Autonomy and resilience in cultural work: Looking beyond the "creative industries"

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Abstract

How do cultural workers deal with the tension between autonomy and control in their working lives? This question has sparked controversy and competing evaluations of empirical data. One answer, advanced in this journal by Mark Banks in 2010, is that cultural autonomy provides scope for self-realization, and potentially for ways of working that challenge commercial and managerial constraints. It allows those with critical inclinations to resist unpalatable controls and set in train processes of struggle which may deliver improvements in the conduct and experience of work. More recent empirical studies have cast doubt on this interpretation, pointing to patterns of instrumental behaviour and conforming autonomy that reinforce earlier images of controlled or self-interested "creatives". Since most of the relevant research in this area has focused on commercial contexts, this article considers whether publicly-funded art provides more fertile terrain for the destabilising autonomy thesis. Based on four years of fieldwork with community arts practitioners in Scotland and Northern Ireland, it captures the everyday pressures of

struggling to survive and to resist neoliberal cultural policies, managerial controls and fluctuating incomes. It also reveals collective inclinations and capacities to intervene that are consistent with the Banks image of dissenting, and even rebellious, independent activists for change. However, the abiding impression at the end of the research is of grinding struggle rather than progressive change, or even sustained relief. Theoretically, this shifts the focus of attention from the nature and potential of cultural autonomy to more grounded ways of appreciating the conditions and dynamics that affect artistic work.

Keywords

Cultural work, creative autonomy, managerial control, artistic agency

Introduction

The creative autonomy associated with cultural work has attracted a great deal of critical interest over the last decade. There is broad agreement that traditional labour process controls have a limited impact across the range of cultural and creative work since outcomes that are valued, aesthetically and financially, rely on the intrinsic abilities of creative practitioners themselves. There is an elusiveness (Smith & McKinlay, 2009) or indeterminacy (Thompson *et al*., 2007) about their work that requires some degree of autonomy to be "built in". Their creative drive, artistic vision, self-organizing abilities and even personal mark on delivered output are crucial for the realization of value, providing some protected space for independent thinking and acting beyond conventional forms of labour management (Toynbee, 2000; Banks, 2010; Hodgson & Briand, 2013).

Much of the recent research has focused on how employers, managers and agents deal with this essential autonomy and apply influence to bring a commercial rationale to bear on the processes involved (Townley *et al*., 2009; McKinlay & Smith, 2009). Multiple layers of managing and shaping activity have been revealed, suggesting that cultural workers are collectively subjected to a wider range of control initiatives than most of their counterparts in conventional work settings (Thompson *et al*., 2007). These range from "light touch" supervision and monitoring to the imposition of bureaucratic standards and procedures and on to restrictive contract and pay arrangements, attempts to curtail ownership rights, and also to limit access to distribution deals (Thompson *et al*., 2007; Hodgson & Briand, 2013).

With so much of this management activity reaching beyond the immediate employment relationship, large numbers of arts and cultural workers are confronting patterns of uncertainty and insecurity that were seldom recognized through the turn of the century. Popular accounts of the "creative economy" deflected attention from the use and abuse of contracting and freelancing, for example. Celebratory images of exciting, prestigious, "self-actualizing" work, and correspondingly progressive management practices, dominated the policy and prescriptive management literature (Florida, 2002). Critical commentators have since provided a much needed corrective (McRobbie, 2002; Hewison, 2014), calling attention to complex and uncertain working lives that often require artists to combine their art with other sources of income, for instance (Louden, 2013). The precariousness of cultural work is now widely acknowledged, although reactions and ways of coping on the front line have not been so obvious. Indeed, scholarship in this area has generated some controversial lines of argument.

Part of the literature connects the in-built autonomy in cultural work to patterns of resistance and means of securing better conditions and workplace experiences (Harvey, 2001; Ray, 2004). This is reminiscent of earlier reflections about the "space for struggle" and scope for securing progressive change at work and in the wider society when employers concede, or are unable to contain, autonomous action (Kelly, 1985; Ramsay, 1985). Banks (2007, 2010) delivers some of the most confident writing on this theme, conceptualizing the nature of autonomy in cultural work and the reasons for linking it to collective concerns and necessary improvements.

For Banks, this autonomy typically combines aesthetic values with social and political awareness. It involves an ethical sense of personal ties to family, community and society that take the practice of being an authentic artist or creative worker to the point of questioning and possibly challenging accepted conventions and understandings. In other words, personal commitments to art and to income are informed by favourable and unpalatable experiences, as well as interpretations of conditions that enhance or detract from the human condition. Finding innovative, provocative or attractive ways of expressing this sense-making is part of what it means to be a cultural worker, and as the pressures posed by managerial controls intensify the creative imaginings of both "unruly free thinkers" and less radical "artistic labourers" (Banks, 2010) are more likely to deliver "autonomous zones of creative dissent" (Banks, 2007, p. 147).

