Who cares? At what price? The hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour and the moral failure of cultural policy

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Abstract
In the broader context of research into cultural labour, this article focuses analytical attention on working conditions within socially engaged arts practice, which have been under-researched to date. In particular, the article aims to uncover the unacknowledged costs shouldered by socially engaged practitioners working on publicly subsidised participatory projects. On the basis of the analysis of qualitative interviews with socially engaged artists and creative professionals, the article calls for an explicit effort to bring our public cultural institutions to task in relation to what Mark Banks calls 'creative justice'. This entails highlighting the mechanisms of systemic exploitation of artists within current funding practices and the ways in which project-based funding rarely incorporates, as a matter of course, provisions to ensure the fulfilment of duties of care towards both artists and participating communities. The article draws on feminist ethics of care to advance a first intervention towards developing fresh thinking on *the moral economy of the subsidised arts sector*; it does this by starting from an acknowledgement that the normative environments of contemporary arts funding point to a clear moral failure of cultural policy.

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Introduction

The past 50 years have witnessed a remarkable growth in prominence of what is commonly referred to as socially engaged arts practice – participatory in nature and with a clear intention to act as intervention in the social and political sphere. This practice centres on 'artist-led, non-object-based encounters, performances, and collaborations with others' (Hope, 2017: 203), and its history is rooted in the countercultural movements of the 1960s/1970s. Yet, since the late 1990s, socially engaged arts practice has been increasingly successful in attracting public funding (albeit not sufficiently so as to disrupt pre-existing funding allocation principles). This was the result of a renewed focus from policy-makers on the societal benefits of active participation and the hope that they might support wider strategies of social cohesion and inclusion (Belfiore, 2002; Hope, 2015).

Against this wider backdrop, this article focuses analytical attention on working conditions within socially engaged arts practice, with the aim to uncover the 'hidden costs' that socially engaged practitioners shoulder. Commonly, in this chronically underfunded area of creative practice, artists work significantly more hours than they are paid for (Hope, 2015). In this regard, socially engaged arts practice is not different from other areas of creative practice and cultural work (Siebert and Wilson, 2013). However, alongside loss of earning, there is something distinctive in the experiences of socially engaged artists working with participants who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, displaced, vulnerable or at risk of various forms of social exclusion. This uniqueness relates to the personal, psychological costs and ethical dilemmas artists face as a result of how public financing of such arts projects works within UK arts funding. This article highlights the systematic and embedded exploitation of socially engaged practitioners within the very fabric of the public infrastructure designed to support socially engaged practice with disadvantaged populations. My contention is that funders are able to essentially neglect meaningful care (both during and after completion of the project) for the groups involved in the arts activities because artists are willing – due to their beliefs and a strong ethical and political drive in their practice – to carry out those duties without pay, specialist training or support (Lingo and Tepper, 2013). This ostensibly amounts to exploitative practice, due to the obvious imbalance of power between funders and the artists whose livelihoods depend on project-based employment and continued support from funding agencies (Kester, 2004). The article discusses the unsustainability of this modus operandi, the personal price paid by artists and their implications for the subsidised cultural sector.

The article presents an original conceptualisation that brings together notions of the *cultural* moral economy – as elaborated by Russell Keat (2000) and Mark Banks (2006, 2017), among others – and feminist scholarship on the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993, 2013). Therefore, the article offers itself as the first step in the development of a fresh strand of critical cultural policy scholarship that holds public cultural institutions and funders to account – in the name of fairness and social justice – relative to their care responsibilities towards both the artists they fund and the publics and communities that are supposed to benefit from that funding. If collectively pursued, this development can lead to a much-needed critical renewal of cultural policy studies (Turner, 2011).

The moral cultural economy and creative practitioners' labour

Cultural labour has emerged as a central concern for academic scholarship. Research has focused in particular on the precarious and exploitative nature of employment and the socially stratified access to careers in the cultural and creative industries (Banks, 2017; Cohen, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2015). Research has documented the ways in which working practices, talent pipelines and the culture of unpaid internships conspire to keep work in the cultural and creative industries the preserve of the privileged (Brook et al., 2018; Dubois, 2015; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; McRobbie, 2016) and an area in which social mobility is still rather limited (Friedman and Laurison, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2016). Evidence shows that precariousness, informality and the demand for flexibility characterise this type of work, with significant psychological impacts (Lee, 2019). Furthermore women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities find developing sustainable careers in these industries especially challenging (Conor et al., 2015; Shade and Jacobson, 2015).

