Authority, Knowledge & Performance in Participatory Practice

Claire Blencowe, Julian Brigstocke & Tehseen Noorani

Executive Summary

Participatory practices - participatory budgeting, cultural community development, dialogic processes, action research and so on – can foster community empowerment, positive forms of authority, and genuine investment of people in governance and political process. This project draws upon the insight of theatrical grassroots participatory initiatives in the field of mental health, performance studies scholarship and post-structuralist political philosophy to articulate the value of, and interrogate the nature of, participatory practices; rethinking the relationship between such practices and authority. The project began with a series of consultations and a literature survey, which fed into a weeklong residential workshop where an interdisciplinary group of academics worked collaboratively towards developing robust theoretical articulations of the value and nature of participatory practice. They have now published an essay collection on this theme aimed at a wide general audience and freely available online – Problems of Participation: Reflections on Authority, Democracy and the Struggle for Common Life (Noorani, Blencowe & Brigstocke eds; 2013, ARN Press). Other outputs include online resources (especially a literature survey) and an academic article ‘Objective Culture, Authority and Service-User Empowerment: A Reflection on Participatory Practice’ (Blencowe, Noorani & Brigstocke – in preparation, 2013).

Researchers and Project Partners

Project Team: Claire Blencowe (PI); Tom Wakeford (CoI); Julian Brigstocke; Tehseen Noorani (post-doc research fellows).

Community Partners: Stepping Out Theatre Company; Mad Hatters of Bath

Academic Partners: Patrick Bresnihan; Leila Dawney; Anna Harpin; Sam Kirwan; Naomi Millner; Helen Nicholson; Jenny Pearce; and Erin Walcon.

Key words

Authority; Democracy; the Commons; Knowledge; Objectivity; Participatory Practice; Performance/Applied Theatre; Mental Health.
Authority, Knowledge & Performance in Participatory Practice

This project was conceived at the Connected Communities Summit 2011. It draws upon the insight of theatrical grass roots participatory initiatives, performance studies scholarship and post-structuralist political philosophy to articulate the value of, and interrogate the nature of, participatory practices; rethinking the relationship between such practices and authority. It also aims to contribute to contemporary debates in political philosophy concerning the nature of the ‘common’ (common resources, common sense, public discourse, authority) and the question of how to hold ‘the commons’ open to the influence of diverse and disempowered people in the face of the powerful contemporary totalising forces of privatisation, securitisation and commodification through participatory practice.

Participatory practices (participatory budgeting, cultural community development, dialogic processes, action research and so on) can foster community empowerment, positive forms of authority, and genuine investment of people in governance and political process. The promotion and improvement of such methods can help us to move beyond the problem of democratic deficit and engender a positive response to the feelings of ‘loss of authority’, ‘loss of community’ and gross inequality that characterise contemporary Britain. Progress towards that end is often hampered by a lack of a robust theoretical account of participatory practices, and their relationship to empowerment. Further, the lack of a theoretical articulation and interrogation of the nature and value of participatory practice leaves the idea open to distortion, and the terminology and techniques of participation have often been taken up within commercial and governmental enterprises that pursue very different agendas. By developing an account of the value and nature of participatory practice this project aims to enhance the capacity of such practice to contribute to democratisation and community empowerment.

The PI (Claire Blencowe) and the Co-I (Tom Wakeford) and two post-doctoral fellows (Julian Brigstocke and Tehseen Noorani) made up the core project team. Project partners include researchers from previous Connected Communities...
projects (Immanent Authority and the Making of Community, Participants United, Issue-Based Creative Clusters, and Power in Community), and additional academics who brought expertise at the cutting edge of applied theatre studies and critical pedagogy. There were also two community partners – Stepping Out Theatre Company and The Mad Hatters of Bath – both of which are grass roots participatory initiatives in the field of mental health. Both groups, in their different ways, use theatrical performance, creativity, artistic excellence and fun to develop community, empowerment and dignity. The project built upon the collaborative activities of the Authority Research Network.

**Activities**

The central activity was a weeklong intensive workshop which brought together eleven academics from a number of disciplines (especially social science and performance studies); including theoretical and more practice orientated perspectives. The workshop was designed to facilitate the creative emergence of ideas, arguments and resources explaining the value and nature of participatory practice. To this end we included ‘open sessions’ within the timetable, creating opportunities to ‘make things up as we go’, and maintained flexibility (and debate!) concerning the nature of the outputs. During the workshop and afterwards we worked together to produce a collection of essays – *Problems of Participation: Reflections on Democracy, Authority, and the Struggle for Common Life*. The core team are also preparing an academic article for submission.

**Initial Research**

Prior to the workshop the post-doctoral research fellows carried out a Literature Survey and a series of consultation interviews with all the project partners – presented in a document called ‘Interviews & Stories’. These two documents were put together with a number of preparatory and supplementary readings to form a ‘preparation pack’ for the workshop.

