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‘Life Chances’: Thinking with art to generate new understandings of low income situations

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Introduction

In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels- to participants and to spectators- the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term- an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle- that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary (Bishop, 2012, p. 284).

This chapter investigates how community members, academics and artists might collaborate to enable new imaginings of welfare provision, social work and regulatory systems for families with children on low-incomes. The regulatory regimes that enact, delimit and inhibit the progress of families on low incomes across England and Wales are diverse and multiple. They include immigration status (including from EU countries) availability for work, mental health, child protection, structural and overt racism and the non-portability of professional qualifications across national systems. These regimes do not explicitly interact with one another although their effects are affectively experienced. Here we discuss how contemporary art practice might materialise these intersections and enable disruptions of regulatory regimes in ways that are not possible using traditional social science approaches and we explore how processes of disruption that occur as a result might be understood. In this chapter, we focus on how a research team including artists Close and Remote co-produced with community members and academics a socially engaged artwork - *Life Chances* - that aimed to generate new knowledges about the regulatory regimes that low-income families experience. By staging and troubling contradictory notions of ‘life chances’ through art, we specifically ask how the regulatory services that families encounter in two urban settings – the Easton area of Bristol and Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown in Cardiff – shape, constrain and enable the life chances of individual families and communities.

The Life Chances project

Life Chances was a co-produced research project (2015-2017) exploring life on a low income for families with children, and the regulatory systems encountered in their everyday lives. It was co-designed by academics from Bristol and Cardiff Universities, artists Close and Remote, and two community organisations: Single Parent Action Network in Bristol and South Riverside Community Development Centre in Cardiff. From the outset there was an intention to work with socially engaged arts practice as its emphasis on collaborative working closely reflected the principles of co-production. For the purposes of this chapter, a definition of socially engaged art practice might follow Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen's sense of:

Art that leaves the art institution and performs different kinds of interventions or artistic social work, often intended to create some kind of dialogue in conflict-ridden urban space (Rasmussen, 2017).

Importantly, social practice involves making art with, rather than simply for, communities where the social encounter forms the material, the process and the aesthetics of the work (see text box below, on *Art as Method and Outcome*). In *Life Chances*, the artwork comprised jewellery-making workshops, field trips, writing a novel, designing and producing a game and writing and performing music and poetry.

Between December 2015 and July 2016, 22 workshops were undertaken separately in Bristol and Cardiff and with both groups together twice in Chepstow. Most workshop participants (n=17) were parents of dependent children and in receipt of asylum support, or benefits and/or tax credits. Two of the original participants were male, the rest female; most were from a Black or minority ethnic background, including Black British (of Jamaican heritage), Asian or of African heritage. Five had arrived in the UK from another EU country, having left countries in Africa and Asia; four of these had been asylum seekers when they arrived in that EU country.

Figure 1: jewellery made as part of the project

Activities consisted of making jewellery, which was used as a method of ‘making and talking’ (Watson et al., 2016). This acted as a prompt for people from very different experiences and cultural heritages to collaborate. Workshop

sessions also included more formal ways of developing fictional characters for a novel through drawing and writing on flip charts and using Google Docs to create and edit online collaboratively. These sessions enabled our co-authoring of the novel by bringing together participant experiences of regulation through characterisation and narrative. Through repeated performative signposting by the lead artists, participants and researchers were ‘located’ in the novel during the sessions. The novel provided a speculative ‘stage’ on which to experiment with ideas and practices. Statements such as “We are now in the jewellery business inside the novel” created a fictional and playful space in which participants could explore what running a business might mean outside of the apparent confines of everyday experience.

Life Chances as a concept

Life Chances is a widely-used phrase, adopted by UK governments to headline their policies on children, families and poverty. The UK’s Coalition and Conservative governments’ (2010-2016) use of the concept was to place responsibility on individuals to explain their claims of denigration of ‘society’, rather than on the State. The ideological work of the use of this concept has been to emphasise the role of individuals ‘actualising’ their life chances through, for example, some form of entrepreneurial economic activity to lift them out of poverty.