Though sceptical about the prospects for fundamental change any time soon, Banks does entertain the possibility of artists making a difference at the local and everyday level of cultural work. Again, this comes down to a belief that creative autonomy is underpinned by normative principles, and that this combination can have a destabilising effect on management and organization:

> The cultural worker, then, is…a productive subject capable of deviating from, or adopting a critical or oppositional stance towards, apparently binding social relations; fueled – in no small part – by their own normative commitments to autonomy and their inevitable embeddedness in other non-market, social structures. (Banks, 2010, p. 261)

Although Banks makes reference to empirical material, this potential to challenge and change is theorized rather than demonstrated. It also sits uneasily alongside many of the empirical studies published in recent years. Research into the working lives of film makers (Blair 2009), theatre actors (Haunschild & Eikhof, 2009) and especially musicians (Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Umney & Kretsos, 2014) points to more instrumental, divisive and compliant grassroots behaviour.

Interpretations of networking activity and the willingness to accept unpaid work figure prominently in accounts of self-serving, exclusionary and debilitating practices that undermine professional solidarity and perpetuate precarious working conditions. The emphasis here is on the personal cultivation of economic ties, on the way that contacts are developed or manipulated to "open doors" for recognition and regular sources of income.

Responses to informal hiring and freelancing in music, film and theatre are traced not to collective questioning, challenging or changing but rather to an "economy of favours" (Ursell, 2000) in which cultural workers are preoccupied with keeping themselves "on-side with the in-crowd", managing impressions to a point where it can be difficult to distinguish between colleagues and rivals (Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009, p. 165; Blair 2009).

Free work, including the propensities of both novice and established workers to accept unpaid positions, is regarded as part of this favour-focused, cliquish agency, with some participants evidently internalizing the exploitative logic that this is good, and even essential, for career development. Echoes of earlier concerns about illusory and colonized autonomy are discernible in accounts of cultural workers being seduced or duped into accepting unpaid work as a normal part of everyday life, and desensitized to the effects of cheap labour and fragmented learning at the same time (Holt & Lapenta, 2010, p. 223; Siebert & Wilson, 2013). From here, personal and sectional survival tactics and competitive manoeuvers represent more obvious aspects of cultural autonomy than collective attempts to change the terms and controls set by managers and agents.

While the insights afforded by this empirical research are compelling, it would be premature at this stage to settle on a negative view and relegate solidaristic notions of cultural agency and progressive intervention to the sidelines of serious scholarship. Part of the reason is that this body of work is in danger of squeezing out the capacity for principled reflection and social criticism that Banks and other researchers in the arts accept as a key defining feature of cultural work (McRobbie, 2002; Louden, 2013). Economic

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and egotistical orientations come to dominate, crowding out other possible or likely influences on cultural workers. Yet there is some contrasting empirical research, notably by Coulson (2012) on musicians, which concentrates on the reflexive abilities of artists and the potential, at least for some, to criticize the workings of inhospitable labour markets and adapt, collectively and constructively, devising supportive networks and collaborative learning arrangements, for example. By this assessment, non-instrumental values and the critical faculties of artists remain important, seeming to heighten sensitivity in some cases and counteract attempts to seduce workers or camouflage unpalatable controls.

It is vital to acknowledge this level of complexity and to prevent the fracturing of discussion around polarizing images of progressive and constrained cultural autonomy. If Banks is in danger of theoretically overstating the progressive agency of cultural workers, the fieldwork conducted by Umney and Kretsos (2014) and the other researchers noted above is being asked to carry too much of a burden with the specific claims drawn about desensitized careerism and the reluctance of cultural workers to challenge management controls. Of course, the assessment of these matters must be empirical, although this in itself is conditional upon cautious theorizing about the range of principles and orientations that influence artistic agency and the extent to which these apply across representative contexts and communities.

Much of the research interest to date has concentrated on cultural work in the commercial sector, with very little attention given to the situation of artists who rely on public funding for community engagement. This article examines the significance of their agency and

collective experience for the debate on creative autonomy. Drawing upon four years of regular research contact with 27 Scottish and Northern Irish community arts practitioners, it addresses three questions: How do community arts practitioners experience management controls and exercise their essential autonomy? How do concerns for personal wellbeing influence their agency and patterns of engagement with fellow artists and participating members of the public? To what extent do they challenge and secure improvements in the conditions that affect their cultural work?

The cultural work of community artists

The community arts are distinguished by the nature and level of public participation (Prentki & Preston, 2009). Whether this involves drama, dance, music, creative writing or any other form of artistic expression, the cultural work is shared rather than restricted to independent artists. The role of the arts practitioner is to help members of the public devise and present their own art in ways that speak effectively to local issues or address pressing neighbourhood concerns. These are often social, economic and political, linking the community arts through developmental and funding initiatives to local authorities, health and social services, and economic regeneration agencies (Herbert, 2004).

Community arts projects have drawn support from policy agendas that have variously emphasized social inclusion, economic development and employability, life-long learning and active citizenship. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, community cohesion and neighbourhood and urban renewal have also been important themes, with local authorities and other agencies funding collaborative work across sectarian divisions to promote

understanding and reduce conflict. This has been a key element of youth theatre in Glasgow housing schemes (Schrag, 2014), for example, and delivered an increase in community arts activity in Derry/Londonderry after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Jennings, 2012). Challenging official policies and peace-building programmes has also been part of the community arts tradition in these countries, however.