**Workshop – June 2012**

At the workshop we were able to hold focused discussion sessions around the key readings, ideas and examples of participation, separated from the hubbub of our everyday lives. We limited the range of materials we had access to, organised activities in rolling pairs, and combined intensive work sessions with cooking, cleaning, walking and eating. Over the week, we were able to discuss problems of participation in a spirit of friendship and the context of a long-term commitment to collaborative thinking, openly sharing and drawing upon one another’s experiences, perspectives and reflections. The conversations sometimes took time to get going, taking place within safe spaces that we constructed during the week. One of our challenges was to ensure that conflict and disagreement were not stifled, but facilitated, by the safety of the spaces.

We developed a certain craft of ‘conversation management’. We experimented with our conversations about participation along several dimensions – speeding up and slowing down discussions, rearranging groups and pairings, altering the heterogeneity of the space of discussion and adjusting the intensity of our engagement with one other. We
saw how the best insights often came when not focusing on the problems at hand (though primed by focused discussions). We found ways of luring agreements, disagreements, near-consensuses, total disagreements and productive alliances. We remain divided as to how ‘participatory’ our event was. It was not a participatory event in many conventional senses of the term: it was deliberately exclusive and very time-demanding. However, much like a ‘consensus conference’, it was productive in bringing different viewpoints together and into constructive dialogue. Despite the values associated with participation, perhaps even because those values are so important and widespread, we would argue that it is important to make the time and space to benefit from the virtues of critical distance, from time to time. Whilst the event was not participatory it certainly was highly collaborative, perhaps it is the case that real collaboration places transitory limits upon participation; indeed the difference between ‘collaboration’ and ‘participation’ is itself an excellent problem, ripe for further exploration and conversation!

Much time at the workshop was devoted to planning and commencing written outputs from the project. We continued to work on these after the workshop, meeting where possible and communicating through e-mail.

**Outputs & Findings**

**Literature Survey**
The first project output was the literature survey – which was posted as an online resource in 2012 and is available [here](http://www.authorityresearch.net).


The survey offers provocations for thinking about the theory and practice of democratic participation. It brings to the forefront three concepts that may seem alien to the practice, politics and theory of participation: **authority; performance; and objectivity**. It does not offer an exhaustive account of the literature around any of these concepts but offers potentially fruitful pathways into contemporary theories of participatory practice. In particular, we are interested in tackling some important issues that have been raised in relation to participatory discourse (Hickey & Mohan 2004). Such issues include: its enduring fascination with the ‘local’ (Mohan and Stokke 2000); its inadequate account...
of the relations between and individuals and organisations in social change (Cleaver 1999); the tendency to see participation as a technical method of project work (Carmen 1996; Rahman 1995); its valorisation of presence (equating participation with ‘giving voice’ to excluded subject positions, and contrasted with the distance and abstraction of representation); and the scalar hierarchies that it can presuppose. Questioning the theory and practice of participation in relation to the concepts of authority, performance and objectivity may generate some useful entry-points for reframing such problematic discourses.

**Literature Survey Contents:**
- Introduction
- Authority, Participation and Democratic Theory
- Theorizing Authority
- Participation: History, Typologies and Methods
- Barriers to and Problems With Participation
- Participation and Performance
- Participation, Objectivity, Materiality
- References 47

The Literature Survey is a useful online resource for students and researchers interested in participatory practice, especially Connected Communities researchers.

**Essay Collection: Problems of Participation**
The second output is a collection of essays which combine theoretical articulation of the value and nature of participatory practice, with critical creative reflections and practical guidance on the ‘craft’ of participation, freely available [here](#). A key finding of the project is that participatory practice should be understood not as a set of technical procedures (that can be mapped out in a tool kit) but rather as forms of creative craftwork that are mastered over time, through practice, and that must always be open to change, responsiveness and co-determination. As such, a collection of reflective essays is the best and most appropriate format through which to achieve our objectives of enhancing capacities of participatory practice through theory.

The essays are organised around three ‘problems’ of participation. These ‘problems’ raise questions, conundrums and challenges for participatory practice and thinking. They point towards both difficulties and opportunities. We are not identifying ‘problems’ in order to simply criticize or to reject participation. Problems are an enduring part of all worthwhile practice, driving creativity, understanding and skills. Our aim is to vitalize participatory thought and practice by raising and reflecting upon three broad problems.

The first problem that the essays address is that ‘Participatory Democracy Needs Authority’. The authors of essays in this section affirm the value of democracy, paying particular attention to how it needs to be cultivated through structures of authority. Those who have authority and those who grant it are connected by bonds of trust, that allow us to hold people and actions to account. This dependence of democracy on authority constitutes a problem, creating challenges and dilemmas, because trust takes time and emotional labour to build and often seems to be a scarce resource. Moreover, we have to deal with the fact that there are always power relations and inequalities at play – however participatory our practice or democratic our intentions.

The second problem that we take up is that ‘Participatory Democracy is a Craft’. Rather than understanding democracy in terms of electoral politics, and participation in terms of handbooks and manuals brimming with the latest techniques and models, the contributors attend to the subtleties of effective participation, whether in civil society activity, processes of collaborative learning or in ‘ordinary’ life. Enhancing democracy through better forms of participation requires particular ethical and embodied sensibilities and commitments, which can only be developed through practical experience and need to be nurtured through slow apprenticeship. Democracy is craftwork more than it is a set of institutions, textbook techniques or processes. However, as the authors of this section suggest, it is a difficult, costly and embodied challenge to learn the skills and ethos of such craft.

