

[In]Visible and un/fixed Communities: Living with the Welfare Reforms

Interim Scoping Study Report

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Abstract:

This project is working with two third sector organisations to critically interrogate the lived realities of the welfare reforms. The key themes that have shaped the project are housing, food, job seeking, benefits and technology. The research consists of two ethnographic projects with community arts organisations and young people that are supplemented by a number of interviews with third sector and public sector workers, charities and community organisations. It also represents one of a number of projects funded by the Communities and Culture Network+ that is investigating the impact of the Austerity measures.

Our overarching aim is to critically interrogate the assumptions that are at the heart of the welfare reforms- around digital literacy, around individualism, around politics and identity, and understand how these are revealed through the framing issues detailed above. The second aim is to work with the participants to produce digital texts that speak to the issues detailed above, and to work with them to engage in wider issues around digital transformation.



Methods

“Applied, activist and public uses of (audio)visual anthropology allow, in a very direct way, the experiences of those who are normally invisible to be seen and their voices and feelings to be heard” (Sarah Pink, 2011, 452)

The project consists of two long-term engagements with community arts organisations Studio12 and Space2 who each have a commitment to engage young people in creative media with a view to reintegration into society. Both these projects have involved ethnographic work with participants for the duration of the creative media projects that have specific timeframes. For Studio12, this ethnography was with 3 main participants between March-September 2013 over a period of 6 months (although engagement continues through the showcasing of material and continuing involvement with the organizations and people involved). For Space2, ethnography is between November 2013 to August 2014, with 8-10 participants (although engagement is planned beyond this period). In both the fieldwork, observant participation occurred while the young people create digital audio-visual material that speaks to their current situation (such as being on Benefits, as NEET individuals, as aspiring artists, as Leeds residents). Our methods are in keeping with what Rose, Degen, and Basdas call a ‘walk-along method’ (2010: 340), observing, interviewing, reflecting and asking our participants to do the same.

At the time of writing, one project with Studio12 has completed the media project it was working towards and is showcasing work on the BBC website Fresh: [Mandlenkosi Maposa](#), [Saph Holden](#), [Hassan Abdullahi](#). These films are one output of a complex project that is currently being written about in other formats and forums as well. A second experimental output for the project was a [small documentary](#) that was co-produced by a third sector organization (Studio 12) an industry media producer (Left Eye Blind) and academia (the Communities and Culture Network+). This has opened up interesting reflections on participatory methods, co-curated work, ethical design, issues around responsibility and reflexivity, authorship, expertise.

The second project with Space2 is editing together material in the final stages of the work. Outputs include a film – a taster has been shown as part of West Yorkshire Playhouse’s [Recipe for Life](#) event, and there is a screening that is being organized as part of one of the participants Art Award Activities for August. A second output relates to the other digital material created (photos, social media blogs, scencescapes, animations and interviews) that will be edited into a second digital output in conjunction with the participants.

Both of these projects have been supplemented by interviews that have been undertaken by the researchers named at the start of the report, although the participants of Space2 have also done a number of interviews as part of their projects. At the time of writing, interviews have been conducted with Leeds Council members, Leeds Fed, Together Housing and St George’s Crypt, Get IT Together, and Fareshare.





Executive Summary

Dr. Helen Thornham, Dr. Edgar Gómez Cruz

The Executive Summary draws on preliminary research data under the themes at the heart of this project. When the project was commissioned, it seemed that Universal Credit would be rolled out in stages in the close foreseeable future. Because of a number of political, socio-economical and logistical issues, the government has postponed the roll out of Universal Credit (indeed, its future in this form remains in doubt). Despite this, the wider Austerity measures continue to be felt in the everyday lives of people, so that while the specific policy move towards digital provision and ‘digital by default’ is slower than first imagined, it is nevertheless ongoing. It is also the case that for public and third sector organisations, the Austerity measures have similarly been ongoing for some time. Public sector organisations have been rationalising organisational structures since 2008 as a result of budget cuts. In interviews with us, they have said that these measures will only begin to be felt by the wider public in 2015-6. Immediately, then, this draws a much wider context for our research, and locates the projects within a much longer timeline. Indeed, it is clear from our project that the long-term normative context for the young people is of reduced income and careful budgeting.

