

In Harmony Liverpool Research Network



Summary of discussions held during Workshop 1 – Cultural Capital in the Community

22nd March 2013


institute of cultural capital



Arts & Humanities
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The In Harmony Liverpool Research Network held its first workshop – Cultural Capital in the Community – on Friday 22nd March 2013. The city (and much of the country) was hit by appalling weather including unexpected blizzard conditions, so we're very grateful to all colleagues who joined us, especially those travelling from as far afield as Oxford, Milton Keynes, Cumbria and Glasgow!

The workshop opened with an introduction to the network from Kerry Wilson (Principal Investigator) of the Institute of Cultural Capital, including a description of our umbrella AHRC-led Connected Communities programme, the network's origins, aims and objectives and structure of the workshop. This was followed by a presentation on the commissioned evaluation of In Harmony Liverpool from evaluators Susanne Burns and Paul Bewick, including an overview of evaluation aims, objectives and indicative findings. The team outlined how their evaluation had informed the development of the network, acknowledging the accepted limitations of such work in relation to given timescales, budgets and resource allocation, and other restrictions including a need to prioritise the assessment of outputs and outcomes as specified by funding bodies and other key stakeholders. They also noted that attribution should be a major consideration in any research on the Impact of In Harmony Liverpool going forward, as the West Everton community (where In Harmony Liverpool is based) has been subject to a number of interventions and infrastructural changes in recent years. In relation to connecting communities, Paul and Susanne described many positive elements of the programme from its inception, including the collaborative qualities of the bidding process to secure initial pilot project funding; the level of stakeholder engagement in evaluation design and delivery; the 'iconic' value of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic as lead organisation in facilitating partnerships and 'opening doors'; each creating a 'family' characteristic to In Harmony Liverpool, which is now reflected by other key dimensions such as sibling groups and whole families learning to play instruments together.

The event coincided with the 4 year anniversary of In Harmony Liverpool, providing the opportunity for workshop participants to enjoy a lunchtime performance from West Everton Children's Orchestra, West Everton Super Strings and musicians of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra at the Philharmonic Hall, and engage with the programme as a cultural experience in itself.

The network primarily acts as a 'stepping stone' in seeking to develop a collaborative programme of empirical research attached to In Harmony Liverpool, enabling the discussion of emerging research interests amongst an interdisciplinary research community, and the testing of the feasibility and appropriateness of research questions within the context of previous and existing research from a range of disciplines. With this in mind, three invited academic colleagues spoke about their research on the Sistema phenomenon and cultural capital from sociological and educational perspectives.

Dr Geoff Baker (Research Associate, Faculty of Music, University of Oxford and Reader in Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Department of Music, Royal Holloway, University of London) gave an illuminating talk on the culture of El Sistema based on his fieldwork in Venezuela. Geoff was keen to reiterate that his research focuses upon the original Venezuelan Sistema model only, and that he has never researched and would not be referring directly to other national adaptations including In Harmony Sistema England projects. Geoff calls into critical question some of the cultural assumptions made about Sistema and its social impact, in both socio-political and artistic contexts. Social inclusion is often the political watchword associated with the movement, but this is narrowly defined and is yet to be systematically proven. The political associations and rhetoric around Sistema in Venezuela, led by its founder Jose Antonio Abreu, have seemingly had chameleon-like qualities, starting with strong neo-liberal, right-wing and essentially capitalist connotations to the more socialist utopian ideals associated with the movement today and appropriated in Venezuela in the Chavez era from 1996 onwards. In an artistic capacity, Geoff highlights the tensions between the

orchestra as a metaphor in Sistema discourse and as a cultural reality. Drawing upon Max Weber's classical organizational theory and Spitzer and Zaslav's *Birth of the Orchestra* (2005), the orchestra is described as complex, competitive, stratified and dysfunctional; autocratic and elite. Whereas Sistema and now In Harmony Liverpool suggest that the 'orchestra as community' model creates an equal and equitable learning environment, traditionally the orchestra has a much more problematic, hierarchical value system. Similarly in Geoff's view the Sistema model presents other elitist artistic challenges – its focus on classical (or more accurately orchestral) music excludes other musical forms and traditions which may be of equal or more cultural value to participating children and communities.

Geoff has since blogged¹ on the Cultural Capital in the Community workshop, commenting on the inclusive qualities of In Harmony Liverpool and the potential capacity of the research network to advance the Sistema debate, with the caveat that some of his concerns on how Sistema is applied and interpreted as a music education intervention remain. During the workshop Geoff's suggested approach to researching the 'cultural capital' impacts of In Harmony Liverpool focused on the role of the orchestra, its comparative value to other musical forms, and implied capitalist ideologies – encouraging 'disciplined and productive subjects' – as compared to the social revolutionary model presented by Sistema. Geoff cited Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and recommended an approach that considers communities' own cultural capital and musical tastes to have the same value.

