic practice and public engagement.

Keywords: Cultural policy, cultural politics, public participation, participatory decision making

The participation myth

Introduction

Arts policy in England has long been characterised as focussing on the supply end (the artist) at the expense of the demand side (the audience) but it is claimed that from 1990s this shifted, with new priorities around increasing participation levels from a wider cross section of society (Bunting, 2006). Cultural policy and investment was also increasingly developed not only through the traditional arts agencies, such as Arts Council England, but through local authorities, and policy attachment to broader public policy agendas such as health and well-being, social inclusion and economic development (Gray, 2008). Not only the arts practices currently funded, but the decision making structures that supported these were thereby brought into question, which under the New Labour government which came to power in 1997 led to calls for a wider range of voices to be involved in decision making (Smith, 1998).

But the arm's length principle that operates between the British government and its delivery agents, such as Arts Council England, means that while the government might suggest the need for a wider range of voices to be involved in decision making in the arts, civil servants are limited in their capacity to determine in what way this should be implemented. Instead this is left to agencies such as Arts Council England themselves to determine. It is suggested that by its nature this may reinforce the dominance of self-interest in informing policy formation, rather than opening up decision making as proposed (Garnham, 2005).

This is demonstrated in the way that the new participation policy was lambasted by some establishment figures within the arts sector, for the failure to guarantee the preservation of the established arts canon and widening the range of voices involved in the arts was said to risk damaging quality (Tusa, 2000, McMaster, 2008). Rather than challenge these views, critics from the arts establishment were invited to advice on the way arts policy was implemented in practice. This supports the claims that a cultural elite, of well-funded institutions, wield power and influence in arts policy making (Griffiths et al., 2008).

It is acknowledged that the influence of cultural elites is not unique to countries operating under the arm's length principle (Anberrée, 2012) indeed it has been argued that the problem may be reinforced through a centralised Ministry model, and that greater localism is needed to reduce such power. This article therefore examines two contradictory theories on power. On the one hand Steven Lukes (2005) argues that elites will always dominate policy decisions and override weaker voices, due to the uneven distribution of power in decision making groups. This is challenged by theorists who argue that widening the range of voices involved in decision making can bring about change in policy and practice (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010).

Focusing on empirical data collected in an English context, this article therefore aims to have a wider international relevance, by analysing cultural policy decision making in relation to such theories about the exercise of power. This article explores the gap between the claims that there was a shift of priorities, with an increased focus on participation and the concerns that nothing much changed in practice, by examining the way the participation agenda was interpreted and implemented in England from 1997-2013.

The participation agenda

Despite the rights granted in Article 27 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights that "everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts" (quoted in Bollo et al., 2012 pg 7) there have been growing concerns internationally that participation in the arts is by no means universal. Participation rates are consistenlty shown to be

correlated with socio-economic position (the middle classes and more affluent being much more likely to participate). Governments have responded by introducing strategies and measurements to assess who is taking part, In England, in 2006 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) started an annual survey on who participates in cultural activity, in order to measure the success of their arm's length agencies in achieving increased engagement from different socio-economic and cultural groups (DCMS, 2006). However, between 2006-2011, despite increased investment in the arts during this period, this showed that the hoped for engagement of a broad social constituency was not being realised in the subsidised arts (DCMS, 2011). Significantly the main barriers to engagement were also identified as being a psychological feeling of exclusion or lack of interest in the arts on offer, rather than the practical limitations of wanting to, but being unable to participate (Bunting et al., 2008).

Conversely participation in amateur and community arts was said to still be vibrant in the UK during this time, but woefully under resourced (Dodd et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that such activities are more successful at achieving the social impacts that the New Labour government aimed to achieve through increased cultural investment, rather than attendance as a spectator (Edgar, 2012, DCMS, 2006, Matarasso, 1997), but despite this the evidence was not used to redistribute funding from one area of the arts to another. In reality the arts organisations in receipt of funds broadly remained the same. In 2004 eighty-five per cent of Arts Council England funding was going to the same organisations as it had the decade before (Frayling, 2005) and in 2008, despite Arts Council England promising a departure from the historic funding patterns of the past, in reality seventy six per cent of those previously in receipt of funding gained an increase in the level of funding they received (Arts Council England, 2009).

This may suggest a tendency in policy making to follow a path dependence (Liebowitz and Margolis, 2000) where it is deemed easier to implement new strategies, such as the one to increase participation, through partnership with the existing funded arts institutions. But this article argues that it is also the influence of powerful voices from a cultural elite, who as Lukes (2005) suggests are able to dominate over newer voices, that contributes to maintain the status quo and reduce the potential of new policy initiatives.

