



# CULTURAL CAPITAL

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## A PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

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### A RESPONSE TO AND'S CULTURAL CAPITAL RESEARCH

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**It's always heartening to participate in new conversations about what childhood disadvantage and poverty might mean in different contexts, especially when some of the voices are not from "the usual suspects". It's very welcome turn, then, to see AND, and the 'arts and culture industry' more broadly, turn their gaze to explore the impact of poverty and disadvantage on young people's cultural engagements in London.**

As a researcher who has often documented the different choices and opportunities open to young people from low-income backgrounds, I'm really hoping this is the start of a long, on-going discussion. This dialogue is long overdue, and campaigners for low-income young people, such as myself, and the arts and culture lobby clearly have a lot we can learn from each other, and a lot we can do together. In this spirit, I offer some thoughts and critiques of ANDs research briefing, and, hopefully, point to some potentially fruitful topics for future dialogue.

There is an old mantra in youth work that suggests that workers with young people need to ‘start where the young people are’ in order to provide meaningful services and opportunities to them. Indeed, this is the principle driving much of the engagement and participation work that happens right up and down the UK. However, I am a bit weary that some of this very initial work, outlined in AND’s briefing document, might have missed this memo. “Culture” as much research – including AND’s – highlights, is both personal and shaped by socialising forces. At the same time as meaning something to individuals, “culture” is, to a debateable extent, formed and rendered meaningful by the social context that individuals inhabit. As Bourdieu suggests, in a perhaps more mainstream reading of his work than ANDs’ briefing document belies, “culture” can be so socially shaped as to be socially determined; as many sociologists joke, tell Bourdieu what age and class you are, and he’ll tell you what colour you paint your walls. And this is where I’d urge a slight rethink of the AND research. It did not appear to have started where the young people are, in terms of understanding “culture”, and in that sense, appears to have generated an analysis that highlights that poorer young people inhabit a different cultural landscape to their richer peers, and then automatically frames these distinctions as problematic “deficits”. I offer two potentially critiques of this.

Firstly, there is little new in documenting that working class and middle class young people engage in different cultural pursuits, and imperial to suggest that this documents a problem. In a sense, returning to an older language of ‘class’ and ‘class distinctions’ illuminates this plainly. Cultural taste has long since been one of the primary terrains of class distinction, so it comes as little surprise that working class kids would do different “cultural” things to middle class kids. What might have been a more sensitive, and perhaps more telling, research piece would be to have continued to unpack what working class kids define as “culture,” as well as if the concept itself has any resonance in their everyday lives. (In London, poverty and ethnicity overlap, making this task even more important). It may come as little surprise to anyone that young people from lower income backgrounds spontaneously defined fewer activities as “cultural”, because that concept may not apply (or apply the same) in their everyday lives. It may have been more pertinent to take the definition of culture implicit behind this middle-aged, middle-class piece of research – from my reading, something like “practices and activities that make you feel connected to your community and society” – and see what lower-income young people started with. Going to the ballet, I’d imagine, is not going to rate highly in low-income, racially diverse young Tower Hamlets (one of the poorest boroughs in London), however Friday-night meals with your extended family, returning to ancestral homelands for holidays, or getting your weave on at the hairdresser, just might. Stamping a middle-aged, middle-class definition of culture, based on our understandings about taste and distinction, on to different communities, is always going to be a somewhat imperial activity. That poor young men do not think that dance is a cultural activity, and don’t dance as much as their richer peers, doesn’t on the surface of it, seem problematic to me. (Indeed, given that many interpretations of Islam

see dance as haram, and the prevalence of poverty in the Bangaldeshi and Pakistani community in London, this was always going to be a finding – and an example of the need for a more culturally located research). In this sense, I think this research has somewhat “missed the mark”; it failed to explore what the concept of culture meant to these young people, rather it just asked what rituals or practices they might consider as part of a potentially alien concept.

