MEASURING SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE CREATIVE AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES –

The importance of working in partnership to improve data practices and address inequality

Policy briefing
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HEADLINES

Fellowship

Dr Susan Oman worked alongside Arts Council England (ACE) as an AHRC Creative Economy Fellow, reporting to ACE's Diversity Working Group.

The challenge

To understand how best to measure social mobility in a way that works for the cultural sector.

Context of the research

ACE wants to address growing concerns around the lack of social mobility in the cultural sector. To understand the make-up of the sector that it funds, it needs to collect new data about class in the workforce. To achieve this goal, better understanding is required of how inequality data is already collected, submitted and valued by cultural sector organisations.
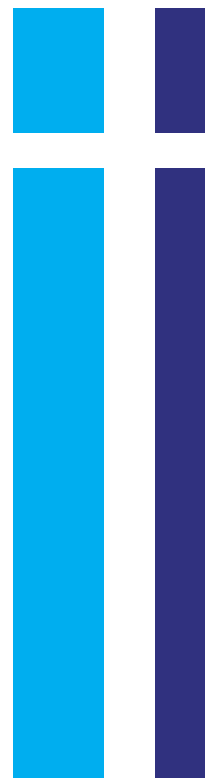
Dr Oman undertook 2 phases of research with 15 ACE-funded organisations, known as National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs). NPOs are required to return data to demonstrate who has benefitted from public investment. This includes the diversity of the workforce in funded organisations. The findings of this research are presented here to inform equality data collection across the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) in the UK.

Wider policy problem

As with all sectors, building an accurate picture of social inequality in the cultural sector and broader CCIs is key to understanding how to address it. Workforce data have historically been duplicated, often captured unsystematically and are resource-heavy to manage. Alongside this, the request for demographic data to understand diversity and inequality issues is frequently met with suspicion. Addressing existing metrics and data practices will improve the experience of data collection and the quality of the data collected. In turn, this will increase the sector's capacity to be data-driven, also improving return on investment.

Key finding

The recommended measure to understand class and social mobility is based on a question which asks the occupation of people's parents or carers when growing up. However, when trialled alongside 40 other questions, this was the most problematic for people to answer. This research found that the various barriers to answering this and other demographic questions can be alleviated by addressing data practices in context: who, how and where this information is collected. Crucially, improving these processes involves communicating the rationale behind the questions asked - and the value of data they produce - to those asked to share their personal data.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample: 15 NPOs which varied across funding areas, arts discipline, organisation type, strategy, mission and size. There were two key aims, across two phases:

- To understand current sector practices in the areas of diversity and data (collection, analysis and distribution)

- To understand people's reactions to, and the general reception of, unfamiliar, yet established proxy social mobility questions in the context of workforce-monitoring data collection

Phase 1
(January – July 2018)

Phase 1 involved some time working inside ACE, a literature review and policy analysis. The principal focus was nation-wide fieldwork inside 15 NPOs. 51 interviews took place with people who held responsibilities for data and/or diversity in each organisation. This painted a picture of how issues of data and diversity might be working together across the chosen organisations.

Alongside this, 26 focus groups were organised with staff from all areas of each NPO (from security to finance to actors). Teams of colleagues were invited to participate in group conversations. The groups discussed their understanding of the phrase 'social mobility' and how they feel talking about class. Each group was then presented with two questionnaires simulated from assembling a number of questions established in prior research. These trialled more than 40 questions used as proxies for measuring social mobility and inequality. The final third of the conversation was dedicated to discussing how people felt about the simulated questionnaires, the questions themselves and the issues they raised for the group.

Phase 2
(August – December 2018)

Phase 2 updated policy and literature reviews, and assessed work happening across the CCIs and elsewhere (for example, the Social Mobility Commission and Cabinet Office) to understand how social inequality is measured in the workforce. The findings from Phase 1's focus groups were used to decide the wording of questions for a pilot survey to

trial the unfamiliar social mobility questions alongside more familiar requests for demographic information, such as ethnicity. Phase 1 also informed detailed explanations that were attached to each question and an introduction to the survey to be shared with staff. Free text options were included, so respondents could describe how they felt about the process, the explanatory text and the questions themselves. These questions were piloted with a survey of 15 NPOs (five were different from phase 1, 10 remained the same).

A second wave of interviews with data practitioners inside the NPOs asked how the survey had been received by those who had administered it, and by the staff who had to complete it. Crucially, these interviews enabled a deeper understanding of how the research may have impacted on the organisation – positively and negatively.

BACKGROUND

Public awareness of the policy problem

The creative industries have come under increasing scrutiny for the perceived dwindling of opportunities for people from less privileged backgrounds to access creative professions. However, research using large-scale survey data explains that this narrative of change is more complicated than it appears. Amid growing media attention on inequality, Arts Council England (ACE) were keen to understand social mobility metrics, how they may be sensitively applied in the cultural sector, and what limitations there are to their implementation and use.

Policy

The Cabinet Office have been trialling proxy social mobility questions to understand the social origins of the public sector workforce. Their recommendations are that parental occupation when growing up is key, with supplementary questions, as appropriate, including: parental education; personal schooling; free school meals status; self-defined class status. These recommendations also support an additional question – as appropriate – to the sector concerned.