Evidence suggests that the existing funded arts organisations tended to define the participation problem as a deficit on the part of the public (Miles, 2013) who needed to be coaxed into engagement through education programmes or concessionary prices, rather than a deficit on the part of the cultural offer they provided. The reliance on the very institutions towards which the data suggested there were psychological barriers, may therefore have reinforced disengagement and contributed to a "crisis of legitimacy" of the subsidised arts sector (Holden, 2006).

A crisis of legitimacy was not just seen in relation to cultural policy during this period, but to the more general perception of an increased democratic deficit, both within the UK and abroad (Keaney, 2006). For many theorists this is seen as part of an international trend towards what is described as a shift from government to governance (Goss, 2001), where the state has less direct control over decisions, working instead in partnership with delivery agents. In the arts sector, in many senses the arm's length principle has meant that the arts have always been delivered through an agency approach but the shift from a narrow range of voices from the professional arts, with a self-interest in retaining the status quo, was very different to the participatory decision making, that includes not only professionals but users, that became discourse elsewhere in public policy (Brodie et al., 2009). Such changes in the decision making unit have been argued can bring about change in policy and practice, and militate against the power of a cultural elite (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010).

The principles of participatory decision making have their roots in the work on deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1994) which argues that decisions should be made through discussions between all interested parties, including the public. But such theory has been accused on ignoring the

power relationships within decision making unit, which may, as Luke's argues, always advantage the expert (Lukes, 2005). Co-production instead is based on the principles that both professionals and users must contribute equally to a planning process and for there to be a real opportunity for change, rather than pre-set agendas (Ostrom, 1996). However the concept of co-production and co-creation, within the arts, more commonly involves the public in the creative process only once the funding has been distributed and the planning stages have been completed (Walmsley, 2013).

In Brazil in contrast the model of participatory budgeting, has seen large scale redistribution of funding through community activism at all stages of decision making (Community Pride Initiative, 2003). This principle has been adopted and adapted internationally by everyone from the World Bank, (Herz and Ebrahim, 2005), OECD (Caddy et al., 2007) and the British government (DCLG, 2008). But despite being adopted by a number of local authorities in UK, and evidence suggesting that such practices did increase levels of engagement from a broad cross section of participants from different backgrounds (SQW Consulting, 2010) there is limited evidence of it being trialled with specific arts budgets either within the local authorities or at Arts Council England.

Instead what the BBC and Arts Council England adopted was a public value approach, which used deliberative consultation techniques to "bring public opinion closer to the centre of … strategic decision making process" (Lee et al., 2011 pg 295), but retained decision making where it had always been. This may be argued to provide an appearance of greater engagement while retaining existing power structures (Lukes, 2005).

What the public value surveys demonstrate is that the public consulted were largely supportive of the principles of arts funding, but policy making was seen as too insular and self-referential, with decisions on what is funded being made by a limited number of people working professionally in the arts (Opinion Leader, 2007). There is evidence of support for the concept of wider public involvement in decision making, specifically for the distribution of funds. Arts Council England did consider strategies to address this including recommendations for a gold, silver and bronze standard for engagement, which by definition suggests a hierarchy to the choices (Hatzihrysidis and Bunting, 2009). Only the gold standard involves the public in funding decisions, but significantly, despite the evidence from the public value survey, it was not adopted. Instead the silver standard, engaging with those that Arts Council England already funds, through peer review, was adopted.

This directly reflected the recommendations made by Baroness Genista McIntosh, in her review of Arts Council England's 2008 funding decisions (McIntosh, 2008). As McIntosh's professional experiences has been within the major national organisations this may suggest a clear example of the cultural elite's ability to prevent a challenge to their power and influence. However the resistance to involving the public, amongst arts professionals, which is also identified in other research (Fennell et al., 2009) may equally suggest the potential of including a wider range of voices. The remainder of this article therefore examines some of this resistance and the potential for change through changing the decision making unit, through analysis of the findings from empirical research undertaken in the arts sector in England.

Methodology

The central question this research explores is whether participatory decision making can challenge the status quo within the arts, and what the implications of this are for the public, artists, arts organisations and policy makers.

Some theorists identify the power of institutional frameworks in setting agendas for decision making and the structural defects within arts policy which may limit change (Gray, 2000), while others argue that individuals make structures as well as structures influencing people (Giddens, 2000). This

research therefore analyses individuals as objects of study, identified by the sampling methods outlined below, and the institutional context within which they operate in order to examine the extent that the individual influences the organisation or vice versa.

Participatory decision making has already been shown to take as its starting point the belief that changing the people involved in decisions would change outcomes (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, Lowndes, 1995). This assumes that people's voices are not just heard, but that they are able to assert their interests over those of others, which is at odds with the notion of the overarching power of elites (Lukes, 2005). This research therefore examines the extent to which the views of different units of study had equal status in the decision making process and whether alternative viewpoints can change the discourse and practice or whether they merely become subsumed into existing attitudes and actions. Consideration is also given to the extent to which actors believed they had changed their views, through the process of involvement in policy making, and whether as has been suggested there is less resistance to such processes once people have engaged (Fennell et al., 2009).

