The AHRC Cultural Value Project

Welcome to the Cultural Value Project
In launching this two-year Cultural Value Project, the Arts & Humanities Research Council wishes to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society. Recent years have seen many attempts to capture that value in straightforward ways, not least in order to make the case to governments for public funding, but none have commanded widespread confidence. The AHRC decided that something more ambitious was needed.

The Cultural Value Project seeks to establish a framework that will advance the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate that value. The first part of the framework will be an examination of the cultural experience itself and its impact on individuals and its benefit to society. The Project will take as its starting point the different forms of cultural experience, such as, for instance, the aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of our cultural encounters. This might be seen as analysing the phenomenology of cultural experiences in order to understand better the benefits uniquely associated with cultural activity. This significant approach will be conducted alongside exploration of the many other economic and social benefits conventionally associated with cultural activity. The ambition underpinning the second part of the framework is to articulate a set of evaluative approaches and methodologies suitable to assessing the different ways in which cultural value is manifested.

The project will broaden our focus beyond publicly-funded arts and culture, to embrace all activities including those in the third and commercial sectors. It will include the informal and improvisatory practice and experience of culture as well as that in formal organisations. Not just a concert at the Royal Festival Hall or an exhibition at Imperial War Museum North, but also young people who get together in a band to make music for themselves, amateur choirs, local art clubs, reading groups and so on. If we wish to understand the value of cultural activity then we should direct our attention to cultural activity of all kinds. The Cultural Value Project does, of course, wish in the medium term to influence decisions on public policy and funding, but its priority lies in developing a much better understanding of arts and culture across the diverse ways that it is organised and experienced.

The starting premise of the Cultural Value Project is that we need to begin by looking at the actual experience of culture and the arts rather than the ancillary effects of this experience. It is the cultural experience itself which will give coherence to the framework as a whole. The value begins there, with something fundamental and irreducible, and all the other components in the framework might be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, to cascade from it. In giving priority to the cultural experience itself, the Cultural Value Project will take the lead in developing a rigorous approach to what many see as the most important aspect of art and culture.

Two Dimensions of the Project
The Project will establish a cultural value framework that will have two dimensions.

The first dimension is components of cultural value, the distinctive if often overlapping ways in which the value of cultural activity can be identified. What might constitute that set of components of cultural value? In order to answer this question we will examine the arguments
presented in the existing research as well as look for new ways of categorising and describing the benefits of culture.

The benefits of cultural experience have been associated with a number of areas: economic benefits (not just economic impact which has in recent years been a dominant argument, but also the creative industries, cultural vibrancy as an influence on UK inward investment, and the argument that a vibrant arts and cultural environment has consequences for innovation across the economy more broadly); health, medicine and well-being; urban regeneration and community cohesion; cultural diplomacy - to mention just some. We would like to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. There is also a less well-developed line of research, but one which will be very important for this Project, that emphasises the role of cultural activity in helping to shape reflective and engaged members of society. It focuses on the benefits of: an enhanced reflectiveness; an improved appreciation of the other and an understanding of oneself; a sense of the diversity of human experience and values; an ability to reflect on difficult aspects of one’s own life and that of others. We would like to interrogate this line of research further and to develop a set of terms and vocabulary to capture this aspect of cultural value.

As part of our project, we would also like to re-open the question of what engagement with cultural activity does for people and to undertake a closer examination of what it is that one tries to evaluate when one talks of the value of cultural and artistic activity. In order to understand better the benefits that are uniquely attached to cultural activity, we think it is crucial to analyse the phenomenology of cultural experiences. We also want to undertake a deconstruction of the current cultural discourse dominated by a number of dichotomies, such as: private versus public; individual versus collective; intrinsic versus instrumental. Many ways of evaluating cultural value are based on the benefits to individuals, often on the basis of their own stated preferences. Whatever the potential of such methods, it is important to recognise that they cannot capture the wider benefits to society, benefits which are more than the aggregate of the benefits to individuals. It is equally important to examine critically the ‘schism’ between the intrinsic and the instrumental. The questions whether the experience of art and culture is worth undergoing for its own sake or whether it is beneficial in some other ways are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it could be productive to analyse the instrumental through the prism of the intrinsic by recognising that the motivation to undergo cultural experience in the first place can stem from the intrinsically rewarding character of this experience.

The second dimension of the framework will be the methodologies and the sources that might be used to evaluate these distinct components of value. The evaluation of each of the components will need different methodologies and forms of evidence, and the Cultural Value Project will articulate these more clearly, identify which are best evaluated by qualitative evidence and which by quantitative, and to establish the relevant methodologies for doing so.

Qualitative evidence should not be seen as a fall-back position when quantitative is not available – there will be no prioritising of one over the other, but rather recognition of the need to seek the most appropriate and robust evidence. We need to establish those areas where secondary use of existing evidence or forms of evidence appears satisfactory and those where new primary evidence will need to be collected. The latter will sometime require a more robust approach to evidence that is already known but it
will also require methodological work to establish new ways of evidencing some of the key components.

Case studies will play a major role. If these are to be a persuasive part of the evidence base, indeed for some components its major dimension, then we must go beyond the merely anecdotal. The approach to case studies will need to avoid the dangers of formulaic templates and remain responsive to the cases being evidenced, but nonetheless be rigorous and capable of being gathered with other case studies to provide evidence for particular components. Case studies will be an early priority for the Cultural Value Project because they will not simply be a source of evidence and evaluation for things we already know but also a way to get a better and more nuanced understanding of what constitutes value and how we might think about it.

**Approach and Outputs**
The objective of the Project is to define a framework for identifying and evaluating the different components of cultural value. This will be set out in a final report, which will be supported by a mixed portfolio of outputs that will include commissioned studies, research publications and working papers. They will together cover conceptual analysis and/or synthesis, methodological investigation and testing, and an evidence base through case studies and quantitative data.

The Project will embrace interdisciplinary perspectives across a wide range of disciplines, embracing the individual creative and performing arts, and bringing together disciplines such as philosophy, art theory, museum studies, cognitive psychology, ethnography, economics, politics, cultural policy, neuroscience, history and much else. Our ambitions require us to reach widely and we hope to identify and to hear from researchers in all areas interested in these issues. We shall also work closely in collaboration with organisations in the cultural sector for which these questions are important: from museums to theatres, art galleries to concert halls, media and film, the creative industries and much else, as well as with organisations in other fields for which identifying value and undertaking evaluations are a prime concern. Funded activity will proceed through a mixture of commissioned work and open calls, with peer review playing a significant role in decisions, alongside a programme of invitation workshops.

Finally, the Project will have a continuing interest in the historical and international dimensions of these questions. This is not the first time in history that people have asked about the value of art and culture, nor is the UK the only country where these questions are being asked today. If we do not engage with the meanings that have been attached to culture in the past, and with the explorations and discussions that are going on in other parts of the world today, then our understanding of these issues in the UK will be weakened. This is a research project and it needs breadth if we’re to refine and situate our own understandings.

**Project Team**
The Director of the Cultural Value Project is Professor Geoffrey Crossick, and the Project Researcher is Dr Patrycja Kaszynska. If you have thoughts about the Project, suggestions of case studies or methodologies, or are interested in contributing in other ways and are not already in touch with the Project, please email: p.kaszynska@ahrc.ac.uk.