Public funding has not prevented artists and communities from exploring different cultural identities, often from a shared sense of frustration or grievance with official policies. The emphasis on participative art-making, and reluctance of artists to become development workers or policy levers (Jennings, 2012), has provided an outlet for grassroots activism and resistant cultural practices (Rahnema, 1999; Prentki & Preston, 2009). Under these circumstances, the art form is valued as a means of highlighting neglected concerns and mobilising marginalised or disadvantaged groups to make art that is capable of influencing politicians and decision makers, rather than the other way around (Herbert, 2004; Thompson, 2009). Examples can be found in the housing schemes of North Edinburgh (Knight, 1999) and also in reactions to peace building initiatives in Northern Ireland (Jennings, 2012). This tension between policy initiatives and the expression of local cultural traditions continues to have an important bearing upon the conduct of cultural work in Scottish and Northern Irish community arts, as subsequent sections will demonstrate.

Participants and methods

The fieldwork for this article began in May of 2012 and was completed during April 2016. It involved regular research contact with 27 artists, 13 in Scotland and 14 in Northern

Ireland (NI). Initial access was arranged through 'phone and email contact with prominent theatre and dance practitioners in Central Scotland and around the Derry/Londonderry area of Northern Ireland. Thereafter, a "snowballing" approach was employed to follow up on suggested contacts who were likely to be interested in the investigation and had relevant personal and organizational experiences. This was also important for achieving a balance in terms of gender and age. These emerged as potentially significant factors in earlier studies, notably those by Coulson (2012), Siebert and Wilson (2013) and Umney and Kretsos (2014) which suggest a link between relative youth and more individualistic, instrumental and careerist propensities. There were similar numbers of male and female respondents, and also an even split between age groups in Northern Ireland, with 7 aged between 20-39 and the same number in the 40-70 age range. Less than one third of the Scottish participants were younger than 40.

Data collection involved a combination of in-depth interviewing and periodic re-interviewing, focus groups, electronic survey work and both participant and non-participant observation. Qualitative face-to-face contact was at the centre of this, providing detailed insights into personal and professional lives, values, practices, associations and reflections. This was supplemented by emailed "update" questionnaires when ongoing commitments prevented direct contact or we "lost touch" with an artist for more than 12 months. These initially produced more guarded written comments than were evident with the interviewing, though became more candid, relaxed and vivid as the fieldwork progressed.

Participant observation was often a condition of access to practitioner work with communities, on the basis that "if you're here you're involved". This was partly to reassure participating community members that the process was independent of funder monitoring and quality assessment of their art-making, though also to witness the application of expressed artistic principles and patterns of engagement. Two of the authors are arts practitioners as well as researchers, and some of their work was known to participants in particular neighbourhoods who expected them to join in. Under these circumstances, the participant observation was also important to avoid unsettling effects. This also influenced decisions about how the remaining author, a social scientist, could be involved in appreciating context and engagement through non-participant observation. At first this was restricted to sitting-in on meetings of artists, then informally meeting community members and finally observing collective processes when the wider group was comfortable with this as they worked.

The final aspect of data collection involved focus group meetings with participating artists in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Derry/Londonderry. Three of these were held, the first with some of the Northern Ireland group in December of 2014, when two of the authors heard reactions to interim results and fresh challenges posed by funding cuts. The remaining two were conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, in March and April of 2016, to share interpretations of the data, ensure accuracy and capture final insights from reflections about the four years of contact.

These methods and arrangements were valuable over time in building a rapport with participants and developing a sensitive contextual and temporal understanding of their lived experience of work and of dealing with funding and management constraints. As others have recognized (Beech *et al*., 2016), one-off interviews and snap shots of professional lives can deflect attention from the complexity and fluidity of local agency as it unfolds (Ybema *et al*., 2009). The timescale and multiple methods applied to gathering data for this research extended the biographic and critical event focus of other studies (including Coulson, 2012 and Umney & Kretsos, 2014), making it easier to capture "live" and ongoing deliberations, expressed frustrations and responses, for example to specific cuts in funding and income.

Over the four years of contact, the research team conducted 83 interviews, received 31 completed questionnaires and carried out the equivalent of 14 full days of participant and non-participant observation. The interviews were guided by semi-structured schedules and lasted between 20 and 90 minutes depending upon surroundings and the preferences of respondents. Only 23 discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. Note taking became the main means of recording interview and observational data.

To promote a consistent reflective approach (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), data analysis relied on careful scrutiny and processing of transcripts and field notes. Each author prepared fieldwork "write ups" after their data gathering sessions, along with a commentary on emerging themes, prominent issues and personal impressions that was shared by email or 'phone conversations. This material was then scrutinized by the

collaborating authors as part of a joint review and discussion of key findings and connections or contrasts with established literature. These comparisons informed subsequent empirical work, supporting inter-related cross-checking and probing across the different forms of data collection. They also heightened awareness about ties to existing knowledge when articulating findings and their implications.

Pressures and insecurities

As noted earlier, personal wellbeing is considered to have an important mediating effect on cultural autonomy, although whether this favours defensive individualism at the expense of solidaristic behavior is a matter of debate. In line with other research findings on terms and conditions (Louden, 2013), the initial results of this investigation magnified the uncertainties and insecurities confronting community artists. This prompted more detailed interviewing about the impact on their orientation to work.

Financial pressures affected all of our respondents during the investigation. There were regular complaints about variable funding, inconsistent income and pressures to absorb costs and provide free labour:

> The latest round of funding from the Arts Council involves a lot of people taking a quite a kicking. (Freelance actor/facilitator, NI, 2014)
>
> Work over the last few years has just steadily decreased, and I've seen the rates dropping dramatically, perhaps down to half of what they were in 2007. (Creative writer, NI, 2012)

I'm not fairly paid in relationship to the time, energy and materials I put into preparing and developing a participatory art project. (Dance artist, Scotland, 2015)

In this context, as in others (Louden, 2013), the art had to be combined with additional sources of paid work to cover living expenses:

If we have other work, like teaching in my case, then life is a lot easier. (Applied Theatre Practitioner, Scotland, 2014)

This year, because of the lack of money, I've been doing arts administration and working as a stage manager. And I've set up my own catering company…because you can't live off what you make in the arts alone. (Dance facilitator, NI, 2015)

I'm fortunate in having a journalistic background and I take occasional commissions there to supplement it [the community art]…and I have published titles, so I have intermittent royalties coming in. (Creative writer, NI, 2015)

I work regularly for a charitable organization…Work in Schools and for local councils has shrunk to almost nothing. (Musician, Scotland, 2015)

I have a regular part-time teaching post which pays the basic bills and means I can take on participatory projects the rest of the time. (Theatre and costume designer, Scotland, 2015)

The way that arts funders released payments was also a source of recurring difficulties:

We tend to get paid in tranches of fees, maybe five jobs at once and then nothing for months because you don't always get paid for something until you finish it. (Applied Theatre Practitioner, Scotland, 2013)

The delays in payment are so extreme, and in the case of small community-based organizations there's only so much that you can bankroll it. People were getting into personal debt while waiting for their grants to come through. (Creative writer, NI, 2015)

Two respondents made explicit references to balancing art projects with poverty:

I don't earn enough so I have to apply for housing benefit and tax credit to make a living. (Dance artist, Scotland, 2015)

There were months when I didn't have enough to buy groceries, like a proper amount of groceries, living on pasta. I literally had no money coming in. (Dance facilitator, NI, 2015)

Others were relying on friends and family to help them continue with their cultural work:

I had to move back in with my mum for about a year and a half towards the end of 2013. I just couldn't pay my rent any more so moved back home, and I'm just moving out again now. (Freelance actor and drama facilitator, NI, 2015)

These financial difficulties and personal judgements about how to "keep their heads above water" (Sculptor, Scotland, 2016) clearly involved instrumental struggles for self, partners and family members. There was also an acceptance that with tighter funding conditions our artists were competing for work, and that this required some active networking with well-placed or knowledgeable others to find useful ways of persuading decision-makers to favour their projects. In this context, however, collective concerns were not diminished, and may have been enhanced in terms of orientation and cooperation by a shared sense of

predicament and frustration about what they all endured for community art. Most of the artists in Northern Ireland, and many in Scotland, knew each other and were convinced that no-one managed to avoid the pressures, or mitigate them for more than short periods, despite feeling that "the pot gets lighter for the rest of us when someone else gets funded" (Creative writer, NI, 2015).

Their personal financial pressures also tended to strengthen the links with community participants, revealing the sort of socially aware and experientially engaged artistic autonomy that Banks commends. Reactions to their difficulties in and around the artistic process had a deep effect on the outlook and commitment of many respondents. There were accounts of people "who had little themselves" arriving for project work in Edinburgh with gifts of food, for example, and offers of access to their own illicit networks to get hold of cheap Christmas presents: "We'll take care of your Christmas list for you". Basic struggles with everyday life magnified the importance of the collective art-making as a way of dealing with their respective situations and also expressing views about causes and consequences:

> Working with communities is the core of my work. It's where I find most of my artistic purpose…to try to give a voice to people who wouldn't have one. (Drama facilitator, NI, 2016)
>
> Maybe the austerity influenced my work in terms of being more radical with my artistic vision…I still work independently and sometimes for free because I believe in the value of art that reaches everyone, in art that allows a real connection between people. (Dance artist, Scotland, 2015)

In terms of attitudes and inclinations, these artists were closer to the Banks image of socially grounded and ethically aware human subjects (2010, p. 264) than the more calculating cliquish and self-serving networkers discovered by Siebert and Wilson (2013), Umney and Kretsos (2014) and others. During interviews and with written comments, they regularly stressed that their art "tends to be based on different kinds of values" (Poetic movement practitioner, NI, 2012) and that they often try to help groups "present critiques of the society that has put them where they are" (Theatre practitioner, Scotland, 2016). The next two sections consider how this affected relations with managers and representatives of the funding agencies.