The use of these theoretical frameworks supports an interpretative approach which allows this article to move beyond a review of how written policy is or isn't implemented. Instead it aims to develop an understanding of how the agendas for decisions are set and what areas participatory decision making is deemed appropriate for and which areas it is not. This allows for analysis of the potential and limitations of participatory power.

In order to undertake this research multiple methods were used. Pre-existing quantitative datasets, from the Taking Part survey (DCMS, 2011) are analysed to examine the evidence for levels of participation and engagement. Quantitative data on funding levels, from annual reports of Arts Council England and from the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers, were also examined. The aim of this is specifically to compare the policy discourse with the actual levels of funding provision.

In addition I was also granted access to a number of internally produced reports, including the unpublished Arts Council England report on participatory decision making mentioned above (Hatzihrysidis and Bunting, 2009) and a sample of applications from arts organisations who applied for Arts Council England's new national portfolio funding in 2010. These were subject to content analysis of how the concept of "participation" was articulated and the different interpretations given to it by both the applicant and Arts Council England officers reviewing the applications.

A survey questionnaire was sent to a selection of twenty local authority arts officers who had identified themselves as having an interest in participation by adopting a voluntary national cultural indicator (DCMS, 2008). The survey asked respondents to describe their approach to meeting the targets set by the national indicator and to reflect personally on the value and impact of national participation policy. The data provided a comparison between thinking or action in a local authority context compared with the views of national policy makers. These were captured through nine semi structured interviews with Arts Council England staff, four from central government and six policy advisers. The interviewees were identified through purposive sampling (Silverman, 2006), to ensure that they included staff at different levels in the arts policy hierarchy from advisers to senior management to officer level.

Arts practitioners from a range of organisations and individual artists, who both had and had not experience of participatory work,were also interviewed, along with community participants involved in projects that involve participatory decision making. The projects were selected from those whom policy makers commonly cited in the interviews and local authority surveys to test the theory that those who have actively engaged in participatory decision making are less resistant to the concept that those who have not (Lowndes, 1995, Fennell et al., 2009).

Pertti Alasuutari (1995) says that a sample of similar people is useful for comparing differences of opinion but a sample of many different types of people is more useful in finding similarities. In an attempt to identify similarities and differences, while covering a range of different types of people, more than one person was selected in each category to ensure that conclusions are not drawn on the basis of what might be particular to an individual. As a result a total of over sixty interviews were conducted.

All interviewees were asked questions about their first arts experiences, their current level of engagement, and the role they see art playing both in their own lives and the lives of others. The function of this is to test the core values of the interviewee in relation to the arts and the importance they place on the participation and engagement agenda. This is then analysed and compared across respondents to assess whether there are correlations between the personal background and their values, which might help determine whether they can be classified as part of a pre-existing cultural elite (Griffiths et al., 2008).

They were all asked to define what they understand by key terminology, such as "art" and "participation". This allows the responses to be compared and contrasted in order to analyse whether there are shared understandings of concepts. As with the local authority surveys interviewees were then asked to reflect on the effectiveness of participation policy and whether they agree with current priorities on participation and engagement. Finally, people were asked to talk about their personal experiences of participatory decision making, as well as identify the pros and cons of such a process for the arts.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to avoid "specific listening" on my part (Hill, 2006) and ensure that the analysis is based on definitions provided by respondents and not by my own assumptions or recollections. The mixed methods approach to data collection, combining published text, unpublished applications, survey data and interviews also aims to increase the reliability of the data, by allowing the triangulation of findings from different sources at the analysis stage.

To this end the survey data collected from local authorities and the applications from the arts organisations were used as the first stage in creating themes to be used as codes to interrogate the data more closely and cross reference findings in a number of ways (Robson, 1993). Some of these themes are: the use of language and how much defintions were shared; the personal background of the person interviewed; the extent to which they felt able to influence policy; attitudes to the decision making process; the perceived opportunities and threats of widening the range of voices invovled; the relationship between processes and outcomes in participatory process. In addition speculative analysis continued throughout the data collection phase, by way of taking notes on other emerging themes and relationships and building on the codes throughout.

Once all the data was collected respondents were grouped according to their category (e.g. Arts Council England staff, local authority officer, artist, arts organisation, and participant) and according to their background (level of arts participation from childhood, any arts training, and level of arts engagement currently) to allow more rich comparisons between theoretical positions and practical experience. The following section identifies the findings from this research.