The final problem is that ‘Participatory Democracy is a Struggle Against Privatization’. Many advocates of participatory democracy are more or less explicitly committed to resisting ‘privatization’ both in the sense of of commodification and market dominance, and in the sense of individualisation of life and experience – seeing both as opposed to equality and dignity. But many proponents of neo-liberal marketization and individualised freedom also promote myriad forms of ‘participation’. Further, as is evident in theatre box offices, ‘participation sells’. This raises awkward questions and uncomfortable challenges for proponents of participation – a challenge that the authors of this section try to address, in part, by reframing participation in terms of acting in, and creating, alternative visions of what we share in common.
Problems of Participation

Reflections on Democracy, Authority, and the Struggle for Common Life

Edited by Tehseen Noorani, Claire Blencowe and Julian Brigstocke

Problems of Participation Contents:

Preface 01

Problem One: Participatory Democracy Needs Authority

Democracy and the Reinvention of Authority 07
Julian Brigstocke

The End of Authority 13
Jenny Pearce

Involving Others: From Toolkit to Ethos for a Different Kind of Democracy 21
Naomi Millner

Participatory Knowledge Matters for Democracy 37
Claire Blencowe
### Problem Two: Participatory Democracy is a Craft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation Stories: The Problem of What Happens When People Don’t Do What We Want Them To</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leila Dawney</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Makes Participation Democratic?</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jenny Pearce</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Participatory Democracy’s Black Box: Facilitation as Creative Bricolage</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom Wakeford and Michel Pimbert</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Visiting Forgotten Tombs</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen Nicholson</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating With Objects</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tehseen Noorani</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futures of an Unlived Past</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Julian Brigstocke</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Problem Three: Participatory Democracy Is A Struggle Against Privatization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation as Performance Sells</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helen Nicholson</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in (A Time of) Crisis</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patrick Bresnihan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Barriers’ to Participation and Capitalist Temporalities</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patrick Bresnihan &amp; Leila Dawney</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodification and ‘the Commons’</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Samuel Kirwan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Common Worlds</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leila Dawney</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and Gifts</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Samuel Kirwan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postscript</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Authors</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The essay collection is freely available online, here. A number of hard copies are being distributed free of charge and it will then be available at cost price from the authority research network. The essays are of interest not only to students and researchers, but also to practitioners of participatory democracy, and indeed a general public that is interested in issues of democracy and community empowerment. Project collaborators are utilising the essay collection in a number of ventures (community university activities, PhD training, teaching, community activism) and promoting the collection through academic, practitioner and activist networks.

**Academic Article**

A final output from the project is currently in preparation. This is an academic article jointly authored by Claire Blencowe, Tehseen Noorani and Julian Brigstocke called ‘Objective Culture, Authority and Service-User Empowerment: Reflections on Participatory Practice’.

This article contributes to contemporary debates within mental health politics and service user engagement by demonstrating the relevance of arts and humanities perspectives to understanding successes and failures in empowerment practice, explaining the importance and significance of arts based initiative (such as our community partners Stepping Out and Mad Hatters) as well as community space based initiative (such as the club house model) through the new application of Georg Simmel’s concept ‘objective culture’. This also makes an important contribution to wider methodological and theoretical debates concerning the value and nature of participatory practice for contemporary democracy and service provision.

**Future Directions**

Ideas and outputs from this and related projects (Immanent Authority and the Making of Community; Power in the Community) are currently being taken up within the scoping work on ‘co-production’ for the major new Connected Communities project Productive Margins – Regulating for Engagement (PI, Morag McDermont – Tehseen Noorani is currently employed on this project).

The authority research network will continue to pursue a broad research agenda that uses the emerging theoretical, arts and humanities informed, theoretical understanding of the nature of authority to illuminate the nature of power relations in various sectors of social life, and to highlight the value of understanding and indeed fostering authority for practices of empowerment, critique, community development, political participation and humanisation.

Areas of substantive new research that are currently being developed include: Christianity and the global/local architecture of political participation in Africa (Claire Blencowe); authority and land rights activism in El Salvador (Naomi Millner); embodied experience, authority and the commons (Leila Dawney; Patrick Bresnihan); service user recovery (Tehseen Noorani); and the history of urban reform movements (Julian Brigstocke).
From 2013 to 2015 the research network will be expanded and the methodologies developed through the AHRC funded project 'Authority Research Network: creative/performative approaches to democracy and authority research' (PI Leila Dawney, CoI Claire Blencowe). These activities will build directly upon this project and involve all the project partners.
References and external links

External Links

Authority Research Network:  [www.authorityresearch.net](http://www.authorityresearch.net)

Project Page:  [http://www.authorityresearch.net/participatory-practice.html](http://www.authorityresearch.net/participatory-practice.html)

Essay Collection:  [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academicstaff/blencowe/participation](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academicstaff/blencowe/participation)


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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx