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BIRDS OF A FEATHER: a call for research and understanding difference

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Abstract

This article begins with an outline of the principle of homophily, which is centred on similarity and connection with others. It explores how in our social networks, friendships and choices – such as our cultural tastes - we seek to associate with others 'like us'. Exploring this premise further, this paper considers this in relation to recent research on creative and cultural professionals in the UK (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018; Taylor, O'Brien and Brook, 2020). The author notes a lack of research on cultural labour in Ireland and a persistent scarcity on research on the arts, creative and cultural sectors here. While this is beginning to improve, there remains a significant lack of data or evidence that supports claims that Ireland is a creative and cultural nation. Conversely, Ireland has suffered from a surfeit of arts attendance data that justifies and proves audiences for the arts but, as this paper notes, this is inherently problematic. Overarchingly, this paper is a call for a greater quantity, in breadth and depth, of research that explores specifics of geography, difference and practice in the creative and cultural sectors in Ireland.

Keywords: homophily; stratification; cultural labour; cultural participation.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER: a call for research and understanding difference

Kerry McCall Magan

Preface from the Editorial Board

In celebration of the 10th issue of the Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy, we invited one of the founding editors, Kerry McCall Magan, to contribute to the Journal. As Director for British Council Ireland, Kerry McCall Magan engages in strategic cultural relations activity between Ireland and the UK in arts and culture, higher education and youth development. Prior to this role, her career spanned senior roles in higher education and the cultural sectors in Ireland. She has been a member of the Expert Panel of *Creative Ireland*; the Expert Committee of *Culture2025: a national cultural policy for Ireland*; a co-founder of the *Arts Management Research Studies Stream* in the *European Sociological Association* and co-founder of *Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland: an all-island research network* and the *Irish Journal for Arts Management and Cultural Policy*. Her recent publication, *Cultural Participation: the perpetuation of middle-class privilege in Dublin, Ireland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)* explores cultural taste and distinction in the social field. As in the work of Susan Liddy also presented in this issue, much of the article draws together insights from a rich research history with a practice in other terrains. In this case, McCall Magan brings to this work, dimensions of knowledge in public cultural policy, cultural management and her own theoretical inquiry. From these pillars, she offers a provocation on the nature and intention of research on cultural participation in Ireland.

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‘Birds of a Feather’: a call for research and understanding difference

In the 1950s, sociologists coined the term homophily, meaning love of the same. They used this concept to explain our inexorable tendency to link up with one another in ways that confirm rather than test our core beliefs (Retica, 2006). Researchers have explored the homophily principle in relation to many activities - smoking, drinking, marriage, even online dating and they note that what people tend to like, in others, are people like themselves, most of the time - online or offline (Retica, 2006). In other words, we gravitate towards others with the same tastes as us– those with the same leisure pursuits, same cultural habits, same relaxation and intellectual tendencies, and we do this in order to connect and feel a sense of belonging.

Sociologists, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook wrote about this concept in their 2001 paper: *Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks.* They put forward the idea that similarity breeds social bonds and structured ties between people - creating networks of every type: marriage, friendship, work, advice, support, information transfer, membership, and other types of relationships. This results in personal networks that are homogeneous with regard to ‘many socio-demographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics’ (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001, p.415). They note that it has powerful implications for the way people receive information, as well as ‘the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience’ (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001, p.415).

As a researcher in cultural participation, I find this premise fascinating. Not least because it touches directly into academic discussions about structure and agency and locates our cultural choices as socially structured and emanating from a position of class and stratification (as distinct from personal choice and agency).

This was highlighted at the turn of the twentieth century by Austrian economist, Thorstein Veblen, in his text *Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 1994) and became articulated more fully by French anthropologist, Bourdieu, in his now seminal study of patriarchal 1960s French society, (*Distinction,* 1984). Both scholars locate the appreciation of certain forms of arts and culture as a direct expression of belonging to specific social status groups and to the structured similarity of the tastes of others.

This status homophily in culture taste has been explored by many scholars and was systematically explored in the UK in the large scale ESRC-funded project, *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE): a Critical Investigation (2003-6).*[i] In this project, Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal Wright (2018) also note that our tastes and cultural choices are socially structured and that we seek to associate with others ‘like us’. This boundary-making is a largely self-affirming and validating experience for individuals that is predicated on the acquisition and display of cultural knowledge and taste, and therefore cultural distinction, in relation to artistic and cultural preferences (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen ([1899] 1994).

So, while none of this is perhaps surprising, why does it matter? Well, it matters because those who are in the dominant group in society – the educated, and professional class have a significant and material relationship with policy, production and practice – particularly in the cultural sector. And like Birds of a Feather, they stick together. It matters because questions of cultural production and cultural consumption are inherently linked, and increasingly centre stage in matters of national

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and international importance, and it matters because questions of cultural labour have historically been marginalised (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016).