Key Themes:

Lived Realities of the Welfare Reforms

The first thing to note in relation to the lived realities of Welfare Reform is, as suggested above, that it is a long term and normative experience. The young people with whom we engage are between 17-25 years old. Their adult experience is of careful budgeting, little money and constant rationalisation around spending. This is also the normative experience for the third sector organisations with whom we work, where employees have had to take pay cuts or work 3-4 day weeks, and funding for engagement activities is increasingly competitive and reduced. At the same time, it seems that the volunteer cohort has increased as individuals within organisations take more upon themselves to help others. One of the most striking elements to emerge from this project is the precariousness across the entire sector. Many of the employees or volunteers have commented that the homeless, the unemployed, the job seeker, the bankrupt – could easily be them in 3 months time. In addition to this, the demographics of the young people with whom we work (those on benefits) are increasingly diverse. It is not the case that those on job seekers allowance are the perpetually unemployed. It is not the case that all those on job seekers allowance are content, unwilling to work, or uneducated.

This is not just about benefits; this is about people’s lives.

Community

The participants understand community primarily in relation to **geographic proximity** to family and friends. Many participants expressed deep-rooted unease at being asked to move locations for council houses as a result of the bedroom tax. Many participants have changed landlords from social housing to private sector when threatened with moving house as a result of bedroom tax or because of defaulting on rent payments. Although the reasons for moving landlords is diverse, it is clear that geographic proximity shapes the communities for the participants of our study and moving outside that community has a range of negative associations. One couple talked about feeling exposed and threatened walking down the street in their new estate, having been moved when they had a baby, even though the streetscape was exactly the same. One participant talked very clearly about where he does and doesn't feel safe in relation to particular areas around Leeds that have very clear identities that relate to wealth, ethnicity and age. One participant is currently being asked to move council estates, but this will move her away from her own mother and grandmother and therefore mean she does not have childcare. Extended families live close by and it is clear that the female members of extended families in particular partake in childcare for the whole family regardless of whether they themselves have children. One of the noticeable elements from our work with Space2 is how familiar all the women and girls are with babies and children, who would be passed around and engaged with during the workshops.

Community **is supported by social media**. Social media quite often becomes the only means of effective communication with friends and family when phone tariffs are unpaid and broadband is cut off for non-payment. All participants use a range of social media and IM sites, out of a perceived necessity to communicate. They use social media to communicate with friends and family, to arrange meetings, to discuss events and activities, to post images and share gossip. They expect parents and grandparents to know where they are through their social media posts, and they use a range of social media sites, although Facebook is the main one. This is not to say that social media use is without criticism, literacy or cynicism: all the participants have discussed what we would call cyberbullying activities directed at them. All of them have had private conversations and posts made public through retweets or re-posting. All of them have continued arguments that have started online into offline and vice versa – so that it is not possible to talk about these environments as separate or distinct. When thinking about community online – it is not the case that social media represents an online virtual community for these young people, but nor is it the case that social media does not represent something akin to community. The best way to think about online engagement is as a fundamental and embedded element of all communication and community, and therefore as equally fraught with negotiation, compromise, disassociation and pleasure.

Technological Use

Social media engagement is an embedded part of young people's lives: it is normative and compulsive. When participants talk about their social media use, they have talked about it as an economic necessity (vital communication when phone tariffs go unpaid for example), a momentary element of their lives that they will move beyond (when they grow up/ get a job etc), and as an addictive or compulsive activity. They identify with and ridicule photos and posts, they position themselves as observer, as distanced critic, as a fundamental part of the social media environment. They identify and disassociate themselves with posts. It is deeply enjoyable, frustrating, pleasurable, mildly irritating.

Smart phones are *the* means of communication for the young people of our research– they are used for job seeking, social media, banking – they are used for entertainment and socializing. Every single meeting and workshop with the participants started with photo, video or meme

sharing – this was their catch up activity. The young people are incredibly digitally literate in terms of tariffs and consumer rights (they know exactly which tariff is best at any particular time across service providers), they are discerning about the apps they use and they have all experienced cyberbullying or been exposed in some way on social media. But for sustained conversations, say with a social or youth worker, phones are problematic when credit fluctuates or is non-existent. For CV writing or job applications, smart phones are also not ideal – the young people may use their phones with speed and frequency, but these activities require a different kind of literacy not accounted for in the ‘digital by default’ blanket statement.

As **objects**, the phones have been smashed or broken. They are fetishised and rejected. They are the tools for many conversations and the objects for discussion. Even as they are compulsively taken in and out of pockets, checked, and engaged with, they are discussed as useless objects, momentary, inadequate. These discussions betray a complex and negotiated relationship with their smart phones.

As **devices**, for communication and identity, they are absolutely central. Some of the participants pay flat rate internet tariffs that allow their phones to be used as modems for the entire household allowing all family members to get online.

As **metaphors**, mobile phones also speak to the way the young people live in the moment, are reactive and responsive to immediate demands and requests. They represent something about, and seem to support a culture of, immediacy that seems to run counter to forward planning, deep concentration, time keeping. In relation to the projects, for example, this meant that all participants had to be constantly reminded about workshops through social media and texting, texted when it was time for them to leave, or when taxis had arrived, phoned when they were absent. In the workshops themselves, phones offered an immediate and frequent distraction that could be turned to at any time. There is something wider here about a culture of immediacy, which has a knock on effect in terms of behaviour, abilities to work, youth, different temporalities etc. The difference is perhaps that for the participants, there is little capacity to develop wider skills such as duration, concentration, and time keeping (which could be developed through, say employment, education, family) so that the sporadic attention seems more noticeable and more frequent even as it is a noticeably growing phenomena *per se*.

In thinking about the ‘**digital by default**’ approach to welfare provision, it is clear from working with these young people that even while smart phones are compulsively taken in and out of pockets, checked, and engaged with, they are inadequate devices for what is required by the welfare system. Their knowledge and literacy of digital technologies is vast and in some cases - with regard to tariffs and consumer rights – far outstrips our own. But this knowledge and literacy does not ‘empower’ or ‘enable’ them when faced with a job search or application, a court order or email exchange with a social or youth worker. Skills are not considered as transferable across media. These young people are, clearly, digital by default, but their digital literacy is also, like the objects they use, often smashed or broken.

Participant: ‘I’m on Facebook all the time’

Researcher: ‘But you said you didn’t write - how come you have a Facebook account?’

Participant: ‘That’s typing, not writing. They’re totally different’

In thinking about the wider **digital economy**, it is not appropriate to approach digital as a determining force, nor is it appropriate to consider digital as a separate entity for the young people – or indeed the organisations with whom we work. In all cases the digital is an embedded and inherent element of people lives. We could suggest that the digital is shaped by what we might call economies of practice – particularly when we think of the uses of the mobile phone in

relation to other communication and financial considerations. Alternatively we could think of the emerging values associated with digital (conscious and unconscious, economic and well-being) that cannot be separated from wider socio-economic, geographic and age-related signifiers. Both of these are more useful ways to approach the notion digital economy for this research.

Mobility

Mobility is **tied to** transport, infrastructure, and community. All of the participants spend inordinate amounts of their day travelling on various buses around Leeds between families, friends, activities, jobseeking related activities. Those participants that have jobs at any time, travel on multiple bus journeys to and from work. These journeys around Leeds that require deep knowledge about infrastructure, timetables and pricing offer produce a very different temporality when compared with the immediacy of the smart phone use detailed above. Participants are people constantly on the move. Mobility is exacerbated by homelessness (a number of participants have been thrown out of home for various reasons and end up sleeping on friends or families sofas), sense of duty (travel to be with someone), and the requirement of constant face-to-face meetings throughout the week.

For many participants in our project, the 'ticket' to participate on the programmed activities is literally what makes them participate. Every week they receive a small fee or bus token to be used for transport. The Space 2 project, for example, gave out bus tokens for a few months of the project, but even though Leeds transport accepts these tokens, bus drivers would use them as a rationale for not allowing people on their bus. Being refused access to buses by drivers is a common and completely demoralising experience of the young people we work with. Taxi drivers, unless booked through the agency used by Space2, often refuse to pick up the young people, so that journeys to workshops (and throughout Leeds) are never straightforward. Mobility for many of these young people is both a routinized daily occurrence and a challenge that is full of demoralizing, angry and ridiculing encounters. At the same time, their understanding of Leeds in relation to postcodes (which is to a certain extent compounded by taxi and bus drivers' understanding), also creates further barriers as some areas are simply no-go. Many of our participants in the Studio12 project live in South Leeds and refuse to go to East Leeds, for example, so that Leeds and mobility is both lived and imagined.

