

Exploring the Fourth Sector

Investigating Multi-stakeholder Cross-Sector Social Partnerships in Societal Arts Marketing

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Abstract

The paper outlines a proposed doctoral research into social partnerships in societal arts marketing and discusses the philosophical and methodological implications of the research design. Qualitative case study methodology informed by constructivist stance, utilising longitudinal data of both historical and present-time dimensions, is assumed to allow for a rigorous investigation of the processes and outcomes of societal arts marketing partnerships. The proposed research aims to address a gap in the current societal arts marketing literature and assist in further conceptualisation of social partnerships in general.

Keywords

Marketing, arts, societal, social, partnership, relational, qualitative, constructivism, case study, longitudinal

1. Research Background

The last decade has seen a proliferation of academic research dealing with social partnerships either as a distinct phenomenon or as an element of wider social and societal marketing studies (see for example Bendell 2000; Warner and Sullivan 2004 for overviews, Crane 1998; Seitanidi 2010). Waddock defined social partnerships as:

“a commitment by a corporation or group of corporation to work with an organisation from a different economic sector ... [and] to work cooperatively to solve a [social issue] that affects them all.” (1988:18)

However, majority of current studies focus on a narrow scope of partnerships in the environmental, health and socio-economic contexts in the developing countries.

Studies investigating what could be called social marketing via the arts appear to be rare (i.e. Navaie 2004; Klein et al. 2005), with none, to the author’s knowledge, focusing on the UK.

Potential reason for this gap may be the on-going debate surrounding the role of the arts and creative industries in the society. The wider social impact of the arts has juxtaposed the opinions between “art for art’s sake”, where the focus is on promoting the arts within itself and “arts for social good” that positions it as a developmental tool. According to Navaie (2004), the arts, if approached from a multidisciplinary and sectoral perspective, have the potential to help in developing human aptitude and enhance social capital, thus can offer a platform for social, political and economic change (Reeves 2002). Indeed, recent reports indicate that creative industries are significant contributors to the UK economy (DCMS 2009), as significant contributors to “wealth generation, employment opportunities, social inclusion and regeneration strategies” (CC 2005: 5). McNicholas (2004) stated that latest research points to direct positive correlations between the arts and cultural economies and business economies.

However, as Navaie (2004) suggested, our understanding of the arts as a powerful vehicle for creating positive social change and of the processes involved, is at an embryonic stage, in need of support from the academia, as well as the policy makers.

1.1 Research Questions

It is argued that the arts and creative industries pose an ideal platform for research into social partnerships, as community partnerships comprising the decision makers and stakeholders of the public, private and civil sectors, are seen as the central tenet of societal arts marketing (Navaie 2004; Klein et al. 2005). The aim of this research, thus, is to investigate multi-stakeholder, cross-sector partnerships that address social issues via the arts platform. The research will attempt to provide detailed descriptions of the societal arts marketing partnerships processes and outcomes, and answer questions:

What are the components and potential outcomes of a successful multistakeholder social partnership within the societal arts marketing arena?

Can partnerships in societal arts marketing act as a platform for social change?

Findings from such research assist the recent calls from the arts marketing discipline for more detailed research investigating involvement of the arts in human capacity and social capital building, as well as contribute to ongoing development of the theoretical and conceptual building of social partnerships. In addition, the research can inform policy makers attending to socio-economic development in the UK, particularly the issues of social inclusion and community development as addressed in the Welsh Assembly Government's flagship programme: "Communities First", by explicating the relevance of the arts and creative industries.

2. Proposed Research Design

"Theory building seems to require rich description, the richness that comes from anecdote. We uncover all kinds of relationships in our hard data, but it is only through the use of this soft data that we are able to explain them, and explanation is, of course, the purpose of research." (Mintzberg 1979: 587)

2.1 Research Context

Literature suggests that the reasons why individual partners embark on partnership are driven by divergent motivations (Selsky and Parker 2005; Seitanidi and Ryan 2007), stemming partially from their inherent sectoral role, but also underpinned by distinct

organisational values (Schein 1984). The concept of values can help us understand better attitudes, motivations and behaviours of not only individuals, but it can also help shed light on the management practices and functioning of organisations and societies (Schwartz et al. 2001).

Additionally, McNicholas (2004) suggested that the relational approaches in partnerships between business and arts organisations have shifted from the traditional transactional types inherent in philanthropy and commercial sponsorship to more interactive, reciprocal modes with a focus on building lasting, strategic relationships, i.e. moving towards the integrative stage in Austin's (2000) collaborative continuum framework of partnerships.