Several governments and think tanks (New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, the Centre for Social Justice, the Fabian Society) have used the term ‘life chances’ performatively to produce different effects. The Conservative government’s *Life Chances* strategy did not define the concept of *Life Chances* but linked it to tackling poverty and disadvantage and making opportunities more equal, emphasizing the ‘family’ and parenting

strategies and capabilities (Lister, 2016). This located successful life chances in the two-parent heterosexual family, the cornerstone of a strategy aiming to ensure that parents stay together. Announcing this strategy, the former Prime Minister stated that:

Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one. Children in families that break apart are more than twice as likely to experience poverty as those whose families stay together. That's why strengthening families is at the heart of our agenda (Cameron, 2016).

The very notion of *Life Chances* however, originates from the sociologist Max Weber who first framed the concept when expanding on Marx's analysis of the socio/economic factors that inhibit/enable the advancement of different class-based groups (Weber, 1978). Weber believed people's life chances were conditioned by economic and structural determinants and that members of a class (where there is a shared likelihood of obtaining goods and a position in society) shared common life chances. Some believe Weber's concepts have been mistranslated (Abel and Cockerham, 1993), with *Lebensführung* (life conduct) and *Lebensstil* (lifestyles) conflated into 'lifestyles', emphasizing choice. Arguably Weber saw lifestyles as in part economically conditioned. In a commentary on Weber's ideas, Dahrendorf explains that life chances are the (logical) probabilities of certain events happening which in turn depend on structural conditions such as income, property, norms, and rights – not the attributes of individuals (Dahrendorf, 1979):

Weber's concept of lifestyles draws together structural conditions (life chances) and personal choices (life conduct) as its basic determinants. *Lebensführung* and *Lebenschancen* are the two components of *Lebensstil*. *Lebensführung* refers to the choices that people have in the lifestyles they wish to adopt, but the potential for realizing these choices are influenced by their *Lebenschancen* (Abel and Cockerham, 1993, p.554)

The inherent irony in this inversion from Weber's original concept by the UK Conservative government is unravelled in this co-produced research project, deliberately renamed *Life Chances* (as a reification of the concept), exploring individual and collective agency and participatory resistance to regulatory injustices and controls on low income families, from the perspectives of those families involved in the research.

The semiotics of political propaganda

In workshops with participants, *Close and Remote* focused on the Government's *Life Chances* posters that were tweeted and circulated in social media as part of their *Life Chances* agenda. They presented heterosexual, mostly white family groups with no more than two children with associated slogans outlining the Government's pledges to improve life chances through the provision of relationship support, mental health provision, careers advice, housing regeneration and investment in health. The imagery was idealised and lacked in any sense of diversity apropos family structures.

Artists Close and Remote used these posters in workshops and invited people to participate in a semiotic – specifically a Barthesian - analysis of the rhetoric of the image. Roland Barthes attempted to wrestle with the problem of whether images were semiotic in a linguistic sense. His sense of the total meaning of the image relied on a mix of the fascination with story and diegesis with the intelligibility of 'culture' as a series of symbols (Barthes, 1977). One of the then Government's *Life Chances* posters show a family of three - a White mother, father and child - hand-in-hand in the foreground, walking towards the viewer. They are standing on a horizontal band of white. Behind them in the mid-ground is a band of light green. In the background, constituting the landscape up to the horizon line is a band of darker green. There are a few trees, simply rendered as blocks of either white or green. On the horizon line stand two tower blocks, side-by-side. The sky is a plain, pale blue. The workshops explored these images as graphic components, as a narrative of a white, heteronormative family realising their 'life chances' and as a series of symbols (the tower block in the background that signals the family's socio-economic status; the blue-sky signals hope; the green grass signals nature). With these individual components identified, workshop participants replaced visual elements with alternatives to explore how the poster's rhetorical force could be transformed. The White family was alternately replaced with a Black family, with a Muslim woman in hijab with a child, with a single father and his children and other similar images. The landscape was transformed by replacing the tower blocks and green grass with a sandy desert, mosque and an olive tree. Importantly, the people in these images are faceless. It is perhaps an unintended outcome of the mannerisms of illustration trends, but this suggests a uniformity and anonymity of despair as the people remain part of a 'faceless society'. By using pedagogical practice traditionally used in art education, *Close and Remote* introduced participants to a reflexive visual literacy that enabled them to re-think and re-work the rhetorics of the political image into powerful and effective counter-propaganda images.