Analysis of findings

It is clear from the review of the personal background of all interviewees that most of those who worked professionally in the arts felt that their personal background provided them with the connections to get "a foot in the door" to working in the arts (Audience Development manager). All had been introduced to the arts when young and described practices such as going to theatre or galleries, more commonly than participatory practices or popular culture. This was seen as a

prerequisite to being accepted as a professional in the arts. The public participants interviewed in contrast were more likely to cite everyday culture such as drawing and playing music at home, as evidence of a cultured childhood. While some professionals defined their backgrounds as providing invaluable arts expertise, many of the public participants questioned the knowledge of the professionals, referring to them as self-appointed experts. This was supported by the fact that many of the "experts" interviewed, acknowledged that they knew little about arts practice outside their specialism. This lack of diversity of perspectives within arts policy, one person argued "tend to produce organisations that have certain sorts of people in certain sorts of roles, which can be …stultifying" (Arts Council England staff member). This supports the case for involving a wider range of voices in policy making (Hatzihrysidis and Bunting, 2009).

However more significant to the values of those interviewed, than their background, was their current employment. There was a clear difference when comparing those working within local and central government and those working for, or advising, Arts Council England. All the local authority surveys described the arts as a tool for "working towards wider outcomes" (local authority survey) and one said they were "not interested in artists [but only] in the role that artists play" (local authority survey). This clearly relates to the demand approach to arts policy mentioned above and was supported by the public participants surveyed. Those working at and advising Arts Council England in contrast "tended to focus on the production of new work by a selected array of artists and arts organisations" (Arts Council England staff), or the supply side. Many felt that it was appropriate for their focus to be different to that of local authorities, as the only organisation that puts the interests of the artists first. One policy commentator expressed "a sort of missionary zeal" (Audience Development manager) for the arts over other cultural activities, which they said contributed to the dynamism of the sector. But others were concerned that this led those in the arts sector to always operate in the role of self-advocates rather than self-critics, creating what has been defined as an "interminable circuit of inter-legitimation (Bourdieu, 1984 pg 53) and reducing the arts ability to look outside its existing structures. Some also questioned the conflation of artists and arts organisations in policy rhetoric, and suggested that organisations had always been "more interested in celebrating the dead, than discovering the living" and so failed to support creativity of either professional artits or the public (local artist).

This difference in focus may be to do with the fact that local and central government are accountable to an electorate, and therefore more public facing by nature. In contrast, by virtue of the arm's length principle, Arts Council England has not historically been required to consider the audience so directly. But the majority of Arts Council England officers did believe that the policy focus on increasing participation in the arts was a good thing and acknowledged that public money required a more public facing attitude than there had been hitherto. Many also pointed to participation as a key stated goal in their ten year strategy (Arts Council England, 2010). However, although most people stated that they personally saw participation as a priority, when asked how much people felt that their views were shared across their organisation, there were differences of opinion.

The view that the "pendulum was swinging too far" in favour of participation, (government policy adviser) was in the minority among this sample, but where it was expressed it was done so by those with influence. It was described as a political shift between secretaries of state for culture. While Chris Smith [Secretary of State for Culture 1997-2001] was said to have ensured that DCMS were putting "efforts into driving up rates of participation…a shift more towards excellence…was going to be [the next minister's] thing" (government policy adviser). One person described this refocus as "an attempt to reassure certain sectors of the cultural world" that they retained their influence in policy making (arts policy adviser). This is demonstrated by the fact that many claimed that reports by Baroness Genista McIntosh and Sir Brian McMaster, (McIntosh, 2008, McIntosh, 2011, McMaster, 2008), held more sway in the reaffirmation of the excellence agenda than either government policy on participation, or the individual perspectives of those working at Arts Council England. One person

even suggested that what they say becomes "policy edict" (Audience Development Manager). This provides evidence that certain voices do indeed wield greater power than others in decision making (Lukes, 2005). In this case those from the funded organisations having greater influence than those working in the organisations which fund them.

It was also acknowledged that it was "really difficult to…define [participation]...because everybody's interpretation of what it is…is different." (Arts Council England staff). This was clearly demonstrated to be the case in the sample of applications supplied by Arts Council England, where the term is defined in multiple ways. Indeed within any one application the term is often used in different ways.

Applicants are asked to demonstrate which of the Arts Council England's five goals they are responding to in all funding requests to the Arts Council England. Goal two relates to participation and engagement by getting "more people [to] experience and [be] inspired by the arts" (Arts Council England, 2010 pg 7). While applicants are only required to respond to one of the goals, only six of the sample of eighty applications provided chose not to respond to goal two. This might suggest that participation is considered a high priority, but as the goal only really asks people if they are taking the public into account at all it is surprising that everyone would not address it when applying for public money.

By analysing definitions in relation to the widely accepted ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) it is clear that the vast majority of applicants define participation at the bottom rung of the ladder, as a process of "informing" the public about the arts offer through marketing and distribution. A much smaller number talked about "involving" them through outreach programmes, which sits in the middle of the ladder. There is almost no reference to the aims at the top of his ladder which relate to "collaboration and empowerment".

