The mundane and insignificant, the ordinary and the extraordinary: Understanding Everyday Participation and theories of everyday life

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ABSTRACT
The Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP) research project questions “official” versions of what constitutes cultural participation and “proposes a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between participation and cultural value” (www.everydayparticipation.org/about/test-showcase-page/). This article will map out a selective literature review of everyday life with a particular focus on sociological writing, and additional contributions from both scholars of history and philosophy. It will suggest how such work might illuminate both UEP research and cultural policy development. Furthermore, it makes the case for such literature usefully underpinning the project’s focus on developing the “research–policy–practice nexus”, arguing that a careful analysis of the complexities of everyday life can help to generate more democratic and participatory everyday cultural environments.

KEYWORDS
Everyday life; participation; cultural policy; mundane; modernity; culture

Introduction
This article will argue, with reference to intellectual histories of everyday life and the work of UEP, that an agenda for change within cultural policy and practice is well overdue. The rethinking of “policy rationales and frameworks” needs to engage much more fully with idea of everyday life both as a form of knowledge and a set of practices, in order to reframe cultural policy away from “a market orientated mentality” (McGuigan, 2005, p. 229). It will outline an intellectual history of everyday life in the context of modernity, from the nineteenth century onwards, suggesting how such theories might inform the research practice of Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP). Interwoven with the histories and research practice of the everyday, will be an indication of how cultural policy might shift its orientation from instrumental economic arguments about the “value” of culture in cities and communities, towards the lived experiences, informal economies and desires of the everyday.

In From popular culture to everyday life, Storey (2014, p. 122) wonders how he has reached his final chapter without coming to a conclusive definition of everyday life. He writes,
The success that this particular failure brings, is that it points to the enormous difficulties in trying to define something that is so taken for granted, not just in terms of how it is lived, but more importantly for this book, how it is critically (or not critically) understood.

Storey’s experience points to the “slipperiness” of the concept and the difficulty of pinning it down to anything in particular, as “the everyday” seems simultaneously both everywhere and nowhere. Bennett and Watson remind us that

… everyday life is a relatively recent phenomenon. The concept does not make its first appearance in social thought until the 1920’s, whilst its emergence as a recognised area of enquiry in sociology is limited largely to the period after the Second World War. (2002, p. x)

More recent work has been undertaken, as Hviid Jacobsen (2009, pp. 6–7) has pointed out, in the “mapping” of the field by, respectively, Gardiner (2000) and Highmore (2002a, 2002b). Jacobsen (2009, p. 14) on the basis of this and other work, usefully summarises the “complication” of everyday life into seven useful categories (place and space, temporality, attitude, artefacts, approach or perspective, academic abstraction, experience). Such a schema provides a framework on to which the research methods of UEP and the ideas of cultural policy makers can be usefully mapped, both theoretically and more practically to develop both in a more democratic way, coming from communities, rather than offered to them from “above”. It offers the possibility of providing an ever-extending map of the everyday, a kind of “cloud atlas”, “a labyrinth of interlocking stories” of the quotiential that might attempt to capture its “multitude of experiences” (Hviid Jacobsen, 2009, p. 14). This could provide an entirely new and markedly different framework for developing policy, which presently has a tendency to be organised through “networks of experts” who regard “culture” as synonymous with economics, often in the context of urban regeneration (McGuigan 2006; O’Brien, 2011).

The everyday emerged both as a “field” of experience and one of analysis. Bennett and Watson (2002, pp. xi–xiii) identify three processes through which this happened. Firstly, the emergence of “the public”, “part of the democratization of political and cultural life”, which identified certain things, experiences, institutions as “in-common”, “ordinary”, and “shared”, deemed worthy of bringing into the public gaze and distributed through various technologies, more recently in soap operas and reality television. Secondly, the way in which the imaging of the ordinary led to “the emergence of new forms of social discipline”, which enabled greater scrutiny of the everyday and finally, the coming into existence of new social movements such as feminism and Black and Gay Liberation, which were productive of new understandings of the power relations of the everyday and ways in which it might be lived differently.