Moreover, using the same aesthetic palette as the original *Life Chances* poster ensured that the critique would be recognisable to participants. French philosopher Jacques Rancière usefully discusses the relationships between visibility, aesthetics and politics:

[A]n aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms. The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an “awareness” of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification (2004, p.63).

Our semiotic workshops acknowledged the necessity of the double effect of the readability of political signification and the shock of the new offered through the remixing of visual elements.

Figure 2: Re-configuring 'family' in Life Chances imagery

Figure 3: Changing the landscape

The poster workshops led into further discussion of participants' experiences as families on low incomes. The women who participated in the workshops (they were almost exclusively women) had a range of craft skills, specifically jewellery-making. Engaging in skills and cultural technique sharing through jewellery-making produced a series of pieces that combined motifs from home countries in Asia and North Africa. *Close and Remote* had introduced a design of concentric circles made from copper strips in initial workshops, which developed repeatedly in a range of jewellery shapes and was eventually used to structure the process of the *Life Chances* game (see below), which was based on characters developed out of the stories told in the workshops, separated into constituent parts, fictionalised and combined into new narratives. Overall, the work evidences a conceptual and aesthetic rigour as each element informed the development of subsequent aspects. Moreover, the work continued with its commitment to co-production and the involvement of participants through the entire process. Sharing methods of image deconstruction with the research volunteers was an important moment in the workshops as the methods enabled a move out from critique towards creative production and was a new process and experience for the artists themselves.

Figure 4: The Life Chances logo and jewellery material

The 'Game' of Life Chances: *Lebenschancen*

The aim of the *Life Chances* game was to enable people to experience character stories as both an embodied experience and as a dynamic art installation. Designed for the AHRC Connected Communities Community Utopias festival in 2016 (to coincide with the 500-year anniversary of *Utopia*) (More, 1516) the game was designed to disrupt everyday knowledge of life on low-incomes from the perspective of interrogating what *Life Chances* meant in the context of welfare reform, punitive regulatory measures and, in particular the intersectional experiences of nationality, citizenship, education, and access to capital and resources in all their forms. The artists introduced an approach that drew loosely on methods in transactional analysis (Berne, 1958). Transactional analysis is a therapeutic approach derived from the work of Berne and ideas from psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and is used to understand and map transactions and ego states between adults and children in family therapy. We did not have any intention to adopt this approach in its technical, disciplinary sense. Rather we adapted the approach to focus on the content of transactions between people in a physical interactive space, trying to expose and explore the transactions that are implicit in life systems (i.e. benefits). Characters from the book were co-developed with participants to create playable actors in the floor-based game where, depending on the detail of your character you can move to different parts of the *Life Chances* mat denoted by points on interlocking circles modelled on the project logo and jewellery motif.

Figure 5: The original Life Chances game mat

In the game, players soon find that some characters have greater access to capital and are physically more mobile on the board than others. For example, Mona Ali, a non-EU asylum seeker from Somalia with a secondary school education (Figure 6) is unable to move from the starting position in most scenarios played, whilst other characters have greater economic capital to draw upon, or the ability to increase earnings as they have the right to work in the UK (a right denied to asylum seekers such as Mona). In some situations, the letters are deliberately inverted to force characters such as Mona to move, but their previous inability to move makes this sudden inversion important as other characters notice the change in position and realise that these characters have not just had a change in their circumstances- rather that

the game is provoking a disrapture in how players understand individual situations.

