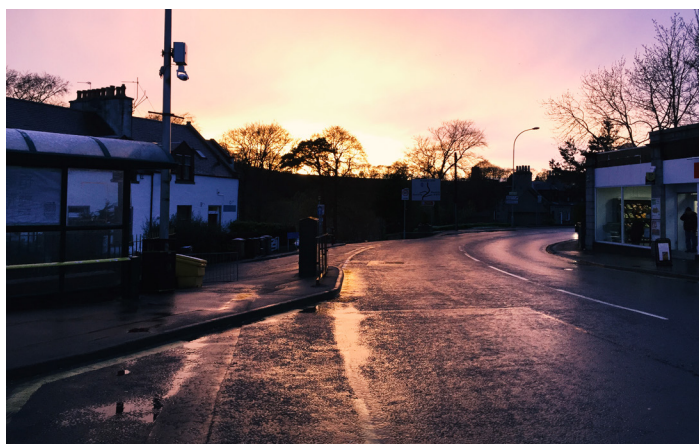


## What is 'everyday' participation?

We are used to thinking about benefits of the 'arts' - going to the theatre, visiting a museum, painting, or playing a musical instrument, etc. - as the traditional way of understanding the value of 'culture' but what about the significance people attach to their hobbies and pastimes at home and activities in their own communities? Can we speak of supposedly ordinary activities like cooking, sewing, taking the dog for a walk, volunteering or meeting up with friends as having cultural worth?

Definitions of cultural value matter, because historically, they have been used to mark out boundaries of status and resource between people and places. They are therefore strongly implicated in the making of economic, social and geographical inequalities. The Understanding Everyday Participation project sets out to paint a broader picture of how people make their lives and relate to each other on a day-to-day basis through culture. This is because we consider that a more democratic account of cultural engagement is required in order to reveal the broader benefits of participation to individuals, communities and local economies. We also believe that a better understanding of 'demand' and the existing creative potential amongst 'everyday' participants can help established cultural institutions broaden their appeal.



Culter at Dusk, 2015

It follows that we are not defining what counts as cultural participation in advance, but taking a 'bottom-up' approach. Instead of relying on statistics and surveys based on broad or reductive, preconceived definitions of cultural engagement, we are using a range of qualitative and descriptive methods - including in-depth interviews, ethnographic research, mapping and social network analysis - to observe the processes and subtleties of participation and to listen to what matters

to people. Equally, while our focus on the 'everyday' sphere might appear too nebulous and unremarkable to grant much purchase on these questions, it is at this level that the 'big' events and 'public' issues, such as the recent independence referendum in Scotland, or the current crisis in the North sea oil and gas industry, are actually lived out and negotiated.

## Which places and why Culter?

Between 2012 and 2017, we are working in six areas. Four English research sites have been chosen for their contrasting profiles as defined by official measures of investment and participation in arts and culture. In Manchester-Salford, where cultural institutions and the creative industries have been central to the cities' rebranding in the wake of industrial decline, the research was based in the economically deprived, ethnically mixed wards of Broughton and Cheetham Hill. Here the importance of parks and open spaces came to the fore and the creative economy of charity shops became a particular interest. In Gateshead, we worked in residential areas adjacent to the culturally regenerated Quayside, with a focus on the facilitated participation of young people in care. This year we are working on Dartmoor, where the role of amateur theatre in village life is emerging as a central theme, and then our final English case study starts in Peterborough in 2016.

**Our two Scottish case studies were chosen to reflect the interest of Creative Scotland - who are funding this part of the research - in communities 'on the edge' of the country.**

Hence, the work here in Aberdeen and the North-East over the past 15 months, which will be followed in 2016 by a case study of island life and migration in the Outer Hebrides. After several months of scoping activity in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, we were drawn to Peterculter because of its position on 'the edge' of the city and the Deeside oil wealth corridor. Our underlying concern in Aberdeen was to understand the impact of the oil industry as a source of both civic identity and cultural dislocation. In this context, Culter stood out as microcosm of change because of its recent transition from an industrial village into a commuter suburb. Whilst being a generally affluent community, it retains pockets of deprivation. It has a population that is older than the city average but is also a place where younger families choose to settle. Having lost many of its shops and amenities to the building of new apartments, it nevertheless displays a rich associational culture and inspires a strong sense of village identity among incomers and established residents alike.

