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# UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION

ARTICULATING CULTURAL VALUES

## Inclusive cultural strategies for an ageing population

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Research Briefing

# Introduction

The society we live in uses age as a social marker. Ageing, primarily looked at through the biomedical perspective, is also often associated with decline. This in turn, encourages us to homogenise older people in all aspects and domains of their social and cultural life.

A survey carried out by Arts Council England in 2015<sup>1</sup> found that “only half of older people attend or participate in the arts as often as when they were younger”, while those who live alone were even less likely to sustain the attendance patterns of their teenage years or their 20s and 30s. What such surveys, and their traditional ways of understanding the value of ‘culture’, fail to consider, however, are the forms and types of participation older people participate in *outside* of the ‘formal’ arts.

Gathering insights from ethnographic research on the everyday cultural participation of a retired population helps us look beyond the model of voluntary ‘non-active citizenship’ where older people are concerned (Lie, Baines and Wheelock 2009).<sup>2</sup> Working in collaboration with The U3A (University of the Third Age), the *Understanding Everyday Participation - Articulating Cultural Values* research project (UEP) examined a cohort of older people engaged in a variety of activities and hobbies, some representing lifelong interests and others begun only after retirement. This research found that many members of the older sub-population are, in fact, highly active citizens.



The U3A is known primarily for offering informal adult education, without the formality of qualifications. They offer four types of activity for its members:

- academic interest, for learning;
- creative groups for making/crafting;
- playing games;
- physical exercise.

We explored members’ participation in formal activities facilitated by the U3A, as well as their informal interests. Our research findings indicate that participation in everyday social, cultural and leisure activities is very meaningful and can have several important personal and social values for the ageing population.

## Key Research Findings

Table 1 provides a general account of the types of activities observed and discussed by participants during the qualitative research.<sup>3</sup>

The table shows that the participants partake in a wide spectrum of activities. These activities can take place within a diverse range of settings and with a range of people (friends, family, acquaintances and strangers).

## Value of participation

Our research found that while the values attached to participation can vary according to *type* of activity, there are generally five reasons why the participants take part in the activities they do.

### Social value

The social value of participation was particularly significant amongst the group studied. This was not just within U3A activities, but in areas of participation more generally. Furthermore, the importance of being with “like-minded people” or with people wanting to learn a new skill or develop a new interest was important. It was clear that U3A membership provided a sense of community for its members.

### The value of continuity: prolonging a working identity

It became apparent during the interviews and observation that the value of participation was also tied into previous working identities. For example, the participants choose to create and facilitate clubs within the organisation which reflected their pre-retirement occupations and careers: a former engineer facilitated the engineering group, a history teacher lectured on history at the U3A.

Sustaining the working self was observed in non U3A activities also. One research participant, ‘Phil’, spent most of his working career developing and building children’s play areas. His main form of participation, during the fieldwork, was the adventure playground he and his wife founded in the 1980s, which they continue to participate in and run, with help from the council.

<sup>1</sup> [http://comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Arts-Council-England\\_Older-people-data-tables\\_November-2015.pdf](http://comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Arts-Council-England_Older-people-data-tables_November-2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Lie, M., Baines, S. & Wheelock, J. (2009). Citizenship, Volunteering and Active Ageing. In *Social Policy and Administration*, 43 (7), p.702-718

<sup>3</sup> \* indicates activities facilitated through the U3A

Physical/sport	Intellectual	Cultural	Craft	Social	Charity/volunteering	At home/others
Pilates	Member of the poetry writing group*	Singing in a choir	Woodwork	Dinner and drinks with friends	Volunteering in a soup kitchen	Decorating
Cycling	Researching history of trains/railway*	Watching theatre productions*	Knitting	Karaoke	Member of the Fabian society	Having barbecues with family in back garden
Gym	Presenting at a conference in Canada	Acting in amateur theatre	Baking (BBC Good Food magazine subscription)	Watching football match with son and grandson	Children's adventure playground founder and facilitator	Watching the Olympics on the TV.
Swimming	Researching and telling life stories*	Playing piano	Photography	Coffee and shopping with friends in town	Sitting on the committee of the local community group	Sunbathing in the back garden
Walking	Member of the poetry appreciation group*	Attending music concerts	Silk painting	Taking part in pub quiz	Attending and helping at church	Travelling in the UK (sometimes, on a canal boat)
Playing golf	Reading	Visiting the museum and having a coffee	Sewing	Playing Bridge*		Travelling worldwide
Canoeing*	Interest in general history	Attending pop concerts	Guitar making			Visiting flower shows throughout the UK
Belly dancing*	Interest in and teaching Engineering*	Listening to classical music at Peterborough Cathedral	Crocheting			Gardening
Indoor and outdoor bowls*	Member of the art appreciation group*	Canal boat painting*				Maintaining an allotment
Miniature golf*		Watercolour painting*				Secretary of amateur dramatic group
Table tennis*						Meditation
Tennis*						
Tai chi*						

## The value of defying time through expertise

There was a shared sense of anxiety from the participants that when they first retired their days needed to be 'filled' somehow, and a way to do this was through 'prescribed busyness' (Cruikshank 2003).<sup>4</sup> Several of the participants decided to invest a great deal of time practising a particular hobby they had an interest in before retiring, such as woodwork or playing Bridge. This investment enabled them to become experts in the activity. Others chose to take up a *new* hobby, such as canal art: "the Roses & Castles it's called". Often this involved a lot of time learning about, practicing and perfecting a new skill. In some cases, this self-taught expertise was used to teach others in the USA.