In addition to issues of pay, questions of adequate resourcing and sustainability have long been at the centre of debates within the community arts movement, of which socially engaged arts practice is the latest incarnation. Public funding, in particular, has been seen both as necessary and as problematic (Kelly, 1984). In 1978, artist Su Braden, in her germinal *Artists & People*, described it as a mixed blessing and bemoaned funders' seeming incapacity to accept that what community arts needed to flourish was 'a long-term commitment from them as administrators and that this commitment necessitates patient year-by-year programming in which communities and artists can grow together' (Braden, 1978: 124). More recently, Sophie Hope (2017) has highlighted the problems posed by the prevailing short-term, project-based approach to socially engaged arts commissioning: project-based funding does not sit comfortably with socially engaged artists' preference for fluid structures and naturally evolving collaborative activities. Thus, pinpointing exactly when a project 'ends' is not always straightforward, because the running out of the funding does not always coincide with the activity's natural conclusion (Hope, 2015). As a result, attending to the aftercare process for both artists and community participants is rarely possible within the scope of projects as delimited by grant timescales and expectations. With perhaps the exception of an immediate post-project evaluation, most activities are expected to cease once the core art activity has been delivered. Projects must also demonstrably provide 'value for money' so that it is a real challenge to build in sufficient time ahead of the core participatory activity to establish a genuine rapport with the project participants. This means that there is very limited scope for projects to be resourced adequately to enable for relationships of mutual respect, solidarity and reciprocity to be forged between those delivering the activities and those participating in them over a sufficiently sustained period of time.[1]

Against the backdrop of these developments in the socially engaged practice field, this article makes an original contribution by highlighting what seems to have been, thus far, a neglected dimension within the creative labour literature (which tends to focus predominantly on the commercial creative industries): the need to bring our *public cultural institutions* to task in relation to what Mark Banks (2017) calls 'creative justice', with the attendant fostering of 'the preservation or development of "good" or better kinds

of cultural work, including work that enables people to flourish and live well in an objective sense' (Banks, 2017: 41). This entails focusing on the mechanisms of systemic exploitation of practitioners within a funding infrastructure that is very comfortable using the rhetoric of collaborative, participatory and socially engaged arts practice and of social justice and empowerment, but does not follow those principles in its own modus operandi. The objective of this exercise is ultimately to develop, on the basis of a case study, fresh thinking on the *moral economy of the subsidised arts*, as a stepping stone towards 'the formation of normative principles for action' (Banks, 2017: 4), which current thinking on cultural and creative industries so urgently needs.

Rooted in notions of the moral economy is the acknowledgement that 'work is always subject to the norms and values of the particular society in which it is *embedded*' (Banks, 2017: 42). A moral economy approach, then, allows us 'to make evaluative (normative) judgements *about* the ethical qualities of the work itself' and establish what counts as good work in socially engaged practice – that is, 'work that allows for the maximum wellbeing for the greatest number' (Banks, 2017: 43; emphasis in the original). To this end, the rest of this article will explore the case study of experiences of artists and cultural professionals working on the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).[2]

The case study – the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project

The discussion presented here is based on the analysis of a set of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2014 with the artists and the cultural and educational professionals who, in 2013, devised, obtained funding for and delivered *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives*. This was a participatory arts and heritage project involving the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) communities living in Lincolnshire and was co-delivered by an education-focused charity, the Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI), and the cultural consultancy *cultural solutions uk*.[3] They collaborated to provide a range of participatory activities involving children from the local GRT communities and their families. The activities were facilitated by a number of artists and creative professionals with expertise in participatory work and included creative writing, photographic work, recordings of oral family histories and working with a professional filmmaker on the production of a short film documenting the participants' experiences and lifestyles. The objective was to offer Gypsy and Traveller young people the opportunity to document, express and reflect on their cultural heritage on their own terms, as an antidote to racialised and stereotypical representation that are dominant in British media and popular culture (Belfiore, 2018). The investigation's original scope was exploring the extent to which participatory arts interventions might function as vehicles of recognition for the Lincolnshire GRT communities involved in the participatory arts activity, thus acting as a 'redistribution' mechanism for cultural value.

For this purpose, a total of 12 interviews were conducted with two staff members of the educational charity that received HLF funding, the LTI; three cultural professionals working for *cultural solutions uk*, who helped with the application and were responsible for the project's delivery; three artists employed to work with the participating children and their families; Gordon Boswell, who in 1995 founded the Gordon Boswell Romany

Museum in Spalding and whose family was involved in the project (interviewed twice); two female participants from the local GRT community; and the project's communications officer. I intended to also interview HLF staff involved in supporting the application and overseeing the post-award phase, but repeated invitations to be involved in the project were all declined.

The analysis presented here is the result of an unforeseen development: the original interview plans were driven by my interest in exploring the politics of engagement and representation in a publicly funded community arts project targeted at a misrecognised and disadvantaged group. However, while pursuing this, from the outset, issues around the working conditions of the cultural workers (both artists and other cultural professionals working for *cultural solutions uk*) emerged powerfully from the qualitative interviews. This article offers a reflection on the broader cultural policy significance of this unexpected set of findings emerging from the fieldwork.