For the Understanding Everyday Participation: Articulating Cultural Values project (UEP), a reappraisal of the concept of everyday life and how it might be articulated through cultural policy is central to the project’s intervention in the debate over cultural policy and is part of the rationale for this special issue (Miles & Gibson, 2016). Back (2015) has recently written a moving account of “why everyday life matters”, arguing that “identifying public issues” in “mundane public life”, “demonstrates the opportunity to link the smallest story to the largest social transformation”. This offers us some sense of why a re-evaluation of everyday life might be useful in the context of both academic research and cultural policy. Life in the everyday, the seemingly unimportant participation of actors in its mundane practices and places, both constitutes and is constitutive of, larger
social processes. It is perhaps only through a proper research engagement with everyday participation, that we can fully understand the impact on individuals and communities, of financial capitalism and globalisation, of austerity or, more positively, the ways in which diverse populations “rub along together” in the convivial everyday (Gilroy, 2004).

Participation, a core concept for UEP, is a contested term but closely interwoven with the intricacies of everyday life. The etymology of “participation” reveals that it was once a word that meant “made to share”, in the sense of being obligated to join in with a pre-industrial collective social life (Patton, in Bennett, Grossberg, & Morris, 2005, pp. 252–254). The structures of modernity and industrial capitalism made the individual, rather than the collective body, the centre of everyday life. Now, actors had to “choose” to share in the experience of joining with others in common purpose. The historical narrative of the development of democracy and the democratic process demonstrates a reigniting of the will to engage in collective action and decision-making, but not necessarily in an obligatory sense. If we regard, as does Barnes (in Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001, pp. 7–28), that practices are “collective accomplishments”, then participation is a key component of understanding everyday life. The orientation of analysis thus moves away from the individual and his or her choices to finding out how practices are produced through collective endeavour. A move away from the “I” to the “we”, has profound implications for how cultural policy is developed and articulated and how research is conducted. The “individual subject” is accorded primary status in policy, and to a more limited extent in academic research. To move away from this focus, would require a recalibration of the whole cultural infrastructure towards a consideration of both an imaginary and a practice involving the collective, rather than individual body. As Miles (2013) suggests, “working class ‘communities’ maintain a rich vernacular culture of everyday practices based around ostensibly mundane activities and social networks”. Theories of everyday life can be useful in the analysis of such practices.

For the UEP project, theories of everyday life thus present a theoretical means of both understanding and refining its research objectives. Reorientating policy development away from “the ‘deficit’ model of participation, which views non-participants in legitimate culture as an isolated and excluded minority” (Miles & Sullivan, 2012, p. 319) is an important rationale for UEP work. Also important for UEP research is the recognition that measurements of “value” inherent in government research hitherto, such as those in the “Taking Part” survey and the CASE programme “is that neither study gives the public a free or genuine voice” (Walmsley, 2012, p. 330; see Taylor, 2016). Government cultural research often rests on an historically designated set of values, leading to a fundamental misrecognition of how “culture” may be understood, what participation might consist of, where it might take place and how it is valued as culture, where, by whom and why?. As Belfiore and Bennett (2010) argue, “a policy enquiry” often involves a “cost-benefit analysis and evaluation”, rather than a more considered process based on careful exploration and considered argument. Should the latter path be taken, then “culture” as practised outside formal institutions and middle class enclaves might be better understood.

The literature review that follows, discusses writing about the everyday, contextualising it in some of the wider debates that have characterised sociology since the late 1970s. It will reflect on theories and understandings of everyday life from industrialisation onwards, demonstrating throughout, its utility in both framing empirical work, and interrogating the
mundane and the everyday in a variety of research settings, in each of its six “eco-systems”. It will conclude with a reflection on the usefulness of academic and policy worlds to jointly work with theories of everyday life to help realise the cultural potential of both individuals and communities.

**Modernity, industrialisation and everyday life**

The nineteenth century saw an emerging and potentially powerful proletariat – the “new” class of the modern world – come under scrutiny and surveillance, as its perceived power and influence began to threaten the confidence of the established order. In response to this and its accompanying social injustice, Marx and Engels in *The communist manifesto* (1848), made one of the most impassioned pleas for social change ever written, and in doing so, were articulating a “critical knowledge of everyday life” (Goonewardena, 2008, p. 117) which became pivotal in the subsequent development of theories around the quotidian. The work of both, for instance, was, later, to heavily influence that of Henri Lefebvre “the quintessential theorist of everyday life” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 71).

The development of the modern city gave rise to a number of sociological and philosophical accounts of how its “social body” coped with modernity. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), born in Berlin and resident after 1933 in Paris and other locations was an urban subject of the modern metropolis, as was Georg Simmel (1858–1918), also a philosopher-sociologist of urban life. Benjamin’s work centred on the “physiognomy” of the city, (Gilloch, 1996), his essay on Naples, (Benjamin & Lascis, 1924) providing a poetic-sociological framework for exploring the “porous city”, its dissolving of boundaries between the “inside and outside, between private and communal life”, noting that, “Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so… the street migrates into the living room”. In contrast, Simmel’s essay, *The metropolis and mental life* (1903), was an account of the “consciousness” of modern life, obtained through what Benjamin termed “microscopy” (attending to the detail), and “impressionism” (Simmel) as means of conveying the fleeting nature of experience in the modern city (Highmore, 2002a; 2000b, p. 37). Both Benjamin and Simmel’s accounts of everyday lives in the new modern metropolis remind us of the importance of micro-detail in the proper telling of the quotidian.

Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau are perhaps two of the most prominent analysts of the everyday, Lefebvre’s *Everyday life in the modern world* (1984) anticipating the events of 1968, which later, may have further influenced his idea of an emancipated quotidian. Drawing heavily on the work of Marx and, critiquing the tenacity of capitalism, its routinisation and bureaucratisation, Lefebvre proposed “the radical reconstruction of everyday life” (Goonewardena, 2008, p. 117), “with the human subject as an active creative force …” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 101). He drew on the pre-industrial form of “the festival” (La Fête), “which he considered, like revolution marks a break with everyday life and a rehabilitation of the everyday” (Trebitsch in Lefebvre, 2014, p. 24). Lefebvre considers “everyday life in modernity thoroughly routinised and degraded”, and “colonised by capital” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 158). De Certeau, (1984), in contrast, controversially understands everyday life as a terrain of resistance, the “tactics” of the dominated, cunningly subverting capitalist rationality in a “hidden transcript” of “popular resistance” (Scott, 1990 in Gardiner, 2000, p. 172). Goonewardena (2008, p. 131) is highly critical of de Certeau’s work,
suggesting that he “offers a classic case of the dissolution of collective politics into cultural politics, a postmodern trend wholly alien to Lefebvre and Debord”, and one, unfortunately in some respects, which has now come into being.

Mass Observation (MO) was founded in 1937 by a group of people, who aimed to create an “anthropology of ourselves”. They recruited a team of observers and a panel of volunteer writers to study the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain (http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/history-of-mo) and was perhaps one of the most sustained attempts in the UK to “document” the micro-detail of ordinary everyday life. “Unlike the continental European theorists of the everyday, ‘Mass Observers’ were not necessarily interested in whether change might emanate from the everyday, although a link can be made between them and Lefebvre, since they were both influenced by Surrealism …”, and the methods used by MO certainly contained an element of the surreal (Ebrey, 2005, p. 73). The detail found in the archive is testament to a detailed anthropology, leaving a legacy of the everyday minutiae of life in Bolton and elsewhere, both in the 1930s and later in their written and visual archive.

The work of MO and UEP has some parallels, in that they both work with anthropological method and make microanalyses of everyday life albeit in different centuries. Although UEP’s work is based in sociology, it adopts anthropological methods in its use of ethnographies, an interdisciplinarity advocated by Wallerstein (2003) who suggests the coming together of history, sociology and anthropology under the banner of historical social science. His position is a useful summary of the approach of UEP, which considers in its research, how macro and micro both constitute and are constitutive of each other, also a practical consideration for those developing cultural policies regionally, nationally and internationally. This is important as it acknowledges the symbiosis of both domains and recognises that one without the other, does not make sense in the formulation of policy.

**Class, culture and the everyday**

Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, both on the Left of politics and academics in the field of English literature during the 1950s, reorientated their work to consider “culture” and class, each for rather different reasons, whilst Thompson (1980) a historian, re-considered who and what constituted history. Hoggart, through a kind of auto-ethnography, made more visible the grain of everyday working-class life, even whilst expressing anxiety about its demise in the face of North American popular culture. In *Uses of literacy* (1957), Hoggart writes a “thick” tapestry of proletarian everyday life, wonderfully detailed (and sometimes romanticised), in his account of “the mutual exchange of a community” (1958, p. 22). Raymond Williams, writing at the same time as Hoggart, in his seminal essay *Culture is ordinary* (1958) and book *Culture and society (1780–1950)* (1963), redrew the cultural landscape to bring it once more into dialogue with the quotidian. His beautifully evocative account of a journey from Hereford to his home in the Black Mountains redrew the boundaries of what we mean by culture, recognising its place at the heart of common everyday life. Through their writing, both Hoggart and Williams “established that the study of popular culture could not be divorced from the wider dynamic of culture as a sphere of economic, social and symbolic activity” (Chambers, 1986, p. 203). This was given further emphasis in their association with policy development, firstly in Hoggart’s membership of the Pilkington Committee on the future of television (1960–
1962), secondly, his role as Assistant Director General, at UNESCO in Paris and thirdly, Williams’ employment as adviser to the Arts Council.

The ideas of Hoggart and Williams have, in addition, proved immensely influential through their involvement in several key university departments, with Hoggart founding and becoming the Director (1964–1969) of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). These networks and associations created a discipline we now know as Cultural Studies and reorientated Sociology and other disciplines towards the “cultural turn”. The focus of their work was on the forms and practices of everyday life, even if it was “culture” rather than “the quotidian” in which the discussion was framed. This, together with a re-formulated understanding of class was the objective of much of the work at CCCS and of Goldsmiths where Hoggart was employed as Warden from 1976 until he retired in 1984. The “turn to the quotidian” is important, a theoretical move to reemphasise the sometime mundane domain of the everyday. It is a rather more precise term than “culture” and as yet (though give it time), has not been appropriated as a useful prop for neo liberal economic theories. The everyday concentrates on the lived experience of the quotidian, which, if made the subject of both research and policy development could represent a democratic turn in the cultural politics of everyday life.

Whilst Hoggart and Williams were redrawing the map of the cultural field, Thompson was doing the same for history, “excavating” the everyday lives and consciousness of ordinary people, foregrounding the lives of those who laboured to make the wealth for others, but had to struggle for their own time, money and power. In the preface to the first edition of *The making of the English working class* (1963), Thompson states his aim to “…rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite ‘cropper’, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the utopian artisan … from the enormous condescension of posterity” ([1963] 1980, p. 12). This seminal work was a critique too, of both conservative positivist historians and of a Marxism “which supposed that the working-class was the more-or-less spontaneous generation of new productive forces and relations” (1980, p. 14). Thompson illustrates the power of industrialisation to shape the kinds of participation in leisure thus “… the average working man became more disciplined, more subject … to the clock … more reserved and methodical … less violent and … spontaneous” moving from wrestling and foot-ball to “pigeon fancying and tulip growing” earlier emphasising the (1980, p. 451) idea of class “as a relationship” (1980, pp. 10–11) and as a “social and cultural formation” arising from historical processes, establishing the way in which class shapes and is shaped by the practices of everyday life.

