

## Arts Research Seminar

### **No. 4: The use and abuse of comparative research in the arts and cultural sectors, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2002, Royal Society of Edinburgh Scotland Foundation**

One of the problems with comparative data is their tendency to stick around well past their sell-by date. "More people go to theatre than to football matches" – a claim recycled by arts lobbyists throughout the 1980s - popped up again during the World Cup summer of 2002, to the surprise of Christine Hamilton, Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at Glasgow University.

"I honestly heard that comparative used to politicians in the last month", she told participants in the Arts Research Seminar, *The Use and Abuse of Comparative Research*, which took place in Edinburgh in July 2002. "It was just before the England - Brazil match, when I suspect more people probably watched that match on TV than were at work - never mind went to the theatre. That statistic is at least 20 years old and [it] applied to football league matches. The really interesting thing about this piece of comparative research is that it says a lot about how football has changed over the last 20 years and how theatre has not."

This was the fourth Arts Research Seminar and the first to be held in Scotland. With the financial and organisational support of the Scottish Arts Council, Arts Research Ltd took over the Royal Society Edinburgh for the day for a discussion about why and how comparative studies are used in the cultural sector. Chaired by the Director of Glasgow School of Art, Seona Reid, the event attracted 64 participants, including academics, funders, policy makers, marketers and market researchers, arts managers and local authority officers. The day followed the pattern of previous seminars, with participants spending much of their time discussing particular questions in small, facilitated groups.

A literature review had been commissioned and circulated beforehand (see *Arts Research Digest*, no. 25) and for the first time in this series, two speakers - Christine Hamilton and Paul Allin, Director of Integration and Harmonisation at the Office for National Statistics - were invited to start the debate. Paul Allin talked about the importance of being clear, in every case, about why comparative data is being sought. What, precisely, are the questions the researcher is trying to answer? He talked, too, about the challenge of making reliable and meaningful comparisons within the cultural sector of one country, let alone between countries, which present different contexts and define and measure their cultural sectors in different ways.

#### *Looking over our shoulders*

Christine Hamilton focused on the relationship between research and policy development in the cultural sector. She suggested that, in the UK, cultural policy remains undervalued as an area of public policy and that insufficient attention is therefore paid to the role of research in shaping it. Her current interest is in historic comparisons. She referred to the example of Glasgow City of Culture 1990, "hailed as a city transformed through its culture", - a claim sustained more by determined marketing than robust research.

Both she and Paul Allin talked about the importance of noting changing contexts, particularly in relation to historic studies. Definitions of cultural activity, vocabulary, demographic profile, economic conditions and many other factors are subject to change over time, reducing the value of a historic study as a comparator or, at the very least, demanding some adjustment of the data before comparisons are made.

In the discussion groups that followed, there was agreement that memory in the cultural sector can be both short-term and selective and that some users of comparative research have a tendency to embrace the findings that will help them to make their argument and to ignore those that do not. The morning groups considered the reasons for undertaking comparative research in the cultural sector and the methods that make comparison meaningful.

Apart from academic interest, the reasons for undertaking this type of research were thought to include: the development of policy; the evaluation of existing policy or practice; an interest in learning from practice elsewhere; the justification of a previously untested decision; the identification of competitors; and the identification of ways to beat the competition.

The overall tone was one of concern about the risks inherent in making comparisons and about the practical difficulties of producing meaningful comparative data. One group suggested that if such research were being undertaken with a view to informing policy then the researchers must understand the ways in which policy is formulated. Comparative research must include an accurate characterisation of the subject (eg levels of local authority arts funding) and its context (e.g. size of population, social and economic conditions). Too often, the results are expressed in headline form only and it is these headlines that are repeated without reference to the whole.

Another concern is the repeated use of inaccurate data or interpretation as a basis for comparison. A study seen as groundbreaking in, say, the 1980s might subsequently have been found to be flawed in some respect, yet its findings continue to be used as a benchmark for contemporary studies in the same field.

#### *The case for dissemination*

It was agreed that existing research remains an under-used resource. One group suggested that the wider publication of research findings might help to raise the standards of research and reduce the risk that findings will be (perhaps unwittingly) misused. As studies become better known to a wider readership, it should become harder for politicians and others to be selective in their use of the findings. The relationship between quantitative and qualitative data was discussed at length. The consensus seemed to be that any comparative study would be enhanced by the use of both, since different types of data tell different stories.

In the afternoon, in new groups, participants discussed mechanisms for increasing the likelihood that research would be used in decision making in the cultural sector. They looked at ways to improve the quality of the research produced and at the dissemination of findings. It was reported that the Department for Culture, Media and

Sport is currently working on designing a 'framework' for the collection of data on the cultural sector. This is a response to the chronic complaints about the incomparability of data within and across different parts of the sector. As long as organisations, from the smallest theatre company to the largest grant-making body collect, analyse and present their data in different ways, comparative research will remain a thankless task.

Setting aside, for a moment, the mechanics of research, a number of participants felt that the application comparative research (indeed any research) to practice in the cultural sector is undermined by a fundamental lack of respect for, and suspicion of, research in the UK. Reference was made to practice in France and Italy, where reflection and research are understood to be integral to the process of policy development. While progress has been made in the UK in the evaluation of certain types of arts and other cultural activity and research has become a more widely recognised practice, it is still marginal.

#### *The quality question*

The quality of research was raised at frequent intervals. The less reliable the research, the less likely decision-makers are to want to use it. There was disagreement among those present about the extent to which 'good research' and 'bad research' should be identified. While a system of peer review is used in some cultural sector journals (eg *Cultural Trends*) it is rarely used outside the education sector. Much of the comparative research commissioned is in any case unpublished and is not subject to review of any kind.

It was agreed that one of the keys to better research is the quality of the research brief and the management of the subsequent research activity. The Arts Council of England produces guidelines to commissioners of research and their existence needs to be more widely advertised. Seona Reid pointed to the fact that the seminar included representatives of two arts councils, the British Council, the DCMS, Resource, the Scottish Museums Council and several other bodies in an excellent position to influence the quality of research commissioned. It was suggested that these and other bodies might come together to offer training courses in commissioning, conducting and using research, possibly in partnership with existing training providers.

A show of hands found that only three participants in the seminar had formal research qualifications and there was a lively debate about the extent to which researchers in this sector need to be formally qualified. One view was that the quality of the research mattered more than the formal qualifications of the researcher. That said there was strong support for a suggestion by one participant that the Social Research Association might be interested in running courses specifically for researchers and commissioners of research in the cultural sector.

Another well-received proposal was that of a network of researchers and commissioners of research to provide opportunities for exchange and to produce mentors for those with less experience in a particular area or type of research practice. A final suggestion was that as a follow-up to the literature review commissioned for this seminar, *Arts Research Digest* should publish a list of data

sources that might be of value to researchers and commissioners of research undertaking comparative studies in the cultural sector.

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