Interesting patterns transpired from the interview scripts in relation to unpaid labour, lack of training and support, and other 'hidden costs' (both material and emotional) that the socially engaged artists and professionals working on this publicly subsidised project shouldered. As noted earlier, it is a common occurrence in creative practice that artists work significantly more hours than they are paid for. However, alongside loss of earning, I was struck by the emerging evidence of the personal, psychological costs and ethical dilemmas that interviewees working on this project felt they had to take on because of how arts projects are financed.

The emergence of these patterns was facilitated by an unexpected yet felicitous case of crossed wires in relation to paid participation in an end of project workshop: one of the artists interpreted this as all engagement in the research being paid on a daily fee basis, including the interview process. Not wanting to disappoint someone who had been extremely supportive of the research and being in the fortunate position of having project funding to address this, I decided to have a day-long extended interview and studio visit with the artist in question (henceforth referred to as A1). This seemed a satisfactory solution that would allow the artist to be paid for her time and for me to gain an additional understanding of the broader context of socially engaged arts practice within rural Lincolnshire. The resulting conversation and extended interview went beyond the exploration of the issues in my original topic guide and included a frank and honest discussion of the working conditions of socially engaged arts practice in a geographical context characterised by a limited arts infrastructure.[4] Yet, key issues arising in the extended conversation with A1 (also discussed within the formal interview) also emerged during interviews with the other artists (henceforth A2 and A3), with the three cultural consultants/professionals (CP1, CP2 and CP3) and with the educational charity employees (ECW1 and ECW2) working on the project. All had paid the unacknowledged price of working in socially engaged practice.

For the purpose of this article, the interview scripts were re-coded with a focus on what respondents said about their experiences of work on the project. The coded scripts were then subjected to thematic analysis with a view to identifying any shared or recurrent issues in the interviewees' experiences of working on the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project. The analysis presented here draws on the interview work with the cultural practitioners and professionals who delivered it, but not on the interviews that were carried

out with project participants from the GRT community, as these scripts are not relevant to the issue in hand. In total, this article is based on interviews with eight individuals professionally involved in the delivery of the project, including the extended interview mentioned above, and on my fieldnotes.

This article develops an intellectual/theoretical frame for the interpretation of the meaning and implications of these hidden costs of socially engaged arts labour in the wider context of UK arts funding practices. While the interview data offer an important empirical pivot for the discussion, the article's purpose is to push cultural policy research to develop a better understanding and a more sophisticated picture of the moral economy of the subsidised arts sector, within which most socially engaged arts with disadvantaged communities fall. This cannot be achieved by a single article, of course. This is but a first step in what needs to be a broader, empirically grounded, as well as theory-building exploration of the true working conditions in socially engaged arts practice.

The article's next section sets out the challenges of caring for project participants as revealed by a thematic analysis of the respondents' experiences; the part that follows argues that feminist ethics of care theories can (1) provide an effective interpretive lens to make sense of the interviewees' motivations in their commitment to fulfilling responsibilities of care towards their project participants, (2) point to a normative approach to addressing the shortcoming of the current funding infrastructure for socially engaged artistic practice and (3) open up fruitful new avenues for research into the broader cultural politics of labour conditions in participatory creative practice.

Working with communities: the weight of responsibility and the 'hidden costs' of caring

The experiences of those who worked on the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project revealed two main categories of 'hidden costs': (1) psychological and emotional costs, and (2) financial costs. This section of the article explores and discusses them both using as interpretative frame the four steps in the process of care and the attendant four moral qualities that align with them, as they have been identified by Jean Tronto (1993, 2013). As I will show, these four steps map closely onto the themes emerging from the analysis of the interview data and are therefore a very helpful interpretative key to make sense of the pressures and dilemmas experienced by the respondents:

1. *Attentiveness – caring about*. At this first phase of care, someone or some group notices unmet caring needs. It calls for the moral quality of *attentiveness*, of a suspension of one's self-interest and a capacity genuinely to look from the perspective of the one in need. (In fact, we might also be attentive or inattentive to our own needs).

2. *Responsibility – caring for*. Once needs are identified, someone or some group has to take on the burden of meeting those needs. This is responsibility, and that is the key moral quality of this second phase.

3. *Competence – care giving*. Assuming responsibility is not yet the same as doing the actual work of care; doing such work is the third phase of caring and requires the moral quality of *competence.* To be competent to care, given one's caring responsibilities, is not simply a technical issue, but a moral one.