This provided an excellent segue into the next presentation from Dr Andy Miles (Reader in Sociology, ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, University of Manchester). Andy discussed his research on existing forms of cultural capital in 'excluded' communities, and within the context of the structural governance of culture. Starting with the Bourdieuan premise that cultural tastes are organised by social class, many such assumptions ignore other relevant variables such as age and 'life-course' influences. Andy introduced the concept of 'omnivourness' as a prominent feature of British cultural capital, reflecting the fact that people have varied cultural tastes, the capacity to sample and enjoy different cultural activities and take equal satisfaction from them. Cultural policy however in recent years has focused on disengagement – or non-participation in organised culture – as a social problem, particularly in relation to New Labour's social inclusion objectives. Cultural participation in this context is used as a classifying device, which associates cultural value with middle class notions of culture and 'the arts'. Referring to research undertaken with communities in Manchester that would be politically defined as culturally excluded, Andy described a number of 'everyday' community-based cultural practices that go beyond the ordinary (e.g. becoming a self-taught, enthusiastic and proficient cook after being inspired by TV cookery programme) and forms of 'ghostly participation' involving self-motivated activities undertaken in own time and outside formal structures.

Andy described "vibrant, vernacular" community-based cultures reminiscent of Raymond Williams' thesis on 'culture as a way of life'. Cultural policy however tends to disregard the 'everyday', focusing instead on psychological barriers to full participation in organised culture (e.g. lack of confidence in formal institutions and perceived 'not for me' attitudinal barriers). In reality, within the Manchester communities studied, such 'detachment' doesn't matter, and people are happy to be 'excluded'. Real studies of cultural participation and capital therefore need to be located spatially as well as structurally. This becomes a more challenging social question when cultural capital is continually associated with life improvement, and 'interventions' seek to extract participation from communities and conform to middle class values. In Harmony Liverpool presents an alternative model, in being an immersive community-based intervention using 'legitimate' cultural forms.

¹ Please see <http://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-older-posts/a-day-out-in-liverpool/>

Andy's research reminds us however that interventions like In Harmony/El Sistema do not exist in cultural isolation, but rather complement existing forms of community-based cultural capital. Previous discussions between members of the network's Steering Group for example have reflected upon the history of music making in traditional working class communities such as West Everton, where older generations will have been proficient musicians (e.g. pianists) but rarely classically trained.

The next academic speaker, Alastair Wilson (Senior Research Fellow, Applied Educational Research Centre, University of Strathclyde) gave an example of how cultural capital is being used within a purposeful 'life improvement' context. Alastair gave a thought-provoking presentation on the Intergenerational Mentoring Programme, which he leads at the University of Strathclyde. The programme raises lots of interesting questions on the ethics of social mobility, cultural capital and educational inequality. The mentoring programme provides one-to-one guidance from retired, professional university alumni for young people in disadvantaged communities in Glasgow, who show academic promise but have relatively little social and cultural capital, or immediate peer support. The aim is to support identified young people into higher education and improve their chances of entering the professions. Alastair spoke of the inherent 'Eliza Doolittle' characteristics of the programme and the challenges in creating a level social and cultural playing field between mentees and pupils from achieving schools. Where extra-curricular activities such as volunteer work and Duke of Edinburgh awards may be the norm for the latter, filling such gaps for mentees aiming to become first-generation university students has many cultural implications. Alastair commented that theories of global low self-esteem fail to rationalise cultural and educational deficits amongst the young people he works with, who are all perfectly confident in their 'own' surroundings. They subsequently have to be re-moulded and 'forced through the doors' of professional career routes. Other challenges include changing staff attitudes and cultures within relevant schools, where young people are told 'not to bother' where higher education and professional entry are concerned.

With respect to In Harmony Liverpool, Alastair's presentation provides perspective on the relative value of early years cultural interventions and enhanced cultural capital in relation to educational attainment, especially when set against the challenges of intervening at later stages in the compulsory education process. When considered against points raised by Geoff and Andy on existing or 'everyday' forms of cultural capital (which must arguably exist within the communities that Alastair works with), the added value of the intervention itself is brought into sharper focus.

Participants engaged in a lively discussion on the ethos and impact of In Harmony Liverpool and the Sistema movement in relation to cultural capital, guided by the following prompts:

- How significant is cultural capital as an outcome for In Harmony Liverpool?
- How can cultural capital be framed and researched with reference to 'impact'?
- What other situated conditions and contexts should be considered?

The [ir]relevance of Cultural Capital

Discussions revealed a number of contradictions and challenges in our understanding and perceptions of the role and value of cultural capital in relation to In Harmony Liverpool – these in turn can potentially become research opportunities as the programme progresses.

