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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

Ambiguity and Cultural Policy

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ABSTRACT

The peculiarities of cultural policy as a policy sector give rise to many difficulties for policy-makers – particularly the creation of poorly-defined and confused policies – stemming from the essentially-contested nature of the core concept with which it is dealing. This is identified as a problem of policy ambiguity, with ambiguity being endemic to the sector. This ambiguity is expressed in multiple ways in terms of policy contents, expectations, outputs, outcomes and mechanisms, and these serve to make the sector a subject of political disagreements, policy inconsistencies and evaluation confusion. Differences between ambiguity as a deliberate choice for policy participants, and as a consequential effect of the structural characteristics of the policy sector are identified. The results of these in terms of the policy forms that are generated for the cultural sector, and the creation of dissent about these – and about the legitimacy and rationality of cultural policies – are identified, as are the results of ambiguity in terms of expectations, contestation, clarity, implementation effectiveness and the control of policy.

Keywords

ambiguity, policy consequences, rationality, legitimacy

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INTRODUCTION

The essentially contested nature of the core concept underpinning cultural policy – that of 'culture' itself – has many consequences for the policy sector, not least of which are the existence of often poorly-defined policies, and the problems that there are in developing effective models for the evaluation of policy effects as a consequence of difficulties in identifying causal and attribution links between policy outputs and policy outcomes (Gray, 2009). This paper

considers these consequences in the context of policy ambiguity. The polysemous nature of 'culture' gives rise to such a variety of policy understandings and practices that the result is not necessarily a state of utter confusion that cannot be satisfactorily analysed but, rather, a field where both the causes and consequences of confusion can be made sense of in ways that provide clear explanations of policy phenomena and this is done through the establishment and use of ambiguous policies. The identification of underlying behavioural and structural reasons for the existence of policy ambiguity in the field of cultural policy form the focus of this paper, the consequences that arise from this ambiguity for the making, content and evaluation of cultural policies are identified, as are the outcomes that are produced for the cultural policy sector as a whole. The focus of the discussion is a sectoral one that is concerned with general matters of principle and policy structure rather than being concerned with any particular country or level of government. Empirical examples, however, are made use of to illustrate the relationship of these general matters to policy specifics.

Defining the content of the cultural policy sector is itself difficult (Gray, 2015) given that there are multiple potential component elements of the sector in the form of, for example, cultural diversity, heritage, sports and gastronomic concerns that individuals, groups and governments may wish to develop active engagement with. Rather than seek to analytically limit the content of the sector this paper will simply refer to specific cultural policy examples where appropriate to demonstrate the multiple ways in which ambiguity can be seen to affect the content of the field. As such, these examples are not intended to be anything other than indicative of the specific ways in organisations which have a responsibility for cultural policy deal with the complexities that sectoral imprecision generates. These examples are drawn from the public sector but there is no reason why the arguments that are advanced in the paper should not be equally as applicable to the private and voluntary sectors as well. Policy ambiguity is not confined to the cultural policy sector alone, but the essentially contested nature of 'culture' makes the role of ambiguity within the sector a much more central concern than is the case with other policy sectors where there is a much clearer focus around which action can take place as in the cases of health or economic policies, for example (see Gray, 2015, 4, 14).

THE NATURE OF AMBIGUITY

While ambiguity, at the most simple level, is linguistically concerned with something which is capable of producing 'alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (Empson, 1961, 1) the term can also be extended to non-linguistic sources for the creation of multiple responses to a similar subject. In the present case this subject is 'cultural policy', in the sense of a defined course of action to deal with a particular cultural issue – including doing nothing at all [1]. Policy ambiguity in this context has multiple senses attached to it which consist of:

- Ambiguity of policy content – in the sense of whether cultural policies have only one clearly-defined intention/policy aim behind them, or whether they will inevitably have multiple potential, and often unintentional, consequences at different levels of effect (individual, group, societal), with this being in some senses a version of the distinction between explicit and implicit policy effects (Ahearne, 2009)

- Ambiguity of policy expectations – in the sense of the results that they meant to achieve – are these 'purely' 'cultural'[2] effects or do they include social, political and economic effects, or is cultural policy simply an instrumental means (Gray, 2007) towards some other policy end altogether?