4. *Responsiveness – care receiving*. Once care work is done, there will be a response from the person, group, animal, plant, environment or thing that has been cared for. Observing that response and making judgments about it (for example, whether the care given was sufficient, successful, or complete?) require the moral quality of *responsiveness*. (Tronto, 2013: 34–35)

Attentiveness – caring about

The range of emotional pressures that respondents described pivots around the central feeling of *responsibility* that all those involved in the delivery of the project and its participatory activities felt towards their participants (children from the local GRT communities and their parents). This feeling of responsibility was rooted in the awareness of the social positioning of the groups, and the discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage they routinely face because of their social status within British society, combined with their consistently negative and racialised media portrayals (Belfiore, 2018; Tremlett, 2013, 2014). The extent to which the cultural needs of the Gypsy and Traveller community are not currently being met by mainstream cultural provision, and the desire to be involved in tangible action that addressed this need, thus redressing the perceived inequality of provision and opportunities for arts engagement, was mentioned by *all* respondents as a key motivation for either requesting the funding that made the project possible or applying to be part of the team delivering it. The public nature of the funding for the project seems to be directly connected to the strength of feeling about the moral responsibility entailed in its delivery. As one of the educational charity workers put it, 'you're taking public money . . . you've got a responsibility*'* (ECW1).

Responsibility – caring for

The importance of, to borrow Tronto's expression, 'taking on the burden' of meeting the communities' perceived needs for creative self-expression and living up to it manifested itself in different ways. Self-doubt was a key one: Are artists – despite their best intentions – effectively doing more harm than good to the participants they work with? In some cases, this sense of uncertainty about the impacts of the arts engagement they provided was tinged with guilt: the remorse of suspecting that the hopes and expectations generated among participants by their involvement in the arts activities might not be sustained post-project (especially in the context of austerity-driven cuts to social and educational services). On one occasion, the overwhelming sense of responsibility for delivering positive outcomes for participants led to one artist working on the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project not being able to 'end' the relationship with one particular participant they had worked closely with. As A1 explained,

> I felt the responsibility to carry on working with Helena[5] [young project participant], um, and I think it's, it's, it's probably . . . I don't know whether we've put Helena in a worse situation because we've shown her what she could do and then, you know, I've kind of felt that I haven't had the support.

A1 worked tirelessly with the education worker at the LTI and the local authority to ensure that Helena was offered a place at the local college despite the lack of the required

formal education. In this process, it became clear that there was no other organised system of support for would-be students in Helena's circumstances and that A1 needed to forge a path for her with very little help:

> But because, um, 'cause it's just been me doing that, I don't feel like there's kind of been the support for Helena that should be there really. I think she's been failed a little bit. It's like kind of opening a door to this amazing future that she could have but then closing it shut because there's not actually any support there.

At the time of the interview, A1 was still working with Helena – 1 year after the project's completion – on a completely voluntary and unpaid basis. She said that it had been '*very difficult*' while also positive in many respects – particularly for the pleasure of seeing a teenager with little formal schooling (and very limited reading and writing skills) having rewarding and empowering experiences, including assisting a professional photographer as a collaborator. This ongoing mentorship role was described by A1 as '*a huge responsibility*':

> I've been trying to get her to the point where I can kind of pull back and let her get on with things and I, I helped her to get her into **** **** [local college] but she did one day, had a not great experience . . . not an awful experience, it just wasn't what she was expecting and said, 'oh I don't . . . I'm, I'm not doing it. I'm never going back'. But she still kind of, you know, needs me and that's, that's difficult so . . .. (A1)

A1 also spoke eloquently of the way in which the sense of responsibility towards participants (who artists knew were the targets of intervention due to their low social status within society) intersects with and gives rise to deep reflections on the impact (not always positive) that participation can have. In particular, she shared her anxieties over the possibility of participants ending up worse off because of their involvement in the project. Recalling her initial meeting with Helena during an oral history training day, A1 told of her incredulity and fascination at the idea that it might be possible to make a living by taking photographs:

> [. . .] [Helena] said, 'do you get paid to do that?' and I said, 'yeah, it's my job' and she said, 'that's an actual job? You can take photographs and get paid?' and I said, 'Yeah' and she said, 'I want to be a photographer' and so because at the very beginning, she'd kind of seen that as her aspiration, um, and particularly 'cause she wasn't in education, um, it did, it, it made me question kind of what we do, sometimes as, as community artists or socially engaged artists because it seems really unfair to kind of lift people up and say, 'look' you know, 'you can do this. Anyone can do this. If you work hard, this is what's out there' [. . .] . . . so when, when it got to the end of the project I couldn't stop working with her but then it is quite difficult for me because there's no income and there's also this huge expectation from Helena and her family . . . (A1)