Many people interviewed acknowledged that in practice organisations were increasingly addressing the participation agenda by targeting "audiences that are already attending and already have an interest" (Audience development manager), to get them to attend more regularly, rather than reaching out to people who are not already interested in the arts. This is counter to the aims of the participation agenda which were clearly articulated by the New Labour government in relation to social inclusion and engaging those who were seen as not currenlty engaged at all (Policy Action Team 10, 1999).

But the Arts Council England assessment comments on the applications do not provide any sense that one definition is prioritised over another in the decision making process. Furthermore, despite many of the claims lacking evidence to support how the plans would be achieved, or targets for measurement, the assessors' do not address this or suggest targets based on them achieving what they proposed. Instead the willingness to take the organisations' claims at face value, suggests a tendency to define anything as participation. This runs the risk of making the word meaningless, a function Norman Fairlcough (2000) argues is used by policy makers to create a rhetoric of change while retaining the status quo.

Many of the local authorities surveyed who had chosen the government target to increase cultural participation (DCMS, 2008) define participation more specifically, in terms of involving people in active creative expression rather than engagement as an audience member. However although most were aware of council strategies that sat at the top of Arnstein's ladder of participation by collaborating and empowering participants in public service delivery, they acknowledged that such practices are not being used widely in the arts. Furthermore, when asked to specify strategies used to meet the government target, it is clear that there is more focus on getting current audiences to attend more regularly, rather than attracting new audiences, or developing new creative opportunities. Some argued that this was because participation targets encourage easy wins to increase numbers, and ignore the fact that reaching new people is much slower, and engages smaller numbers. As such

policy interventions may lead to a "defensive instrumentalism" (Belfiore, 2012) where the arts feel obliged to justify how they are addressing policy without adopting the values which underpin it.

Almost everyone acknowledged the findings of the Taking Part survey (DCMS, 2011) that the arts still attracts an elite minority of the public, which remained largely unchanged despite initiatives to increase participation. There was a consensus with the view that "at many of the cultural events that I go to I see an audience of white, middle-aged, middle-class people - actually not even middle-aged, but even older" (arts policy commentator). This was identified as most apparent where work is from western classical traditions, which takes by far the largest proportion of arts funding. But although some recognised that having an effective participation policy meant being "brave enough to consider that [funding] will look very different for some people" (Arts Council England staff), there was no sense of a real appetite for this degree of change, either within Arts Council England or the local authorities. Instead, change was seen to happen at an inevitably slow pace "incorporated into what people do" (Arts Council England staff), rather than through policy directives or redistribution of funds. There was a sense of resignation that social inequalities will continue to be replicated in arts funding where "80% of our funding goes to 20% of our clients…[and] the people who participate and attend the most make up about 9% of the population" (Arts Council England staff). This is further evidenced by the acknowledgement that participatory organisations were hit hardest in cuts in funding levels from 2010.

Most of those interviewed described the barriers to change in relation to the complexity of implementing policy changes against a backdrop of "the orthodoxy of 60 years" (Arts Council England staff). One commentator suggested that the distribution of funds, through participatory budgeting in Brazil, was made easier due to the lack of their historical funding traditions in the cultural sector. This supports theory on path dependency mentioned above (Liebowitz and Margolis, 2000). But it was also widely acknowledged that there are "powerful organisations that have a strong stake at the table" (Audience Development manager) who militate against change and through the arm's length principle limit the capacity of governments to create the "legislative impetus…which is about stick more than carrot" (Arts Council England staff), which may be needed for change to occur.

The remainder of this article therefore considers where a legislative impetus was imposed by the New Labour government in 2008, through a duty for all public services (including Arts Council England) to involve a wider range of voices in policy making and delivery (DCLG, 2008).

Despite the introduction of the "duty to involve", the staff member interviewed from DCMS said that "there are all sorts of internal government things that are happening, [but] it's not something that we took an active lead in" (government policy adviser). There was therefore no directive from DCMS about how the duty might be applied in the arts sector. Likewise several people at Arts Council England supported the claim that it is "a question still to be looked at seriously. We haven't gone down that route thus far" (Arts Council England staff). Even with a legislative impetus therefore vagueness is evident in relation to its implementation.

Other parts of the cultural sector, such as English Heritage, were cited as gaining considerable profile and increased public support, through projects involving "an audience vote for what should get the money" (Lord Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport 1997-2001). The arts sector was said to be lagging behind. But some of the arts policy advisers interviewed disputed this. They cited evidence of arts organisations, involving their audiences better in dialogue than they had historically. This was said to be happening independently of policy makers or directives. Some argued that the best policy responded to changes developed in the arts sector, rather than trying to lead them. This was supported by the artists and arts organisations interviewed, who argued that participatory processes should be practice-based or community-led, rather than policy impositions.

Some theorists, have also argued that the notion of top-down directives to impose bottom-up participatory processes may be counterproductive (Peck, 2009, Hay, 2007).