Austin sees as crucial the need to view partnerships in terms of a relationship, rather than a transaction, suggesting personal connections and relationships to be, *inter alia*, the central enablers in the process of developing successful partnerships. Partnership processes and outcomes are essentially a result of partners' negotiations in particular contexts, where the resultant relationships effectively emerge from the interpersonal communication processes between the individual social actors. Therefore, partnerships can be seen as socially constructed through the process of interaction between individuals and groups, where reality is constructed through a collective enactment over time and joint consensus as to what constitutes that reality (Olkonnen et al. 2000).

Approaching social partnerships via the relational perspective as an "intersubjective world of culture, consciousness and purposive action, [where] relationships are organised through the ideas, values and interests of [those] producing human action and interaction" (Seale 2004: 36), points to methodologies that advocate humanistic data collection methods, inherent in qualitative methodologies. As argued by Goulding (1999), qualitative methodologies are able to accommodate and actually embrace the complexity, irrationality, irregularity and subjectivity of the nature of humans, their values and social mores. Indeed, Schwartz et al. (2001) posited these aspects of human behaviour as the key antecedents to investigating any aspect of the motivations behind organisational behaviour, as a thorough understanding can help us

not only understand society on an individual basis, but it can also provide insights into management practices and the functioning of organisations and societies.

2.2 Philosophical Assumptions

Notwithstanding, the phenomenon of social partnerships and the inherent processes forms a distinct element of the social science research, where decisions as to the methodological approaches cannot be considered or presented in the abstract (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Morgan and Smircich 1980; Bryman 2008). Morgan and Smircich stated that it is imperative to position research within a recognised framework or paradigm because:

“the choice and adequacy of a method embodies a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and the methods through which that knowledge can be obtained, as well as a set of root assumptions about the nature of the phenomena to be investigated” (1980:491);

i.e. addresses the questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology, as well as acknowledging the nature of society under study.

Moreover, this research reflects the views of Denzin and Lincoln (2000b: 633) that behind every research stands a “personal biography of a gendered researcher”, informed by the inherent perspectives of a particular class, racial, cultural and ethnic community. Hence, initial considerations of a research methodology need to clarify the researcher’s philosophical assumptions as to the nature of reality and how the reality can be interpreted, to help find the best “fit between the method and the person, between their style of working, who they are and how they think” (Goulding 1999: 870).

Social research is here viewed as complex, diverse and pluralistic, with significant variations as to the ways it can be approached. A solid research design, informed by a respective philosophical stance thus needs to acknowledge the varied assumptions that inform different methodologies and methods.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) provided a two dimensional framework, consisting of the extent to which subjective or objective world is assumed to exist and whether the nature of society is seen in terms of regulation/consensual or radical change/conflictual. Burrell and Morgan outlined four distinct, incommensurable paradigms: radical humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive, and functionalist. Each paradigm has specific ontological and epistemological assumptions that have explicit implications on the methodologies and methods available, as well as the type of conclusions that can be drawn. The subjective-objective continuum considers four issues as explicated in Figure 1.

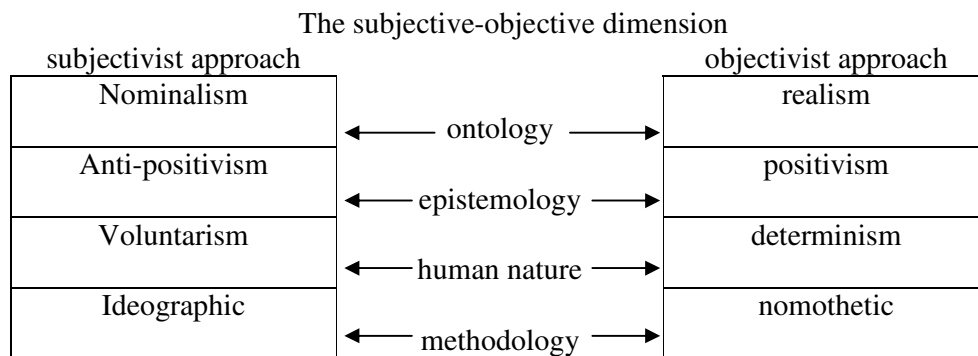


Figure 1: Scheme for analysing assumptions about the nature of social science
Burrell and Morgan (1979: 3)

The basic premise is the different assumptions as to the nature of reality, i.e. the possibility whether the social world can be viewed as a construction of the social actors' perceptions, actions and interactions – the nominalist position, or it exists independent of the researcher, out there, waiting to be discovered – the realist position.