A1 powerfully articulates the weight of expectations artists carry and the hidden costs they face in order to live up to those expectations, not just in the eyes of the participants, the funders or society, but – most crucially – their own. This self-reflexive stance in relation to the effectiveness and impact of their intervention, which was displayed by several

of the respondents, maps onto the *Responsiveness – care receiving* step in Tronto's illustration of the process of care. Here, those providing care evaluate the response to their care work and come to a judgement over the extent to which it was successful, adequate or complete. For example, reflecting on her willingness to continue supporting a project participant long after the project's formal end, A1 commented,

> Oh, I think that's the big thing that I learned, um, because I've gone on to do a lot of work with Helena but that's all been kind of voluntary because she had this real passion for photography and I thought, you know, it's not fair to go in and say, 'I can show you this. This whole new world and, you know, you could really enjoy it but actually now the project's finished, I'm going'. (A1)

While A1 clearly articulates why she felt a moral responsibility towards Helena and how this related to her personal ethics as a socially engaged artist, she was also clearly aware of the unsustainability of this dedication to post-project duty of care towards the young participant:

> It's, it's . . . it has changed the way that I work because it's, it's shown me that, you know [pause] sometimes . . . there is value to carrying on working with somebody but then it's also kind of made me think how do you actually, you know, how do you do that? How can I do that and not find it really stressful trying to find the time [and also] and not having an income as well. (A1)

Indeed, a key theme emerging from the interview scripts was concern about 'letting people down' and the resulting ethical quandaries: lack of post-project support places project workers in a delicate moral position and under a lot of pressure. All interviewees agreed that the project's timeline and duration (which was dictated by the terms of the funding scheme) did not allow for adequate time for setting up activities and developing a relationship with communities facing unique circumstances and challenges.

Some of these challenges were of an exquisitely practical nature, such as the time required for travelling across different Traveller sites in rural Lincolnshire and the realisation that planning activities with participants in advance and across a period of time can be difficult when participants' lifestyle entails travelling across the country, often at short notice. Working effectively with participants who follow a travelling lifestyle would have ideally required a level of flexibility, more consistent and intense interactions with the community, and long-term planning that – respondents agreed – were not possible within the constraints of the funded project. As a result, many felt that they were put in a situation where they had no ethically viable alternative option but to commit to working beyond their contractual stipulations in order to ensure that the project achieved tangible outcomes.

In the words of one of the educational charity workers that co-delivered the project,

> . . . I think the reason we survive and I think the reason we achieve what we achieve is based on a few of us determined to just keep going. (ECW1)

The production of the hefty and substantial project education pack that was distributed to all Lincolnshire schools (and which is available to download from the LTI's website) is a good example of the *Competence – care giving* step. CP2 explained that the

education pack was not initially a main output, but as the project developed, and the team started delivering cultural diversity sessions in schools across the county, they became aware of the impact that a rich and carefully put together educational resource might have. As a result, the education pack came to be a key project output, and much more ambitious in scope than originally envisaged, thus requiring significant investment of time. CW2, who produced it, explained how she devoted a significant (and unforeseen) amount of labour into developing the project's educational resources:

> I hadn't kind of gone into the project expecting to write it and then suddenly we needed somebody to do the education pack, it became very clear it needed somebody who had close connections with the work for us to get the best out of the pack because otherwise it would just be kind of skimming the surface. (CW2)

As Tronto (1993: 133) explains, '[i]ntending to provide care, even accepting responsibility for it, but then failing to provide good care, means that in the end the need for care is not met'. Therefore, wanting this element of the project, which she had been pivotal in developing, to '*be good',* CW2 saw working on it as *'a bit of a personal thing'* and something that ultimately was '*a labour of love'* (CW2), making this a very fitting example of the moral quality of *competence* which lies at the heart of caring (Tronto, 1993).

The commitment to fulfil their caring duties towards the communities they were working with meant that workers involved in the project, whatever their role, acknowledged working significantly more than contracted to ensure its success, leading to significant negative financial impacts. In line with extant research evidence, several interviewees stated that financial drivers are not central to what motivates them to dedicate themselves to community-focused and participatory arts practice, and that 'intrinsic motivations' are much more significant (Abbing, 2002: 82ff.). As artist and academic Sophie Hope (2015: 289) notes, because of the process-based nature of the activities that are central to socially engaged arts commissions, projects overrunning and artists working over their paid hours is common, so much so that '[i]t appears to be the informal rule, rather than the exception'. Furthermore, as Nancy Folbre (2014: 4–5) observes, '[m]otivations other than the desire for material reward almost always plays a role in the provision of care'. However, this still leaves important questions: How much work with community is at least part-subsidised by project workers? What is the implication for fairness and sustainability of community arts practice? As one creative professional working on the project explained, in the arts sector quite often the budget for a strand of activity 'in real terms [is] nothing like the number of hours that you actually need to produce the work [. . .]' (CP3):