But the perceived growth in bottom up initiatives is challenged by the fact that even those interviewed who said it was more widespread were unable to think of many examples when pushed. In practice it was acknowledged that "we use the same five kind of examples at the moment" (Arts Council England staff), whenever providing specifics of practice.

It is also clear, from the language used, that for those who felt such practices were common their definition was once again closer to Arnstein's concept of "inform and consult" (Arnstein, 1969). While those who were more sceptical of how many organisations involved the public, tended to refer more specifically to the definition outlined in the duty to involve (DCLG, 2008) which aspires to reach the top of Arnstein's ladder by involving public participation from agenda setting through to monitoring outcomes. This is supported by evidence that demonstrates that although consultation might not be unusual, decision making itself has to date had more impact in other public policy areas than in the arts (Fennell et al., 2009, SQW Consulting, 2010).

In the few examples, where participatory decision making was cited and involved long term public involvement, it is further worth noting that the organisations, or individual cultural leaders involved, often came from the community arts movement, which some suggested meant that nothing much had changed in wider practice. Furthermore although such strategies may not have been introduced in response to a policy directive, many of the practitioners acknowledged that such practices were only effective where the boards of organisations or funders were involved. Some community participants said that they had been demanding to have a voice for years but that until policy on public engagement came into force they were not heard.

This highlights a problem: whilst vision without policy or organisational support is hard to realise, policy imposition without individual buy-in may be counterproductive. A policy that relies on delivery within existing organisational structures, as has been demonstrated to be the case in England, rather than changing the structures and redistributing funding to facilitate change, may therefore be doomed to fail.

However short term experiments in regularly funded galleries and theatres, involving the public in co-curation of exhibitions or seasons of work, were seen to be becoming more common and everyone who had had experience of them, believed they are successful at challenging thinking about artistic practice and bringing in new audiences. From a marketing perspective it was recognised that such practices both increase attendance and improve public opinion on the arts. Despite their short term nature, over a longer period of time those who had some involvement in such processes felt that "inevitably arts practice would change if the kind of involvement ideas or techniques filtered through a lot of arts organisations" (Arts Council England staff).

But one commentator argued that practices, restricted to arts organisations, rather than funding organisations "remain ineffective because [funding decisions are] done in the old usual way" (arts policy commentator). The only example given, of participatory budgeting in the arts, was in Arts Council England's North East regional office. An experiment had been run that involved young people in mock funding decision panels along with Arts Council England staff. It was said that it was not possible to engage the young people in real funding decisions, without the agreement of Arts Council England national office, which was not forthcoming. But even so it did lead those involved to believe that there was an appetite for such engagement. The decisions were said to have been treated with the utmost care and seriousness by those taking part and "if managed well it could be dealt with on a much broader level" (Arts Council England staff). Despite being seen as a success this initiative has not been replicated let alone extended. This supports the argument that centralised

power, whether in the arm's length or the ministry model may reduce opportunities for such practices (Anberrée, 2012) but the nature of the resistance at national office is also worth examining.

Some national policy advisers questioned whether there was evidence that the public wanted to get involved in the formation or implementation of arts policy. But the evidence for this is demonstrated through the arts debate in which the public asked for greater involvement in decision making (Opinion Leader, 2007). It is also demonstrated by the growing numbers of people that have engaged in participatory budgeting initiatives within the UK and overseas, the longer the initiative has lasted (SQW Consulting, 2010, Community Pride Initiative, 2003). All the people interviewed for this research who had direct experience of such processes also concurred that there was an appetite for engagement in decision making.

Some staff at Arts Council England and some arts managers of organisations who had no direct experience of participatory decision making expressed concerns about the unrepresentative nature of participatory practices, as "there are communities that are much more able, through confidence, skills, money, attitude, to engage … than others" (Arts Council England staff). This was said to challenge the legitimacy of decisions taken through such processes. However those who had experience of participatory decision making in practice said there was evidence that where people "genuinely made an effort [to engage people] and went to different venues that you weren't normally seen in…people turned up who hadn't normally turned up" (government policy adviser). Furthermore, it may be argued that the narrow background of those currently involved in the arts sector is already unrepresentative of the broader public. There was less resistance to the concept amongst local authorities who are themselves more accountable. Resistance to such processes from non-accountable bodies may therefore be seen as an attempt to hold onto power rather than based on a commitment to representation.

The other main concern over public involvement, expressed by those without direct experience, related to the fears of a risk averse public. Arts expertise was seen, by many of those working in the arts, to be necessary to avoid the "potential for dumbing down content if you allow the public to choose" (Audience Development manager). But based on specific examples where participatory decision making had been used, it was suggested that often "the most unusual and radical of solutions was the one that was successful" (Arts Council England staff). This is also said to be the case in other research on such practices , which found that the public were more open to risk taking than expected (Fennell et al., 2009). Artists interviewed, with experience of such processes in action also said it had allowed them to take more, not fewer risks.