If I had a magic wand... what I would like is to have my own place

Housing:

The increasing threats from social housing landlords (including the Council) for non-payment of rent and the perception that this will increase with universal credit, has caused stress and anxiety across the group and their friends and family. The stories recounted often detail a downward spiral of debt whereby the threatening letters and subsequent stress has led to the seeking of alternative accommodation, often in the private sector which in turn has led to increase rent arrears, bridging loans and loan sharks. The majority of the participants have taken out loans of one form or another relating to everyday necessities – the need to decorate a house with damp problems in preparation for a new baby, the need to buy clothes for a new job when all money has been spent on heating and food, the need to buy white goods when old ones have broken. All of these stories end in more debt: the damp returned, the landlord would not fix it, the tenant moved out, but the loan repayment continues; the person was fired, the clothes became redundant, but the debt continues; the tenant buys white goods but cant afford the electricity to run them.

Housing is absolutely central to the participants of the projects, and always present in conversations around the levels of control participants feel they have over their lives. Through housing, participants are positioned within systems or processes that they rarely feel they have

control over. There is a constant threat of being made homeless because of arrears, debt or poor relations with landlords; there is a constant threat of being made to move because of engagements with social service, the council and changes of people in houses (families grow shrink and are reconfigured); family relations are often tense and eruptive; homes are damp, insecure, unsafe (at the start of the Space 2 project, for example, one couple was moved into a flat in December with a baby. The flat had no white goods and no gas connection. They could not cook a meal for the first 2 months until the responsibility of these provisions was resolved between social services, social housing landlord, Leeds council and the gas provider).

There is a big fear factor about ... from a financial point of view it could get even worse and most of our business models are geared to taking an amount of money in. We expect so much rent loss but it will start playing about with what we can invest in and what we can borrow and other bits and pieces ... So it impacts all the way down the line realistically and there's, the housing staff are having to do more support work because there's so much more call for that now.

Employment

One of the main issues and challenges for many of the participants has to do with either keeping or finding a job. There are a number of issues to note in relation to this that has bearing on technology, community and culture:

I want to wake up looking forward to the day rather to having to apply for jobs ... having that pressure... I just want to have more control

C.V.s and job searches are now all conducted online and those seeking employment are expected to devote up to 5 hours a day in searching for employment, and are expected to apply to between 10-15 jobs a week (depending of status). If the quota for job applications is not met, the job seeker may have job seeking allowance stopped. If a job is applied for outside what is considered the applicants experience, job seeking allowance may be stopped. Many of the individuals have had periods of time (up to a year, but usually between 3-6 months) where job seeking allowance is stopped. At the time of writing, one participant has her job seeking allowance stopped because she walked away from an apprenticeship at a care home after being asked to work a double shift. One participant had her job seeking allowance stopped because she was late to an appointment at the job centre. One participant had job seeking allowance stopped for applying for a job deemed outside her experience.

Mobile phones may be conducive to some of activities relating to job seeking, but they are not conducive to all activities related to employment. At the same time, Libraries allow for between 15 minutes and one hour of internet use per person per day. Not all homes have broadband. There are large areas around Leeds where WiFi is unavailable.

Digital literacy in relation to the ability to apply for jobs and upload C.V.s is not the same as knowledge around where to search for jobs, understanding the language of job adverts or applications, representing oneself online. The online experiences of job seeking and application

are as a whole uni-directional and routinized. Bus fare for most face-to-face meetings is the responsibility of the individual.

Each participant has between 1-5 face to face meetings per week at locations around Leeds that relate to job seeking and are with the job centre or auxiliary organisations or workshops (such as CV writing courses, apprenticeship schemes, digital literacy workshops).