- Ambiguity of policy mechanisms – in the sense of determining: who are the appropriate actors to put cultural policies into effect; which are the appropriate organisations to use; and what are the appropriate policy instruments (Howlett, 2011, 41–59) to utilise in turning policy into practice

- Ambiguity of policy outputs – in the sense of being able to identify what the focus of policy evaluation would be for investigating policy success or failure (what, for example, would need to be examined to identify whether 'excellence' has been produced through the implementation of a cultural policy for the arts?)

- Ambiguity of policy outcomes – in the sense of identifying what the consequences of the policy were: are these to be understood simply in terms of the professed aims of the policy, or are spill-over effects to be included – and if so, then which ones should be considered or ignored?

- Ambiguity of policy evaluation – in the sense that the above ambiguities will inevitably lead to difficulties in developing evaluations that are themselves unambiguous

The assumptions that arise from this are that in the field of cultural policy ambiguity is both inevitable and will present a problem for policy-makers to attempt to resolve. This paper does not intend to conclusively demonstrate the accuracy of these assumptions, taking them more as working hypotheses that will allow for the exploration of five issues that are necessarily associated with this topic of concern: the reasons for why ambiguity exists; the consequences

1. This is not necessarily either the only or the best way of considering what cultural policy is but it allows for a concentration on a limited dimension of the subject that can serve to illuminate more general points arising from the focus on policy ambiguity.
2. Precisely what is meant by a 'cultural' effect, let alone a 'purely' cultural effect, depends upon how the term is defined. By itself this demonstrates that the cultural policy sector is rife with ambiguity from the outset: what counts as a 'cultural' policy in one country may be seen as an economic policy in another (as with tourism, for example) and there is nothing intrinsic about policy content that can be used to successfully demarcate where the 'right' home for such a policy may be.

of ambiguity for how cultural policy is understood; what the policy results of ambiguity are; what this means for cultural policy as a policy sector; and what the implications of ambiguity are for cultural policy research. If it can be demonstrated that there are clear cultural policy implications that arise from the discussion of these issues then a framework for the detailed empirical examination of them in future research can be established.

WHY BE AMBIGUOUS?

The root cause of ambiguity for the cultural policy sector is assumed to lie in the essentially contested nature of the concept of 'culture', an issue that has numerous consequences of its own for both the nature of the cultural policy sector and the manner in which policy-making takes place within it (Gray, 2015). Saying this does not, however, explain how a linguistic issue becomes a matter of practical policy concern: to provide such explanation it is possible to divide the basis for practical policy ambiguity between two effective underlying motivational causes:

- Structural Conditioning, and
- Deliberate Choice

While these contribute to a false dichotomisation of the contributing role of agency and structure to processes of policy creation, stability and change (Archer, 1995, 79–89) they do allow for a preliminary differentiation between possible sources for the continued presence of ambiguity even when it produces if not serious problems for policy-makers then, at least, practical difficulties to be contended with.

AMBIGUITY AS STRUCTURAL CONDITIONING

Ambiguity as a matter of structural conditioning can be seen to arise in conditions where the degree of complexity that exists establishes circumstances where the creation of ambiguous policies is the only effective means to achieve any meaningful output. These circumstances may include problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participation (Cohen *et al*, 1972, 1; see also, March & Olsen, 1979, 25), but they may also include the allocation of functions and responsibilities between organisations and tiers of government (and between the public, private, voluntary and charitable sectors), as well as matters of ideological difference and political disagreement. Each of these provides a particular set of structural constraints and opportunities for policy participants to engage with but one where there is no definitive solution that is capable of resolving the conflicts that are generated by their presence.

Examples of such policy difficulties that may allow for the existence of ambiguous policies can be seen across this range of circumstances. In the case of acute ideological disagreement, for example, one means by which policy-makers can paper over the cracks is through the adoption of forms of symbolic policy. Such policies are not actually intended to 'do' anything other than to provide a form of political fig-leaf to disguise an absence of agreed intention. In these circumstances deliberate ambiguity becomes a virtue in that no group of dissenters would be able to claim unambiguous ideological 'victory' but, equally, neither would they be able to claim unambiguous ideological 'defeat' thus allowing for a dissipation of acute conflict into more manageable parameters of low-level dissatisfaction. Similarly, in the cases of political disagreement or problematic preferences policy-makers may find that the production of an ambiguous policy would at least demonstrate a willingness to do *something* – even if nobody is entirely clear what that something is or should be – while, at the same time leaving room available for particular groups to get their version of what needs to be done put into practice. This can be particularly useful where there are clear differences in functional responsibility between organisations and levels of government: the passing of enabling legislation by national governments, for example, allows regional and local authorities the choice of whether to do something or not (such as in England where expenditure on arts and museums by local authorities are both discretionary rather than statutory matters). In these circumstances it is the case that the classification of expenditure as discretionary/statutory is clear – except that it is not. The legislation is deliberately vague as to what count as relevant subjects for permissible expenditure and how expenditure should be classified anyway. Some areas of museum work in England, for example, are commonly paid for from local authority education budgets – such as museum visits by school-children – while exactly the same work could also be paid for from social services or health budgets (which, in the case of the latter, local authorities have no control over anyway) – such as museum visits by groups with various social or mental conditions that are deemed worthy of concern. In these cases policies are created at the local level to satisfy differing local views over what is necessary to deal with these concerns but which are utterly contradictory at the level of either central government or the overall policy sector, leading to the creation of sectoral confusion as a consequence of the ambiguity that was created by the original policy decision in favour of discretionary rather than statutory expenditure.

Thus, structural conditioning can provide the context within which the adoption of ambiguous policy solutions becomes a convenient mechanism to allow something to be done (or not done) in conditions where there is little prospect of overcoming the entrenched positions that have been adopted by policy participants. The exercise of a willingness to simply ignore the depth of these positions, or to deliberately inflame the passions of their defenders, is always possible but this largely depends upon the issue concerned being seen to be important enough to make the political costs of action worthwhile. Given the lack of political centrality that cultural policy has in many political systems

(Gray & Wingfield, 2011, identify this lack of centrality in the case of the United Kingdom through an analysis of the comparative significance of central government departments for the overall work of government where the government's cultural department has a very low ranking: similarly empirically-based identification still remains to be established for most other countries) it may be expected that it is unlikely to be a subject that political actors would anticipate to generate a high enough political benefit to outweigh the political costs that would be involved in doing something more positive, thus leaving ambiguous policies as the consequence.

There is also a further structural dimension to policy ambiguity that originates in the degree of specificity that is appropriate to different levels within policy systems. Thus, at the macro-level of broad governmental or organisational policy anything other than a broad statement of policy content is likely to give too many hostages to fortune for actors to be comfortable with, and vagueness in content allows policy statements to act as expressions of intention rather than as deliberate courses of specific action. Examples can be found in various national organisations such as the Australian government's statement that 'we develop and administer programs and policies that encourage excellence in art, support for cultural heritage, and public access to arts and culture (Attorney-General's Department, 2014); or the Finnish policy 'aim is to realise cultural rights and ensure access for all residents to art and cultural services' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014), or the English policy of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of 'supporting vibrant and sustainable arts and culture', 'maintaining world leading national museums and galleries and supporting the museum sector' and 'protecting, conserving and providing access to the historic environment in England' (DCMS, 2014); or the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)in the United States 'that funds and promotes artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities'(NEA, 2014). Filling in the detail of these desires through specific meso- and/or micro-actions then becomes the responsibility of other parts of the system, whether through other individual organisations (such as private, voluntary and charitable companies, or state, and local authorities, or arm's-length organisations) or through forms of network arrangements, or even through branches of central government itself. The extent to which this filling in of detail results in unambiguous policy statements and action plans is not necessarily clear-cut. Implementing organisations may find that maintaining a lack of precision about their statements can serve a valuable role in providing them with room for manoeuvre. Thus, the Science Museum Group Plan (2013, 4–5) in the United Kingdom contains such plans as: 'improve front concourse and welcome display', 'deliver an ongoing programme of acquisition', and 'increase market reach of Learning programmes and products', none of which is exactly unambiguous. In this context this dimension of ambiguity starts to tip over into the use of policy ambiguity as a matter of deliberate choice.

AMBIGUITY AS DELIBERATE CHOICE

Policy ambiguity in this respect is more complex than is the case with structural conditioning in so far as there are a larger number of discrete cases of ambiguity to consider, each of which gives rise to different explanations for why ambiguity is seen to be a reasonable policy preference. These explanations can be crudely (if rather superficially) divided between those that seek to establish a theoretical explanation for the deliberate choice of ambiguous solutions to particular policy matters, and those that are more descriptive – often in a *post-hoc* fashion – of the reasoning that can be employed by policy-makers to justify the adoption of ambiguity.

The theoretical explanations for the choice of ambiguous policy solutions are commonly found in the rational choice and game theoretic literatures of political science and economics (see, for example, the explanations provided in Shepsle, 1972; Alesina & Cukierman, 1990; Bernheim & Whinston, 1998; Ghirardato & Marinacci, 2002, for particular types of ambiguity associated with electoral campaigning, contracts and subjective utility). In these cases it is assumed that there is a conscious calculation of the benefits of ambiguity for actors in particular specified circumstances, and this can then form the basis for the making of larger generalisations about policy choice. Such approaches depend upon the acceptance of not only the specific behavioural assumptions that underlie the analysis, but also upon the assumption that parsimonious explanations are preferable to more complicated ones. Neither of these, however, are foregone conclusions with the latter being particularly contentious (see, for example, the arguments of complexity theorists on this point: Cairney, 2012; Gray 2014), but this work does provide a set of frameworks for understanding ambiguity as a rational response to particular sets of environmental conditions [3].

The more descriptive approach to ambiguity as a deliberate policy choice is equally dependent upon the particular contexts within policy choice is being exercised (Zahariadis, 1999, 90) but is more concerned with the specifics of this choice (ie. why, in this particular case, was policy ambiguity adopted), rather than seeking to provide generalisable claims about the phenomenon. In this fashion it is possible to identify four distinct contextual reasons for the selection of deliberate policy ambiguity.

Firstly, in conditions of acute policy uncertainty – where nobody really knows what works and what does not, and nobody knows how to make an effective selection amongst multiple policy options – policy-makers may opt to 'let a thousand flowers bloom' in the hope that one of them will turn out to be a rose. The fact that the other 999 may turn out to be variants of poison ivy is not the point: the fact that nobody knows what the 'best' policy solution may be means that simply providing an open arena for experimentation through the establish-

3. Which also serves to indicate the frailty of the dichotomy between behavioural and structural conditions as explanations of ambiguity.

ment of a deliberately ambiguous policy may provide the opportunity for effective practical policy responses to a given policy issue or problem to be created somewhere (and it does not matter where), by somebody (and it does not matter who). An example of this can be found in the core policy of the Regional Arts and Culture Council of Portland, Oregon, in the United States which states that the Council 'works to create an environment in which the arts and culture of the region can flourish and prosper' (Portland Regional Arts and Culture Council, 2015). In such a case the expectation would be that the vaguer the policy framework that is established then the greater the scope for innovative approaches to the creation of policy would be made available. Thus ambiguity can allow for real innovation and experimentation in such uncertain circumstances and this could be the 'best' solution for policy-makers to adopt in the form of the establishment of trial-and-error opportunities for many actors to take advantage of.

Secondly, in conditions where there are considerable tensions between groups of political actors over the content of policy choices (whether in the form of competing pressure groups and political parties, or in the form of fragile coalition government arrangements, for example), the use of ambiguity leaves scope for each participant to manage the precise detail of policy in terms of their own interests or concerns or beliefs (Leitch & Davenport, 2007). This can obviously over-lap with the issues generated by the allocation of functions and responsibilities between organisations and would be anticipated to lead to the same result of the creation of a diverse set of policy responses with subsequent concerns about uniformity and contradiction between organisations and within the policy sector as a whole. However it can also be a positive means by which to avoid causing unnecessary political turmoil. This is not quite the same as the idea of structural conditioning in conditions of entrenched political and ideological preferences and is more concerned with differences of policy preference which may be quite distinct from ideological and political differences, even if the end result is much the same. Thus, arguments about the selection of policy preference A or B or C need not be based upon entrenched ideological positions (although they may be), but could be more simply based upon differing evaluations of the political/social/economic and/or cultural consequences that these policy options may give rise to. In these cases the argument is about policy content and anticipated policy outcomes rather than about whether the policy is in line with particular ideological and party preferences. An example of this can be found in UNESCO's policy concerning culture and development which is aimed at 'convinc(ing) political decision-makers and local, national and international social actors to integrating (*sic*) the principles of cultural diversity and the values of cultural pluralism into all public policies, mechanisms and practices' (UNESCO, 2014). Using ambiguous solutions allows for a shifting of the focus away from the particular towards the general and thus changes the nature of the debate for all of the participants who may be concerned.

Thirdly, where the policy issue itself has assumed a high level of centrality for political actors then the use of ambiguous policy contents can allow policy-makers to either deny responsibility for policy failure, or to claim responsibility for policy success. Recent pressures on public funding, for example, can provide a powerful incentive for policy-makers to be as vague as possible about policy content – as in the strategic document produced by Arts Council England (2013, 39), where 'our core mission can be distilled into two goals: we want excellent arts and culture to thrive, and we want as many people as possible to engage with it'. The more ambiguous the policy is the easier it would be for core policy-makers to adopt either position – to claim responsibility for policy success or deny responsibility for policy failure – as and when may be politically required. In these circumstances ambiguity has the political virtue of making it difficult for critics to pin down precisely where policy failure rested while allowing success to be claimed regardless of whether it is justified or not. The greater the ambiguity associated with a policy the more that unintended consequences can become important for policy-makers: positive results, whether meant or not, can always be claimed as being the inevitable result of putting policies into practice, and negative results, again, whether intended or not, can always be blamed on other actors. Thus, the more important the policy issue is, the more that ambiguity can be a helpful resource for politicians, particularly in those cases where there is a high level of policy uncertainty when the gap between intended and unintended policy consequences can be large as a result of a lack of definitive knowledge about policy contents, outputs and outcomes.

Fourthly, in conditions where there is disagreement about the justification or rationale of particular policy choices then the creation of workable compromises can be achieved through the use of policy ambiguity. Diesing (1962) has argued that different forms of rationality (such as economic, social, legal and political rationalities) create the conditions for the establishment of very different forms of social action that are incommensurable, while Boltanski & Thevenot (2006) have argued that differences in how choices are justified can also lead to incompatibilities between the underlying logics of their resulting policies. To overcome the policy difficulties that are created by these clashes of understanding Boltanski & Thevenot (2006, 279–81) further argue that policy compromises need to be established to provide some common ground for social action, and that these solutions may be best created when there is a high level of ambiguity in the language that is used to justify policy choices. Thus, ambiguity allows for the supercession of incompatibilities between different forms of policy justification and can, therefore, provide an effective basis upon which to reconcile competing claims concerning the logic of policy choices (Zittoun, 2014, 136). This is as much concerned with the use of language and policy rhetoric as it is with the actual content of policies themselves and thus provides an alternative view of the uses to which ambiguity can be put, with ambiguity providing a solution to a different type of policy problem to those concerned with the detail of policy content or implementation (Davenport & Leitch, 2005). Thus 'the objective of the state's support of the arts and culture

is to afford everyone residing in Iceland the opportunity to enjoy arts and culture regardless of their social status and to ensure a favourable working environment for artists' (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2015) provides a general policy intention that offers something to everybody but which actually commits the Icelandic government to nothing whatsoever. By leaving such an open terrain for action multiple actors can undertake multiple actions under the broad banners of social equity and support for artists that, presumably, everyone in society can agree with.

Clearly there are multiple versions of what makes ambiguity a plausible policy outcome in the case of cultural policy where each of the structural conditions and descriptive accounts outlined here can be seen to have relevance in terms of both the general policy arena and the particular policy case. Indeed, it could be argued[4] that ambiguity is only to be expected in the field of cultural policy and that a lack of ambiguity may be more the exception than it is the rule. If this is the case then the consequences of endemic ambiguity need to be considered to identify whether ambiguity has damaging results to put alongside the positive reasons that can be put forward to explain its presence in the policy sector.