Control initiatives

Much has been written about target driven regulatory regimes and how they relate to the arts (Mullen, 2012; Hewison, 2015). Policy makers and funders have become increasingly instrumental in their approach to evaluating projects, and highly bureaucratic when dealing with funding initiatives and applications (Herbert, 2004). All of our respondents railed against managerialism and a "metrics mentality" that pulled them towards narrow agendas and bureaucratic "hoop-jumping":

> I know that many projects I'm asked to do won't attract funding, not because of the quality of work but because of the funding situation and state of the Arts Council. (Creative writer, NI, 2016)

Projects with vulnerable groups can be driven by criteria that demand measurable gains…There has been a steady increase in the need to evidence the value of the work. (Musician, Scotland, 2015)

Official concerns focused on quantifiable deliverables and detached classifications of community needs, drifting away from participant engagement and artistic merit and seeming to reconstitute artists as service providers. Preoccupations with numbers and the importance attached to headcount figures for audiences, performances and frequency of participant contact ostensibly signaled a failure to grasp the distinctiveness and wider value of the artistic process:

Creative Scotland has gone down this excellence route, but that hasn't helped us get authentic results for participants. We got eight thousand [pounds] for youth work and they wanted to know the impact on crime reduction. Well this sort of engagement is difficult to tick-box in a useful way and we can't claim that twenty kids stopped throwing stones at car windows. (Director, arts organization, Scotland, 2016)

We're trying to find clear space for the best chance of good things happening, but can't make it or force it to happen. It's pointless to think about whether their human rights were improved between six and eight each Thursday night. (Dance artist, Scotland, 2016)

Examples were offered of managerial gatekeepers imposing continuity thresholds, and intervening to postpone or cancel projects where these were not demonstrated:

If you don't get the required numbers, and the target numbers are not set by you, the entire project is scrapped. And that includes all your prep work and research you've done, so you're out of pocket…They decide that to get your funding you need to reach 30 people in this age group, whereas twelve is really good for this drama workshop. So you get twelve for the first two weeks and they say 'sorry, that's not enough' and shut you down…a few years ago there would have been time for it to pick up and gather momentum. (Drama facilitator, NI, 2015)

You feel like you're in this brilliant project and people are really excited about it and got loads of energy and so much out of it, and then it comes to an end, and there's nothing. (Actor and Drama Facilitator, NI, 2014)

Some of the sharpest criticism was directed at attempts to frame the artistic processes and have funded projects fulfill top-down policy objectives. From experience, many respondents were deeply suspicious of agency–led initiatives that neglected the expressed interests of communities and functioned principally to transmit approved messages. This was a particular concern of artists working in the Derry/Londonderry area, where much of the funding had been linked to "peace-building", though with officials treating communities as consumers rather than valued constituents in a dialogue about mutually advantageous change:

A lot of resources which could be used for good things have been directed towards a marketing campaign for the city…so that Derry will sell itself to the world better…The model is that we are going to do this and we get the band to do this and the dancers to do that, and they have a picture in mind already about what the

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outcome will be…It's just karaoke…but in community arts practice people are not things that can be levered in that simple way. (Movement Artist, NI, 2012)

I would like to see cultural things being valued in a broader sense. You can't turn Orange marching into a carnival…There's no movement in political and religious identity through an ideology of PR and marketing, or instrumentalist ideas about cultural development. (Freelance performance artist, NI, 2012)

All of the artists in Northern Ireland considered their work to be important for acknowledging, reflecting and addressing the complexity of cultural traditions, and exposing superficial images of new lives without conflict. Similar arguments were heard in Scotland, with accounts of artistic practice establishing safe spaces for young people to examine situations of violence without oversimplifying the issues or presenting straightforward solutions:

We're not here to administer to the poor or be artistic social workers. That's why we need to stay radical. (Theatre practitioner and director, Scotland, 2016)

Making a difference?

Identity research has established that struggling is a regular feature of cultural work, although most of this relates to personal anxieties and ways of mediating threats to the self that come from public performance and audience reaction, for example (Beech *et al*., 2016). The processes involved are intimate, emotional and often uncomfortable since the struggles are about artists coming to terms with their own abilities, reputation and sense of

purpose. Although there were elements of this among the community artists in this study, their accounts of struggling were more obviously confident, collective and directed at the external pressures generated by managers, officials and policymakers:

> We have to speak up and take the argument to them, to make it clear that the art is not about their tick boxes and flimsy plans. (Theatre practitioner, Scotland, 2016)
>
> I'm basically an artist activist who is needed now more than ever, a self-sustaining independently minded person who is trying to do some good. (Creative writer, NI, 2016)

Some of the Northern Irish group presented a logic of action that was familiar from the "space for struggle" literature of the 1980s (Ramsay, 1985):

> There are lots of negative and anti-creative things in the ideology of the [funders], but there are also gaps where, if we are principled and careful, we can preserve space for poetic action and stand on our own creative ground…Our purpose is to find space for quality art within a framework which has some gaps for that. But we have to work to keep those gaps open. (Poetic movement practitioner, NI, 2012)

By contrast with the narrow individualism and exclusionary networking discovered in some commercial contexts (Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Umney & Kretsos, 2014), this struggling relied upon group ties and structured interventions by combinations of artists and community participants.