All participants want employment. They talk about wanting to gain some element of control in their lives. All of them dislike the experience of going to the job centre and cite this as one of the most demeaning and demoralising activities of their week. The participants want to develop certain skills and careers – e.g. within care and health. They are persuaded to consider themselves as pursuing a ‘career’ rather than as applying for any job. This creates a range of tensions.

Because you're not educated on the importance of say a credit rating with regards to borrowing, you've probably not bothered. You've probably even blagged: 'I didn't pay my mobile phone bill' or 'I didn't do this'. But you don't realise in not doing it you're actually damaging your own future financial standing. So, it's all those little things. They're very small but...

Dreams, Anger, Future

The participants we engage with are aspirational – they attend workshops with third sector and community arts organisations that are difficult to attend for a range of reasons (travel, money, child care, peer pressure). They do this in the face of what we might call wider societal rejection or abjection: they are regularly not allowed on buses, not picked up by taxis, refused service in shops. Their journeys beyond their local community are rarely pleasant or straightforward.

It is very common for participants to say that there is ‘a lot going on in my life’, and although this usually means some specific problem, it is not uncommon for them to feel depressed, anxious or tired and this feeling tends to be impactful across their activities.

They have a voice that they want to be heard and a desire to regain some element of control of their lives. This is usually talked about in terms of getting a job, but they are also aspirational about their futures – they have clear aims and desires about where they want to be. They are reflective about opportunities and chances that they take or turn down. They are engaging in media projects, they are doing Arts Award qualifications; they are constantly seeking to improve their lives in some way. At the same time they are constantly humiliated, stigmatised, stereotyped, objectified. Every single workshop with the Space2 project starts with a narrative of humiliation, whether that is something quotidian like being refused on a bus, or encounters at the job centre to something more instrumental like past abuses being investigated by social services, or court orders.

I've got some friends where the father's not there... it means there's less money in the household – that child may not get the best education simply because when he goes home he's dealing with his mother and this drama at home. When he goes to school he's labelled a naughty kid – because obviously he can't concentrate; he's not on that level. So, eventually you've got someone who gets to 16, GCSE day when we get our results – I had some friends, personally I was fortunate to get my GCSEs, but you've got a friend who's got nothing. You ask him, "So, what are you going to do?" "Well, I need to get money". "Why?" "Well, because of food. I need to eat. I'm dressed like a tramp". "So, what are you going to do?" "Oh well, there's Big John up the street; I could probably get an ounce off him or I could get this off him". "Then what?" "I could probably sell it". "Who are you going to sell it to?" "The rich kids". "Who are the rich kids?" ... these rich kids they talk about are just the working class.

Next Steps

Work with Studio12 and Space2 will continue informally as participants conclude Arts Awards and are directed to other events, activities and support structures. We will be sourcing further funding to continue to work with these groups.

To conclude this particular project, Interviews are planned with:

- (1) Voluntary Action Leeds, Together for Peace; LS14 Development Trust and Community Unity, Social Landlords Association and Residential Landlords Association. Our purpose here is to talk to groups and communities affected by the Austerity measures and Welfare reforms, those who are vocal within council politics, and those who are less visible. These groups have to use and implement digital technologies as part of their engagement activities, so will also contribute to a wider understanding of the issues, concerns, presumptions and oversights in relation to the digital.
- (2) Trussell Trust (Armley), which offers short-term food packages in specific geographic areas, community and faith centres (Beesdon, Woodhouse, Heart, Chapeltown Mosque, Harehills Temple). These are all Church organisations, and our aim in working with them is not only to make visible those populations at the extremities of the social housing agenda, but also to investigate the implications of the increasing reliance on the Church and volunteers, to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of State provision.
- (3) Leeds, Sheffield and York Councils and representatives of the NHS. These are heavily involved in the implementation of the reforms, and key concerns for these organisations relate to the shift to the digital as both a means to implement and a support for the implementation of the welfare reforms. Working with these organisations would offer political, practical and economic contexts for the longer ethnographic - inspired work, and help locate our findings and the implications of them. These public sector organisations are interested in investigating solutions for the range of issues the reforms pose- such as the lack of digital connectivity or literacy within key geographies and populations around Leeds.

The final stage is to work with other projects funded by the [Communities and Culture Network+](#) to gather a national perspective on these issues.