THE POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF AMBIGUITY

In many ways the policy consequences of ambiguity are as much, if not more, to do with how it creates the conditions for debate as it is to do with the detailed content of cultural policies *per se*. In this respect the focus returns to the uses of policy language in the context of deliberately chosen or consequential occurrences of policy ambiguity. Almost by definition it would be anticipated that ambiguity will give rise to persistent argument and debate about the adequacy of policy definitions, policy contents, methods of implementation (Matland, 1995) and evaluation, as well as about who the key policy-makers *should* be expected to be; and that the greater the degree of ambiguity that there is the more intense these clashes would be. As such, a key consequence of policy ambiguity is that it opens the policy sector to a great deal of internal debate between proponents of different positions, with this being exacerbated by the high levels of policy uncertainty and the existence of problematic preferences that are inherent within it. Ambiguity can be a means to avoid having to deal with the deeply-held and deeply-felt positions that policy actors have adopted and, as such, the idea that there will actually be a means to fully resolve these differences is probably unrealistic, as ambiguity deliberately avoids the idea of resolution in favour of a much more fluid notion of policy. Thus, the arguments can change, and the policy fashions can alter, but there is unlikely to be any definitive solution to continuing cultural policy concerns and interests, even if

4. With what degree of seriousness rather depends upon how far the claimant wants the case to be pushed.

workable compromises (in the justificatory sense proposed by Boltanski and Thevenot [2006]) are achievable.

For core policy-makers this is not likely to be seen as a major problem is so far as ambiguity allows all of the actors concerned to stake a claim to at least some of the territory of cultural policy, without the core policy-makers having to definitively come down on the side of one set of actors or another, or one policy proposal rather than another. Indeed, again, this is part of the point of deliberately choosing ambiguous policy solutions, where the ability to avoid having to make definitive choices is the point of the exercise. While policy ambiguity may give rise to a great deal of low-intensity conflict in the field of cultural policy it also allows for the possible establishment of multiple 'solutions' that displace argument into a series of continuing examples of policy bickering rather than full-blown, high-intensity, policy warfare. Thus a general policy aim may be reachable through a variety of means, and via a number of different paths that utilise different sets of actors for different purposes, and a deflection of debate and argument to a concern with these may be preferable for core policy-makers to detailed debate and argument about the specifics of the general policy itself.

These consequences, in turn, give rise to a number of distinct policy results as the outcome of attempting to deal with the establishment of multiple sites for argument that arise from the ambiguities of cultural policy. These results, again, do not necessarily resolve the problems of policy ambiguity but they do contribute to further complexities in managing the subject by creating further arenas for disagreement to be expressed in, whilst being equally indeterminate as subjects for concern. In direct policy terms ambiguity can assist in creating the conditions for both policy instrumentalisation (Gray, 2007) and policy attachment (Gray, 2002): in the former through the replacement of a 'cultural' focus for policy with a 'social', 'health' or 'education' focus instead; in the latter by the use of 'culture' as a mechanism for necessary resource acquisition. In this case the 'cultural' component of the policy is still central, but being able to be 'cultural' requires the necessary resources (not only financial but also in terms of political support or legitimacy, for example) to be utilised, and policy becomes directed at getting these so that the 'cultural' component of policy can then be produced, with this acquisition being done through a process of 'attaching' culture to the issues and policy concerns where these resources can be found. Operating in an ambiguous policy environment makes both of these strategies more feasible as they can serve to direct concern to non-cultural issues, and thus provide a degree of policy specificity that is otherwise not easily and directly available to core cultural policy actors in their pursuit of explicitly 'cultural' ends. The fact that this specificity is not seen, in many if not all such cases, as actually being 'cultural' but some other policy concern altogether then creates the conditions for an intensification of policy argument and debate within the cultural policy sector itself, thus reinforcing the already existing policy consequences of continuous internal conflict.