Despite the clear contribution of the framework to help understand various research approaches, it has been subjected to wide criticisms as being over-simplistic and its firm position on the incommensurability of the paradigms (see Willmott 1993). Morgan and Smircich (1980) reconstructed the absolute points and presented a subjectivist-objectivist continuum outlining: projection of human imagination, social construction, symbolic discourse, contextual field of information, concrete process and, concrete structures (respectively); as six positions along this continuum.

Social partnerships are here viewed as social constructions and outcomes of interactions of individual actors and their reference points. The notion of absolute truth is rejected and a paradigm means an absolute reference point reached via social consensus (Gummesson 2000). Thus a constructivist position is assumed, where the ontology largely aligns with nominalist/subjectivist end of the continuum, in that “meanings do not exist before a mind engages them” and so realities are multiple, constructed by its participants (Cooper 1998: 8). Epistemologically, knowledge is subjective and is provisional and contested. To interpret a reality, it is necessary to perceive it from the social actor’s perspective, albeit remaining flexible as to the inherent subjectivities that researchers inadvertently bring into the interpretation. This can only be done through a dialectic and joint interpretation between the researcher and the participant (Schwandt 2000).

Although it is acknowledged that there are some facts in the social world that could be termed objective realities, these are viewed as constituted of and as outcomes of the interactions between the individual partners, which are underpinned by the actions and interactions of the individual managers, thus are a social construction.

2.3 Research Methodology

Constructivism advocates investigation practices that are exploratory in nature, where research questions are based on issues and concerns of social actors and knowledge constitutes an interpretation of a joint understanding of these issues, as arrived at via a consensus between the researcher and the participants in a particular context (Schwandt 2000). Essentially, the researcher must move closer to and fully interact with the studied phenomenon and its actors, where qualitative methodology offers methods best suited to producing rounded and contextual understandings. Although it is posited that it is not possible to discover an ultimate explanation of the processes involved, by utilising qualitative methodologies, researchers can gain depth insights into how the realities are constructed.

As explicated above, societal arts marketing partnerships is an empirically underdeveloped area of research, lacking firm theoretical and conceptual foundations.

Selsky and Parker (2005) further suggested that social partnerships research lacks longitudinal contributions that are likely to provide insights into complex emergent processes of partnerships. Thus, this study will be exploratory in nature, aiming to develop novel and systematic theory, grounded in contextual, longitudinal data of both historical and present-time dimensions, from a constructivist perspective. The aim is to construct a second order concept as endorsed by the individual partners in the existing partnership via iterative approach using multiple sources of evidence, to allow for a continual combination of inductive and deductive reasoning and analysis of data (Charmaz 2000).

2.3.1 Qualitative Case Study

Case studies are recommended as a particularly instructive research method in studies where research is exploratory in nature, the phenomenon under study is complex and the aim is to build/generate theory, as it helps to draw out new insights on phenomena, which can significantly enhance existing knowledge on a topic (Lincoln and Guba 2000; Yin 2003). Yin (2003:13) defined the case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident... [using] multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion”. One of the key decisions in the case study methodology is whether to focus on a single case or utilise a multiple case study approach (Yin 2003). Although neither strategy can claim superiority, Gummesson (2000) suggested that the key strength of case study research is the opportunity to provide a holistic view of a specific process/phenomenon. Thus focusing on one case is sufficient, as the benefits of a depth insight get diluted in multiple cases. Since this study aims to provide a holistic perspective of the processes and outcomes of a specific societal arts marketing partnership network, one unique, “critical” case (Flyvbjerg 2006), exemplifying a highly successful multistakeholder social partnership has been selected.

2.4 Research Quality

The case selection approach does not imply a representative sample of one in terms of empiricist/statistical generalisability logic that claims ultimate truth in findings, but as an approach used to identify certain phenomena and “lay bare mechanics that one suspects will also exist in other companies” (Gummesson 2000: 90). Moreover, it is believed that qualitative case study research provides useful contextual insights, descriptions and interpretations of phenomena that may prove useful to those who need to or wish to understand it.

3. Conclusion

The proposed research design implies a constructive strategy for rigorous investigation of the processes and outcomes of societal arts marketing partnerships. It enables the researcher to assume a position of an “interpretive bricoleur” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000a) who clarifies and interprets a set of representations of this specific marketing context. It is seen as particularly instructive in the present study, considering the dearth of research on partnership processes in this context, especially in terms of a more longitudinal format.

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