There was consistent evidence over the four year investigation of artists pooling their resources, providing material and emotional support, especially to younger colleagues, and helping each other to get through difficult periods:

> Jumping around to protect other artists often gets forgotten…Their momentum keeps you going and feeding off their energy and talking about ideas and not outcome demands keeps your mind on the creative process. (Visual artist, Scotland, 2016)

> You panic, and everybody I speak to in this field feels exactly the same. And that's encouraging because you're not on your own. You know you've got this network of people who go 'oh my god there's no work', nothing in the diary for the next few months. But getting together to put on a showcase event or do this open-mic poetry thing and have a play with it, all of that has been massively important for me in getting back in touch with why I do this work…It keeps the fire burning when there's no work coming, getting together to share practice and figure out how we get funding. (Freelance actor and drama facilitator, NI, 2014)

> Here in the northwest people are very unselfish and generous in giving their time and expertise to try to work together for the common good. I know that sounds pious, but we do have a good spirit, despite the changes in programming. (Creative writer, NI, 2016)

Some of the more established artists were sharing their fees with others who were financially stretched by irregular payments, and also with participants who experienced difficulties with child care and commuting costs during their art work:

My working conditions are good at present. I've had enough work to make a living for over ten years and regularly pass work on to others. (Musician, Scotland, 2015) When we have a good commission, then there is potential to support younger talented artists and they come along as assistants. (Applied theatre practitioner, Scotland, 2014)

Calling upon the network for free labour, materials and access to facilities was also a regular occurrence:

The thing with socially engaged art is that you soon let your ego go. You have to when you're asking partners and friends to come in and operate the cameras or lights, and even set up a crèche. (Musician, Scotland, 2016)

We've begun providing our studios and technical support at low cost or no cost to a range of community arts groups and artists who can no longer afford to continue elsewhere. (Movement artist, NI, 2012)

We all have amazing boxes and trunks full of costumes, props and paints…and these are often borrowed, but we make sure that we mend anything that may have been ripped, and wash and iron everything. (Applied theatre practitioner, Scotland, 2014)

What supports me is working with a group of people committed to their art and not to business outcomes and who have dance studios and facilities where we're allowed to experiment and develop projects without pressure from the funders. (Dance artist, Scotland, 2015)

There were distinct studio and workshop spaces in Edinburgh and Derry/Londonderry that provided focal points for this networking and sharing. These were described as "centres of nourishment" and "central hubs" for their coping and struggling activities.

Participants played an active part in this supporting and sharing work, accepting voluntary and occasionally some paid work to keep the centres running, and devoting considerable time and effort to raising project funds through bake sales, car boot sales, pop–up cabaret and crowdfunding events:

> They're doing more than the art. They're making it easy for people to be here, making bread and soup for everyone, because they realize that some don't have very much. (Musician, Scotland, 2016)
>
> They got people they respected to get letters written to support us when they realized that the funding was a problem. (Visual artist, Scotland, 2016)
>
> When the youth theatre do a production, they just fundraise and put on different events to get money for the set and to get costumes from the charity shops. (Drama facilitator, NI, 2015)

Managerialist tendencies and the policy agendas that influenced funding were contested procedurally, through efforts to re-frame evaluation criteria and reporting processes, and also with some political maneuvering to help the funders to "get it". Australian research has already demonstrated that community artists can be creative in stretching the evidence base of assessment to accommodate indicators of artistic and social achievement (Mullen,

2012). The artists in Scotland and Northern Ireland were reinterpreting success criteria and adapting reporting procedures in a similar fashion:

> We have our own ways of gauging success, and we're redefining what counts as a good indicator. (Theatre practitioner and artistic director, Scotland, 2016)

> I separate the tick-box charade and the more interesting stuff as part of the process, and recently started setting up situations where the participants interview each other at times during the project. And if they say something that's cool about what we've done with the art or what it means to them, I use that as evidence. (Musician, Scotland, 2016).

Pulling officials closer to the art was part of this process, playing the "old pals act" to claim space for more appreciative views and to cultivate some advocacy inside the funding agencies. There was some recognition that officials were under pressure themselves, and that those who had worked as arts practitioners had similar concerns and experienced dual role tensions:

> I feel a greater obligation to support management as I can see the stress they come under. (Musician, Scotland, 2014)

> They seem afraid to step out of management roles but as artists all we do is step out. Some are on-side and interested in what we do, so we have to help them get it and speak up. (Director, arts organization, Scotland, 2016)

One group of artists explained how they developed supportive ties with two funding officers from the health sector:

We brought them in for a steering group meeting, which we had to do, but scrapped their proposed agenda and just got the artists to talk about interesting things and give them snippets of the work, so everybody lightened up and different sides of the fence came together. (Director, arts organization, Scotland, 2016)

Others took a radical turn to more forceful interventions and political positioning.

Through the research contacts, we learned about "rebellious" work on a Glasgow project by an artist who has since published an account of his activities and the "benefits of being a bit of an asshole" (Schrag, 2014). The officials in this instance had some unsettling experiences with scheduled oversight meetings, including an instance of "kidnapping" where they were removed from a comfortable gallery venue, via taxis, to a muddy field in a housing estate. Schrag had set up a board room table and a resident's forum to challenge preconceived notions and promote a less patronizing view of the participants. This was prompted by an official vocabulary that was considered to be offensive, or at least myopic, presenting those involved as warped by sectarianism and requiring social adjustment that art was capable of stimulating.

This was the most dramatic demonstration of shared inclinations:

We've dug in. We've got a bunker mentality and we're not going anywhere. (Playwright and drama facilitator, NI, 2013)

We're not there to teach or judge participants but to share and learn together. (Theatre practitioner, Scotland, 2016)

In Northern Ireland, some of the artists were able to play different policy agendas and funding initiatives against each other, finding gaps between peace-building and the need to be inclusive and accommodate competing interests. The first quotation in this next sequence identifies opportunities that were presented with the creation of the Culture Company, which had responsibilities for marketing and delivering cultural events during the 2013 City Of Culture period (Boland *et al*., 2016):

> When the City of Culture came here and the Culture Company started up, I went and got support like we've never had before…We still had the relationship with the Arts Council who were telling us that the work we were doing wasn't right, until we got a buzz about the show. We got to do it three times with more and more people…and at that point the Arts Council gave us some of the other money we'd asked for. (Arts company director, NI, 2012)

> They know they have to involve the Protestant community. There's no getting around that and it puts me in rarefied air. They all find use in me as a bit of go-to guy for that, and if I'm going with one it drags the others along. (Theatre director and facilitator, NI, 2012)

> The councils proposed a regional dance studio in Derry, a kind of dance supermarket…We wanted a home for the company and studios for developing the kind of work done so far…We got funding for this capital project in the way we want…They've gone back to their view of this [in documentation] and we keep having to drag them back to our ground.. But we've defended our space for an autonomous organization and artistic values, rather than bureaucratic and corporate ones. (Movement artist, NI, 2012)

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Discussion and conclusion

Against a backdrop of competing theoretical arguments and empirical studies that have prioritized commercial art-making, this article set out to promote a deeper understanding of the tensions between autonomy and control in cultural work. The publicly–funded, locally-supported and participatory work of community arts practitioners provided the focus for this approach. Here, as in many commercial contexts, top-down shaping and rationalizing interventions had important negative effects, constraining and complicating artistic work while increasing financial pressures and feelings of vulnerability. It also produced some open and confident criticizing, as well as value-driven mitigating and resisting activity of the sort anticipated in the destabilizing autonomy thesis.

As an influential proponent of this, Banks argues that cultural autonomy generates rather than merely restricts opportunities to challenge and change instrumental management processes. Socially engaged artists are ostensibly well-placed to take advantage of their "space for struggle" and secure improvements in the collective conditions and experience of work. The community artists in this study were certainly conscious of social pressures and the financial hardships posed for communities, both artistic and public, by austerity budgets and funding restrictions. Their reactions and orientations were collective as well as personal, marking an obvious contrast with musicians and others in the commercial arts who were found to be more narrowly focused on marketing the self and maneuvering their way through calculative networks to remain employable (Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Umney & Kretsos, 2013; Blair, 2009). These points are significant, although there are other key

questions to consider: Is it reasonable to suggest that these community arts practitioners were also moving towards progressive outcomes? Were sustainable improvements within their reach, or are they mainly surviving, demonstrating resilience and 'making the best' of difficult situations?

Some of the respondents presented images of themselves and their colleagues that were broadly consistent with the "unruly free thinking" that Banks commends (2010). All of them were involved with joint resisting and contesting activities that approximate to his vision of grounded and authentic action and anticipated pattern of "zoned" dissent (2007). Favour-focused networks were still evident, although these could not be fairly characterized as competitive, careerist or exclusionary. They were closer, in fact, to the mutually supportive, protective and developmental ties revealed by Coulson (2012), reaching into participant communities to foster shared critiques of conditions and controls and to cultivate forms of advocacy and activism that would enable them to "stand on their own creative ground" (Movement artist, NI, 2012). Some of these certainly had a radical edge. However, it was impossible to connect them to any sort of formal or transformative shift in the policies, programmes and management arrangements that affected respondents, or even to secure instances of progressive improvement. This sits uneasily with some of the more dramatic claims made about the political significance of cultural autonomy, and highlights the need for a grounded understanding of artistic agency and the conditions and dynamics that affect creative resistance. The struggles in this instance were ongoing and unresolved, the insecurities showed no signs of abating, and the responsiveness of officials was informal and variable.

One of the most telling reactions to the "space for struggle" arguments of the 1980s focused on the significance of countervailing influences (Ramsay, 1985). There was a realization that the "space" is not inhabited exclusively by critics. It remains open to conservative as well as challenging interests. It is available to multiple actors, including those with opposing views, and is not usually contextualized in ways that are favourable to assaults on the status quo. The caveat here is that the strategic and reactive agency of managerial and directive interests exerts a continuing influence on outcomes, and needs to be accommodated within a relational conceptualization of struggle. Autonomous cultural workers may be able to resist and possibly, at times, deliver means of avoiding the more crushing effects of commercialism and managerialism. However, "their" space is not truly independent or free from the struggling of officials and traditionalists, who may also be adept at closing in on that space to contest or curtail interventions that they perceive to be dysfunctional or undermining.