Thompson’s account of the way in which work shapes all kinds of cultural participation helps us understand, for instance, how different kinds of labour shape the social life of the communities in which they operate. By association, we can also begin to question how the demise of particular kinds of work might affect particular people and places. More recent “flexible” working has, too, profound implications for cultural participation, the “social times” of evenings and weekends now designated as working hours per se. A focus on the temporalities of work, both in and outside the home, theoretically and practically has real utility for all those involved in understanding community participation “The term temporalities denotes the social organisation of time in durations, cycles, synchronies, sequences and rhythms, and their articulation” (Glucksmann, 2005, p. 33). As such, the complexity of lived temporalities and their interaction with the temporalities of work need due attention in for instance, seeking to understand the nature of participation.
Rather than assuming (as many do), that these days, people are selfish and uninterested in the well-being of their respective communities, it may be more useful, for instance, to make a close analysis of how the temporalities of particular kinds of work might impact on their ability to contribute (see also Miles, 2016).

The CCCS under the Directorship of Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and later Richard Johnson, took the idea of culture and everyday life and analysed its articulation with “the political”, through the publication of a large number of Occasional Papers (and books) which engaged with “subcultures”, “feminism and popular culture” and “reinterpretations of Marx”, amongst other things. In addition to and alongside a reappraisal of Marx, part of the work of the Centre was to reshape understandings of class, in an effort to understand its relationship with culture more broadly, specifically the intersection of class with culture, gender, race, sexuality and other structural inequalities. There was both a concern to widen what was perceived as “culture”, with a particular concentration on political economies of “the media” and the cultural economies of media forms, as well as a focus on language and the text. At what was known (ironically enough) as “the Centre”, “everyday life”, named as such, was not under discussion in the same way as “culture” and “class”: the cultures and class formations that were the subject “of” “enquiry” tended to be youth orientated and not necessarily mundane.

The feminist everyday

Bennett and Watson cite “the history of new social movements” as the driver for the emergence of new visibilities of everyday life and suggest that feminism, in particular, has redefined our knowledges and perceptions of the everyday. Feminist academics have challenged the boundaries of knowledge, (about) the way in which the everyday is shaped in intellectual discourse, that is, what is “admissible” knowledge, and who is perceived as being “capable” of producing it (Ebrey, 2005, p. 79). Early work generating the second wave of feminism, such as Betty Friedan’s The feminine mystique (1963) laid great and necessary emphasis on the oppressive nature of the “confinement” of (admittedly white middle class) women within particular modes and spaces of “femininity”, particularly those of the home and the everyday. Friedan was one of the first women to turn specifically to the everyday in her profound but simple question on behalf of all women working in the home; “is this it?”; thus marking the beginning of women’s liberation.

Whilst some early feminists challenged the association of women with the everyday, others, such as Smith (1987), called for an understanding of an “embodied subject” located in an actual historical setting, while Wierling (1995, p. 154) urged us to recognise the everyday as “a form of knowledge of which the most learned are women” (quoted in Ebrey, 2005, p. 80). Felski, some years later, in another feminist reading of the everyday, articulates it in terms of time (routine), space (home) and modality (habit) and notes its association with women and the working class in particular. In doing so, she makes a specific critique of the work of both Lefebvre and de Certeau, in particular Lefebvre’s idea of the everyday as “alienated” and “residual”. Felski chooses instead to emphasise its “secular” and “democratic” nature and the shared sense of mundanity experienced by its participants, a transformation indicating a move away from the historical association with “superstition and magic” (Felski, 2000, p. 16).
Bell hooks (1991), similarly writes from a feminist perspective, making the point that, home, “rather than a place to get away from”, is central to the African American experience, representing “somewhere to go back to” in the midst of everyday racist oppression. hooks’ analysis reminds us that there are many everyday lives, lived under different circumstances, in different contexts, under different regimes of power. The story of one home, one everyday life does not speak for all (Ebrey, 2005).