The dominant class populate government, lead cultural institutions, manage arts organisations and in effect, the cultural sector is dominated by the educated and professional class. Texts such as the powerful and recently published *Culture is Bad for You* (Taylor, O'Brien and Brook, 2020) highlight this and challenge the pervasive inequality (and lack of diversity) present in the creative and cultural sectors in the UK. A sobering and insightful read, it draws on data captured in the 2018 Panic! research which highlights how 'historically marginalised groups reported feeling uncomfortable and marginalised as cultural consumers, just as they did as cultural producers' (Quille, 2020). This survey, carried out by Create London, captured data from 2,539 people working in the cultural industries who contributed to this survey through an open call on theguardian.com. The researchers found that the creative and cultural sectors are a 'closed shop' unless you are white, middle class and educated and that gender and ethnicity can substantially affect your career (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018). In this research, they explore difference and diversity and highlight how women, people of colour and those from lower socio-economic, under-represented and socially marginalised backgrounds find it difficult to engage and progress in a career in the creative and cultural sector; noting that these sectors demand unpaid internships, peripatetic working and embrace low-pay and precariousness. The researchers show how this results in a deep and enduring inequality in both cultural production and cultural consumption.[ii]

In Ireland, excepting some recent studies (see the work of Queen's University Belfast academic, Michael Pierse, and Atlantic Technological University academic, Emma Penney), we lack data on the socio-demographic profiles of creative professionals. As both a cultural manager and academic researcher, the deficit of this information, in my view, means we lack an informed understanding of who we are, and what we need to do to develop the sector further. This means that policies, strategies and initiatives are developed by government, by cultural institutions and by organisations in a vacuum and may or, may not, address issues that exist. Simply put, if we do not know how unequal we are, we cannot know where the greater inequalities lie. This is important because if we do not know, then we cannot target initiatives, develop policies and focus on what can be done – raising awareness, creating building blocks, taking initiative to address the imbalance and inequity that most certainly exists (its existence can be evidenced from Pine, 2020; O'Hagan, Murphy and Barton, 2020; Barton, Hadley and Murphy, 2023).

We do know that there has been bullying and harassment 'right across the spectrum from inappropriate language and insults to sexual assault and violence' (Oireachtas, 2022). And we do know that powerful grassroots initiatives such as Waking the Feminists speak to significant issues of male voice and privilege in the Irish theatre community (RTÉ, 2018). Organisations such as the Irish Theatre Institute have responded to this and surveyed over 1300 people in the Irish arts sector, engaging in research and analysis launched in the report Speak Up: A Call for Change (Irish Theatre Institute, 2021) and Safe to Create – a web resource fort the Irish arts and creative sectors to promote dignity at work.[iii] Bodies such as Arts Council Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, who are the agency tasked with the development of the arts in Ireland, have also taken a lead role in developing equality, human rights and diversity policies and strategies which relate to dignity at work, disability and the arts, cultural rights and equality, diversity and inclusion strategy and

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planning and these are welcome initiatives. However, we continue to lack the wholesale sectoral knowledge that provides insight into who and what we are.[iv]

We do not know important information such as how precarious arts, cultural and creative work is, or if socially marginalised and under-represented groups in society find it difficult to 'break into' a career in these sectors. Nor do we know if many self-exclude from these sectors due to a feeling of status dissonance (Isom Scott, 2018). Initiatives such as the Basic Income scheme in the Arts, piloted by the Irish government between 2022-25 speak to an extant and critical issue of precarity in cultural labour that require a solution but as noted by O'Brien and Clancy (2021, p.53), there are inherent issues with definition, scope and conflation of terms that 'in turn reveals a lack of understanding of the complexities of life within the cultural and creative economy'. Without objective, wide scale and systematic research, we do not know ourselves and cannot tell how much Ireland might, or might not, follow the trends and patterns of other countries in this regard and how Ireland benchmarks against other nations. And more importantly, we do not know the kind of strategic or policy response, or the systemic behavioural change at an individual and organisational level we need to make to address specifics, gaps and homophilic practices.

Accessing empirical research data on the creative and cultural sectors has always been difficult. And this has been an over-riding theme for me across the last fifteen to twenty years. Whether as a lecturer, researcher or, engaged in advocacy during my time on the Research Committee in the National Campaign for the Arts[v] or again when I was researching my PhD and book on cultural capital and cultural participation (McCall Magan, 2023), I kept experiencing difficulty when trying to locate empirical data – quantitative or qualitative – on arts and culture in Ireland. This was frustrating as time and time again, I have encountered many assertions across the years by polity, government and pundits about arts, culture and creativity – their importance, value and weight in the Irish nation but empirical hard evidence has been worryingly hard to come by.[vi]

What has been available is a large amount of data on arts audiences and cultural consumption and there is a surfeit of information on audience demographics, box office preferences and ticket sales. Unsurprisingly, this data shows trends and patterns that follow a similar picture to the UK's Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion study whereby the upper and middle classes, the more educated, and largely women comprise the majority of arts attendees (McCall Magan, 2023). In other words, whether it's in *Audiences, Acquisitions and Amateurs* (Sinnott, Kavanagh and Lansdowne Market Research, 1983), *The Public and the* Arts (Hibernian Consulting, Insight Statistical Consulting and Drury, 2006), or *The Arts in Irish Life* (Arts Council Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, 2017), the bulk of attendees is made up of the ABC1s (professional, managerial and skilled classes)[vii] and these surveys show the same patterns of middle to upper middle class cultural consumption as elsewhere (Bennett, Emmison and Frow, 1999; Bennett et al, 2009; Lizardo and Skiles, 2015; Warwick Commission, 2015).