In this research, the agency of other groups, notably policy makers and managerialists within the arts bureaucracies, remained important, more often clashing than dovetailing with the community artists. Even when they established a rapport with officials, and certainly when "kidnapping" them, reactions were not always positive, and could generate feelings of embarrassment or annoyance as opposed to enlightenment or an awakening to the need for change. Contrasting interpretations and sensitivities complicated the application of artistic autonomy, and these could harden into more determined or insensitive opposition. For example, some respondents were convinced that parts of the

funding establishment regarded the community arts as rather amateurish, often translating this into support for tighter controls as a way of professionalizing the field. From here, the frontline activism for the art and the communities could be construed as irrelevant or unhelpful, and therefore ignored, avoided or resisted. Certainly, within the funding regimes, there was a lingering attachment to the logic and measures already applied to this area of the arts, and this cut against the activism of the frontline artists.

The corollary is that the spaces in which the artists struggled were troubled, compromised and difficult to move through, despite the evident conviction and creativity of the activism. These artists and communities were surviving rather than prospering. They were passionately frustrated rather than assuredly transformative, resigned to exploiting gaps and opportunities, with a resilience that was often difficult to sustain and which took them on an emotional roller coaster. There were encouraging periods and strong points where the collective ties gave people a rejuvenating boost and even the physical means to continue, although resilience could also slip to anxiety, stress and "burnout". They were highlighting purposeful activism and still explaining how they felt "worn down", "hemmed in" and more vulnerable than anyone should ever be.

This variability is neglected in much of the literature on cultural autonomy, which can dwell on potential (or the restriction of it) without conceptualizing the risks and dilemmas for those involved. Limited attention is also given to the fluidity of interpretations and responses, and the possibility of people moving either towards or away from active dissent, resistance or progressive interventions as a result of difficult personal or collective

experiences with struggling. Although Banks himself acknowledges a plurality of possibilities other than challenging (including conforming, adapting and making-do), his theorization connects autonomy and transformative potential without following through to account for the impact of different conditions and contingencies on the everyday propensities to oppose and to consistently pursue improvements. Wider studies of employee resistance point to the significance of shifting rather than just different or competing positions and alliances, revealing how constructive opposition can be encouraged though also undercut by tough experiences as processes of struggle unfold (Beirne, 2013). The struggling of the artists in this investigation was at the same time creative and stressful, rewarding and difficult, engaging and insecure, considered vital by all and yet impoverishing for more than a few. This underlines the need for more focused theorizing to understand the dilemmas that confront cultural workers and to appreciate how these affect nascent or developed forms of activism.

Turning from agency to structure, some fresh thinking could also be applied to enabling and regulative possibilities. The activism discovered in this research was local. It emerged from the grassroots, in the absence of wider support structures and conducive regulatory arrangements. This was another source of annoyance for respondents, and a justification for their persistence. There was a feeling among the artists that their activism for both art and communities would have more of an impact if they had the same bargained rights and employment conditions as other sectors.

There are, of course, some prominent examples of collective organization within the arts, including alliances with trade unions to represent cultural workers, establish fair pay scales and eliminate exploitative contracts (Cohen, 2012). There are also concerns about the impact, extent and longevity of these initiatives, and the capacity of established trade unions to secure bargained rights and benefits for freelance and other disadvantaged workers beyond their traditional heartlands (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Beirne & Wilson, 2016). The lack of structured support may be more important for effective struggling than 'space' per se, although contrary arguments can also be anticipated. Effective forms of representation and organized support may be construed as undermining local activism and the capacity for self-realization. With this research, however, the merits of struggling on broader fronts to reconcile structure and agency, to establish conducive arrangements for nurturing and sustaining progressive grassroots interventions, are far more obvious. The insecurity of the community arts practitioners provided a reason for activism and also a restriction upon it. With this realization, the relative importance of representative and wider support structures could be usefully developed as part of the debate on cultural autonomy, exploring options for mutual learning, mentoring and advising at a minimum, though also rejuvenating applied research on negotiating possibilities, procedural agreements and innovative ways of contesting arts sector managerialism.

The destabilizing autonomy thesis, as articulated by Banks, relates progressive change to the reflective sense-making and considered activism of front line cultural workers. To this extent, his work is in tune with a rich tradition of social theorizing about the centrality of local agency and capacity of front line workers to effect change (Beirne, 2008). Influential

theorist-practitioners such as Gustavsen (1979) regularly argued that the liberation of work should begin with the activism of workers themselves, urging researchers "to go out among people and see how they work with their problems" (1979: 349) and underline the importance of initiatives that are rooted in local agency. This analysis of the particular struggles of some community arts practitioners magnifies the need for a more inclusive understanding of the complex mix of interests, interpretations, setbacks, responses and modifications that have a bearing upon the progressive aspects of cultural work. It also requires that these be situated within the specific conditions of their development, so that issues and outcomes can be evaluated realistically and tactically, with a grounded sense of future prospects and in the absence of hasty judgements or wishful thinking.

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