## What we have found

Although the research we originally planned to do in Culter is now finished, the task of analysing the large volume of rich material we have collected will take a while to complete. In the meantime, we have also embarked on some follow-on work, such as the film and *Postcards from Culter* project, to help illustrate and develop particular themes emerging from the research.

## Interviews

In each of the project's six case study locations, we carry out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of around 30 local residents, recruited to reflect the demographic profile of the local population. The idea of the interviews is to draw out what can broadly be thought of as 'participation narratives'. In the first interview, we explore with people what they take part in, how day-to-day responsibilities impact on this, and what their participation means to them. We ask about how their background and life history has influenced their preferences for some activities over others, and how their participation is shaped by feelings of belonging and identity. These initial conversations are then followed up a few months later when we talk to the same people about changes in their lives and communities, building up a more detailed picture of how their participation is impacted by social and civic networks and by attachment to place in the context of local political and cultural economies. Some prominent themes appearing in the Culter interviews so far include:

### People are multiply engaged in everyday culture, and participation can often be highly skilled and creative.

Participation is abundant in Culter. People take part in a wide range of informal activities, in many settings, though often with a strong local, family and friendship emphasis. Hobbies such as craft, gardening, studying, or traditional music and dance often involve intense levels of engagement, requiring commitment, knowledge and practice.

### There are many types of value that accrue from participation

People draw a range of benefits from the activities they engage in, including a sense of well-being, belonging and personal identity. Amongst the most important, however, is the way in which participation generates and reinforces 'social capital'. Social relationships through participation both underpin neighbourhood culture, providing the motive force behind local organisations, and - through the internet and social media - link people and the community to the wider world.

### Participation is shaped by the intersections between age, work, gender and social class

People with younger families, along with those who work long hours, or in shift work, sometimes struggle to find time for participation outside of home and the family. Retirement often brings more opportunities for participation, which sometimes can't be realised for reasons of ill-health, or maybe experienced as a double-edged sword when people who have finished working feel obliged to spend time volunteering. Older, middle-class people are more likely than

others to participate in formal cultural activities and visit traditional arts venues and traditional gender divisions between men and women's tastes are evident; although, in some respects, both of these types of distinction seem less marked in Culter than in other places.

## Place matters

The 'outdoor life' and natural physical environment of the village is appealing to many Culter people, regardless of age or social background, and an essential setting for their participation. Many people also identify with the village's semi-rural and industrial heritage, which they feel provides the foundations for its particular associational culture and sense of identity. Some expressed a sense of being 'in-between' the city and the shire. This can be rendered positively, as 'having the best of both worlds'. Alternatively, the spirit of community in the village was counter-posed to Aberdeen as a city which - due to the commercialization wrought by oil and the neglect of its public spaces - has lost its soul.



Culter F.C. Ladies Day, Saturday 25 April 2015

## Ethnographic research

Complementing the interviews, in each case study area we also carry out studies of places, events or institutions connected to everyday participation using the method of ethnography, or 'participant observation'. This involves a researcher living - and, as far as possible, becoming 'embedded' - in a community in order to better comprehend its day-to-day rhythms and the relationships which define it. In each research location, the focus of the ethnography is determined in part by scoping work, during which we hold community group meetings, and partly by the themes emerging from the first wave interviews. In Culter, the importance of 'club life' quickly became evident, and so, with the generous support of the respective institutions, ethnographic work has been undertaken in three contrasting venues: Culter Village Hall, Culter Mills Sports and Social Club and Kippie Lodge Sports and Country Club (formerly Aberdeen Petroleum Club). Some of the main findings from this aspect of the research include:



### Social spaces, social solidarity and friendship

There is a symbiotic relationship between the social spaces of the village in which we undertook the ethnography and the social solidarities and strong friendships that were encountered there. All three ethnographic settings provided spaces for social networks to expand. It was often around the acts of eating and drinking in each setting that social ties were strengthened and further intensified. These spaces often provide a supportive environment for those, for instance, who have been bereaved or ill, or whose spouses may be working offshore. Given the prominence of the oil industry in village life, the 'settings' in which we worked were often the places in which women were able to form intense and close friendships in a context where their husbands or partners spent long periods of time away from home. This was especially true of Culter Village Hall and Kippie Lodge, whilst the Mill Club provided an anchor for men, often working in 'the oil', pulling them back in to Culter life, after work trips away on oil business to sometimes distant locations.

### Sense of belonging and identity

There is a strong sense of belonging and identity in Culter, expressed through various forms of language, like the use of the Doric terms *quines* (women) and *loons* (men), in everyday conversation. This sense of belonging is played with, in the ubiquitous use of the term 'incomer', where even those who have been resident in Culter for forty years or more are identified as such. Given that most people in the village are now incomers, this seems to be used as a humorous conversational device more than anything, but there are still 'hierarchies of belonging' within village culture. There is, too, a strong sense of a Scottish identity in Culter, though not necessarily one that excludes others. This is expressed particularly through music, whether it be accordion, fiddle, pipes, or even playing **500 Miles** at the end of a dance at the Mill Club.

### Strong culture of volunteering

Village associations such as the Community Council and the Theatre Club, as well as the Culter institutions in which we worked, are kept afloat through a strong culture of volunteering. The tasks of paid work in at least two of our ethnographic settings are often augmented through extra unpaid hours, which are vital in keeping the institutions viable. There is sometimes dismay amongst those who take on this voluntary work on behalf of the community that more people don't step up and help. However, there is also a realisation that working hours have increased, making after-work volunteering very difficult. Several residents pointed to the time involved in contemporary parenting cultures, where children are involved in organised after-school and weekend activities, and as a consequence people are prevented through lack of spare time from getting involved in the social life of the village.

### Alternative and gift economy

Alongside volunteering, a kind of alternative economy exists within the village. Historically, Culter has had little support from the local council or national government. It has therefore had to create a vernacular economy where people swap skills to get things mended, bake to augment funds, buy and sell raffle tickets, hold socials, and find numerous other means of supporting the village culture. Added to this, is a pub social

culture where the regulars may make provision (such as cooking Sunday roasts and leaving them at people's door) for those who need some assistance.

### Distinction between urban and rural

Culter, although now lying within the boundaries of Aberdeen city, was once a shire village and is still regarded by some residents as more 'Aberdeenshire' than 'Aberdeen'. Culter Community Council have recognised this division of opinion by creating 'the village in the city' tag, thereby encompassing both positions. The complex distinctions being made between 'urban' and 'rural' can also be seen in the everyday conversational questions of whether one is a *toonser* (town dweller) or a *teuchter* (country dweller). Even the buses that run through the village, operated by different companies, are named 'the country bus' (which runs up Royal Deeside to Ballater) and the 'town bus', which operates between Culter and Aberdeen.

### Absence of young people from the public stage

At first we were surprised, when walking around Culter, at the visible lack of young people aged 16-25 in both public exterior and interior spaces. However, there are very few resources for this age group in our ethnographic settings, so that they are almost completely absent from life in the Social Club and to a lesser extent at the Village Hall. Younger people are more evident at Kippie Lodge, given the swimming pool and gym facilities, although more often these are children under the age of 16. Here there seem to be anxieties over letting out space to young people for social events, in case of over indulgence in alcohol, or illegal drug use. As a result, they largely abandon the old participative cultures after the age of eighteen, often to form their own associations in Aberdeen city, which are based more around commercial and small business activities. Until they reach this age, local teenagers tend to spend time at home on their computers or to find rural spots where they have some space to themselves.

