Culture Matters: Young People's Perspectives

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How young people engage with culture is usually examined by looking at how often they participate in certain arts activities or attend arts events. For example, 'Culture statistics' are published by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities (DfC), giving headline figures on rates of young people's participation in sport, engagement with the arts and attendance at arts events, the use of public libraries, museums and science centres (DfC, 2017). However, as responses to a recent *Arts and Culture Strategy Consultation* by the former Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure[1] (DCAL, 2016) indicate, there is no consensus on a single definition of arts and culture. It is clear that culture is understood and expressed in many ways which can reflect various factors, including but not only, age, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality.

To explore some of these complexities, a module of questions was included in the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey 2016 and five follow-up interactive group discussions were held. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how sixteen year olds living in Northern Ireland interpret 'culture' and engage in 'cultural activities'. This focus is particularly pertinent as, while difficulties in defining culture are not limited to Northern Ireland, the region's troubled history means that the potential exists for understandings and expressions of culture to be contested or embraced in quite specific ways.

The survey began with an open-ended question inviting respondents to comment on what sort of activities the word 'culture' made them think about. Young people were then asked how they felt they expressed their culture. Respondents could choose more than one option from a list of options. The response options provided did not focus exclusively on more 'traditional' understandings of culture

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often associated with Northern Ireland, but sought to draw on understandings of culture that might have broader appeal to young people in general such as clothing, activities, religious practices, language, food, friends or music and film. Subsequent questions then focussed on the frequency and type of activities they engaged in; their perceptions of barriers to participation and whether they attended a youth project or club. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they wished to participate in follow-up focus group discussions to explore the topic further; four were subsequently held in Derry, Newry, Ballymena and Belfast. In seeking to see if there was anything distinctive in how young people living in Northern Ireland understood or expressed culture, one further focus group took place in Letterkenny in the

Republic of Ireland. This Research Update presents some of the main findings that emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative data.

Survey responses

On hearing the word culture, a wide variety of activities were mentioned, indicating the multifaceted ways in which young people make associations between the word culture and cultural activity. Some of the most common activities that came to mind included music, dancing, festivals, sports, food, parades, language and tradition (**see Figure 1**).

When asked to select the ways in which they felt they expressed their culture, the majority of young people chose religious beliefs and practice (58%) and language

Figure 1: YLT open-ended comments

Table 1: Do you think you express your culture in any of the following ways?

	%
In what you wear	39
In the activities you take part in	51
In your religious beliefs and practice	58
In the language you speak	57
In what you eat	42
In who you hang about with	32
In the music you hear and the films you watch	44
Something else	37

spoken (57%); this was followed by the activities they took part in (51%) - **See Table** 1.

When responses are explored by rurality/ urbanicity religious beliefs and practice is much more important as an expression of culture to young people in rural areas (74%) than for those living in cities (54%) or small towns (55%); while hearing music and watching films is more important for those living in cities (56%) and small towns (49%) than those in rural areas.

Respondents were also asked how often they engaged in activities including watching TV/videos/DVDs; listening to music; playing online games; attending cultural or sporting events; going to the cinema; dancing; making art; and craft design. Again location was a factor, with those from rural areas being less likely to watch TV/videos/DVDs; listen to music; go to movies; attend cultural or sporting events; play online games or make art.

Potential barriers to participation were explored by asking respondents what might prevent them from taking part more often in activities. As Table 2 clearly shows, lack of time is the single most prohibitive factor to being more involved in activities (69%). While respondents from different location (rural/urban) did not differ significantly in how likely they were to say lack of time was a factor, it was significantly more likely to be mentioned by respondents from a well-off background (73%) and those attending

grammar school (74%). Those from not well-off backgrounds were more likely to cite costs, no-one to go with and lack of suitable activities. Urban/rural differences were also evident with 38 per cent of respondents from rural areas compared to 31 per cent from urban areas and small towns highlighting difficulties in getting there/lack of transport. While the percentage of respondents saying that safety concerns were an issue was small, this was more likely to be the case for those living in urban areas (9%)

than respondents from small towns (6%) and rural areas (3%). In relation to the availability of local activities of interest, this was more likely to be mentioned by respondents living in urban areas (34%) than small towns (29%) or rural areas (28%).

Focus group findings

One of the main aims of the focus group discussions was to gain deeper insights into how young people identify with

Table 2: What might prevent from attending particular activities more often?

	%
Not enough time	69
Poor health or a disability	4
I don't have anyone I can go with	27
Difficulty getting there/lack of transport	33
The cost involved	41
Concerns about my safety	6
I would feel out of place going	21
There are no local activities/events I am interested in	30
I don't know where I could attend such activities/events	20
Some other reason	3
Nothing prevents me	10

the word 'culture' and how they might express their particular version of culture through their day-to-day experiences. A number of interactive activities were designed specifically to tease out any apparent differences in meaning between 'culture' and 'cultural activity'; to find out what young people like to do in their spare time; whether or not they feel these activities are important and whether or not they would describe these activities as cultural.

Similar to the survey responses (see Figure 1), common answers to what participants thought of when hearing the word 'culture' included sport, music, dance, religion, history, food, clothes, customs, language, traditions (family and societal) and art. For the following participant, tradition was the first word that came to mind:

Tradition. Doing what you're used to doing with your family and stuff.