Much of the data from these Irish arts surveys proves the popularity of the arts in Ireland and this was valuable information at the time when bodies such as Arts Council Ireland needed to demonstrate the quantity and regional reach of arts audiences. This was particularly important at a moment in time, such as in 2009, when the McCarthy report (2009) was threatening 'efficiency savings' and devastating cuts to the creative and cultural sector. But in a contemporary context, it is important, and valuable, to have a more nuanced, insightful and considered understanding of the

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arts in Irish life – both in terms of the role arts and culture plays in supporting 'the essence of who we are' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2016) and understanding how central the arts are to civic life (Oireachtas Committee, May 2023). This is because the relationship between how culture is consumed and how it is produced is 'absolutely essential to understanding the relationship between culture and social inequality' (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016, p.471).

We desperately need a variety of forms and types of research that captures empirical data on the role arts and culture has in Irish life – including but not limited to inquiry into cultural labour, precarity and the socio-demographic profile of our creative and cultural industries. We do not know just how white, how unequal, or how lacking in diversity our creative and cultural sectors are but we do know that these sectors lack diversity and equality. We also know that cultural work is precarious and that the sector is supported by low paid work, internships and seasonal labour (Barton and Murphy, 2021, McCall Magan 2018).

If we are to think about arts, culture and creativity as a situated context, as a social construction, it becomes clear how 'all art is collectively produced' (Wolff, 1981, p.118). This is because the co-produced nature of this activity involves many people: policymakers, consumers, venues, institutions and educational providers. This means that we all hold responsibility for perpetuating low pay, precarity and inequality and that in any given society, the practice, production and consumption of culture contains concealed beliefs, obscured value systems and hidden assumptions (Keats and Urry, 1975). These values, beliefs and assumptions are sometimes made explicit through educational curricula, cultural policy and arts strategies as well as through distributive mechanisms such as public funding to arts and cultural practice, infrastructure and projects (see also Feder and Katz-Gerro 2012, 2015; Oakley and O'Brien, 2016).

This is a call for the need to 'reorder knowledge' around 'particular types of activity' and any contemporary cultural research needs to take account of the cultural forms and activities that are engaged in by less dominant groups in society (Miles and Sullivan, 2012, p.311). It is a call for a systematic, well-organised, wide-ranging cultural research programme that takes a long view and is both societal as well as sectoral in scope. Perhaps the agency provided by the merging of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland might provide such an opportunity (O'Brien, 2022). Until we have research that explores the specifics of arts and culture in Irish life including cultural labour, cultural participation and cultural practice in Ireland, we are in danger of continuing to perpetuate existing practices, barriers and obstacles, and operate as homogeneous birds of a feather and stick together.

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[ii] The Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries survey and research was commissioned by report lead authors: Dr Orian Brook, Dr David O'Brien, and Dr Mark Taylor. It forms part of Panic! It's an Arts Emergency project. The authors commissioned Create London to deliver a cultural programme around the themes of this research. As part of this, Create London and the Barbican convened an afternoon of discussion at the Barbican Centre, to reflect on the content of this report and share it with the sector and the public: Available at: http://www.barbican.org.uk/whatson/event/panic-2018. Panic! It's an Arts Emergency additionally comprises a public resource by Arts Emergency, a creative careers project for young people, and work by artist Ellie Harrison. It is a continuation of a project initiated by Create London in 2015, which included a nationwide survey of artists and creative industries workers (the Panic! dataset)

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and follow up interviews. Find out more about all of the above at: www.createlondon.org/event/panic2018/ .

[iii]Available at: https://www.safetocreate.ie/.

[iv] See here for Arts Council Ireland policies on Dignity at Work, Arts and Disability, Cultural Diversity and the Arts, the recently published Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implementation Plan, as well as the Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy: Available at: https://www.artscouncil.ie/Equality-Diversity-Inclusion/.

[v]Available at: https://ncfa.ie/

[vi]While this is beginning to improve, there remains a significant lack of data or evidence that supports claims that Ireland is a creative and cultural nation. See examples such as: arts and culture are 'not an elegant add-on [but] the essence of who we are as a still-young Republic with an ancient people' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2016, para 7-8); 'the vital nature of culture and creativity remain at the heart of everything we do' (Merrion Street: Irish Government News Service, 2016); 'I know I don't need to tell anyone here about the importance of Irish culture, Irish art and Irish productions, it cannot be overstated' (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 2022).

[vii]Social class classifications in Ireland are based on the occupation of the head of the household. The grades are often grouped into ABC1 and C2DE; these are taken to equate to middle class and working class, respectively. See Central Statistics Office (www.cso.ie) for more.

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