> it's more about doing what you can and it was one actually I worked way over, I put a lot of hours into it and I ended up editing the publication as well which we hadn't or I hadn't bargained for but it needed doing. (CP3)

Pressures to deliver value for money, and tight delivery budgets, also meant that artists found themselves having to juggle the desire to do a good job with the realities of having to make a living, especially when the number of contracted (and budgeted for)

work days as calculated within the project funding application did not quite equate to actual time spent on delivering the participatory activities:

> I think, I mean it sounds really awful because I'm not motivated by money but I think with this project that there was so much effort that went into it and kind of, you know, being contracted to do so many days' work but actually then those days were split into 2 hours here and there and so [. . .] so, you know, if, if you're expecting to do a project where you've got 6 days, maybe you're contracted for 6 days and you think they're full days, if you then, you know, split them down into 2 hours here, there and everywhere and then factor in your traveling time and then factor in the times when you've turned up and nobody's been there, you know, that 6 days really in terms of my time is probably about 20 days, minimum, really and so although, you know, I am not, I'm not motivated by money, I need to pay my bills. (A1)

These hidden costs, and the resulting financial, emotional and psychological price, were largely borne by the artists, and to a lesser degree (at least in relation to psychological and emotional costs) by cultural and educational professionals working on the project. Undoubtedly, the burden of the duty of care for participants was unequally distributed between those who funded and those who delivered the project. Yet, arguably, appropriate funding that allows for freelancers to be fairly paid and for project participants (who are often vulnerable and/or experiencing disadvantage) to be properly supported, both during and in the aftermath of a funded activity, should be a funder's responsibility. In reality, however, the power imbalance between the funded and the funders, and the oversupply of artistic labour (Sholette, 2010) make it prohibitive for cultural workers to challenge what seems an ingrained (and largely unchallenged) way of working within the system. As Sophie Hope (2017: 218) points out, 'there are funders to please and careers to protect and so rocking the boat too much might jeopardize future funding and commissions'.

Further empirical exploration will be required to determine whether this is an issue affecting the broader sector or a distinctive feature of the project studied here, but it is worth reporting that interviews highlighted the lack of engagement by the funding body once the project was funded. This, in turn, seemed to compound the interviewees' feeling that those delivering the project were left to their own devices. When asked whether the funders had expressed enthusiasm or commitment for the project beyond the mere funding of it, CP1 replied that there had been initial genuine enthusiasm, particularly among one HLF staff who was present at the planning meetings, but that they felt that that interest soon ebbed away:

> It didn't last because she [interested and supportive HLF staff] wasn't our lead officer, and our lead officer was solid and did everything we needed to do but there wasn't much engagement or interaction between Heritage Lottery, err, from the beginning to the end of the project really. But in the beginning there was more than just the cynical tick boxing. [. . .] So I'm sure it wasn't just cynicism on their behalf.

If cynicism and lack of interest are not behind the officers' lack of continued engagement and support of the project, then questions need to be asked about the broader administrative funding infrastructure and the extent to which it allows for staff time and resources to be effectively distributed along the life of funded projects.[6]

In sum, the empirical evidence clearly shows that, irrespective of their specific role (as artists, creative professionals or educational charity workers), all those engaged in the delivery of *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* shared the same perception of theirs being 'ethical work', meaning that 'they are self-consciously engaged in forms of practice that contain ideas about what is "good" (and therefore "bad"), exhibit moral ways of acting towards others and negotiate the balance between holding instrumental and non-instrumental values' (Banks, 2006: 456). The following section will delve further into feminist ethics of care theories to consider the pressures that the commitment to 'ethical work' placed on interviewees in the broader context of contemporary cultural policy-making.

The moral failure of cultural policy: an ethics of care perspective

The previous section has shown how Tronto's taxonomy of the phases of care allows us to make sense of the respondents' motivations: their *attentiveness* in the identification of a need among project participants and their wider communities (for voice, for self-expression and for the opportunity to communicate their cultural values and personal experiences in their own terms, as well as for practical support, in the case of A1) and their willingness to assume the responsibility of care were the reasons why they all, in their different ways, put their financial interests and well-being to one side. They did so in order to make sure that they could deliver effectively the 'care giving' phase, which entails 'the direct meetings of needs for care' (Tronto, 1993: 107).