Participating to become an expert meant that time speeds up for these participants, instead of slowing down and needing to be 'filled'.

## Exploration and enjoyment

Participation for this population also provides a sense of enjoyment and fun (Chen and Fu 2008).<sup>5</sup> The value of enjoyment can come from solitary activities, such as exploring new places, as well as the more social engagements where a new skill can be learnt. Sometimes activities can be combined to experience different values. One participant, for example, combines his interest of history with his enjoyment of walking, travelling and exploring new places, and meeting new people.

## Defying the physical effects of ageing

Participants discussed during the interviews that it was important to participate in physical activities to remain fit and healthy in later life. The term "preservation" was used by one participant to describe why he takes part in more physical activities such as table tennis, yoga and tennis.



<sup>4</sup> Cruikshank, M. (2003). *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>5</sup> Chen, S. Y. & Fu, Y.C. (2008). Leisure Participation and Enjoyment Among the Elderly: Individual Characteristics and Sociability. In *Educational Gerontology*, 24 (10), p.871-889.

## Recommendations

The 'third age' narrative observed throughout UEP's research and presented in this report challenges the assumption that older people don't change their habits or opinions. It also demonstrates that if social and cultural policy is to achieve a truly inclusive approach to 'active ageing', it is important to recognise the *entire* spectrum of abilities and interests that the ageing population values.

The UEP project's research findings demonstrate that everyday participation can be a crucial context for the way an ageing population adjusts to concerns and experiences of retirement. We suggest that cultural policy makers and practitioners should recognise the valuable role participation can have in later life and therefore contemplate the following recommendations:

- There is evidence that the arts can have a role to play in active 'healthy ageing' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing 2017).<sup>6</sup> However, it is important to ensure that arts, cultural or creative commissioning aimed at planning, procuring, delivering and evaluating services which promote healthy ageing amongst the older population, recognises that many individuals are highly engaged in a variety of everyday cultural activities.
- Furthermore arts and cultural strategies aimed at improving health and wellbeing need to expand beyond identifying this population in terms of fragility and dependence.<sup>7</sup> As it stands, the social care of this group is presented as a 'challenge' in terms of economic costs to society (Arts Council England).<sup>8</sup> Moving beyond this understanding can be achieved by acknowledging that the framework of 'active ageing' is already being successfully negotiated by many members of this population. Successful negotiation takes place through various forms of participation and not necessarily just through formal health and social care or cultural channels.
- Current strategies of social and cultural inclusivity and active ageing identify that ageing well involves enabling older people to contribute to society (Local Government Association, 2015).<sup>9</sup> The diverse everyday activities older people participate in can provide routes into and avenues for continued engagement in community life. More research into how, where and with whom older people participate is required in order to inform cultural practitioners and service provider support of such pathways.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Briefings/LGA.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/public-services/cultural-commissioning-programme/resources>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value\\_arts\\_culture\\_evidence\\_review.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value_arts_culture_evidence_review.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/ageing-silver-lining-opportunities-and-challenges-ageing-society-local-government>

- Finally, it is also important to strengthen existing strategies outside of the cultural sphere, which can support and make places of participation accessible for older people. For instance, building on travel and mobility policies - such as the free bus pass, currently available only locally - to make more places of participation accessible.

## Understanding Everyday Participation

### Articulating Cultural Values

Definitions of cultural value matter because they are powerful. Naming something as 'cultural', or not, marks out boundaries of status and resource between people and places. Culture is strongly implicated in the making of economic, social and geographical inequalities.

The Understanding Everyday Participation project (UEP) proposes a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between participation and cultural value - one which transcends traditional ways of understanding the value of 'culture' to include the significance people attach to their hobbies, pastimes, and community-based activities. Using innovative research methods, we are addressing current policy challenges, including economic inequalities, class divisions and well-being. We are generating results which signpost ways to build social capital and community resilience to austerity.

UEP research emphasises the social and civic dimensions to everyday culture. It reveals the multiple ways in which people participate, and how this impacts on their sense of self, relationships with others, and their engagement with the places they live in and visit. Our findings confirm that it is participation per se, rather than particular cultural practices, that matters most. They also highlight the importance of family, habit and tradition in people's consumption preferences, providing robust evidence which questions market models of choice and decision-making.

We work proactively with both local and national stakeholders, including policy influencers, cultural organisations, community groups, members of the creative economy and government. We ensure our research findings are available and accessible so that the broader benefits of everyday participation to society are widely shared.

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