### The inequalities of an oil-related economy

The dominance of the oil-based economy locally, has meant that the cost of living in Aberdeen is prohibitive. This is easy to negotiate if you are earning a reasonable salary, but life becomes very difficult if, for instance, you are a care worker or someone employed in the retail sector. House prices and rents are very high and services very expensive, thereby making it almost impossible for those on a low income to participate regularly in public social and cultural life of the village.



Culter from Station Road South, Summer 2014

## What's next?

How are we developing the research?

### Beyond the (spoken and written) word

In recent months, we have taken advantage of new funding opportunities to add an important visual element to our research. This has taken two forms. First, we made a documentary film about village life, provisionally entitled *A Short Film about Everyday Participation in Culter*, in order to represent the practices, places and people we are writing about more vividly than would otherwise be possible in reports and papers; and then, as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's annual Connected Communities festival, we undertook a photography-based project, *Postcards from Culter*, during which local residents were encouraged to begin a visual dialogue about the past, present and future of the village.

It has been suggested that by moving 'beyond the word' we are sometimes better able to convey the meanings and impacts of our research to broader audiences.

The Understanding Everyday Participation project aims to generate a different perspective on the nature and significance of participation in everyday life, using a range of methods to reveal and represent its value. Alongside written texts and oral presentations, still and moving images add additional – mobile, sensuous and evocative – dimensions, allowing us to view the subjects of our research from multiple vantage points.

Our experience with making the film and organising photographic workshops was that new constituencies became engaged with the project. We live in a culture saturated with images so it is perhaps unsurprising that a visual approach accommodates and fires the imagination more than a literary one. Yet, the process of film-making and workshop curation also opens up new spaces for people to communicate with, become involved in, and take ownership of, the research by co-producing tangible and familiar objects.



Fire and feet at Culter Brownies, summer 2014

## The lives of oil

We have plans over the coming months to develop new research on life in the oil and gas industry, the social and cultural aspects of which have been remarkably little studied in the UK. This builds on an interest in the relationship between work, leisure and industrial change that has featured strongly in the people's stories of everyday participation in Culter. We are particularly interested in how the local, national and global 'mobilities' of oil have impacted on the everyday lives, relationships and prospects of individuals and families connected with the industry. We are also interested in how the coming of the industry, through economic distortion and transformation of public and commercial space, affected the culture of Aberdeen. Drawing on a collection of oral histories, in combination with new interview data, we aim to trace the ways in which oil lives have changed over the past 25 years and to evaluate how current developments in the political, technical and labour economies of the oil and gas industry will affect the future culture and society of Aberdeen.

### Analysis, dissemination and impact

Over the next few months we will employ coding software to help develop the analysis of our fieldwork notes together with the 120 hours of interview recordings made during the research in Culter. This will then be written up into several types of output. Academic articles based on work from across the Understanding Everyday Participation project will feature in special issues of the journal *Cultural Trends* in 2016 and a book on the project will be written after work on our final case studies finishes in 2017.

A full, public-facing, report on the Culter and Aberdeen case study will be made available towards the end of 2015, which we hope will contribute to policy development in cultural services and related areas within Aberdeen City Council and in the local cultural sector. In the meantime, we will use *A Short Film about Everyday Participation in Culter* to illustrate and publicise the work of the Understanding Everyday Participation project in our other case study areas and more broadly. It is too early to identify how our findings might translate into detailed policy prescriptions. It seems clear, however, that the everyday creative activities which underpin and maintain the viability of local committees are resources that require wider recognition and support from local authorities and cultural sector organisations.

The Understanding Everyday Participation project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of their Connected Communities: Communities, Culture and Creative Economies programme. The project involves an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the Universities of Manchester, Leicester, Exeter and Warwick. Dr Andrew Miles is the UEP Principal Investigator, and can be contacted at [andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk)

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