Responsibility is evidently a central moral category within an ethics of care. Tronto (1993: 131ff.) acknowledges the complexity of this concept and points out that it might take different shapes according to several factors (cultural context, the ways in which the care need arises, as in the case of caring for one's child, etc.). She also notes that, at one end of the spectrum of possible definitions of responsibility, 'we might assume responsibility because we recognize a need for caring, and there is no other way that the need will be met except by our meeting it' (Tronto, 1993: 132). It is precisely this understanding of the responsibility of 'caring for' which helps us to understand both the emotional drivers for the sustained commitment to Helena that A1 spoke about compellingly and her dilemma of feeling pulled in different directions by, on the one hand, the responsibilities of caring for her own children and, on the other, the moral pressure of continuing to assist a project participant whose need for support and guidance continued after the project's conclusion. In fact, that need was, arguably, heightened and made *more* pressing by the aspirations that the project had instilled in Helena, whose engagement in the photography work had instigated desires, ambitions and concrete training needs that could not be met in her immediate social and geographical context. The complex and emotionally deep connection that A1 established with the teenage girl she worked with is captured by Virginia Held (2006: 12) when she writes,

> Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own individual interests; their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for. Neither are they acting for the sake of all others or humanity in general; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and particular others.

The picture emerging from the examination of the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project and the experiences of those tasked with its delivery suggests that the normative environments of current arts funding point to *a moral failure of policy*. Poorly funded socially engaged arts practice is too often relied upon to provide evidence, case studies, support and legitimacy for broader arguments around the social benefits of the arts that are deployed by the arts establishment to help 'make the case for the arts' (e.g. 'The case for arts and culture' on Arts Council England's (ACE) website)[7] as part of their legitimating strategies. Through this form of 'defensive instrumentalism' (Belfiore, 2012), the sector relies, defensively, on what it perceives to be rhetorically powerful justifications for funding, irrespective of their inherent robustness and validity. This, in turn, reinforces patterns of funding that advantage established public arts institutions, which receive the lion's share of public funds, while keeping socially engaged forms of activity under-resourced. In other words, the work of socially engaged arts practitioners – which as we have seen is primarily driven by a commitment to an ethic of care towards the communities involved – sustains and reproduces prevalent and long-standing unequal patterns of funding distribution, which see established, mainstream and building-based arts organisation as the main beneficiaries.

The 'hidden costs' mapped here have an effect on cultural workers' well-being alongside financial implications and take working practices in these areas far away from notions of 'good work'. Effectively, socially engaged arts practice's survival is reliant on what we may call an *invisible subsidy* on the part of the creative professionals. This phenomenon in itself is nothing new, but it requires us to ask: Whose burden should project participants' care *really* be? If, as it seems to be the case, it is effectively artists who often end up taking charge of such duties, should they not be trained to do this safely and appropriately? Should creative professionals not receive themselves psychological and emotional support to deal with the pressures of working with highly vulnerable groups and communities? And most crucially, should this emotional labour not be acknowledged, recognised and suitably remunerated? The remainder of this article builds on the interpretive framework deployed in the previous section; it proposes the adoption of an *ethics of care approach*, such as has been developed within feminist scholarship, as a route towards a renewed critical research agenda that can address these questions and move us closer to 'creative justice' (Banks, 2017).

In the words of one of its most prominent scholars, Virginia Held, '[a]n ethic of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations' (Held, 2006: 15). I am going to argue that, based on the analysis of the interview data, the ways in which the team delivered the *Our Big Gypsy Lives* project and related to its participants can best be interpreted through an ethics of care approach. As Held (2006: 15) explains,

> [. . .] in the ethics of care, the values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness have priority; in practices of care, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated.

Trust, solidarity, mutual concern and empathy towards participants, as well as their families and wider communities were all themes that emerged powerfully from the interviews, and they run across the entire body of interview scripts, not only the portions that

could be cited here. A central tenet of the ethics of care is indeed that it is relational, in the sense that it conceives of relationships between people as more fundamental than individuals (Noddings, 2013: viii).

As Joan C. Tronto (2013: ix) suggests, 'despite voluminous discussions about the nature of democratic theory, politics and life, nothing will get better until societies figure out how to put responsibilities for caring at the center of their democratic political agendas'. I am therefore proposing a parallel conclusion: that, similarly, we will not be able to move beyond today's morally compromised cultural policies and arts funding practices unless we demand that responsibilities of 'caring for' both those that deliver and those that are at the receiving end of publicly funded arts interventions be put at the heart of the decision-making process in policy development. As Tronto (2013: 55) explains, political practices of care revolve around processes for the allocation of responsibilities in society, so '[p]olitical "care work" also requires that those responsible for the allocation of care responsibilities throughout society are attentive to whether or not those processes of care work' (Tronto, 2013: 55). Arts institutions with responsibility for the distribution of public funding to participatory arts activities have fallen short of their moral obligations to scrutinise the 'processes of care work' that are entailed in socially engaged practice. They have consequently failed to fulfil their own responsibilities towards both artists and participants and have, therefore, contributed to the compromised normative environments of contemporary cultural policy-making.

