

A question of ethics: *Careful communities of practice and affective cultural work*



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Instrumental Values research project

- ['Instrumental Values: Professional ethics in collaborative cultural work'](#)
2017-19
- Mid-career AHRC Leadership Fellowship award
- Study of **ethical dimensions of collaborative practice** between museum and library sectors and partner agencies working in two priority public policy areas, focusing on **museums working in health care settings and prison library services**.
- Three case studies per sector using ethnographic [qualitative] approach.
- Funded under Public Policy highlight notice
- Motivated by previous research on cross-sector [instrumental] value of arts and culture and perceived gap concerning implications for professional identities, values and practices in cultural work.

Communities of Practice research framework

- Considering **sites of multidisciplinary collaborative cultural work as communities of practice** (CoPs), defined as vehicles for situated learning, generating knowledge and sharing practices within and across a range of work-based and organisational spatial settings (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi et al, 1998; Amin and Roberts, 2008), including:
 - The extent of **work assimilation** across professional boundaries;
 - Identification of **shared repertoires**, artefacts and symbols of collaborative professional learning;
 - The **social construction of embodied professional knowledge** and skills;
 - The articulation and representation of **unique professional identities** in creating **collaborative 'added value'**;
 - The **reciprocal value of defined codes of ethics** to collaborating professional communities;
 - Each set within the context of **public policy agendas and their influence** upon developing cross-sector professional communities.

A question of [professional] ethics

- Professional ethics in practice are ‘the **norms of right action, good qualities of character and values** aspired to, espoused and enacted by professional practitioners in the context of their work’ (Banks and Gallaher, 2009).
- Professional ethics differentiated from other codes of civic morals through the **legitimacy, autonomy and regulation of collective power**... [and] are subsequently ‘more developed, and the more advanced in their operation, the greater the stability and the better the organization of the professional groups themselves’ (Durkheim, 1957).
- As an example of the legitimation and regulation of professional ethics in cultural professions, the Museums Association published a revised [Code of Ethics for Museums](#) in 2015, following a substantial consultation with members.
- Call for a ‘transformation in the understanding of professional ethics’, paying greater attention to a ‘**third order**’ of **public accountability** and greater responsibility towards the wider public good (Lane, 2017).

Notes from the field: collaborative contexts

- Much more complex than originally anticipated in terms of:
 - Range and volume of **collaborating organisations**;
 - Integral supporting role of **third sector and voluntary** organisations;
 - Range of **'life-course' professional skills and experiences** held by cultural CoP members;
 - How **circumstance and opportunity** inform and shape the 'successful' cultural CoP.
- For example, [Cognitive Stimulation Therapy](#) groups for prisoners with dementia at HMP Norwich.

Notes from the field: professional ethics and ‘virtuous intuition’

- Knowledge of, but **little reference to, codes of ethics/practice** as determined by professional bodies in day-to-day collaborative practice;
- Some **conflict between what are regarded as core professional values and regulations enforced locally** e.g. principles of intellectual freedom and equality of access to information for librarians versus censorship of reading materials in prison;
- Work much more **ethically informed by** personally held moral values; political ideology and orientation; other professional training and development; faith and religious beliefs;
- As such, research steered towards a **‘virtues-based approach’** to understanding ethics in integrated professional environments, including a focus on shared moral qualities and key virtues amongst practitioners.

Notes from the field: the 'third order' of ethical practice

- The cultural CoP effectively embodies the 'third order', as affective cultural work is arguably happening *in spite of* situated institutional conditions:
 - Prison services/staff have enabling function but **varying levels of active participation** and collaboration;
 - Driven by [collective] **personal integrity, initiative and sheer will-power** of the cultural CoP;
 - Tenacious **navigation of the prison system**;
 - Ethical **challenges/compromises** regarding relationship management within the prison;
 - How to position myself and the **research as part of the 'third order'**?

The ethical community of [cultural] practice

- Considerable **work assimilation** across professional boundaries – from vernacular appropriation of prison life to blurring of roles/identities within the cultural CoP;
- Outcomes-based **repertoires of professional learning**, symbolised by impacts on those taking part and strength and qualities of CoP (cultural objects are functional);
- Evidence of how **knowledge is socially constructed** through a) navigation of the system and b) the way the cultural CoP supports, cares for and nurtures itself through critical reflective practice;
- Self-generating and sustaining own **codes of practice** through shared values and experiences of working together;
- Policy agendas have an **enabling function** – creating opportunities to strategically position work of CoPs.

Implications for cultural policy and the cultural value debate

- The **true 'cost' of making a difference**: doesn't cost much (financially) to run a reading group but 'successful' cultural CoPs constitute a considerable long-term investment in terms of multidisciplinary professional skills, experience and personal commitment.
- Issues of **complexity and replicability** – especially for asset-based policies (e.g. social prescribing) and positioning of arts and culture as cost-effective public policy interventions.
- What constitutes **'good work'** for those undertaking cultural work for the 'greater good'? The most virtuous people have tipping points...
- Moral questions of **dependence upon third sector** and voluntary work – where does the 'third order' of public accountability really sit when it comes to professional ethics?

Next steps for the research

- Final phase of fieldwork October 2018
- Knowledge exchange event in collaboration with Institute of Applied Ethics*, University of Hull on 13th November 2018
- Research workshop, Liverpool, December 2018
- Knowledge exchange event with Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies*, Australian National University, January 2019
- Write a book, 2019-20
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*Position paper to be prepared in advance