In the case of policy instrumentalisation the concern about the 'cultural' dimension of cultural policies has become the root of a great deal of heated debate about the purposes of cultural policy with this being irresolvable as a consequence of the definitional problems that surround the core concept, and the multiplicity of opinions, views, beliefs and ideological positions that are then generated from this conceptual confusion. This can be seen, for example, in the current concerns and debates about questions of cultural 'value' (Hutter & Throsby, 2008; Throsby, 2010, 17–22) where this can often, and usually is, to be seen to be either in some form of competition with economic, social, educational and political (and other) forms of value (Warwick Commission, 2015) or as simply being subservient to these other values. The result of policy instrumentalisation, however, is not simply the creation of further policy dissension, but also the establishment of the conditions for further questioning of the legitimacy of the specifics of the individual policies that are then produced. In this context the establishment of forms of policy specificity does not resolve the issue of ambiguity but, instead, helps to reinforce it – the provision of a clear target to be shot at through having a specific policy would allow for the creation of clear categories for policy evaluation of outputs and outcomes, and a desire to avoid this can lead to a retreat to ambiguity as a means of diffusing policy debate. This may, indeed, be a necessary consequence of a search for a resolution of policy ambiguity through a clear specification of policy aims and means – specification may resolve, in the short-term at least, the issues of group disagreements about means and ends, ideologies and meanings, and divided responsibilities between multiple actors and organisations, but only at the cost of stoking further debate and disagreement about policy definitions, contents, means of implementation and evaluation, and about the distribution and exercise of power within the policy sector itself[5].

A further result of these debates about policy practice is that the underlying rationalisations of, and justifications for, policy choices become increasingly fraught as the practical consequences of policy ambiguity become evident. For policy-makers an avoidance of debate about these issues can be invaluable – particularly in circumstances where they are unclear to the policy-makers themselves. This will be most marked when ambiguity has been chosen as a deliberate policy strategy as a means to avoid having to make definitive choices between competing solutions in conditions of policy uncertainty, when conflict avoidance is a positive benefit. Unfortunately a desire to avoid conflict does not mean that it is actually escapable, and ambiguity in itself not only does not remove the conditions for conflict it actually provides the grounds for the creation of continuous conflict. This may appear to be an example of a non-virtuous circle of policy dissatisfaction – with disagreement over policy contents leading to disagreement over policy justifications, leading to further dis-

5. It is worth noting that a possible consequence of policy ambiguity is the creation of the conditions for 'institutional isomorphism' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, 77) – an homogenization of institutional forms and practices to cope with conditions of uncertainty. The empirical accuracy of this claim for the cultural sector is open to question at the moment, although see Kangas et al, 2010.

agreements over policy contents and so on – but, again, this may be preferable for policy-makers to the unpalatable requirement to provide definitive answers to policy issues that do not actually prove to have definitive solutions available for their resolution. Again, policy disagreement as a displacement activity for having to deal with irresolvable problems can be a bearable price to pay in these circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

The endemic presence of ambiguity in cultural policy can be used to help to explain a number of features of the policy landscape that forms the sector, not least the difficulties that appear to exist for the creation of clear, specific, policies that can be accepted by the majority of participants in policy-making without dissent. The combination of ambiguity as a structural characteristic of the sector and ambiguity as a deliberate policy choice in conditions of uncertainty and dissension provides the conditions for expecting that the cultural policy sector will be centred around argument and debate rather than about consensus and unity[6] (6). This derives from the assumption that there are multiple and divergent expectations about what cultural policy can, and should, be aimed at, and that there is no method by which these expectations can be drawn together into a coherent, and cohesive, policy whole. Such an assumption should be examined in more detail even though the current evidence would serve to indicate that it is not a ridiculous one to hold. The end product of this dissensus is that cultural policy can be commonly expected to display the characteristics of: a lack of policy clarity (probably the majority of them, although empirical evidence to support this assumption is really needed);the presence of problems in developing effective mechanisms for policy implementation and evaluation; a lack of effective top-down control of policy by policy-makers; and an open-ness to contestation by a large number of actors both internally and externally to the policy sector. In those cases where policy specificity and clarity *are* established it is also expected that such policies will be subject to even greater levels of conflict than those where a greater or lesser degree of ambiguity is present.

A proper evaluation of the claims that are made in this paper is really needed, with this evaluation covering both the logic of the argument that has been put forward and its empirical adequacy. As such not only is a coherent set of research questions required but also a development of the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions upon which the argument is based. As such this paper identifies a framework for examining the assumed wide-spread existence of ambiguity within the cultural policy sector.

6. Let alone any ideas about 'sweetness and light' in Arnold's (1993 [1869], 66) quote from Jonathan Swift.

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