Conclusion

In *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, Virginia Held (2006: 10) observes that 'the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility'. Looking at the mechanisms for the funding of socially engaged arts practice targeted at disadvantaged communities through an ethics of care lens, thus, means asking to what extent the funding bodies are *really* 'attending to and meeting the needs' of the project participants for whom they claim to be taking responsibility. Are they in fact simply passing on the burden of the actual *practice of care* to the artists and practitioners who are charged with delivering the project?

On the one hand, a rhetoric that celebrates cultural democracy, everyday creativity and the benefits of participation has become increasingly prominent in official British cultural policy discourses (Hadley and Belfiore, 2018; Hope, 2015). On the other, the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project has shown us that the delivery of the positive social impacts claimed by funders was dependent upon the willingness of those delivering the participatory activities to assume the *full* responsibility of caring for participants, often at great personal costs and without appropriate remuneration.

The analysis presented in this article, then, points to one clear conclusion: the pressing need for a push towards an emphasis on normative perspectives in cultural policy research which focuses on the ethics of its mechanisms and practices. There is a role for researchers in bringing our public cultural institutions to task on this front. To this end, it is crucial that we develop fresh thinking on *the moral economy of the subsidised arts*

sector. In 2006, Jim McGuigan (2006: 138) suggested that a worrying political 'quietism' afflicts too much of contemporary cultural analysis and concluded that 'Cultural Studies should renew its commitment to critique in the public interest'. I propose that this challenge needs to be extended beyond the sphere of cultural analysis into a push for a *social justice–driven, activist cultural policy agenda* that brings together cultural policy researchers, artists and creative sector professionals. As Mark Banks (2017: 43) states, a moral economy approach that sees cultural work as a form of 'moral endeavour' demands 'normative judgements *about* the qualities of the work, in terms of the contribution it might make to human well- or ill-being in capitalist societies'.

This article is a call for a 'critical recharge' of cultural policy research that highlights the need for fresh critical scholarship focused on questions of social justice and equity relating to both artists' labour conditions and practices of arts project funding. To this end, a moral economy approach combined with an ethics of care framing offers an interesting way forward. A critically recharged research agenda requires the willingness to hold public institutions and funders to account in the name of fairness and social justice, even when this might lead to uncomfortable conversations with funders, policy-makers and cultural sector partners.

Pressure needs to be placed on funding agencies, since, as posited in Iris Marion Young's (2006: 102–103) 'social connection model' of responsibility, 'all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices'. This, arguably, places a special responsibility on academic scholarship, which is less enmeshed than creative practitioners in the hierarchies of power and mechanisms of dependence that are embedded within the arts funding infrastructure. While aware of the unsustainability and inherent exploitative nature of the system's reliance on invisible subsidies on their parts, artists and creative professionals are not always in a position to make remonstrations to their funders. This would indeed be risky behaviour in the context of the 'reputation economy' (Becker, 2008; Gandini, 2016) within which cultural professionals (who are largely freelance) operate: the importance of maintaining good relationships with funders – so as to obtain commissions – perpetuates silence around the realities of working conditions within social engaged practice and works against positive change. A feminist ethics of care and its vision of a 'caring democracy' offer a clear pointer in this respect:

> Caring democracy thus requires a commitment to genuine equality of voice, and of reducing power differentials, as much as possible, in order to create the conditions for a meaningful democratic discussion of the nature of responsibility in society. (Tronto, 2013: 33)

Finally, efforts need to be made to take this scholarly work out of the academy so that it can be brought to bear on decision-making and policy development in the cultural sector, and foster changes in funding practices. This could lead to a critical renewal of both cultural policy studies and practice, and it will require a strong intellectual leadership. This article's ambition is to function as a rallying call to scholars and practitioners in the field to raise up to the intellectual, political and ethical challenges posed by the current normative environments of participatory arts funding and of cultural policy-making more generally.

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Notes

1. The lack of sufficient time to establish meaningful, reciprocal connections with the young project participants and their families came up time and time again in interviews for the case study discussed in this article.
2. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) distributes National Lottery funding to community-driven heritage projects across the United Kingdom.
3. The Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) was officially the organisation that applied for and received HLF funding for the project, but *cultural solutions uk* was responsible for the project design, putting together the funding application and the project delivery. They, therefore, effectively led and managed the project for which LTI was the formal lead, a situation that occasionally seemed to create tensions when decisions about the direction of the project needed to be made.
4. At the time, Lincolnshire had no building-based organisation in receipt of regular arts council funding.
5. Helena is a pseudonym.
6. The reason given by the HLF employee with responsibility for the project when repeatedly declining to be interviewed was indeed lack of available free time.
7. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/why-culture-matters/case-art-and-culture (accessed 13 March 2019).

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