(Female, Newry group)

However, there were some noticeable differences between the groups regarding their initial thoughts on culture. The group in the Republic of Ireland was more inclined than the other groups to say that hearing the word 'culture' made them think about meeting different people and finding out about different people's backgrounds. Meanwhile, the Belfast group were more likely than other groups to associate culture in various ways with personal identity – who you are, as well as the things you do. For example, the following participant believed that what your family's culture is sets the blueprint for your own culture:

It's family. What your family's culture is, is going to be your culture isn't it? You can't really break away from it. It's what you were born into. You don't become part of a culture, you never hear of that happening. Whatever you're born into is your culture.

(Female, Belfast group)

When describing what things came to mind when thinking about a 'cultural activity', common expressions were things like commemorating specific events such

as the Twelfth parade or the St Patrick's Day parade. Other examples included celebrating special occasions such as a family wedding. Some mention was made to other countries' religious festivals such as Ramadan and Shinto. In general, there was little distinction made by any of the groups between the word 'culture' and the phrase 'cultural activity'.

Young people completed a brief one week diary prior to attending the focus group. This aided the discussion on what they did in their spare time. Weekday activities (Monday to Friday) were typically taken up with school work. Other common activities were similar to the survey responses and included watching TV, listening to music, playing video games and spending time with family and friends. One activity that emerged as significant in the focus group discussions, and not in the survey, was part-time work. Certain activities were more likely to be described as being more important than others. For example, school work was important because you needed to do well in school and get good grades. Having a part-time job was also considered important because it was a way of getting extra money and gaining some independence. Spending time with family and friends was important for maintaining good social relationships. The proportion of time devoted to school work and part-time work chimes with the survey findings, where 'not enough time' was the greatest barrier to participation. Other activities such as shopping, reading a book, playing video games, were more likely to be described as '*fun*', '*everyday stuff*' and not that important. Weekend activities generally involved more school work and spending time with family. It also included attending church. For those who practiced their faith, this activity was considered very important because it was a central part of life and of their families' lives.

Having identified the common activities that young people do in their spare time, and getting a notion of the importance attributed to these activities, the next step was to gauge whether or not they considered these same activities to be cultural. Generally, the first reaction was to say that most activities were not cultural. The exception to this was practicing your faith, where faith was linked inextricably

with family practices and tradition and, in the opinion of the groups, made it cultural.

This was usually when the conversation took an interesting turn as the debate widened into what exactly makes a common activity a cultural activity. Here, participants began to make more fine-grained distinctions as to what would count as cultural. Dancing for example, could be viewed as cultural if it was Irish or Scottish dancing. Reading a book could possibly count as a cultural activity, but it depended on the type of book - if it was a history book for example it would count. One participant in the Newry group helped out at the shop at the local Gaelic club and played camogie. As both these activities are linked with Irish sport then, for her, this makes them cultural activities. In the same group, another participant who was volunteering with a local charity, viewed this activity as important because '*it was important to give something back*', but did not consider it to be a cultural activity.

The complexity involved in interpreting young people's understanding of culture and what constitutes cultural activity is exemplified further by a discussion among the group in Ballymena, when discussing the significance of 'attending an art exhibition' in terms of its cultural importance. One participant thought the activity in question was only '*showing your culture*' as opposed to '*taking part in your culture*', indicating an even greater level of differentiation taking place between what might be described as 'passive' versus 'pro-active' demonstrations of culture. Overall, activities that were associated with family and societal tradition were more likely to be identified as cultural activities. Meanwhile, activities that were perceived to be disconnected with history, family and tradition were not viewed as cultural. Everyday activities that young people enjoy doing may be important to them, but these activities are not viewed as cultural, according to the particular perception of culture that young people have in mind.

Conclusion

The focus group responses reflect the findings from the YLT survey in relation

to what young people commonly associate with cultural activities. However, the qualitative findings further reveal the extent to which young people's understandings of culture involve a multi-layered thought process. Here, the emphasis on tradition is very strong, as is the connection with family and history.

While perceptions of culture and cultural issues were common across all five focus groups, some groups had a more nuanced view than others, influenced by the location and composition of the group. The bearing of 'place' in the focus group findings accords with the survey findings which showed some differences between urban and rural respondents. This indicates a strong contextual component to understandings of culture.

These findings can help inform the development of a new Strategy for Culture and Arts which acknowledges the positive role that arts and culture can make to the achievement of overarching government commitments such as tackling disadvantage and improving health and wellbeing.

References

DCAL (2016) Culture and Arts Strategy: *A digest of Consultation responses*.
www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-strategy-culture-arts-2016-2026

DfC (2017) *Engagement in Culture, Arts and Leisure by Young People in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Key points

- The majority of young people said religious beliefs and practice (58%) and language spoken (57%) were the ways in which they felt they expressed their culture.

- Young people found lack of time to be the single most prohibitive factor to being more involved in activities (69%).

- How young people interpret culture, and what they believe constitutes cultural activity, is hugely complex and multi-layered.

- Activities that were associated with family and societal tradition are more likely to be identified as cultural activities.

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[1.] Following a reduction in the number of government departments in 2016, most of the activities of the former Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) have been transferred to the DfC.