Figure 6: Example of one of the Life Chances game cards

Whilst we started with the language of transactions between people who have different resources and ‘starting points’ in the game, it became evident as the game developed that there were alternative analyses that could be used to understand what was happening in the game. Transactions are not solely at individual levels but are reliant on the regulatory systems and societal structures within which people transact. This demanded different theoretical understandings and framings. In particular, the game is not purely concerned with economic capital. It is for this reason that we reached to the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu. The game mechanics operate across a ‘field’, that is a:

Configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions (Bourdieu, 1992, pp.72-73).

For players in the *Life Chances field* the:

Medium of these relations, these determinations, is capital, which is hence both product and process within a field. All capital-economic, social and cultural-is symbolic, and the prevailing configurations of it shape social practice (Grenfell and James, 2004, p.510).

This is illustrated as players experience the nuances of *Life Chances*; some have little income, others have substantial income and wealth. However, in some cases income is offset by possible debt. It becomes apparent that in some contexts, the poorest characters can progress (albeit fleetingly) as they do not have the means to borrow money in the first place, while those with high income potential are limited by poor health and the experience of Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) work assessments, or by caring responsibilities and the burden of childcare costs. Other characters demonstrate the challenge of being highly skilled and educated in one country only to find that the capital (economic, social and cultural) they understood they had in one national context is either not recognised or cannot be exchanged in a new regulatory state when people migrate to the UK.

Bourdieu's theories have significantly informed our understandings of how the *Life Chances* game has operated in the project. *Habitus* operates as the organising structure within which individual actions and dispositions reside. Bourdieu described habitus as:

A power of adaptation. It constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion (Bourdieu, 1993, p.88).

Some of the characters experience *Hysteresis*, that is Bourdieu's concept of being as a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) where the structures of their habitus and dispositions remain the same, but conflict with the environment in which they find themselves: 'Innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.257). This is particularly the case for recently migrated characters such as Nadjma Murabit, the qualified doctor from North Africa, who finds herself unable to practice medicine in the UK as she cannot afford the £700 required to take her English language tests. Or for Asha Silano, whose teaching qualifications from Somalia are not recognised in the UK. Both women find themselves reliant on minimal asylum benefits, in dire financial situations, with dependent children to care for. Yet they are both qualified professionals but are in new national regulatory systems where they become 'fish out of water' and dependent on state financial assistance.

For some other characters, the taken-for-granted power, ability to progress their life chances and their potential for capital accumulation also becomes visible in the game as some characters progress exponentially whilst observing others that remain fixed in (literal) positions on the floor mat. This is exemplified by fictional characters such as Barry Hamilton, the chief executive of the fictional security firm G4N, who develop and manage the roll out of the Universal Credit system in the novel; and Sir Newton Abbotsley, the owner of the Daily Saliva newspaper- both of whose social, cultural and economic capital enable them to navigate regulatory systems and avoid business ruin and political scandal. This is what Bourdieu describes as an experience of *doxa* where:

The systems of classification imposed by the group to which an individual belongs, and the power relations within the group – is taken for granted and experienced as natural (Dumenden and English, 2013, p.1080).

Observing the game in action it is interesting to note that even when embodying other people's characters and life narratives, players start to associate with 'people like me' (in the game world) and those who advance socially and economically start to compare income, education, career and family. Bourdieu claims that dispositions, habits and behaviours mark out people as belonging in certain groups and located in certain habitus:

It is each individual's habitus that determines the true nature of the interaction – that is, the habitus defines the social distance between social agents brought together in physical space because each individual carries with him/her forms of dispositions that are markers of his/her social position within social space (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82).

Yet it is exactly this 'distance' that the game challenges. People can play different characters from different walks of life and physically stand in the same small space and together experience the injustices of an unequal society. Players are confronted in intense ways with questions of institutional racism, paternalism, social networks that enable progression in life chances and the role of the state in wealth redistribution. But beyond these abstract questions the game also has an empathetic layer of experience- players 'embody' their character, they relate to their difficulties and frustrations and can 'see' other players advancing their and their families life chances in speeded up reality. Players report feeling upset, angry, stuck and frustrated by the experiences of their own character or of observing what happens for others- even those playing the more powerful and affluent characters.

ART AS METHOD AND OUTCOME

In its initial stages, *Life Chances* worked with project participants to co-write a call for artists to join the research. Rather than approaching art as a way to communicate research, as a way to engage different publics in research, or as an instrument of well-being (Matarasso, 1997) we considered art as knowledge-producing in itself (see (Allegue et al, 2009). Following a pitching process with both academics and community participants, social practice artists Close and Remote joined *Life Chances*. At their first meeting with community participants and co-researchers, Close and Remote stated that the aim of art should be to make work that is of long-standing value, where value is understood as involving, but not be limited to, social benefit and is expressed through both process and outcome (see Simoniti, 2018).

Vibrant debate concerning the role of art in community-involved projects concerns relationships between the aesthetic value of the artwork and what art historian Grant Kester terms a dialogic aesthetic that emerges as part of the process in socially engaged art:

In a dialogical aesthetic... subjectivity is formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange itself. Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori "content" with other already formed subjects, but is itself intended to model subjectivity (Kester, 2005, p.5).

Central to this dialogic aesthetic is 'empathetic identification', which Kester (*Ibid*) suggests can be achieved along a series of 'counter-hegemonic' axes: the rapport between artists and collaborators, within the collaborators themselves, where a form of solidarity can emerge, and across the collaborators and other communities. In contrast, art historian Claire Bishop argues that the ways in which 'the intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus—and medium—of artistic investigation', leads:

To a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond (Bishop, 2006, pp.179-180).

In *Life Chances*, we aimed to address equally the artistic significance, aesthetics and rigour of the multiple elements of the work and the quality of the collaborative relationships and processes that were at the heart of its production.

Engaging across these axes demands mixed methods: doing things together, co-creating art and developing rapport and empathy. In their workshops, Close and Remote drew on contemporary art and devised performance techniques and adopted aspects of 'transactional analysis' (Berne, 1958), to focus activity on media analysis, jewellery-making and collaborative writing. To achieve what sociologist Yasmin Gunaratnam describes as improvisatory empathy (2012), *Life Chances* workshops focused on Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and *Utopia as Method* as 'a form of speculative sociology of the future' (Levitas, 2013, p.85). Using these techniques, we devised multiple elements of a durational, distributed and co-produced artwork. Together we imagined a fictional narrative in which people came together to participate in jewellery-making workshops and to share their experiences of living on low incomes. Participants extracted aspects of their own lived experiences to begin devising alternative characters comprised of disparate elements of testimonies from multiple people. As a Utopian method, this allowed us to create hybrid collective-individuals and to re-imagine systems in ways that participants believed would better support their families in contexts of state intervention. The fictional space was thus complemented by a real-world space in which a playful, creative and critical use of the reified materials and languages of the political *Life Chances* project reflexively enacted its objective: to produce empowered, economically active individuals engaged in creative-entrepreneurial endeavour.

Where we contributed methodologically is the way in which we worked together to develop the textures of character, plot line and interactions with other characters and services that are encountered in the novel. We describe the *Life Chances* novel as sociological fiction (see Leavy, 2015). We deliberately adopted this term in order to evoke sociology's contested aims of producing broad-based change through society-level engagement with justice agendas. Sociological fiction, documentary fiction and creative nonfiction methodologically resonate with the production of verbatim and documentary theatre (Forsyth and Megson, 2009), experimental performative and reflexive documentary (Renov, 2004, Minh-Ha, 1990), and the ethnographic and fictional turns in contemporary art more broadly (Rutten et al., 2013). Fictionalized accounts of real events aspire to present people's lives in ways that offer aspects of identity protection, enable ethical encounters with people's testimonies and aim to present testimony and experience in order to critique and transform structures of power. These accounts have a long history that stretches to the late nineteenth century with Étienne Lantier's journey in Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885), which fictionalizes conversations Zola had with Turgenev. In film, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Georges Rouquier's *Farrebique* (1946) and Jean Rouch's