From culture to practice …

It seems apposite to discuss the “practice turn”, as a final contribution to my “mapping” of historical and sociological writing on everyday life. The “cultural turn”, as I have suggested earlier, whilst exciting and innovative in many ways, tended to subsume the whole of life under a “cultural umbrella”. It neglected to properly sift out the different fields of production and of culture, in some accounts, suggesting that to resist the everyday through practices of consumption would, at some level, produce structural change. This of course did not happen as planned, and rather than for instance, de Certeau’s cunning tactician, we have the capitalist fox, primed to appropriate and accumulate the “newest everyday cool” for the accumulation both of corporate economic and cultural capital (see McGuigan (2009). Rojek and Turner (2000) were particularly critical of this turn from the “social” to the “cultural”, a phenomenon he termed “decorative sociology”. In an effort to move beyond the focus on “spectacular” cultural forms, such a club cultures and Hollywood film, some researchers began to develop new forms of analysis such as the “practice turn” developed more thoroughly by Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny (2003), Warde (2014), and Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012). This and its relevance to both policy and research will be discussed further in my concluding thoughts.

Conclusion

This article has discussed cultural policy and UEP in the context of the sociology of everyday life. Cultural policy is deficient in its neglect of everyday life in the following ways. Firstly, it has become the province of networks of cultural “experts”, rather than being grounded in everyday lived experiences. It is, therefore, an idea of cultural life that is offered to communities rather than one sought from them about what might be useful and enjoyable on their terms – a top-down model, in effect. Secondly, culture has been instrumentalised in the service of economic life. It is thought of as a useful “firework” to attract business (companies, tourists, visitors), into, particularly cities. Thirdly, the “micro” world of, for instance, a Village Hall on the edge of Aberdeen is rarely connected to the “macro” world of work, for example the Oil and Gas Industry in a meaningful way (Miles & Ebrey in press), to see how each is constitutive of the other, how the worlds of each might impact on the other in surprising ways. Fourthly, too much emphasis is put in the cultural field on individual choice, for example who goes to what theatre performance, in which esteemed cultural institution, neglecting to consider forms of culture, like, for instance, the communal practices (the making of sets, the learning of lines) involved in the staging and performance of a village pantomime.

Warde (2014) offers an alternative means of approaching both UEP research material and cultural policy, in the “practice turn”. The clue comes in the word “practice”, indicating
a theoretical approach that can also be a practical tool. A relatively new approach of understanding the social world, seemingly more “inclusive” and grounded in everyday processes, it represents a move away from analyses of the often spectacular and individualised “cultural” towards the ordinariness and often “collective” “competences” of the “practical”, “material”, and “embodied” everyday (see also Miles 2016).

Warde (2014, p. 279) suggests that his work utilises “theories of practice as a lens to magnify aspects of common social processes which generate observable patterns of consumption”. This approach seems a useful path to tread, as the UEP project attempts to make sense of, for instance, ethnographic work in Village Halls, Social Clubs and Sports and Country Clubs in North East Scotland. Practice theory may help us make sense of, for example, the “common social process” of creating a participatory Mother and Toddler group, from a selection of individuals (Miles & Ebrey, in press). The significant object that brings the group together is the tea and snack trolley, of indifferent aesthetic, ordinary stoneware mugs for mums, dads, grannies and granddads, plain plastic cups for the kids. The trolley is an important actant in the whole scenario, a key element in the transformation from group of individuals to a collective, as people gather around to share food and drink. This emphasis on the mundane, the ordinary, the practices of everyday coming together of ordinary–extraordinary people, is particularly useful for the work of UEP and its work in the settings of the quotidian, but also points to new directions for cultural policy in its orientation away from individualised consumption, to collective practice, from the spectacular to the mundane, “from actions to routine”, to “material” over “symbolic” (Warde, 2014, pp. 286–287). Savage et al.’s (2015) recent work drawing on Bourdieu’s idea of social cultural and economic capitals further suggests ways to work with more nuanced ideas of class and culture in UEP’s analysis of the classed sensibilities of a Scottish village.

Such a dialogue between academics, policy makers, community members and cultural practitioners could be productive in creating a properly constituted research–policy–practice nexus. Through analysis in the academic field and ongoing dialogue with policymakers on the basis of shared knowledges about everyday life, the revealing of structural inequalities and a cultural response based on knowledge located in and co-produced with communities could be groundbreaking.

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