The evidence from interviews, in line with the findings from literature (Fennell et al., 2009) demonstrate a clear disparity in perceptions between those who have engaged in participatory decision making practices and those who have not. The greatest resistance to the concept exists where there is least experience of it in operation. While this may reflect that those who have engaged are likely to be those who are already predisposed to believe in its potential rather than its risks, there are indications that the initial fears and perceptions are seen to be misplaced and eradicated over time. But this requires "the humility to accept that you might learn something from your community as opposed to knowing best about what they want" (Arts Council England staff).

Conclusions and implications for policy

This article has questioned, based on evidence, whether the perceived shift in policy towards participation that is claimed in literature, ever really had an impact in the arts. Funds have been shown to have continued to go to the same institutions and policy initiatives, such as increasing participation, have relied on them being delivered by existing funded organisations and leaders who may not embrace such values.

The findings from empirical research support the theory that widening the range of voices involved in decision making can be a valuable learning experience for those involved (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010), but there is little evidence that this is able to challenge the status quo in the broader arts sector.
The resistance to change, from parts of the arts sector, coupled with an approach to decision making which ignores the unequal nature of power within decision making are the greatest barriers to increasing participation.

Further research would be worth undertaking to determine whether public engagement is becoming more commonplace, as some suggest, or whether the arts do lag behind other parts of the public sector. In addition some longitudinal studies on the impact of involvement in such processes may shed light on whether resistance to participatory decision making may reduce over time.

But rather than relying on the existing arts infrastructure to lead the change, I would argue that redistribution of funding is required, both to reduce the power of the cultural elite and to widen the range of voices involved in the arts and participatory decision making offers a model to genuinely give arts policy and practice a more public facing approach. In return the public may become a more powerful voice to advocate for public funding of the arts in general although requiring acceptance that they arts they fund may be different to those funded today.

While the principles of participatory decision making and widening the range of voices involved in the arts, may be argued to be more important in organisations operating under the arm's length principle than within central or local government, where there is some accountability through the electorate, it is acknowledged that cultural elites also wield power under the ministry model in other countries, so further international comparison would therefore also be valuable.

References

ALASUUTARI, P. 1995. *Researching culture; qualitative method and cultural studies,* London, Sage.

ANBERRÉE, A. Year. What personal responsibilities towards the construction of a cultural democracy? Involvement of the public in the construction of a cultural democracy: improvements and restraints. *In:* HENDRY, J. R. & BARRAQUIER, A., eds. IABS 2012 - Personal Responsibility for Improving Society,, 2012 Asheville, NC. International Association for Business and Society, 261–272.

ARNSTEIN, S. R. 1969. A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners,* 35 216-224.

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND 2009. *Annual Review 2008,* London, Arts Council England.

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND 2010. *Achieving great art for everyone, a strategic framework for the arts* London, Arts Council England.

BELFIORE, E. 2012. "Defensive instrumentalism" and the legacy of New Labour's cultural policies. *Cultural Trends,* 21**,** 103-111.

BEVIR, M. & RHODES 2010. *The state as cultural practice,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

BOLLO, A., DAL POZZOLO, L., DI FEDERICO, E. & GORDON, C. 2012. Measuring cultural participation. *UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics* Montreal: UNESCO.

BOURDIEU, P. 1984. *Distinction,* New York, Routledge.

BRODIE, E., COWLING, E. & NISSEN, N. 2009. *Understanding Participation, a literature review* [Online]. Pathways Through Participation. Available: www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk [Accessed 6/6 2012].

BUNTING, C. 2006. *Public engagement with the arts: Arts Council England's strategic challenges* London, Arts Council England.

BUNTING, C., CHAN, T., GOLDTHORPE, J., KEANEY, E. & OSKALA, A. 2008. *From Indifference to Enthusiasm; patterns of arts attendance in England,* London, Arts Council England.

CADDY, J., PIEXOTO, T. & MCNEIL, M. 2007. Beyond Public Scrutiny: Stocktaking of Social Accountability in OECD Countries. World Bank Institute.

COMMUNITY PRIDE INITIATIVE. 2003. *Slicing up the Pie, Community involvement in participatory budgeting, Porto Alegre, Brazil* [Online]. Available: http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/documents/Slicing-20up-20the-20Pie.pdf [Accessed 10/1/11].

DCLG 2008. *Participatory Budgeting: a draft national strategy,* London, Communities and Local Government Publications.

DCMS. 2006. *Taking Part survey* [Online]. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-report-taking-part-survey-2005-to-2006-year-1 [Accessed 1/4/2011].

DCMS. 2008. *Technical_Note_NI11* [Online]. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available: www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Technical_Note_NI11_FINAL.pdf [Accessed 1/6/2011].