participatory ethnographic fiction *Jaguar* (1967) use fiction and participation in order to evoke the drama of everyday life, challenge structures of power and critically frame the ethical and creative relationship between artist and collaborator. In anthropology, a turn towards fiction was initially driven by an acknowledgement of the 'literariness' of ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p.4). However, the appeal of these docu-fictions is troubled by art historian Hal Foster's critique of the '*realist assumption...in quasi-anthropological art, in particular with its siting of political truth in a projected alterity*' (1995, p.303-04). *Life Chances* has contributed to this field by troubling the stable siting of political truth in projected alterity, through both the collective characterisation in the novel and the transactional practices of the game. Participants amended and edited aspects of their hybrid characters and plotlines all the way through the writing process and these characters became the characters of the game, which we are all invited to inhabit in the game play. In *Life Chances*, the constellation of methods of collective making and artistic 'objects' (jewellery, novel, game) do the work of troubling the notion of the individual as subject to regulation and create spaces in which people can intervene in and reconstitute seemingly monolithic structures. Using regulatory frameworks and sociological methods as source material enabled collective exploration of questions around art-making and the cultural and potentially economic value of art for and with communities.

Exploring Regulatory Terrain: Social work

In the course of the workshops in Bristol, four participants spoke about their different experiences of social work, especially in children's services. One workshop included developing aspects of a social work character for two other characters to interact with. These raised questions such as: "*Who tells a social worker what to do?*" "*Do social workers get training about parents from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds?*" "*How do you complain about a social worker?*" To develop a better understanding of the children's services field and to inform participants about the system as well as provide a backdrop to the novel's storylines, a social work academic with a long history as a practising social worker, together with a family lawyer, were invited to a workshop to answer participants' questions, and discuss problems and solutions. From this we gained some understanding of social workers' *habitus*, their prime concern being the child, in some cases infused with a different idea of parenting than that of the participants'. The *doxa*, or 'rules of the game', in children's services were not obvious to participants. These included what is legally possible concerning looking after someone else's child (such as private adoption, parental responsibility) and giving up the care of one child to another family member (subsequently the lawyer sent in information about delegating parental responsibility). Significantly there was concern about not knowing the 'rules of the game' in relation to child care procedures. Parents felt there was a lack of transparency about what was happening and why, and what their role was or could be.

For example, there was lack of clarity about whether a parent could obtain or query minutes of case conference meetings; the workshop experts said that minutes cannot be changed but a parent could send in a correction and ask this to be circulated. Discussion particularly focused on an incident reported to the group by one participant who was being audio recorded in an

interview with a social worker but was told that she could not make her own recording. This led to several participants endorsing that they had also experienced this and the social worker expressed her concern that this should not happen, but that she was not aware of any practice or legal guidance that would indicate to social workers that this was acceptable.

The lawyer subsequently sent information from the *Transparency Project* outlining when this can be done in order to equip parents with the knowledge to challenge practitioners if this situation arose again for individuals (Transparency Project, 2016). This report emphasises the lack of research on this issue and maps why, and in what circumstances, parents may want to have their own audio record of meetings with social workers. Interestingly the report notes that it is unusual for courts to consider recordings from parents and that there are accounts of recordings presented by parents to courts that are of very poor audibility and deemed inadmissible. The report authors do, however, cite legal cases where parental recordings were considered, although only in one case presented did this influence the court outcome:

In *Medway Council v A & Ors* (Learning Disability; Foster Placement) [2015]
EWFC B66 a mother made covert recordings of the abusive and racially insensitive foster carer who she was living with along with her baby, and until the recordings were played she had been disbelieved. The court relied on the recordings and made findings against the foster carer who was clearly heard verbally abusing the mother (Transparency Project, 2015, p.6).