Increased access and openness to different cultural activities and opportunities (for the whole community) is described as a positive outcome in the most recent full In Harmony Liverpool evaluation report² – see for example indicators from Philharmonic Hall postcode box office data presented on page 59. The report goes on to recommend that consistent effort is made as the programme progresses to improve and enhance community participation. This outcome as a form of cultural capital was downplayed however in the evaluation team’s presentation, which prioritised social outcomes and the value of *social* capital. The evaluators explained that In Harmony Liverpool is primarily regarded (and subsequently evaluated) as a social programme – musical prowess and educational achievement for example is not measured or assessed as part of the evaluation. This was problematic for some participants – it raises questions on the significance of the *cultural* intervention if purely designed to fulfil social objectives (would any other type of intervention have the same impact?), and the risks involved and missed learning opportunities if not fully considering the musical impact of a major strategic music education intervention. An objective research programme, which is not accountable to core funding bodies and prescribed outputs/outcomes, can help to overcome this.

The relevance of established theories of cultural capital to In Harmony Liverpool was also briefly discussed. The evaluation team cited ‘dimensions of cultural impact’ in their initial presentation (i.e. Pierre Bourdieu’s embodied, objectified and institutionalised dimensions defined in *The Forms of Capital*, 1986), indicating that these “must be correlated with the social capital (networks, relationships and resources) being developed within the various communities (*fields*) at play”. In this context, the blurring of social and cultural capital will not account for the fact that some children will be more consistently engaged with the music education process, and therefore more musically/culturally accomplished than others, as reflected by the observations on children’s motivation and attention levels on page 44 of the full evaluation report. Some clear distinction should be made here between social and cultural capital outcomes – children who are no longer musically or culturally stimulated or engaged may continue to benefit from social outcomes, but the quality of experience will be different from those still feeling a sense of cultural reward. The extent to which this impacts upon family and other community members may also differ, suggesting a relationship between individual and collective levels of both cultural and social capital on mutually exclusive terms. Emerging questions include:

- If social capital is the most significant outcome of In Harmony Liverpool, where does the relevance of the *cultural* intervention begin and end? How much active cultural/musical participation is required before social capital is achieved?
- There are many emerging questions concerning opportunity, entitlement and empowerment – what is the causal relationship between active participation in In Harmony Liverpool and individual and collective cultural capital? How active must participation be (e.g. musician; audience member) and where is the capital held?
- What is the relationship between musical proficiency and enjoyment and *both* cultural and social capital on individual and collective scales?

Cultural interventions, ideology and impact – In Harmony or not?

Geoff’s provocation prompted much debate on the appropriateness and usefulness of accepted ideological assumptions (and any challenges to them) relating to the Venezuelan Sistema model.

² Please see <http://inharmonyresearch.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/In-Harmony-Liverpool-Year-3-Interim-Report-March-2012.pdf>

One participant commented that it is damaging to take any kind of ideological stance when seeking to research the impact of a programme like In Harmony Liverpool, which should be treated on its own merits rather than as a form of borrowed 'cultural imperialism'. This was countered by the fact that all publicly funded (and especially educational) interventions have an ideological underpinning by their very nature, and that these motivational characteristics cannot be detached from any consideration of process and impact.

In Harmony Liverpool was inspired by El Sistema and was not therefore an original, independent innovation. It is now part of the In Harmony SISTEMA England family, and participants observed that it is important to acknowledge what aspects of the Sistema tradition – and indeed other related projects and incarnations – are adapted and/or adopted as the global movement builds. What for example happens to the rhetorical power and value of the Sistema brand when adapted or reconfigured in other settings, and when differing forms of impact are prioritised or seen as more important than others? How easily can any Sistema model be wholly adopted or transferred in other settings? As In Harmony Liverpool progresses it is vital to consider the full range of situated cultural conditions in the community when assessing its impact, and the role that these conditions play, not least to overcome the problem of attribution flagged by the evaluation team. Such a grounded study will furthermore be of interest to any other community either already engaged in a Sistema programme or considering a similar intervention.

In final comments, Andy Miles added that there is a fundamental question of community cohesion or fragmentation that should be considered in the context of a long tradition of 'betterment' and enhanced entitlement within the working classes. Is the overarching ideology of In Harmony Liverpool/El Sistema to improve chances for individuals or to improve the 'equality of condition' in communities themselves? If the former, the sociological implications of this should still be considered, i.e. what happens to communities when individual success stories (and cultural capital) leave? What is the wider social research project beyond evaluating In Harmony Liverpool on linear input/output terms? The construction of community here is also important – Alastair commented that many of his mentees do not aspire to leave their communities for reasons of personal identity and security. The evaluation team and In Harmony Sistema England colleagues closed the discussion by stating that the programme is not about fuelling individual ambition, but involves a pragmatic approach to cultural capital, that is respectful of ingrained, traditional values but seeks to empower communities to "aspire" beyond current limits.

The project team would like to thank all workshop participants for braving the blizzard, providing so much food for thought and making such an enjoyable workshop!

Kerry Wilson, March 2013