FINDINGS

Phase 1
Policy and literature review – findings

- Both academic expertise and policy specialists recommend that the key indicator of social origin (to measure social mobility) is the occupational status of the main household wage earner when respondents were aged 14

- This briefing paper focusses on this question, rather than the supplementary questions[1], because it is

  1 the most socially scientifically robust, and

  2 the most problematic for people when trialled

- Comparative work to measure social mobility (the social origins) of the workforce in different sectors (such as broadcast, for example) recommends using Cabinet Office questions

Focus groups – findings

Broad Responses to the Data Collection Process

- Most people did not mind answering many questions on their background – in principle – as long as they did not feel the questions were too intimate or left them identifiable

- People were concerned about the safety of their data and personal information, and with whom they would share one kind of data or another

Broad Responses to Issues of Class and Social Mobility

- There was a general lack of confidence in defining social mobility, although most people had some idea of what it meant

- There was a general uncertainty in self-defining class – and discussing it more generally

Responses to the Social Mobility and Inequality Questions

- 100% of the groups identified issues with the question which asked them about the parents or carers' occupation status when they were 14

- The second most problematic question was self-defining socio-economic status and origin

- There was a clear emotional response: people felt the questions that enable social mobility metrics are alien, intimate and intrusive

- There were practical obstacles: people were not always sure about their parents' occupations

- There was a political reaction: "I don't think you should ask this question, it's too personal"

- People cannot see how the questions make sense of the qualitative experience of their personal life narratives: 'I can't see myself in the form' was a familiar response

- People did not understand the reason for the question or what it was trying to identify

Interviews - findings

- A significant number of organisations felt that, of the recommended proxy questions, parental occupation was the largest leap in current practices of collecting workforce data

- Some organisations had an ideological problem with more familiar demographic questions, such as sexuality, especially if the organisational culture was one that identified as non-discriminatory in this regard: they did not see it as an issue in their organisation

- Most organisations wanted more communication on the equality monitoring data and associated issues from ACE to share with staff on issues of data and inequality

- Some organisations requested a maximum of one additional question (feeling that any more would be problematic), but others didn't see the number of additional questions as a barrier to responding

[1] A detailed working paper on the methodology, detailed findings and analysis of the pros and cons of each question is forthcoming in the publication, Oman, S. (2019) Improving Data Practices to Measure Inequality and Introduce Social Mobility Metrics: A Working Paper for the cultural sector. Available here: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/faculty/social-sciences/making-a-difference/sheffield-solutions

FINDINGS *continued*

PHASE 2
Piloted Survey Questions - findings

Overall, when piloted, there were fewer negative responses to the question that asked about parental & carer occupational status than in Phase 1. This could be due to the fact that:

- People often respond to survey data collection differently than in focus groups

- Many of the survey respondents were likely to have participated in a focus group in Phase 1, so this would not be the first time they saw these questions

Interview - findings

Interviews in Phase 2 revealed that the research impacted on organisational culture in various ways that may have improved the response to the questions in survey format.

- The research triggered organisation-wide conversations about class, social mobility and inequality

- There were other, broader conversations around what the proxy questions aim to do: what they are getting at

Interviewees suggested staff:

- Had sought the answer to the question about their parents' or carers' occupations (thus alleviating some of the practical issues)

- Had felt more informed about the reason for using the question (somewhat alleviating the political issues with it becoming statutory)

- Had begun to acclimatise to the idea of being asked the question (somewhat alleviating the personal and emotional issues)

CONCLUSIONS

Data and the processes used to collect them have a central role in how different sectors and policy address inequality better. Attention to issues of class and social mobility is central to this progress. However the measure of social mobility that is recommended as the most robust, involves asking questions about people's social origins that feel alien and intimate. This research spent a year working with the cultural sector to understand how this measure – and other proxy questions – 'work' in the sector. The research explored different aspects of organisational culture to understand how data are currently being administered. It also sought to understand how people feel answering questions about different aspects of their identity and their social origins. The research revealed there is much scope to improve data practices and the quality of data across the CCIs. Its findings suggest a number of easy ways to improve people's experiences of having their data collected. It demonstrates that the better people feel about having their data collected, the better the quality of the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

1. Establish a policy sector lead organisation or advisory committee on measuring social mobility and inequality across the CCIs. This could be the new All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity.

2. All CCIs should begin standardising workforce data as a requirement of funding received from public funding bodies.

3. Measuring social mobility requires accurate data of the social origins and destinations of the sector; appropriate standardised questions must feature in workforce data collection practices, following Cabinet Office guidance.

4. To understand social origins, the most robust way is to collect data on the parental occupations of the workforce, following Cabinet Office guidance.

5. To understand social destination, the CCIs must work together to categorise creative occupations, as this work is currently diffuse.

6. Policy and public bodies should advise the CCIs to synthesise communications regarding additional questions on social origins with upcoming changes to the ONS Census questions which inform diversity data collection practices. Keeping sector organisations informed about coming changes to data collection on the workforce is necessary to keep them onside and enable them to collect the best data possible.

7. Funding, regulatory and advisory bodies should provide guidance to those organisations it requires to collect data with regards to good practice and how to communicate the value of the data collected. This should include examples and case studies.

Practice / sector

1. Organisations, funders and the sector as a whole should be sensitive to people's hesitation to share their personal data.

2. The CCIs should work towards encouraging a positive diversity data culture within organisations through discussions, workshops and training on the value of diversity data, and the reasons behind why it is collected.

3. This research reveals how differentiated data expertise is in the sector: organisations should reflect on their own data policies and practices to see how data could work better for them.

4. Organisations need to be more open to the fact that the whole sector needs to improve the quality of data and diversity practice in the sector. Without a general acceptance we need to do better, change is less likely.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR SUSAN OMAN is an AHRC Creative Economy Engagement Fellow looking at Good Data, Diversity and Inequality in the Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield. Susan completed her interdisciplinary PhD, based in Sociology at the University of Manchester in 2017. Her thesis was on the cultural politics of participation and well-being in the context of metrics and knowledge production. Susan is interested in the Sociology of Knowledge and its role in social change and policy, with a focus on culture and everyday life, well-being and inequality. Susan focuses on methodological rigour in practice and policy-relevant projects for – and beyond – the cultural sectors.

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