The *Transparency Project* report pre-dates the introduction of the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) of 2018, but it clearly explains to parents and practitioners the legal situation in respect of the *Data Protection Act* (1998) and how parental recordings can be considered in the light of this legislation. At the time of the workshop this guidance was valid and provided assurance to workshop participants that it was legal and possible to ask to record meetings with social workers, and indeed court proceedings, as long as permission was sought in advance. Although in the case of court recordings the report notes that: ‘A court is unlikely to give permission unless it is clear that the recording is both relevant and reliable’ (*Ibid.*, p.14).

The workshop, and subsequent guidance provided by the family lawyer, offered genuine information to participants on what could and could not be done in respect of social work interactions and provided a space for people to ask questions of a social worker and family lawyer without fear of recrimination or unwanted questions about their personal

circumstances. Participants' recommendations from this experience, which fed into the novel characters and storylines, included local accountability (such as a local commissioner for children), a manual for parents and a role for parents that is similar to parent advocates and parent/community input into service delivery and training.

The development of storylines in the novel highlight tensions between presenting a sufficiently realistic scenario of social work intervention and giving participants a voice in shaping the narrative. Two issues from the workshop with the lawyer and social worker that were used in the published novel included the right of parents to audio record social work interviews and the legalities of parental responsibility. In both instances scenarios were 'negotiated' between participants whose 'characters' embodied these issues and with those with knowledge of the system to keep the integrity of characters and narratives whilst also being realistic. This representation of emotionally difficult experiences was made possible through the fictionalisation processes and through real life negotiations between participants who had devised the characters concerned including the social work student (developed by one of the community development workers) who is seen to challenge the practicing social worker Debra, in one scene in the novel:

[The Scene] Debra (social worker) is visiting the home of Shireen, mother of Marlon who she claims is being racially bullied at school. Debra is accompanied by Secnach (visiting social work student from the fictional island of Zantonica, off the coast of Somalia). SHE, Shireen's friend is also present. Debra has sat down and put her digi-recorder on the table ready to record the discussion when... ..

"Hang on," Shireen takes her phone out of her pocket, presses record and puts the phone on the table.

"I'm sorry but you can't really do that..." Debra reaches over for the phone.

"Yes she can," replies SHE.

"This is a confidential meeting about a child's welfare so I'm afraid due to data protection, I must ask you..." SHE interrupts Debra. "Shireen can record this meeting, it's within her legal rights."

"This is true," Secnach agrees, "I was reading about this subject in preparation for this meeting. A parent can record a social work meeting if it is for their personal use."

"Yes, well, thank you Secnach. I was about to say, before the interruption, that if you are recording the meeting, I must ask you to keep the recording for your personal use only. No sharing on Facebook or whatever," Debra frowns at Secnach and reaches for a biscuit.

“Why would you think Shireen would post personal information about Marlon and her family on social media for all the world to see?” SHE narrows her eyes and shakes her head at Debra. Debra takes off her glasses and smiles. “Yes. Sorry. I meant no offence. Shall we start again?”

“I suggest we do” says SHE.

“Have a seat, please,” Debra gestures towards the sofa.

“Thank you for offering me a seat in my own yard,” SHE sits down on the edge of the sofa.

Secnach catches SHE murmuring, this woman is a real eediat. Secnach looks over at Debra and can see by the tightness of her lips that she heard it too. (Poulter et al, 2016, pp.73-74)

The scene then moves to a discussion of parental responsibility for Marlon, as Debra mistakenly assumes that Shireen and SHE are in a same-sex relationship and co-parent the child. This illustrates the lack of sensitivity and knowledge that the social worker has in engaging with the friends who support each other with their children. When Debra realises her mistake she then tries to remove SHE from the discussion as she cannot understand the relevance of her being there if she does not have parental responsibility.