DCMS. 2011. *Taking Part survey, the national survey of culture, leisure and sport* [Online]. London DCMS Publications. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/taking-part-the-national-survey-of-culture-leisure-and-sport-january-december-2010 [Accessed 2/3/12].

DODD, F., GRAVES, A. & TAWS, K. 2008. *Our Creative Talent, the voluntary and amateur arts in Britain,* London, Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

EDGAR, D. 2012. *Looking Back, Moving Forwards, State of the Arts,* London, Arts Council England.

FAIRCLOUGH, N. 2000. *New Labour, New Language,* London, Routledge.

FENNELL, E., GAVELIN, K. & JACKSON, R. 2009. *Participatory Budgeting and the Arts,* London, Involve.

FRAYLING, C. 2005. *The only trustworthy book…' Art and Public Value,* London, Arts Council England.

GARNHAM, N. 2005. From Cultural to Creative Industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy,*, 11**,** 15-29.

GIDDENS, A. 2000. *The Third Way and its Critics,* Cambridge, Polity Press.

GOSS, S. 2001. *Making Local Governance Work. Networks, Relationships and the Management of Change,* Houndsmills, Palgrave.

GRAY, C. 2000. *The Politics of the Arts in Britain,* Hampshire, Macmillan Press Ltd.

GRAY, C. 2008. Instrumental policies: causes, consequences, museums and galleries. *Cultural Trends,* 17**,** 209-222.

GRIFFITHS, D., MILES, A. & SAVAGE, M. 2008. The end of the English cultural elite? *The Sociological Review,* 56**,** 187-209.

HABERMAS, J. 1994. Three normative models of democracy. *Constellations,* 1**,** 1-10.

HATZIHRYSIDIS, M. & BUNTING, C. 2009. *Public Value Programme: A Wider Range of Voices,* London, Arts Council England.

HAY, C. 2007. *Why we hate politics,* Cambridge, Polity Press.

HERZ, S. & EBRAHIM, A. 2005. A Call for Participatory Decision Making, Discussion Paper on World Bank-Civil Society Engagement. *In:* OF, C. A. P. B. T. C. S. M. & (JFC), W. B.-C. S. J. F. C. (eds.).

HILL, M. 2006. Representing negotiating multiple roles and identities in the field and behind the desk *Qualitative Inquiry,* 12**,** 926-949.

HOLDEN, J. 2006. *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy,* London, Demos.

KEANEY, E. 2006. *From Access to Participation, Cultural policy and civil renewal,* London, Institute for Public Policy Research.

LEE, D., OAKLEY, K. & NAYLOR, R. 2011. 'The public gets what the public wants'? The uses and abuses of 'public value' in contemporary British cultural policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17**,** 289-300.

LIEBOWITZ, S. J. & MARGOLIS, S. E. 2000. Path Dependence. *In:* BOUCKAERT, B. & DE GEEST, G. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

LOWNDES, V. 1995. Citizenship and Urban Politics. *In:* JUDGE, D., STOKER, G. & WOLMAN, H. (eds.) *Theories of Urban Politics.* London: Sage.

LUKES, S. 2005. *Power: a radical view,* Basingstoke, Palgrave, Macmillan

MATARASSO, F. 1997. *Use or Ornament? The social Impact of participation in the arts,* Bournes Green Comedia.

MCINTOSH, G. 2008. *Review of Arts Council England's Regularly Funded Organisations Investment Strategy 2007-08 - Lessons Learned,* London, Arts Council England.

MCINTOSH, G. 2011. *Review of Arts Council England Investment Process 2010/11,* London, Arts Council England.

MCMASTER, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts; from measurement to judgement,* London, Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

MILES, A. 2013. Culture, participation and identity in contemporary Manchester. *In:* WOLFF, J. & SAVAGE, M. (eds.) *Culture in Manchester: Institutions and Urban Change since 1800.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

OPINION LEADER 2007. *Arts Council England, Public Value Deliberative Research,* London, Opinion Leader.

OSTROM, E. 1996. Crossing the great divide: co-production, synergy and development. *World Development,* 24**,** 1073-1087.

PECK, J. 2009. The Creativity Fix. *Variant,* 34**,** 5-9.

POLICY ACTION TEAM 10 1999. *The contribution of Sport and the Arts,* London, DCMS.

ROBSON, C. 1993. *Real World Research,* London, Routledge.

SILVERMAN, D. 2006. *Interpreting qualitative data,* London, Sage.

SMITH, C. 1998. *Creative Britain,* London, Faber and Faber.

SQW CONSULTING 2010. *National Evaluation of Participatory Budgeting in England,* London, Department for Communities and Local Government.

TUSA, J. 2000. *Art Matters,* London, Methuen.

WALMSLEY, B. 2013. Co-creating theatre: Authentic engagement or inter-legitimation? *Cultural Trends,* 22**,** 108-118.