Secondly, and this is where I suggest conversations and discussion critically needs to follow, assuming that engagement with a particular type of artistic and cultural practice will be beneficial, to young people for whom this type of engagement may be culturally alien, is potentially damaging. When you question if a (middle aged/ class) arts and culture could, or should, improve life changes for children from low income families, you suggest that the problems of poverty and life chances stem, in some part, from the lack of this type of arts and culture in their lives currently. That is, it’s possible to interpret this sort of statement as a suggestion that working class cultural pursuits perpetuate poverty and low life chances, while middle class cultural pursuits could ameliorate them. There is no hard evidence to suggest this, and while the conversations with five head teachers might suggest otherwise, I remain unconvinced that the cultural distinctions of low-income communities are the root of their problems. I would instead point to deindustrialisation, structural unemployment, recessions, austerity, institutional racism and inequality as causes of poverty. Indeed, much evidence supports this; statistically speaking, children from ethnic minorities households, workless households, lone-parent households, households affected by disability, households headed by women and household’s crushed by the burden of London’s ridiculous housing prices are more likely to be in poverty, and more likely to grow up poor. These are the risk factors for childhood and adult poverty, not a lack of dance, no matter what head teachers might say. Perhaps these are also conversations the cultural and artistic community could join in with; I can imagine no better medium for communicating these shocking realities with the community and decision-makers at large.

Further, when it is suggested that engagement in the arts and culture could help build resilience and discipline, and build character, and that this in turn would improve social mobility, there is a risk of dangerously individualising the problem. Putting aside the question of how going to the cinema or drawing will improve discipline, when you link issues of personal ‘character’ to problems of social mobility, it implies that individual young people lack of this ‘character’ is the problem that needs to be addressed. With that, you define individual young people’s character as part of the problem of the reproduction of inequalities. Having worked with a great many young people from deprived communities, who have suffered indignities and hardships more than I can begin to imagine, and have managed to develop the most creative, ingenious, personally-taxing and self-disciplined coping strategies just to get through the school day, I struggle to understand why we feel, as a blanket statement, they lack resilience or discipline. I think to suggest that their personal character deficits are what reduces their chances of succeeding overlooks the blindingly obvious issues of entrenched privilege, and the scarcity of socio-economic

opportunities this privilege creates. It's a dangerous, albeit politically popular, rhetoric to be dabbling in.

In this sense, it is both fantastic to see that the arts and culture industry begin a conversation about childhood poverty and inequality, and how it could in turn function as a tool to distribute privilege. However, to really redress this, we also need to begin to question our own privilege, and cede some power in redefining notions of 'culture' to ensure that, in the rush to assist working class young people, we don't walk down the well-trodden path of defining them as the problem makers of the inequalities they suffer so deeply from.

There are conversations and discourses emerging that seek to challenge the systematic barriers that young people from low-income families face, rather than simply aiming to support them to adopt more middle-class cultural pursuits as a "way forward". I would encourage those involved in the arts and cultural sector to engage in these, and work with campaigners and academics who seek to tackle the social drivers of poverty, rather than just the behaviours and pursuits of the poor themselves. I would encourage those in the education sector to reflect on how their practices and policies potentially disadvantage young people from low-income families, from their uniform policies to the price of excursions, and seek to address those first and foremost, rather than tinkering with the extra-curricular preferences of these youngsters. But more broadly, I suggest that the more inclusive, and more radical discussions that we can all have returns to critically reflecting on our own privilege. Just why is it that dance and music, and other middle aged/class pursuits are seen as a form of cultural capital that is worthwhile enhancing, while younger/working class past times are regarded as a cultural dis-amenity?



#### **ABOUT RYS FARTHING**

Rys is a Barnett Research Fellow at the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford. Her research interests include child poverty, youth participation and youthful politics. She has worked at a number of universities in England and Australia, as well as a number of NGOs in the youth and poverty sectors. Her current research is participatory, and explores child poverty policy from young people's perspectives and the role of place in shaping the lives of young people growing up in financially deprived areas across England.

**WE ARE INVITING COMMENTS FROM PARENTS, YOUNG PEOPLE, CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS, ACADEMICS, THOSE WORKING IN EDUCATION ETC. WHICH HELP CONTRIBUTE IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, FOR CAMPAIGNS AND ACTION THAT CAN HELP BUILD MORE EQUAL ACCESS TO THE ARTS AND CULTURE FOR ALL CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE IN LONDON.**

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