As a piece of fictional writing this provided a space for participants to make public the real situations that they felt were discriminatory, with practitioners who were ill informed of their situation. Leavy (2015) suggests that empathy is created in fictional writing through: *Interiority* – which allows readers to access the inner lives and emotions of the characters and through a process of: *Interpretive gaps*, that is, writing in such a way that: ‘*readers have to use their imaginations to fill in gaps that can sensitise them to emotional complexity*’ (Ibid., p.57). She claims that these processes are not dissimilar to social science research practice, as both are in the pursuit of *Verisimilitude*: the ‘*creation of a realistic, authentic and lifelike portrayal*’ (p.57). Debra is characterised as a white, middle class, middle-aged social worker who lives in a cottage with a cat. It is this characterisation which prompted us to organise for the Black Jamaican social worker to talk to workshop participants and this felt important at the time to challenge the stereotype portrayed. Yet the embodiment of Debra is symbolic of the White oppression, lack of cultural sensitivity and institutional racism perpetuated by regulatory workers towards them and their families that participants were determined to convey throughout the project process. It was unnecessary to tell the reader how participants felt about their experiences of social workers - Debra embodies these experiences and Secnach provides a foil, and an alternative reality within the realm of social work regulation. Yet we also leave many things unsaid: these are the ‘*interpretive gaps*’ that Leavy (2015) describes and that are possible in a speculative fiction such as this. We had no privileged

access to any form of ‘truth’ and the interpretive gaps allowed us to be honest about this and to incorporate hesitancy and uncertainty about what was known of people’s stories, including those of the fictional Debra. The focus on producing a novel provides opportunities for readers ‘to explore meanings rather than truth, existence as opposed to reality’ (Tierney, 2004, p.162).

Conclusion

In this chapter we argue that the creative, practice base of the *Life Chances* project enabled examination of what can be a dizzying and alienating range of regulations and regulators. By supporting an engagement with ‘the means of production’, the project manifested and materialised the agency that collaborators already had but were perhaps not facilitated to act out.

Life Chances provides a new perspective on the role of fiction, in that fiction of this kind can link real people and their lives to the power system and therefore create commentary. In this case we opted for satire, while many of the actual reported life stories are very serious. This creates an incongruity in the book and is a way of disrupting and transgressing hegemonic narratives and providing counter narratives of who the people are who live in low income situations and what their everyday experiences with regulatory systems are.

The transformational aspects of this practice entailed the catalysing of new organisation and economic activity by the participants in an ironic gesture of embracing critically the neoliberal invitation that *Life Chances* as a fiction offered through the development of a new Community Interest Company run by participants. Indeed, *Life Chances* has created a number of obvious tensions and lived contradictions. We have knowingly supported the social and participatory turn in the use of art in social research and have supported participants to engage in reproducing capitalist politics of financial independence through creative entrepreneurial activity.

Life Chances as an artwork has, however, provided a nuanced rendering of community participatory art in a politicised, reified space, that has been both reliant on relationships and a mutual knowing, as well as respecting individual stories and experiences and there are elements of the ethical turn in participatory art in our work (Bishop, 2012). Commentators on participatory ethical arts practices argue that the norms for judging the quality of art might be seen to shift away from individual sensory judgment to those of ‘dialogic exchange and

negotiation' (Bishop, 2012, p.23) or have a focus on the relational bases of arts practices that are described earlier by Rasmussen (2017).

Life Chances has created autonomous artworks that disrupt and force the spectator to question the status quo where the project has encouraged utopian thinking to re-imagine the welfare regulatory systems that currently delimit people's life chances. This socio-political art practice has both resulted in objects of arts practice that can be identified as art (a fictional novel, immersive game, songs, propaganda posters, jewellery) and tentative and precarious processes of empowerment, education, participation and democratisation that have so far resulted in entrepreneurial activity and continued community development practices from within the communities we sought to represent. Yet *Life Chances* also has unmet potential to affect spectators and it is this potential that continues to be performed and tested in new contexts and with new audiences. Central to this ongoing work is engagement with regulators, policy makers and politicians as we explore the potential of the artwork to develop societal capacities to understand and see the experiences of families in low-income situations in new ways.

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